

Roots & Branches at Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

*By Connections Director Dottie Kelly and Branches Coordinator Joanna Wilson
Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA*

Roots classes are six-hour informational sessions spread over three Wednesday evenings or three Saturday mornings, held every other month. The first session is dedicated to the history of the Unitarian Universalist movement, and the second to the development of the theology of today...including each of us developing our own.

The last session is an orientation to our Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge. We talk about its journey from a 35 member fellowship in 1951, the purchase of property, the buildings from separate capital fund drives, and even tour the campus. This is when we talk about our governance structure, the pathway and expectations of membership, and our longstanding Small Group Ministry covenant groups which we call Branches.

Our ministers, Rev. Steve Crump and Rev. Nathan Ryan, talk extensively about Branches, urging everyone to consider becoming involved. Since the ministers are not actual members of any Branches group, one of the Branches Coordinators gives personal testimony of the value of belonging to a group. Since its inception in 1999, the Branches program has grown to 24 groups with about 60% of our congregation participating.

The ministers explain not only what a Branches group is, but what it is not: a Twelve-Step group, a therapy group, a social group only. We have those programs including book clubs, but Branches is a mini-church. We learn how to live a covenantal life with a dozen fellow congregants and it translates to a mature relationship with 400 congregants for the benefit of everyone.

The ministers emphasize that we consider Branches an important arm of the ministry to our congregation. Although we have an outstanding Congregational Care team as well as a team of Pastoral Care Associates, most often it is fellow Branches group members who provide the first-line hands-on assistance, be it emotional or practical, needed by a congregant. Branches leaders, who are trained by the ministers, instinctively know when they should notify the ministers about a situation of need.

In the Roots packet for each attendee is a Request for Branches placement form which lists the times and days of all groups and asks the participant to indicate their choices and availability. They can give the form to staff at that time or later, and the placement process begins. Empty chairs are found to fit the needs of the individual. We have several groups for which we provide child care if needed.

We ask for a one-year commitment to the group. When the person asks for Branches placement, no matter how long it has been since Roots, they are sent a document named Small Group Basics which reviews these points, as well as a sample of a Covenant used by many groups.

We are very proud of our Small Group Ministry program and support it with an annual Appreciation Sunday, an annual social event for leaders, and several workshops each year. Retention is high with many people staying involved in a group year after year. Financial support is higher for Branches members than for the overall congregation. You could say that strong Roots produces strong Branches.