

The Power of Welcoming All Newcomer Class Graduates into a Group

By Mark Gilbert and Suzanne Besse, Branches (Small Group Ministry)

Co-coordinators at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

Our Small Group Ministry (SMG) program at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge is one of the largest among Unitarian churches. We call our small groups “Branches,” the name derived from our church’s minister-led orientation program for prospective and new members called “Roots.” This model was created at All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa OK. Our SGM program began in 1999 and continues to grow as does our church membership. Currently 22 groups meet on a monthly basis with more than half of the congregation participating and, since 1999, our church membership has grown from 300 to 475. This model was created at All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa OK, whose staff first encouraged our program in Baton Rouge and shared program materials with us.

Groups meet year round, and although members are expected to commit to a year of participation, most choose to remain with their groups for several years. New members join established groups as others depart. The group I belong to has met since 1999, and only two of the original group members remain, although we are currently at the higher end of the recommended 8 to 12 members.

We strive to abide by the Three Agreements on the UU SGM Network web site, one of which is: To welcome new members, to keep the groups open to new people and ideas. The ongoing Roots orientation classes continue to be the number one way folks find their way into Branches groups. In the three two-hour Roots sessions, participants learn about the Universalist movement and our church, including Branches. Our ministers, Rev. Steve J. Crump and Rev. Nathan A. Ryan, lead the Roots classes and encourage participants to join a group. An invitation to join a Branches group is one of the ways Roots grads are welcomed into the church community. We also require Roots graduation or church membership before someone can join a group. The rationale behind that requirement is that the person will be a better and more committed group member if they have already made some commitment to the church. Most Branches participants who are not already members join the church within a few months of joining a group.

The ongoing placements can be tricky; however, data show the efforts result in better member involvement and retention. Success requires teamwork between the Branches coordinating team, which includes our Associate Minister, Rev. Nathan Ryan and co-coordinators, and the Roots class coordinator who issues the invitation and explains the placement process. Folks can complete a request form in the session or online. They are asked to rank their preferences for meeting days, times, locations, and whether childcare is needed. The information is used to find groups with openings that best fit each request.

You’ll need up-to-date information about the groups and a form or two to make this ongoing process of getting new folks into groups as soon as possible work. It does for us, so I’m sharing some of our best practices and strategies. My cocoordinator, Mark Gilbert, is excellent at tracking data, creating forms, and finding tools to streamline the process. Included below are his descriptions of the tools used to manage files and scheduling.

Best Practice: Annual One on One Meetings with Branches Leaders. Once a year the coordinating team led by the minister meets with the two leaders of each group for an update on the status of the group and its members, including the leaders. These confidential One-on-Ones are also an opportunity to find out how the team and church can support the Branches Leaders.

Tool for Scheduling: We use Doodle, which makes this task easier than the time-consuming email alternative.

Best Practices for Ongoing Placements:

Up-to-date information about group size, meeting info, and leader contact info is essential. Personal contact with prospective members is also important. Phone calls and face-to-face conversations at church by the coordinators and the leaders can make entry into small groups easier for new members. All are given a copy of *Branches Basics for Participants* (included in the Training Manual) prior to the first meeting, and leaders are encouraged to include one or more welcoming rituals suggested in the **Facilitator Training Manual**, which can be ordered on the SGM website.

Tools for Leaders: All are provided a hard and electronic copy of the Facilitator Training Manual and are emailed updated lists of group leaders and member participants. Leaders are expected to report all changes within groups to the coordinators.

Tool for creating Placement Request Form: We use JotForm, a free service for up to 100 form submissions per month. It offers tremendous flexibility and makes it possible for folks to fill out and submit forms online. Paper forms are also used and made available at the Welcome Table on Sundays.

Tools for Maintaining Lists of Group Leaders and Participants: Information from a word processing file was migrated to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (you can also use an Open Office Calc spreadsheet as well) to allow greater flexibility, such as formatting and adding functions. The spreadsheet is then uploaded to a Google Drive (Note: if you have a Google account or email address you have access to Google Drive) to allow even greater flexibility, including the ability to share the file, edit, and export it in various formats. We also created shared folders in Google Drive to be able to share files among the members of the Branches coordinating team. Our approach may not work for you (*one size does not fit all*), but we hope it may give you some ideas for making the management of your program easier. A former coordinator used a simple low-tech sortable Word table to track this information.

Conclusion

The main idea we'd like to share is that recommending covenant group participation to newcomer class graduates, welcoming them into your program and making room for them is powerful. It is guaranteed to result in growth to your program and will support membership growth by increasing retention. It requires solid ministerial support and in the beginning, it means continuously identifying and training new leaders, so that you can open new groups. **The Facilitator Training Manual** covers identifying, recruiting and supporting your leaders, as well as training them.. If you have shortterm groups, rather than continuing groups, you would need to open new groups during the year. We hope this is helpful and inspiring to you.

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