

UU SMALL GROUP MINISTRY NETWORK  
**Jumpstart Your Small Group Ministry Program**

*by Alicia Hawkins, Albuquerque, NM*

PART 1 *Quarterly* 2009 Fall

Often our small group ministry programs start off with a bang, then lose momentum after a few years. Participation lags and program management now seems more like work. In this article we will explore what some of you have done to ignite a dwindling small group ministry program: what has worked, what has not, and what your process has been.

First, let's look at signs of a dwindling program. Rev. Lucy Ijams, minister of the UU Church in Meriden, CT, speaks of becoming aware that the SGM program was getting a bit "ossified". Numbers go down, it becomes harder to find "fired up" facilitators, and there is a general feeling of "same old, same old" to monthly facilitator meetings. Excitement has been replaced by tedium. Some of the areas to focus on in reviving your program are facilitators, meeting structure, visibility in the church, and program logistics. We will concentrate on the first two in this article. Bringing new life to a program will involve changes in some areas and, perhaps, some resistance to change.

**Facilitators** are at the core of SGM. Groups thrive with great facilitators and flounder with weak facilitators. Some say that great facilitators are naturals. In most cases, however, we find that great facilitators have had great training. Pay attention to options for training and provide initial training for new facilitators who have previously been group members, ongoing training through monthly meetings where facilitators share "joys and concerns" of their groups and help one another with issues, and coaching for new facilitators from your "veteran/ace" facilitators. Pairing up co-facilitators is an art, putting together all the varied skills of each facilitator - young/old, male/female, organized/spontaneous, calm/ emotional, first-time/veteran - there are lots of pairing possibilities!

How do you find good facilitators? Kathy McVoy of First Unitarian Church of St. Louis suggests asking people who are already good facilitators who they might recommend. Often this can bring to light good facilitators from other areas of the church. Also, ask your facilitators to suggest possible new facilitators from their existing groups. Almost always one person will come to mind.

Make it easy for facilitators to do their job by supplying them with everything they need, starting with great materials. We have a writing team busy doing that at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque and Main Line Unitarian Church. Provide logistic support to form the groups, help with room reservations, provide name tags and chalices.

Give facilitators recognition all along the way. Consider honoring them in worship services, listing their names in the church newsletter, and hosting a recognition dinner for them. Create a "thank you" note from their group. The covenant groups did this in Albuquerque and facilitators were deeply touched by group member comments. Give them a token gift. Ask clergy to write them a note of thanks emphasizing how facilitators are part of the leadership of the church.

**Meeting structure** varies across the U.S. Be aware of what variations may be helpful and what areas should not be tinkered with. For example, maintaining a safe space for sharing is crucial for SGM and cannot be changed. Here are some areas that can be modified: Change the style of material used. If the group is used to coming to the meeting with little forethought to the topic, give some material with quotes and questions ahead of time. On the other hand, if your group has been using "ponder ahead of time" materials, try session plans that present a topic on the spot. If

your groups use free choice for topics, try changing to all groups using the same topics and a couple paired with the minister's sermon.

Change the sharing process. Here's one possibility: Start with a round of brief comments on an aspect of the topic from each group member (kind of a "starter sharing"). Follow with a second round of deeper sharing on the topic. A third round may include sharing brought to mind from others' sharing or may come from a question such as, "What realization have you come away with about this topic?" Vary the sharing process to find out what works best for your groups.

Meet for a 6-8 month series. A limited time frame is helpful and may encourage participation since some people find it stressful to leave an ongoing group. Let groups that want to continue indefinitely do so. Supply them with top-notch materials and suggest they try rotating the facilitator role. You may get some new facilitators from this practice.

Tinker with all aspects of the meeting. Invite members to bring their favorite opening reading. Try a chalice extinguishing ritual. Vary the silence process by using a walking meditation or a visualization. Instead of a closing reading try this: Ask the group to come close together around the chalice holding hands. Invite each person to say a word or phrase that describes how they are feeling right now.

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## **PART 2**

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In the Fall 2009 issue of the *SGM Quarterly*, we looked at signs of a dwindling SGM program and focused on facilitators and meeting structure as ways to breathe new life into a program. Now we'll explore two additional areas: Visibility and Program Logistics.

### **Visibility in the Church**

"Your program needs to be visible to everyone who takes part in the life of your congregation if it is to be understood as a real and vital part of the life of the church," states Rev. Russ Savage, Assistant Minister at the UU Church of Annapolis, MD [See his article in the *Fall 2009 issue*]. Some ways to make this happen:

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Speak in worship services in a pulpit editorial at least once a year. Fern Aron of Shawnee Mission UU Church in Overland Park, KS, recommends asking respected congregants to talk about their experience in small group ministry. Choose a diverse group of speakers.

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Look at exposure in the newsletter. What about the website? Look at bulletin boards, new member materials, brochures, and annual reports. What possibilities can you find for getting the word out to others?

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Coordinate topics with the minister. Group members will feel like the "in group" when they hear a sermon that relates to their covenant group topic.

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Find ways to interact with other areas of the church. For example, do a one-time covenant group for RE teachers, a youth group, young moms (complete with babysitting services), or for an as-

pect of a social action program. Be creative to find ways to let all areas of the church become acquainted with SGM.

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Rev. Lucy Ijams of the UU Church in Meriden, CT, suggests having a Spiritual Sharing Circle Experience after the worship service for a half hour to acquaint others with the SGM process. She also suggests advertising the session topics in the newsletter to let folks better understand what these groups are all about.

### **Program Logistics**

Changes in this area are limitless. If your groups are ongoing, try some time-limited groups of 6-8 months. Fern Aron tells us that “groups are OK with dissolving their groups in May to go on to others in September of the next year.” If your groups start once a year, try two start-up dates. Often mid-January is a good start-up time.

Solicit opinions and ideas from group members. At the end of a series have a celebratory potluck where groups can participate in plans for the next year. You’ll have lots of ideas to try out.

There is a lot of administrative work involved in a successful SGM program: room reservations, participant sign-ups, newsletter articles, facilitator trainings, session plans, and endless details. Creating a steering committee may be helpful to prevent burn-out of the SGM coordinator, and will elicit new ideas to keep the program fresh.

Have a brainstorming session. Albuquerque wanted to find a way to involve more new members and came up with three-session minicovenant groups to introduce the concept of SGM to new members. This has expanded to include “old-timers” who never quite knew what SGM was about and wanted to try it before signing up for a six month group.

Here’s a good question to brainstorm with selected group members, clergy and leadership in the SGM program: Are small groups just another program or does small group ministry fulfill the very essence of what the church is about? Being clear on your congregation’s ministry objectives is crucial to your program’s long term success. The only “sacred cow” in the eyes of many in the area of SGM is that of creating a safe place where participants can tell their stories to open, appreciative listening hearts. Any other area of SGM can be explored to further enrich and enliven the experience for those in our churches.

It can be a lot of work to overhaul a lethargic program. It can also walk hand in hand with the vision of the church. Try some tinkering with *your* Small Group Ministry program.

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