

Preparing to Experience

*By Wendy Sapp, Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga, Tennessee
Small Group Ministry Journal, Fall 2012/Winter 2013*

As we prepared for our recent church-wide kickoff to Small Group Ministry, I once again struggled with how to explain Small Group Ministry to people who have never been in a small group. I finally realized there is a simple answer: It can't be done. I can explain the purpose and the format and the philosophy behind the concept, but people still arrive for their first group meeting feeling unprepared and uncertain. SGM is not an easily encapsulated program; Small Group Ministry is an experience.

Though there is something truly ineffable about Small Group Ministry, there are steps we can take to prepare facilitators and participants, and there are strategies that facilitators and participants find useful in preparing for each session.

Program planning: The first step in preparation is to have a clear picture of what Small Group Ministry is in your church. Every congregation will have a slightly different version of the program. My church uses a steering team that meets for two months each summer to evaluate our program, make revisions and changes, and introduce these changes to the facilitators. The steering team consists of coordinators, facilitators, participants and occasionally someone completely new to Small Group Ministry. The range of voices allows us to look at our program with fresh eyes each year and ensure that Small Group Ministry is meeting the needs of the congregation.

Preparation before groups begin: Once we have clear direction for Small Group Ministry from our steering team, we prepare facilitators through careful selection and training. With the exception of the first year of our program, we have required that all facilitators have experience as participants in SGM. We require all facilitators, new and returning, to attend a one-day training session, which paints a picture of the

program as envisioned by the steering team, clearly delineating the roles and responsibilities of the facilitators and others involved, and provides concrete strategies and tools for facilitating groups.

On a less intense scale, we prepare all new group participants. The steering team staffs a registration table after service for several Sundays to explain Small Group Ministry and answer questions. People who have never participated are called by the coordinators and/or the facilitators who explain SGM and the level of commitment that is expected. When participants enter a group with the understanding that they are committing to regularly attend, arrive on time, and participate in two service projects outside of their usual group time, they seem to approach the experience with a more intentional frame of mind than would be present if we had a less demanding group structure.

Preparation for sessions: In addition to the information and skills we can offer facilitators and participants before groups begin, we try to provide optional strategies for facilitators and participants to mentally or spiritually prepare before each session.

Each fall, we begin our new year of SGM with each group using a session on deep listening. We have used several different listening sessions, but the main purpose of all of them is to provide an introduction to the concept of deep listening and deep sharing and provide an opportunity to practice both. This sets the stage for the group to understand the expectations of the SGM format and be better prepared for future sessions.

Facilitators are asked to prepare for sessions well in advance so they do not enter the room unsure of what they will do or frantic because they spent the last hour trying to locate a session. They are also encouraged to arrive well before the start

time to set up the room (chairs in a circle, chalice and lighter in the middle) so a calm environment is established when participants arrive. Additionally, when facilitators enter the meeting with the expectation that they will share deeply, they provide a model of sharing for other participants that can lead to more meaningful sessions.

Closely following the format helps participants prepare to be more focused during sessions. Opening words and moments of silence encourage participants to slow down and be in the moment. We often use a check-in of “What are you leaving at the door to be fully present with us tonight/today?” which keeps the check-in focused on the more critical components of someone’s life rather than a laundry list of minor happenings. After exposure to these components for several sessions, many participants begin to mentally prepare themselves by slowing their minds and setting aside distractions before arriving for their session. We encourage all participants to facilitate one session during the year and this experience often deepens their understanding of SGM and helps them enter future sessions better prepared for the experience.

Some groups choose to use sessions that require work prior to coming to the session. This could be something as simple as bringing a treasured object or as detailed as completing several readings and exercises related to the session topic. Participants of groups that require preparation appreciate the added experience of the exercises. Other participants prefer that the SGM experience remain contained within the session and find required preparatory work to be an unnecessary added stress that detracts from their experience.

Conclusions: On a programmatic level, facilitators and participants should be given sufficient information to enter Small Group Ministry with a basic understanding of the expectations. Facilitators can prepare themselves, the session, and the meeting space to enhance the SGM experience for all participants. Participants

learn to set aside the outside world and remain focused on the moment. When the session begins, preparation makes the experience deeper and more meaningful for all.