

Learning by Training New Small Group Leaders at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge *By Suzanne Besse, Branches Co-coordinator*

Twelve new small group ministry leaders recently completed New Leader Training at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA (UCBR). I learned a lot, and I was the trainer, supporting the old adage that the best way to learn is by teaching or leading training. I learned from the participants who, along with the new leaders, included 3 experienced ones. Two wanted a refresher, and one wanted to attend with her new co-leader, something to think about as we plan training.

At UCBR, we call our small group ministry program Branches, and have done so since its beginning in 1999 because our Roots program is how most members come to join a Branches group. Roots is a six-hour introduction to Unitarianism and our congregation, and is led by our ministers. You can learn more about our program in an article in the Fall 2014 *SGM Journal*.

Diana Dorroh, a SGM Network Board member and former newsletter editor, is a member of UCBR. She trained me in 1999, and has continued to train and support leaders until recently. She also co-authored the Network's *Facilitator Training and Development Manual* in 2008, which is what we continue to use, although we call it the Branches Leader's Guide. We continuously update it and recently began emailing it to all leaders. So now it's more accessible and the attachments--including job tools such as the covenant boilerplate, service project ideas, and sessions designed for welcoming new members--can easily be shared with members. One new Leader said she's going to send the Guide to her entire group, because all of them share facilitation duties.

Diana is my mentor and friend. During our careers in state government, we both trained trainers, so we know folks with on-the-job experience can be effective trainers. Experienced Branches leaders can be ideal trainers, because they know what leaders need to know, as well as what resources and support they need.

At UCBR the goal is for all Branches leaders to complete training before leading a group. What works best is Just-in-Time training, which means as close to the time leaders take on their roles as possible. Adult learners are most highly motivated to learn what has immediate relevance, knowledge and skills that can be used right away. Retention is also higher.

Trainers know folks don't have to like the training for it to be effective. Data shows no correlation between enjoyment of a training experience and how well folks perform after training. So in evaluating the training, we wanted to know:

- *What topics, tools, or activities were most helpful? Least helpful?*
- *What ideas or tools did you take away that will affect how you lead your group(s)?*
- *How would you make the training more helpful?*

The New Branches Leader Training described here is the initial training and designed to last 1.5 hours. It's an orientation and intended to be the first and not the last training and development opportunity. Many of the responses to the evaluation questions and feedback during the training sessions are included in the play-by-play below.

Welcome and Opening Reading by the minister: The minister's presence is big, we learned. He was unable to attend one of the sessions, and although we explained the unavoidable absence and used the opening he'd chosen, it wasn't OK. More than one new leader noted the absence in the evaluations.

Visit the UU SGM Network website: www.smallgroupministry.net. The web address is prominently displayed on the cover of the hard-copy Branches Leader's Guide given to participants at the training. I brought my laptop and projected the website; however, if leaders brought their own, they could actually sign up for the Covenant Group e-Newsletter, the SGM Discussion Group, or join the SGM Network right then. Most were familiar with the session plans, but had not looked at other features, so with them telling me where to click, we explored the site.

The Branches Model: The first stop in the Branches Leader's Guide was the Branches Model, emphasizing that it's been tested and clearly works, although it does take work, but work that pays off. And if you're not following the model, it's not Branches. One leader said staying true to the model and learning ways to do so was what he found most helpful.

Takeaways: We created a flip chart list of skills and knowledge new leaders wanted to take away and used it to guide the training. Responses included: When to contact a minister or a coordinator for help; Examples of service projects; Choosing sessions; Integrating new members into an established group; Roles and responsibilities of Branches leaders; and Strategies for check-ins.

Likes and Wishes: In keeping with the Branches model, here are some of the likes and wishes expressed at the training sessions: Emphasis on and tips for staying true to the model were helpful; Would like to meet and share with other groups and leaders more often; Will use many of the attachments in the Guide; Needed more time to practice skills, such as modeling check-ins and creating session plans; Use visuals or videos to enhance training; Would like more inservices/ training sessions; Want more ideas for service projects; Would like training on creating sessions; Need our own Branches website or other way to share sessions and resources.

I hope what I've learned from our sessions will also be helpful to you, as we all strive to design and deliver the training, development, and support our Small Group Ministry leaders want and deserve.

"Deep listening requires that we make a conscious decision to put ourselves aside and be fully present to another. We empty ourselves of judgments, thoughts and opinions, simply opening space for the other to unfold. It is really a sacred experience, if you will, a time of oneness with another. We can practice deep listening to ourselves in the same way...quieting our minds, letting go of our judgments and allowing our deepest knowings and thoughts to arise."

~Barbara Green, founder of "Listening For Life"

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