

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network  
**Making Small Group Ministry Available**  
Diana Dorroh

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## **Part 1 – INTRODUCTION**

*CGN October 2010*

From a congregational perspective, there are several reasons to include virtually everyone in your small group ministry program:

- The opportunities for growth through small group ministry are maximized by involving as many people as possible. Since many membership losses occur with our newest members, "getting new members into" covenant groups and keeping them there for several years can affect numerical congregational growth.
- When the norms of listening, acceptance and covenantal behavior are applied throughout the congregation, the culture changes and your next conflict could be more civil and inflict less lasting harm.
- Having most of your congregation in covenant groups allows a natural structure for providing shared ministry in times of national, local and congregational trauma.

From an individual perspective, it is simply more hospitable and more equitable to remove barriers and make it easier for everyone to participate and share the benefits of intimacy, ultimacy and mutual ministry. Of course, we also need to allow people to opt out without judgment and with the choice of participating at a later time.

Over the next six months, we will be exploring ways that congregations have made small group ministry more inclusive. A preliminary list of opportunities is listed below. I welcome your identification of more opportunities, as well as your stories about your own congregation's efforts to include more people in covenant groups or an individual group's successes and challenges.

1. **Extra Care Required Members** - Those who have trouble sharing and those who need and perhaps are receiving psychological help can often participate when there is a solid small group ministry model and capable leaders who are both trained and supported.
2. **Youth, Children, Multi-Generational Groups** - This is a new focus for many congregations, and there are stories about successes with different age groups. Rev. Helen Zidowecki is focusing on this topic and we will be hearing from her.
3. **Handicapped and Non-Driving Members** - Often a group meeting at church can be enough to provide access to handicapped people. Non-drivers are a special problem, however. At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, we are experimenting with a daytime group with non-drivers and members who are willing to assist with rides.
4. **Elderly** - Many churches are experimenting with groups especially oriented to the elderly.

5. **Parents with Young Children** - Several churches are offering childcare at the church for parents who need childcare in order to participate. At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, we have 3 such groups and continue to add new members and more groups.
6. **New Members and Graduates of the Newcomers Class** - Making openings available to graduates takes some planning and a good system for identifying, recruiting, and training leaders and starting new groups.
7. **Long-Term Members** - Sometimes long-term members need a special invitation to attend a group. Send me your success story about including one or more long-term members.
8. **Members Challenged by Distance** - Opening geography-based groups in areas that are 30 - 45 minutes away from your church can allow people who are unwilling or unable to travel 45 or even 75 minutes each way to participate in a covenant group.

Please send me your stories, whether they're short and simple or long and complex.  
[Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com).

## Part 2 – MEMBERS CHALLENGED BY DISTANCE

*CGN November 2010*

In the process of soliciting articles for Covenant Group News on the subject of Making Small Group Ministry Available, I have established and shared the following schedule for discussion of the topics identified in the October Covenant Group News. None on the issues will be exclusively dedicated to the topic for that month, but I plan to include at least two articles on the subject each month. To fulfill that promise, I need your help. Please send me your ideas, challenges, and successes, [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com).

In my own church, the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, we have about sixteen groups with randomly chosen participants. However, we are now experimenting with special purpose groups to allow more people to participate. We have two groups established to make small group ministry more available to people who live 30-45 miles away from the church. The group in St. Francisville, north of Baton Rouge, has been operating very successfully for about two years. The group has two enthusiastic leaders and about 6 members, total. About a year ago, we opened a group "across the Mississippi river" which calls itself "Westside". This group has four very faithful members, including the two leaders. When we have a new congregation member who lives in either area, we put the new member in touch with the leaders.

Another way to serve church members who live 30-45 miles from your church but attend church on Sunday morning would be to offer a group that meets at church right after the church service(s) or after lunch. Of course, you'd need to consider your worship schedule and available space. This could also be an intermediate step, collecting people who live in different directions and "spinning off" groups, as you have enough people who can meet together in homes to form a group. Are you already doing this? If so, please drop me a note [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com).

**Making Small Group Ministry Available with Skype**  
from Sandy Lubert, First UU Church of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

*CGN November 2010*

I am a facilitator at First Hamilton (mine is currently the only active group, unfortunately). We have, in the past, had very active SGM. I am quite passionate about it.

One interesting thing I can share with you is that last Wed night, I SKYPED\* someone in to our SGM meeting! She is a friend who is living in Illinois and has not found a congregation yet. So we both set up our laptops with webcams, and she participated fully -- and virtually! It was a great experience and I believe it has tons of potential applications for all kinds of ministry and congregants who might not be able to "physically" participate in SGM but are otherwise keen.

\*Skype is software that can be used to contact two computers for a conversation. If both have cameras, they can each see images of the other.

### **Making Small Group Ministry Available with Online Groups**

by Rev. Lynn Ungar, Church of the Larger Fellowship Minister for Lifespan Learning, CLF  
Worldwide office is in Boston, MA

*CGN November 2010*

Online covenant groups allow members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship to have deep and lasting relationships with a small group of people who may live literally on opposite sides of the world. Rather than having meetings in person which last for an hour or two, CLF covenant group sessions last 3-4 weeks. Over that time the facilitator sends out an opening reading and invites members to check in. A few days are allowed for members to check in via email, and then the group moves to considering questions on spiritual topics posed by the facilitator. Again, responses are given via the internet, and people have a week or two to post their responses, and to respond to the posts of others. A few days are allotted for closing and evaluation, and then most groups take a week for open "back porch chat" or "tea time."

This online format makes it possible for people who are geographically isolated to have close relationships, and permits those who are unavailable Sunday mornings or weekday evenings to interact on their own time frame. It also means that people who are shy, quiet, or take their time in processing can relate on terms that are comfortable for them. While online groups sacrifice the pleasure of sitting in compassionate silence, they offer distinct advantages, and some of our groups have been meeting continuously for more than five years.

### **Part 3 - PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN**

By Diana Dorroh  
*CGN December 2010*

The series of subtopics on Making Small Group Ministry Available continues. This month's subtopic is Parents with Young Children.

My experience with involving parents of young children in covenant groups began about four years ago. I had noticed during the winter and spring of 2007 that we were getting young parents who could not participate in a covenant group unless childcare was provided. With the newcomers class in April, there were finally ten, enough to start a covenant group with childcare.

The RE Director was supportive and willing to arrange paid childcare for the group at the church on one night a month. The church board allocated funds to pay the childcare workers. I planned to lead the group, but two capable and experienced leaders stepped forward after that first meeting and assured me that they were willing and able to lead the group. Our minister and I trained them and they became leaders. We continued to offer participation with childcare to graduates of our newcomer class. Within a year, the covenant group swelled to about 18 members and split. One leader went with the newer people and one stayed with the older members. New co-leaders were recruited from within the groups. Leaders from both groups attended the leaders' meetings and discussed their challenges and successes. Soon there was a third group meeting with the first two and one meeting on Wednesday night, when childcare is always provided for Choir Meeting and Wednesday RE programming.

This was a huge success for our church and was allowing us to grow in this critical demographic. These parents were coming into the newcomers class, signing up for a covenant group, attending church, bringing their children to RE on Sunday, joining the church and pledging. And there were at least 30 of them, mostly collected within two years. About this time, tension developed around the parents' concerns with the childcare provided and their own individual roles within the church. Some of the angst might have been avoided if we had included long-term members in the groups, either as leaders or group members to orient the new members to the church and help with problem solutions. Today we have three thriving groups. Members of these groups have gained experience as church members and leaders and are being asked to serve in a variety of ways. We added one leader with ten years of experience and UU SGM Institute training and we've added some members who do not need childcare to make the groups more random. Providing competent, reliable, and cheerful childcare on Friday nights continues to be a significant challenge, but a nice problem to have. As our minister, Rev. Steve Crump, says: "Dying churches don't have these problems."

I hope our story makes clear the power and benefits of inviting new members into your covenant groups and making childcare available to those who need it. Some planning is in order (1) to make sure the groups have experienced leadership, either as group leaders or participants, and (2) to get funding and appropriate organizational placement for supervision of the childcare.

There are, of course, other ways to make small group ministry available to parents of young children. When two parents want to participate, they can join groups on different nights. Also, some groups have had success with providing childcare for groups meeting in private homes. There are two articles below this one that describe other churches' experience. I know that many churches have made groups with childcare part of their programs and others are trying it. Send me your stories. [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com)

## **Description of A Robust Program with Daytime and Childcare Groups**

from Sue Majors, High Plains UU, Colorado Springs, CO

*CGN November 2010*

We are doing well. Jack (Majors) and I have headed up the facilitators for our small group ministry program for a year now. We call them U and I groups (Ultimacy and Intimacy). Our church has had U and I groups for 10 of our 13 years in existence. We presently have 10 groups with 2 new groups ready to start in the next few months. We are holding a Facilitator training next month and have 11 people attending, either to become facilitators for a potential new group or to take over their existing group (as their facilitator takes a break after 2 years or more of

facilitating). We have 160 members at High Plains and have 91 in U and I groups, with 7 more waiting to join a group. Our church has experienced significant growth in membership, as well as in U and I participation. This year we will have an Interim Minister and Jack and I will be doing the U and I facilitator training (which the minister has done in the past) and chair the U and I Facilitator meetings (which we have shared with the minister).

I also wanted to share about two new groups we started this fall.

One is a daytime group that meets at 10am on Thursday. It is mostly older, retired members. They sometimes go out for lunch with each other after the group. They meet as a standard U and I group with regular topics and a trained facilitator.

We also started a parent/childcare group. Because parents need flexibility, we offer the group on Friday night at the church and the attendance varies. We have two trained facilitators who also come. If there are enough people for 2 groups, the facilitators divide the group into two smaller ones and they all discuss the same topics in different rooms. We have a childcare provider who has blocked out these Fridays for us and she has back up if needed. We do ask parents to let us know if they will be coming or not the day before but allow for emergencies of course. The topics this fall have been child centered. Two have been "Emotional Intelligence" and "Is parenthood a competitive sport?" At some point in the future, some of the participants may want to switch to personal spiritual growth topics. There is also the option of having 2 groups, one for child centered topics and one for more usual U and I topics.

So far, both groups are working well.

*Editor's Note:* Sue describes a program that includes more than 50% of the church's membership, program growth, and membership growth. I believe that there is a relationship between program growth to 50% of membership or more and church membership growth. Does your church have a similar story? [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com)

## **Part 4 - THE ELDERLY**

*CGN January 2011*

CGN January 2011 I'm hoping to have a more complete article on this topic next later this year. For now, here are my thoughts and an experience.

Involving an elderly person in your group might require finding someone to give them a ride, adapting your facilitation style to make sure they stay included, and choosing some topics that allow them to express their current life concerns and issues.

Starting a group for the elderly might require choosing an accessible location, meeting in the daytime, and finding topics for all of the sessions that focus on the issues most important to the elderly, as well as adapting your facilitation style and getting rides for some members,

And now, my story. There is an elderly person in the group I currently lead. Let's call her Harriet. A family member usually brings her to meetings and participates in the group as well. When the family member is not available, someone else gives her a ride. For the first six meetings, Harriet participated in check-in, but then tended to "doze off" during the discussion and it was getting progressively more obvious. My co-leader and I just let that happen. After the sixth meeting, I decided that I was going to keep her engaged in the discussion topic, whether I

was leading the session or not. Simple enough. I was just going to ask her a question as she was falling asleep. For the last two meetings, she has not slept and has participated actively, but she did it herself. I haven't had to ask her a question yet. Serendipity, grace, mystery---they all happen in covenant group meetings.

### **Comments on Making SGM Available to the Elderly**

Dottie Kelly, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

*CGN January 2011*

At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge we are fortunate to have a campus that is 100% accessible for anyone with mobility impairment. We are proud of the forward thinking of those working with the architects in the 1980's when these things were not mandated by law but by consideration of others. This asset, and our members who enjoy it, directed our thinking to offering them access to our Branches program as well.

We then thought about members who may be avoiding joining one of our other 23 groups because of the inconvenience of driving at night, usually because of visual deficits. We also have members who do not drive or have no transportation and are seen at church only when transported by others. In January we started a new group meeting at the church at 10 AM on the same day of the month as our other daytime group. That group had immediately filled with active retirees who all drove when it opened a year ago. We hope to exchange rosters for the purpose of ride sharing and for a quarterly social lunch event following the two meetings. It is not totally an affinity group, because it has drawn someone who works an evening shift and is available only for a daytime group. But we have brought into the Small Group Ministry program another nine people who were not being served before this group.

### **Comments on Making SGM Available to the Elderly**

Jan Bowden, UU Church of Little Rock, AR

*CGN January 2011*

I enjoyed reading the most recent issue of the News. About a year ago, one elderly member of our covenant group moved into an assisted living center. She's much happier, and so is her husband!! Neither of them is driving very much at night anymore, so it was a "no-brainer" for our group to decide to have our meetings at the center. The facility has a nice, small meeting room and a very comfortable front lobby, so we can meet either place. Using the center means that Elaine can continue to participate and none of the rest of us has to clean our houses!

Another issue that you might explore sometime is that of attendance. My group has a core group of 6-7 who attend regularly, but there are a few others on the group's email list who attend rarely, if at all. But they still want to be counted as members. Do other groups have similar problems, and how do they deal with them?

*Editor's Note:* We discussed this very issue at our Leaders Meeting in Baton Rouge this week. Several leaders said it usually resolves itself and the member starts attending regularly or drops out. Another leader said that she has a member who comes only occasionally when she has a problem and seems like a stranger to the group. Yet another leader told a story about talking to the member about being taken off the email list, getting agreement, and then being accused later by a third party of removing someone from her group. There was general agreement that having

such a member interferes with intimacy in the group. One of the issues is: When does the health and intimacy level of the group outweigh the value of being there for members who do not attend regularly, but need to continue to be part of the group? Send me your thoughts on handling group members who do not attend regularly. [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com)

**Note from Sayer Johnson, First UU Alton, IL**  
*CGN January 2011*

I am co-facilitator of the Parents Seeking Peace Chalice circle. We also support a LGBTQ chalice of which I am a member. We have a 50 plus group, a women's chalice a men's chalice and a "general" chalice group that meets at a person's home and serves two local churches.

I have been involved for about 3 years and I am always looking for good topic. We are always trying to "grow" our group. We have lots of parents. We are a growing congregation...I think we have just about moved away from a family church to the next level. Since I have been here we have gone from about 30 regulars to about 70 and moved from one service to two.

I am very invested in the spiritual health of the church and I believe small groups are what made me feel most a "part" of the community.

**Thoughts on Challenges Facilitators Face in Making Small Group Ministry Available,**

from Becky Smith, Manatee UU Fellowship, Bradenton, FL  
*CGN December 2010*

I have thoughts on making covenant groups more available to the elderly from being in a group with a participant who didn't like to drive in the dark. When we had the time change, our 5:30 start group was leaving in the dark and this made it more difficult for her to participate. I also have a group member who doesn't have a computer so that means an email message misses her and she needs a phone call. Also if people are hard of hearing they are isolated by that and if they don't hear all of what someone else says they can't participate. If they can't hear they can't listen.

*Editor's Note:* Please share your solutions to helping people participate in your covenant group. [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com).

**Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME,**  
*CGN February 2011*

"An elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential and whose life continues to have within it promise for, and connection to, the future. An elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy, and pleasure, and her or his birthright to those remains intact. Moreover, an elder is a person who deserves respect and honor and whose work is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and formulate this into a legacy for future generations."

*From Age-ing to Sage-ing, Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, p. 271*

The Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, Maine, started intentional focus on older congregants last year with discussions following our Elder Lunches once a month, and using the Aging session from the UUA adult curriculum, *Weaving Our Diversity*. This year we

are offering Small Group Ministry following the Elder Lunches. This ministry is under the leadership of the minister, Rev. Carie Johnsen and the Pastoral Care Associates.

Some of the guidelines for my own development of programming for elders are:

\* *The language used is inclusive and positive.* "Elders" is a respected concept in many cultures, and the wisdom and insight of elders is certainly needed in our culture at this time.

\* *The factors to be considered in planning small group ministry for elders need to be considered for everyone.* While transportation or time of scheduling or the ambiance of the room may be more pronounced factors for elders, these factors apply to all ages.

\* *Actively involving elders in planning Small Group Ministry for Elders increases relevance.* I realize that I am working on building a program that I want to grow into. And working with elders in the Augusta congregation is so rewarding and, frankly, exciting. We have two elder-specific groups, and others that involve elders in a more diverse age group.

\* *Elders have so many gifts - provide an opportunity for them to share.* In a culture that tends to favor youth, we are the losers when the wisdom of the elders is not a regular part of our mindset. It is a privilege to walk with elders in their later years, with gifts, surprises and transitions.

I invite you to look at UU resources as you develop your Small Group Ministry with elders:

\* The Northern New England District website for the work of Rev. Patricia Hoertdoerfer. I have been using some of her writings in developing session plans, and have been led to great resources for further study.

\* "Congregations develop programs for seniors" By [Donald E. Skinner](http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/121197.shtml), Winter 2008 11.1.08 (<http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/121197.shtml>)

I look forward to hearing experiences of congregations as they develop Small Group Ministry for Elders to be one of the most dynamic parts of our programming.

Editors Note: Rev. Helen Zidowecki is President of the UU Small Group Ministry Network.

## **Dan Lathrop, University Unitarian Church, Seattle, WA**

*CGN February 2011*

I am Dan Lathrop from UUC Seattle. First, I've been involved with Covenant Groups at our church for several years. Through the covenant group experience I have truly bonded to the church. For the past 2 1/2 years I have been a co-facilitator of "Covenant Central" as we were dubbed...the volunteers who coordinate the facilitators, assign individuals to groups, deal with the various situations that arise, conduct training for facilitators, and distribute the themes. We have a dedicated Theme Team that drafts the themes.

I wanted to address the topic of the elderly. Last year we had a 91 year old participant who was blind and nearly deaf. She'd participated for years...and when she couldn't drive, she hosted the meetings in her condo and later in her assisted living facility. She finally had to give it up this year due to declining hearing. We have several elderly members who participate and facilitate groups. Fortunately we are large enough to coordinate seven or eight groups meeting in the morning, afternoon and evenings.

## **Part 5 -PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

by Mary Heafy, Keene UU Church, Keene, NH



As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The simplest way to do this when interacting with a person with a disability is to remember that a person with a disability is a person first. All people, including those with disabilities, have unique skills, talents, interests.

Some general etiquette tips include:

- **Practice the Golden Rule.** Think of the person first, not their disability. Relax and be yourself
- **Always ask before giving assistance.** A person with a disability may not need or want your help
- **Think before you speak.** Avoid using labels. Always use people first language (see chart below)
- **Avoid showing pity or being patronizing.** People with disabilities are not victims. Do not use a pet name, such as "honey". Do not speak with someone with a disability as though they were a child
- **Focus on ability rather than disability** - what a person can do rather than what they cannot do
- **Remember that everyone** - people with and without disabilities - has the ability to succeed and the ability to make mistakes and learn from them
- **Always use positive, people first language** that empowers rather than marginalizes.

People First Language	
Offensive	Preferred
Birth defect	Person who is disabled since birth, born with a congenital disability
Cerebral palsied	Person who has cerebral palsy
Cripple	Person who needs mobility assistance
Deaf and dumb, deaf mute	Person who is deaf and does not speak
Deformed	Person who has a physical disability
Emotionally disturbed	Person with an emotional disability
Handicapped	Person with a disability
Hunchbacked	Person with a spinal curvature
Insane, deranged, deviant	Person with a mental illness
Midget, dwarf	Person who is small in stature
Mongoloid	Person who has Down Syndrome
Normal	Typical, non-disabled, able-bodied
Retarded	Person with a cognitive disability
Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair

When you interact with **someone with a disability**, speak directly to them, not to their aides, interpreters, companions.

When you interact with **someone with a cognitive disability**, speak to the person in clear simple sentences. Give them time to communicate with you.

When you interact with **someone who uses a wheelchair**, do not push, lean on, move or hold the person's wheelchair. Try to put yourself at eye level - pull up your own chair.

When you interact with **someone who is blind or visually impaired**, always introduce yourself by name and let him or her know when you are leaving. Offer your arm or elbow if they request assistance but NEVER grab their arm or elbow. If the person has a guide dog, do not pet or distract the dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety.

When you interact with **someone who is deaf or hearing impaired**, remember that the person may have some hearing, may be able to read lips or may use sign language or assistive technology. ASK them how they prefer to communicate

When you interact with **someone with a speech impairment**, allow them as much time as they need to communicate. Be respectful and avoid trying to finish their sentences

The best way to explore how to support a person with a disability is to speak directly to the individual. A facilitator may begin the conversation as simply as, "I am delighted that you will be part of our covenant group. I wonder if there are any accommodations you might need to participate in the group?" Some things that might come up are a physically accessible location, large print handouts, time to compose thoughts before speaking, seating within the group that allows for greater visual or auditory access, something to do with his/her hands to stay focused on the conversation, a stretch break.

The Job Accommodation Network is a wonderful on-line resource with an A-Z listing of accommodations by disabilities. (<http://askjan.org>). While primarily designed for workplace accommodations, the simple, practical suggestions may serve as a starting point for identifying how to include a person with a disability in small group ministry or other aspects of congregational life. Another resource is found at [www.dhs.state.il.us](http://www.dhs.state.il.us) and is a flyer called "People First: a guide to interacting with people with disabilities". A number of suggestions in this article are drawn from the People First flyer.

In conclusion, relax, be yourself, look forward to making a new friend, focus on what a person can do rather than what they cannot do. Know that we all misspeak and misstep from time to time but learning from these is experiences is what allows all people - with and without disabilities - to grow.

## **Part 6 - YOUTH, CHILDREN, AND MULTIGENERATIONAL GROUPS** by Rev. Helen Zidoweki, President, UU SGM Network

*CGN May 2011*

I appreciated the opportunity to be at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge May 21-22 to lead a workshop on Small Group Ministry With Youth. Transformation occurred with the session plans on "Youth-Adult Relations" and "Being a Facilitator." The youth are ready to take this on! They

will be working with the incoming DRE, SGM Coordinator and youth coordinator on the logistics.

It was an honor to work with Rev. Steve Crump on the Sunday Service, where I described the movement toward Small Group Ministry for all ages as being in a swimming pool.

"Now think of a large **swimming pool** and the water is Small Group Ministry. The adults were the first into the water. They found small group ministry to be a great experience. But if it were such a wonderful thing, why should it be for adults only? If we want our children and youth to understand the culture of the congregation and to stay in the congregation, why not introduce them to small group ministry? If small group ministry is going to change our congregations, and our children and youth are our future leaders, we had better involve them in this new way of "doing church."

Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group materials became available for Young Adults, youth, and children initially between 2003 and 2005. So other ages have been exposed the Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups. But the pool is still filled primarily with adults.

But in order to swim in a pool with all ages, we have to move all around the pool. What happens when we have small group ministry with mixed ages? Or with families? This could get pretty interesting with lots of splashing. Maybe we need to have a some lanes set aside for swimming laps, like being with our own age groups. And then we have some open water so that ages can mix. And maybe people can move between the lanes and the open area! How much fun! How much energy! How much possibility!"

My visit was capped with an afternoon with their group leaders and members. In addition to an overview of their program, they field-tested a session plan critique sheet that will be on the Network website. This is a tool for reviewing the numerous session plans that are available as well as a guide for developing session plans.

Thanks, Baton Rouge, for your contributions to Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups.  
Helen Zidowecki

### **Additional Issues to Consider Before Making SGM Available to Youth**

Susan Jordan, Emerson UU Congregation, Marietta, GA  
UU SGM Steering Committee on *CGN June 2011*

We at Emerson UU Congregation in Marietta are just beginning our Emerson Listening Circles in September. We discussed having a SGM program for youth and decided to wait because of the obstacles you described and others we may not have thought of.

- How will the youth feel if there are two adults present (... with criminal background checks)?
- If we meet in someone's home, will we need two adults (... with criminal background checks)?
- Will it be a Sunday morning program? ...
- What happens to their regular Sunday program?

- Would the format for Sunday RE be SGM once a month?
- Will it compete with OWL?
- Since many do not drive, it may be difficult to get them back for another church activity later in the day on Sundays.
- Youth are busy with activities and studies. When would they be able to gather during the week?
- Our RE Director, Beth Klein, says, "My dream is to offer an Interfaith Sr. High youth group for East Cobb based at Emerson that does community service work." ... Wouldn't this be an outstanding SGM program.

The bottom line for us is that we are going to start with adult programs. But we are very interested in learning about the joys and challenges of a program for youth.

## **Part 7 -NEW MEMBERS AND NEWCOMERS CLASS GRADUATES**

Diana Dorroh, CGN Editor

*CGN June 2011*

In 1999, the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge adopted the Roots and Branches model, described by Rev. Brent Smith in the Summer Quarterly. An important part of this model is inviting graduates of the newcomers (Roots) class to join a covenant (Branches) group. Our church's initial goal was to create a program that would allow new members to make a connection to a small group and to the church. There were two initial problems: persuading the participants to join a group and finding leaders for the groups. As time went by, the Branches program became a well-known part of our church and was an easier "sell." Also, our minister, Rev. Steve Crump, talked in each class session about the benefits of joining a group, so that by the last session, most were ready to join. Also, in the early years, forming so many new groups created a constant need for new facilitators, but somehow Rev. Crump, and I found qualified leaders and trained them before the last session of the Roots class was held. Our groups continue indefinitely and most members stay with their group. So... after about five years, half of our congregation belonged to a covenant group. After about seven years, more than 60% of our congregation belonged to a group. Currently, we have 24 Branches groups and 250 participants, including about 40 facilitators. If better retention of new members is one of your goals, I highly recommend a concerted effort to get them into a covenant group.

Since 1999, our congregation has grown from 300 members to 390 members. When most members of a congregation participate in small group ministry, membership retention improves and this creates a potential for numeric growth. Another benefit of having most congregation members in a covenant group is the tendency for group participants to be in right relationship in other church settings and to listen and accept other church members. This can make the inevitable church conflicts more civilized.

Recently, I'm hearing that more congregations are intentionally inviting new members and graduates of their newcomers classes to join a covenant group. At one of the GA workshops, a staff member from a church with more than 950 certified members described an experience of intentionally "putting" new members into covenant groups and, over time, having 700 members in small group ministry. I'm in the process of contacting the sgm coordinator at this congregation, so that you can hear their whole story.

Send me your experiences with including new members and newcomers class graduates in your small group ministry program. [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com)