



Building Community: The Spiral In Small Group Ministry

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adapted from *Deep Fun*, by Jennifer Martin and Galen Moor, UUA Youth Office, and *Building Community in Youth Groups* by Denny Rydberg, 1985

Facilitator Training Manual, UU Small Group Ministry Network, 2008

Small Group Ministry is about building a community in which participants feel comfortable in sharing to a degree that enhances spiritual growth – intimacy. Understanding the process will help ensure the success of a group and of a small group ministry program as a whole.

**How can we understand the process?*

**How can we enhance the process?*

Building community has been described as taking steps, often pictured as going up stairs. But building community with other people by taking steps together along a spiral path from an outer point toward a deeper center seems more applicable for Small Group Ministry.

Step One: Bonding The first step in building community is to break down the cliques and barriers that exist, and to establish a relationship among the individuals in the group. As each person is accepted and welcomed by others, they begin to identify as part of the group. The things to consider, then, are:

**How do we establish trust in the group?*

**How do we welcome and accept each other?*

**How can members develop a sense of connection and commitment to this group while still having friends in other parts of the congregation?*

Step Two: Opening Up When an individual can share non-threatening areas of life, and perceives that another is genuinely interested, trust will develop. The more empathetically a group listens, the more secure an individual feels as a member of a group. People can share to whatever degree they feel comfortable.

**What will it take for each of us to feel comfortable enough to share non-threatening areas of our lives?*

**How will each of us know that the members of the group are genuinely interested in our story?*

**What will happen when we feel trust?*

**What will happen if any one of us does not feel respect, interest or trust?*

Step Three: Affirming Participants in affirming interactions leave feeling warm about the group and themselves. This is crucial at this stage of the community building process. After Opening Up, people need positive feedback before they will consider sharing further.

**How would each of us like to be affirmed in the group?*

**How can we affirm each other?*

**Why is affirming important to the group?*

Step Four: Stretching Difficult situations are opportunities for stretching. When people move beyond their normal comfort level they experience the greatest potential for growth. Individuals cannot merely say they care for each other in a stretching exercise; they must actively show it. They must create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable enough to expose their imperfections to the group. Individuals also realize they can achieve much more as a group than they could as a collection of individuals. They realize the importance of each member to the

entire group. Facing and overcoming difficulties give people the confidence that they can cope with everyday problems.

**Have we — individually or as a group -- had situations that caused us to move beyond our normal comfort level?*

**How have we showed our support for each other?*

**How can we, the group, create an atmosphere where any of us might feel comfortable enough to expose imperfections to the group?*

Step Five: Deeper Sharing & Goal Setting At this stage, individuals share deeply with one another. The group becomes a setting where people can express their visions of the future and present struggles. The group can help the individual while holding the individual accountable for his or her decisions, remaining supportive throughout the process.

**How can we each become comfortable enough to hold each other accountable for our decisions and our interactions, and still remain supportive?*

**Members of a group change. How do we welcome new people into the group while still keeping our established closeness?*

**How do we say good-bye when people leave? Are there rituals that we might want to have to mark these changes?*

Summary: There are several notations for building community in small group ministry.

**Groups are dynamic* rather than static. There is a general progression toward deeper levels, but the rate and even how far the group goes will depend on the group itself.

**Changes in the group* will result in changes in progression through the steps. For example, when a new person enters a group, *bonding* will include informing the new person of the group culture and of details that the rest of the group knows about each other – names of children, significant events, etc. – as these items come into the conversation.

**Topics may work differently* depending on the levels of community development. Introducing session plans that ask deeper questions may be intimidating to a group that is at a beginning level. Likewise, a group that functions at deeper levels may take a topic beyond the questions that are suggested.

**The session plan itself* includes some of the steps of building community. The greeting as the group comes together and the opening ritual is *bonding*. The check-in or sharing is *opening up*. The response of the group to each participant is *affirming*. The *stretching* and *going deeper* relates to the topic itself, the way the questions are asked, and the amount of sharing that occurs.

Awareness of the steps of building community helps in understanding group dynamics and group expectations. The group should not be “judged” by its level of functioning. Groups may change different levels for various reasons. The importance is in working at the level of the group.