

## **A Covenant Group Success Story**

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With over half the congregation enrolled in covenant groups, the UU Fellowship of Vero Beach believes its program promoting small group ministries is a resounding success. In just four years, the program has grown from 80 participants in 9 groups to 140 individuals in 14 groups. This has happened in a congregation that currently numbers just 245.

The program began in 2011, after two time-limited groups had met with success and a wave of interest seemed to be growing. Members Pete Kersey and Jen Sutton took the initiative to expand the concept and promote participation among the whole congregation. With the endorsement of the Rev. Scott Alexander and the help of a few like-minded members, they designed a comprehensive program using guidance from the UU Small Group Ministry Network website and the book, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry* by Robert Hill. The first group of facilitators was trained in November of 2011 and the first sessions were offered in January of 2012.

Program co-founder Jen Sutton believes the initial success of the program may have been encouraged by the fact that the Fellowship had recently undergone both a transition in ministerial leadership and a change in facilities, and members voiced a need for increased connections. That same yearning has proved to be consistent over time. As membership increased and the Fellowship grew from a pastoral to a program congregation, the benefits of belonging to a small group became even more apparent and membership grew as a result. The program is now an integral part of our ministry.

The Vero Beach Fellowship was coined a “tidal” congregation by Interim Minister the Rev. Maureen Killoran. Some members reside in the Vero Beach area year-round. Other “snowbirds” leave for northern climes during the summer months. The covenant group program accommodates that reality by offering both year-round (10) and seasonal (4) groups, so that all members can be accommodated.

The democratic process is evident in the development of each year’s discussion topics. Ideas initially are solicited from members of current groups. Next, the 20 facilitators discuss all contributed ideas and come up with a list of about 15-20 possible topics, on which group members are then asked to provide feedback. Finally, facilitators vote for the top 12 topics. The co-chairs of the Covenant Group Program, Jen Sutton and Bonnie Shelton, then develop discussion outlines for the coming calendar year, doing primary research and reviewing session plans from the SGM Network website.

Sample topics for 2015 include Beliefs, Recapturing Childhood, Living with Intention, Dreams, Legacy, Laughter, Scarcity/Abundance, Money, Silence/Solitude, Deep Listening, Negativity, and Chance/Probability. In 2014 the topics were Anger, Compassion, Evolution, Forgiveness, Goodness without God, Guilt, Happiness/ Joy, Humanistic Religious Naturalism, Prejudice, Self- Care, Spirituality, and Visiting a Dying Friend. Program co-chair Bonnie Shelton remarked, “We believe we have substantive, diverse topics that promote reflection and energized discussions, and hope to post some of our discussion guides on the SGM Network website in the future.”

Overwhelming positive feedback has been received from members on the interesting and significant discussions engendered by the discussion outlines. All covenant groups discuss the same topic each month. However, as is typical of UUs, the discussions may vary widely, reflecting the particular interests and experiences of each group member.

New facilitators receive at least a four-hour training session based on outlines and protocols suggested by the SGM Network's *Facilitator Training and Development Manual*, and are provided with participant guidelines and an extensive written reference guide. Further, facilitators meet on a regular basis to discuss issues related to the program and to provide assistance and support to one another.

Program co-founder Jen Sutton remarked, "No matter how interesting the discussion, the central purpose of our covenant group program is to foster intimacy, open communication, and service. Though our program has no formal requirement for service, groups have spontaneously reached out to provide support for members in need (assistance with rides and memorial services), for the congregation (property clean-up, potlucks) and for the community (participation in a soup kitchen). Skills such as active listening and not rushing to judgment are beginning to move out of small groups into the general congregation."

Jen and Bonnie agree that covenant groups are the best tools we have found for maintaining a small community feel in our medium-sized congregation. We are grateful to those who came before and have shown us the way.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Fall 2015