

## **Short-term Small Group Ministry**

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Many members of Main Line Unitarian Church (MLUC) participate in Small Group Ministry. Some of our fifteen groups have been meeting for many years. While small groups are a wonderful way to foster connection and spiritual growth within an active church community, church members may be hesitant to join long-term groups for a number of reasons.

Some might be worried that they will not fit in with a given small group's social culture. Others might be concerned that they will not be able to forge new connections where long-standing bonds already exist. For others, a long commitment can be a stumbling block. Some who are interested may have concerns such as how small groups are run, how sessions are selected, how privacy is assured, what SGM social projects entail, and how to know when SGM "is working."

To address these barriers, the SGM Steering Committee began offering short-term small groups in the fall of 2013. At present, short-term small groups are offered throughout the year, except during holiday season and summer vacation. The groups meet at MLUC in the evening on easy-to-remember rotating days: in October the group meets on Mondays, in November on Tuesdays, etc. This allows as many individuals as possible to attend on a day that is convenient. Attendees are asked to commit to attending all four sessions offered during a given month. The minimum group size is ten individuals, and child care is offered. The short-term SGM program is led by two trained short-term group facilitators, one experienced and one new, whenever possible. The church offers short-term facilitator training twice a year.

The four topics used are carefully selected from existing material in order to give individuals new to SGM a well-rounded, positive experience. The first session typically offered is an "opener," giving participants a sense of other group members, while allowing them to feel comfortable sharing in a safe environment. The second session goes deeper. A session on happiness, or one's definition of success, for example, may be offered. The third session explores a subjective topic: the search for meaning, ways of pursuing spiritual growth, or ways to cope with stress and disappointment are possible topics. The final session is future-oriented, such as where one would like to be in ten years.

New church members are encouraged to join a short-term small group. During new member classes, participants are introduced to SGM by a facilitator and a SGM group member. A week later, participants in new member classes have an opportunity to try a SGM session as part of their new member orientation. While this session is shorter than normal SGM sessions, it gives participants an idea of what a SGM experience has to offer. During this trial session, participants will hopefully hear things from others that enhance their appreciation of members in the group, and gain insight into the shared nature of human experience. Typically, about half to three-quarters of the participants in MLUC new member classes sign up for a short-term group. Other church members are also encouraged to sign up via MLUC's newsletter. In general, the final short-term group consists of about half new members, and half church members.

Once the short-term small group runs its course, the group decides whether it would like to become a long-term group. Sometimes, in cases where the group chooses not to continue, members of the short-term group will decide to join an existing group. Typically, a SGM candidate is encouraged to try the group for three sessions before deciding whether they want to join the group or not.

The SGM Steering Committee at MLUC has made short-term small groups a viable option for those interested in experiencing SGM. The short-term program has developed into a successful vehicle for introducing MLUC members— old and new—to a rewarding path of connection and spiritual growth through small group ministry.