



## *Sharing the Good News!*

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

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### **An Experience of Small Group Ministry: *From Happiness to Despair to Real Joy* by Alan C. Miller, Conference Minister**

I had an insanely happy childhood. I grew up in a small town with lots of friends and lots of things to do. I had great parents and school was fun. As a matter of fact, we were so happy that my brother and I never realized that we were poor until years later.

However in June, 1971 all of the happiness ended in an instant. It was Saturday morning, my father and I were mowing the lawn and my dad dropped over and died in my arms of a heart attack. Dad was 45 years old and I was 19 years old. We were loyal church-goers so I thought God would help us somehow get through the pain. But my mother was so distraught that she attempted to take her life on three different occasions.

Somehow I managed to finish college and get a job in the corporate world. After my first week of work as an engineer for U.S. Steel Corporation, I realized I hated the corporate world. There were so many company games to play and so much back-stabbing as people stepped on each other in an attempt to climb the corporate ladder.

I was now 23 years old and life just felt dark: dad had died, my mother was emotionally ill, and I had spent 4 years of college preparing for a career I hated.

About 6 months after graduation my wife and I started going to church again; not out of faith but more out of a sense of childhood habit. The pastor at the church asked us to help with the senior high youth group. Sunday nights became our favorite night of the week.

We were supposed to be the advisors, but we were getting more out of the youth group than we felt we were giving.

In February, 1975, the pastor asked us to help chaperone the annual senior high youth retreat. I had never been on a retreat; I didn't know what to expect. The pastor spent the weekend trying to help us experience "koinonia," the fellowship enjoyed by those drawn into community by Christ. We played stupid games, we shared during relational Bible studies, we had a bizarre talent show, we laughed, we ate, and we sang. On the closing night the pastor had us sit in a circle. He then invited anyone who wanted to, to share a word with the group. Some shared words of "thanks" for a great weekend. Others shared stories of things they had to face back home and asked the group to pray for them. After each person shared their words, they were invited to sit in the middle of the circle while we laid hands on them and prayed for them. Suddenly I began to speak, although it was hard to talk through my sobs. I told of my father's death, my mother's illness, and my disillusionment with my career. When it was over no one said anything, for there was nothing to say. But everyone stayed with me and did not leave me alone with my pain.

The next morning when I woke up, I felt like my soul had just had a bath. I remember thinking: "I wonder if life as I had been experiencing it was the result of the way we humans had messed up God's creative desire for us; and I wonder if what I had experienced in that circle last night, was the way that God had created us to live and to love one another." For the first time in my life I had found meaning and purpose --- I had found God.

#### **TO CONTACT US OR TO REGISTER FOR EVENTS**

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