

Welcome to the Congregation!

From the SGM Journal Editors

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One of the many benefits of small group ministry is giving newcomers a place to belong from the very beginning. In addition to forming connections right away, newcomers in covenant groups have the opportunity to learn about Unitarian Universalism, observe how UUs live their faith, and commit to an organization that shares their values.

In this article we'll hear from three congregations that offer newcomer covenant groups as a point of entry to congregational life. Roxie Morison facilitates Newcomer's Chalice Circles at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington, NC, and regards the Circles as a valuable part of the welcoming process. During Coffee Hour, Roxie seeks out and invites anyone who "feels like a newcomer" to participate. She also provides NCC information for the Membership Committee to share with visitors.

The Circles have 6 to 9 members and meet two evenings a month from September to May. The group creates and adopts a covenant over the course of three meetings. They begin with the topic "What Brought You Here?" (to Wilmington, to Unitarian Universalism, to this Chalice Circle). Group members then rotate responsibility for "hosting" the CCs: choosing the topic, notifying all members, bringing and lighting the chalice candle, choosing the topic readings, timekeeping, and extinguishing the chalice. Roxie provides the meeting agenda and resources for topics and readings, and reminds each host of their responsibilities before their turn.

At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA, greater than 60 % of the congregation participates in covenant groups, called *Branches*. Graduates of the member orientation class, *Roots*, are strongly encouraged to join a group. The Branches program is publicized on the website, in the weekly and monthly newsletter

and Sunday bulletin, and a sign-up card is included in the Roots packet. The Branches administrator invites all Roots graduates to join a group that meets their availability. New groups are formed for Roots graduates when there are no openings in existing groups. Experienced church members are chosen to lead the new groups, which greatly enhances the introduction to covenant groups, UUism, and the congregation, and facilitates the assimilation of new members into the life of the congregation.

The UU Community Church of Washington County in Hillsboro, OR, offers a five session Newcomer's Covenant Group in addition to their longer-term groups. The groups are started when at least six people have signed up. Kathy Foldes, leader of the Newcomer CGs, then contacts each person to see what day and time works best for everyone. Session topics relate to being new in a group: "Getting to Know You, Starting with Your Name" and "Deep Listening." Each group does one service project during their time together.

Newcomer's CGs are formed two to three times a year at UCCWC, even in December and July! New Covenant Groups are intentionally started just after the Newcomer's group ends so that participants can continue along with others who have been in the church longer. The congregation's Membership Team reports that participants of the Newcomer's CG become involved in the life of the church while those who did not join a CG tend to drift away over time. As Kathy says, "There's something about that bonding and learning a new way to relate in a small group. People become more involved, join as members, and step up in our church and in the outside world."

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