

Basic Elements of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry

Small Group Ministry Network, June 2008

Small Group Ministry is intentional lay-led small groups that deepen and expand the ministry of a congregation. The *basic elements* of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry have evolved from the experience of many people in diverse congregational settings.

The *Power and Promise of SGM* are Intimacy, Ultimacy and Growth.

***Intimacy:** SGM helps build community and provides opportunities for deeper relationships.

***Ultimacy:** SGM provides an opportunity for deeper spiritual exploration and search for meaning.

***Growth:** SGM provides opportunities to grow leaders, as group members become facilitators. It has the potential to grow churches in numbers, as well as in generosity, cooperation, and sense of well-being.

A *Covenant* is a set of relational ground rules or agreed upon behaviors of how members will be with each other. It creates a safe environment and enables a small group to build friendships and share spiritual exploration. Ground rules typically include time management, commitment, respectful listening, confidentiality, and speaking from one's own experience ("I" statements). Reviewing and restating the covenant is suggested at meetings when the group is new and when there is a new member.

Three agreements or 'covenants' between the groups and congregation are implemented from the outset:

*To engage in service to the congregation and larger world.

*To abide by a set of relationship ground rules.

*To welcome new members to the group or to the program overall.

Groups of 6-10 members, including the facilitator, that meet 1-2 times per month for a specific length of time (a designated number of weeks or months) or long-term, sometimes for several years. It is expected that groups will change over time by adding new members and/or by forming new groups. The "empty chair"

symbolizes including people who are not yet participating.

Group Leaders or Facilitators (or preferably co-facilitators) are chosen and trained by the minister(s) and/or designated lay leadership as part of shared leadership in the congregation. Leaders meet with the minister and lay leadership for spiritual support and training. Leadership falls into two distinct roles. The *Group Leader* protects the container, that is, the model, within which participants freely share their lives and minister to each other. The Leader also maintains the group's connection to the larger program.

The *Meeting Facilitator* leads a meeting of the group, using basic facilitation skills, and assists with upholding the model during the meeting. These functions can be done by one or several people. Leaders meet with the minister and lay leadership for support and training.

Session plan is a guide for the time together and a springboard for discussion. The *Standard Format* includes:

*An *opening* reading from a Unitarian Universalist source.

*A *check-in* during which each person is asked to briefly answer a question such as, "What's most on your mind today?" "What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here?"

*A time for the *focus* or purpose of the meeting. The topic or activity can be whatever the group prefers, so long as it is consistent with our Purposes and Principles and the mission of the sponsoring congregation. The focus should be more on sharing than on debating.

*The *closing check-out*. The facilitator asks each person for a word or phrase that says how she or he is feeling as the meeting draws to an end.

*A *closing reading*. Again, it should be from a Unitarian Universalist source.