

MINISTER'S PAGE

Successfully Run Programs

by Rev. Russ Savage

*Excerpted from **Strategies and Solutions for Small Group Ministry Challenges**,
presented at General Assembly, June 2008*

Over the course of ten years, I've worked with vibrant small group ministry programs in congregations of varying sizes. My experience has taught me that several things are essential to a successful Small Group Ministry program. First among them is the involvement of the minister. Ministerial support provides visibility, legitimacy, and even prestige to the SGM program. One of the most powerful things you can do is to have a Small Group Ministry Sunday, with the minister preaching about the program and some participants giving testimony about their own experience with it.

A second essential to a successful program is a lay person or team to oversee and coordinate the program, keep records of group status, communicate with the facilitators, and manage the integration of new members into groups.

Finally, your program needs to be visible to everyone who takes part in the life of your congregation if it is to be understood as a real and vital part of the life of the church. Are there frequent newsletter items about your SGM program? Are there opportunities for new people to sign up? Are there attractive, inviting messages about the SGM program for visitors and others to see? Is Small Group Ministry included in annual reporting to the congregation, with an invitation and information about how to join?

Are there periodic mentions of Small Group Ministry from the pulpit? This is one of the most effective ways of convincing people of the value and importance of the SGM program. Do you have a table staffed with a volunteer during coffee hour on at least some Sundays? This is another good face-to-face way to spread the word about SGM.

Do you have a brochure that tells in an inviting way about your Small Group Ministry program and provides the mechanism for signing up? This is good for the bashful visitor who doesn't want to talk to a stranger but picks up things from your literature rack. Finally, is your Small Group Ministry program prominently featured on your church website, with a way to sign up on-line?

What outcomes would you be able to observe if you had a successful Small Group Ministry program? I think there are several good indicators. One is simply that there is a reasonably good level of participation. Another is that, whether they are presently participating or not, people in the congregation know about the program and appreciate its importance.

I have this dream of a perfect answer from some member of my congregation who is asked by a visitor or a stranger or a neighbor or a co-worker, "What do you do in your church anyway?" And this well-informed and involved member comes back with this answer: "Every Sunday morning we have a stimulating worship service, with thoughtful and well-researched preaching and beautiful and uplifting music. We have a Religious Education program to provide our children and young people with the knowledge and spiritual tools they need as

they move through the stages of development. We do the work of Social Justice, striving to make the world a better place especially for those who have been most marginalized in the world. And we have a Small Group Ministry program, to foster closer bonds of connection and provide a place for each person to progress along the path of individual spiritual development." Wouldn't it be great to have our SGM programs ranked right up there along with all our other important areas of activity? May it be so in your congregation and mine.

Rev. Russ Savage
Assistant Minister
UU Church of Annapolis, MD
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-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Fall 2009