

## **My Experience as a Branches Facilitator**

**By Bobby Thompson, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA *CGN March 2009***

I was one of the first group of church members to be trained as Branches (small group) facilitators. Our minister, Rev. Steve Crump, did a wonderful job of giving us a model of what the groups should look like, and more importantly, what they should feel like. Even so, interacting with humans, on this level, in real time, there is no training for that. Mark Gilbert, co-facilitator, and I had the luck or bad luck, however you look at it, of forming a group that decided, right out of the chute, to fly without a net, as someone put it. In other words, they wanted to be a covenant group without a covenant. No matter how much Mark and I pushed and prodded, they were not going to have it. They wanted their bond as a group to stand alone, with no strings attached. To make matters worse, we seemed to attract new people into the group that were just as rebellious. While Mark and I commiserated over it, Steve said that indeed a covenant had been made. It was an unspoken one.

That was nine years ago. The membership has ebbed and flowed for different reasons, mainly members moving away. Still, we have retained a core group of dedicated members.

At our last meeting we were discussing "transformation" from a series on Process Theology. It was about how being accepted by or accepting someone or a group can be transformative. Each member expressed in some way what the group has meant to them, new and old members alike. We have seen each other through good times and bad. Some mentioned what a boost it has been to their spiritual growth to be a part of and have the support of such an open and accepting group. Others talked about the transforming power of a phone call, a card, a face at the hospital, prepared food after surgery, or checking on each other after a hurricane. Some said this was the best or smartest thing the church could have come up with. Others said it is the thing that keeps them connected to the church.

I add my voice to the transforming power of being a witness to, as well as a part of this process of small group ministry. We provide a safe space, once a month, for two hours where we can count on being heard and not judged. We are not there to fix, but if we can help, we do. It has been amazing to me to be a part of this group that has bonded without a written covenant and flies without a net. We do it, I'd guess, by holding each other's hand.

**MiJa Thompson, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA *CGN July 2009***

My membership and leadership in Branches is a vital part of my life. The gifts I receive are endless and I am graced at every encounter.

I am member and co-leader to Branches 12 and 20. This allows me 2 hours, twice monthly, to meet with, and share with people who are unique and valued in a church community that I love. We are not like minded, but we agree to meet, talk, and listen to each other. We listen with love and respect, never feeling we need to fix or solve. Just listen and share and in so doing, we impact each other. We agree to be present, sharing in this process of being in community together and working on our relationships with each other. We covenant to share our joys and concerns, our dreams and fears, our thoughts and feelings. We support each other as we meet life's challenges, and we care.

My commitment to Branches 12 & 20 is no less important to me than my commitment to the church. It is one and the same. I make attendance a priority and I honor the relationships that

have developed. I am grateful for the safety of the space we share, and I look forward to being in that space every month. It is by far the easiest gift I give to the church with a return that is unequalled.

**Ray Boudreaux - Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA, *CGN September 2009***

My wife Kristie and I recently attended the UU Small Group Ministry Institute at the Mountain. It gave us an opportunity to reflect on our experience as leaders and participants in our small group ministry program we call Branches.

We became involved in the program at its inception 10 years ago. We and members of our first Roots (newcomers) class became Branches 1. I had just started coming to the church when the program was started. The Roots class introduced us to a church that puts its focus on the building of community rather than on the insistence of a belief system. I was introduced to people with backgrounds from all major religious traditions, races and sexual orientations. There was no selection process to the creation of a Branches group. The Roots class was randomly created as people arrived at our doors and expressed an interest in the church. This diversity is an important factor in the success and richness of the experience of Branches.

When we first came to the church, I had no idea what to expect. I was sensitive to any hint of proselytizing, and I found the atmosphere freeing. and I was fascinated by the reading we use for chalice lighting. I was ready -- all that was needed was a way to overcome my discomfort with strangers.

I have come to believe that most people crave community and intimacy. As Mother Teresa said "the spiritual poverty of the West is far greater than the material poverty of the East." In this culture it's hard to create real intimacy.

The Branches experience is designed to foster an environment where a small group (8-10 people) can, over time, become a closely-knit community. We learn to value our differences rather than use them to build walls between us. I am very grateful for the wealth of friends I now enjoy as a result of Branches..