

MYTHS: PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

CGN October 2011, Note and a Question from Marion McCord, Covenant Group Coordinator, First UU Fellowship of Hunterdon County, Baptistown, NJ

My question is this: looking at the training materials from Peter Bowden and others, it is clear that the UUA currently supports a model of covenant groups that includes a ministry team, steering committee, registrar, and content team, as well as covenant group leaders and participants. We are a relatively small congregation already struggling to fill committee and leadership roles. Our current structure includes ministry--our minister is the 'leader' of our CGL (covenant group leaders') covenant group, and I am the coordinator. But you will probably agree that we do not have what could be called a 'ministry team' in place. Nor do we have a registrar, or content team. (That begs the question about the current structure for our covenant groups...definitely not a 'top down' model such as the one outlined here.) But my question is, should we wish to conform more closely to the new model, "how should we go about finding people to fill the roles outlined above when our congregation is already so challenged by volunteer over commitment?"

From Susan Hollister, UU SGM Network Board

The number of people needed to lead a Small Group Ministry program has a lot to do with the size of the congregation, the number of groups, and the capacity of the coordinator. When a congregation is just starting out in small group ministry, one volunteer coordinator can direct the program, particularly when it is endorsed by the board.

In a small or lay-led congregation with fewer than 5 covenant groups, the coordinator receives sign-up forms, assigns people to groups, keeps a list of participants, and provides resources for topics and session plans. Other responsibilities are facilitator selection and training, regular facilitator support meetings, a program flier or brochure, and a sign-up table.

If the small congregation has a called minister, the coordinator and minister can share leadership responsibilities. For example, the coordinator might manage membership while the minister develops session plans. Together they recruit and train facilitators and lead the facilitator support meetings. The coordinator writes an article for the newsletter and displays brochures and sign-up sheets on the Welcome Table. During Sunday announcements, the minister issues an invitation to join a covenant group.

As small group ministry grows in a medium or large congregation, the coordinator may form a steering team of two or more people to help manage the program. This can happen as early as 5 groups or as late as 15 groups if the coordinator has the time and resources to devote to the job. Team members are often selected from among current or past facilitators or group members with a particular interest in small group ministry and in seeing the program grow. The coordinator remains in the major leadership position and continues to oversee groups, train facilitators, assign new people to groups, and evaluate the program. Team members assist with these basic functions or with additional projects that the facilitators or minister have requested. Many congregations are professionalizing this coordinator role. Some assign it to existing staff, but many others are hiring new part-time paid coordinators or hiring new staff with portfolios of small group ministry and several other functions.

FACILITATORS' MEETINGS

CGN November 2011 Small Group Ministry Myths --Facilitators' Meetings Don't Work -- Diana Dorroh

At the UU Small Group Ministry Network's General Assembly booth this summer, Network volunteers talked to numerous people who were unable to get their facilitators'/leaders' meetings to work as they thought they should. Several of them simply said "facilitators' meetings don't work." It began to sound like a chorus. This is a good opportunity to review the purpose, range of options, and Network recommendations for these meetings.

Basic Purpose:

- To connect the groups to the church and the minister(s)--critical, if you have a minister, because small group ministry is ministry shared by the minister with the leaders
- To support the leaders
- To provide coaching and training for leaders
- To develop connections between the leaders

Examples of Additional Purposes, added by individual congregations:

- To test drive sessions before the groups see them
- To serve as covenant group(s) of leaders

Decisions to be made:

- Frequency
- Format
- Attendance Requirements

Frequency -- Originally, the norm was monthly leaders meetings, in addition to one or two covenant group meetings that leaders must also attend. Over time, many programs have changed their frequency to every six weeks or bi-monthly, with about 5 -- 7 meetings per year.

Format -- A simple agenda that includes discussion of group issues and problems seems to be the best way to address the leaders' needs for support and coaching. And when the leaders' needs are met by the meetings, they will be more likely to attend, so the connection to the congregation and minister(s) happens also. However, I know that many congregations use a covenant group format or conduct a session as a test drive before it is used in the groups. Whatever you're doing, I recommend that you ask the question: "Are our facilitators' meetings providing the support that our leaders need?" Or more generally, "Are our facilitators getting the support that they need?"

Attendance Requirements -- I've recently heard of congregations that make attendance at leaders' meetings a requirement for continuing as a group leader. If you're doing this, please share your experience with us diana_dorroh@hotmail.com. However, there is merit in a more relaxed standard also. If your congregation has 7 leaders' meetings per year, you might consider attendance by one of the leaders from each group at 3 of those meetings a minimum standard or requirement. That's probably enough to connect the groups to the church. I've found that leaders attend when they need support most--as new leaders or when they have an issue or problem they'd like help with. The challenge to program leadership is to persuade more leaders to attend regularly to share their experiences and expertise with other leaders. You might consider a covenant for your facilitators' group that includes regular attendance.

In summary, the frequency of meetings and your standards for attendance will be related to your program goals. For example, if you want most of your members to belong to a covenant group, you'll be looking for a way to make leadership more attractive and easier for current and potential leaders, which may include fewer facilitators meetings. On the other hand, if your goal is to assure a consistent and high level of quality among the groups, and you are willing to have a smaller program, you'd perhaps have more frequent meetings and higher attendance standards.

The Facilitator Training Manual, published by the SGM Network, includes a section on conducting effective leaders' meetings. It discusses the purpose of meetings, elements to include, and mini-training topics. This comprehensive resource is available from the UU SGM Network, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/forsale.html>. The cost is \$25 (\$15 for Network members) plus \$6 shipping and handling.)

At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, where Rev. Steve Crump and I have co-led a small group ministry program since 1999, we hold 90 minute leaders' meetings about every 6-8 weeks, for a total of about 7 per year. Steve's presence and support at these meetings has been a great blessing to our church and to our program. Our congregation has 388 members and 250 covenant group participants. We distribute a list of our participants by group at each meeting and ask for updates. Steve gives opening and closing readings and a short visionary message. We do brief individual check-ins, but our main topic is the groups' issues, problems, and successes, and a brief report on the most recent meeting. Steve often asks questions about individuals in those groups and might talk to a leader after the meeting about an individual participant. So our connection goes both ways. We have about 40 co-leaders of our 23 groups. Some leaders attend about 6 of our 7 meetings per year; most of these leaders are on our steering team. Leaders usually attend when they're new to group leadership and when they have a particular problem, but most of our leaders send me an email report on their group before the meeting if they won't be present. I'm comfortable with attendance if one of the group's co-leaders attends 2 or 3 times a year. Unfortunately, about 5 of our leaders never attend. This is a continuing issue for our program. Meeting attendance varies from 10 to 25. However, every meeting "works" for the leaders who attend, as well as for me and for Rev. Crump. Each meeting keeps the groups connected to the church, facilitates shared ministry, provides support to the leaders and allows the leaders to make connections with each other.

Let us hear your experience with facilitators meetings. I'll include them in the January 2012 issue of Covenant Group News. diana_dorroh@hotmail.com.

CGN March 2012 Facilitator Meetings: Myth and Magic Explored, Rebakah Feeser, Coordinator of the SGM Program, Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland County, Boiling Springs, PA, along with Anne Gero and Kit Franklin.

"Facilitator meetings don't work." Have you heard the rumor traveling and proliferating across the miles (as any good rumor does)? Or, as Diana Dorroh, Editor of Covenant Group News wrote in her email requesting this article: "...there seems to be a myth, "facilitator meetings don't work."

So how can we at the Unitarian Universalist congregation of the Cumberland Valley (UUCV) explain the reality that our facilitator meetings are working? Though our experience and this article challenge the myth, as both a coordinator and small group facilitator I must acknowledge that the definition of myth does offer some useful information. This is a story about "heros" (and heroines) explaining the beginnings of what we see as a natural and relevant phenomenon in the life of our program.

When our Small Group Ministry (SGM) began approximately 10 years ago, it consisted of small groups with coordinators meeting periodically to oversee the program. Those meetings did not include the facilitators, and some think that the facilitators not meeting regularly contributed to some groups straying from SGM principles. However, it became clear that for the program to thrive, structures needed to be put in place to encourage its growth. Our current efforts build on this foundation. And though the coordinators have changed over the years, the commitment to supporting and enhancing the work of the small group facilitators has not. For example, the coordinators have a covenant, as do the facilitators and each small group. This "parallel process" is likely responsible for keeping the program viable as we commit each time we meet to the promises that direct our work together.

In 2009, the facilitators' group created a covenant that we still use. We have shortened it to simply stating the intentions rather than detailing how these are implemented at each meeting. As this is central to our meetings, it seems appropriate to include it here...

"As a facilitator of the UUCV Small Group Ministry, I commit myself to these behaviors listed below:

quality participation by:

- Giving these meetings priority on my schedule and by notifying the convener if I cannot attend or will be late.
- Participating or passing during activities and sharing.
- Increasing my understanding of small group ministry.
- Improving my skills as a SGM facilitator.

effective communication by:

- Listening deeply to others without interrupting.
- Speaking my own truth as I understand it.
- Using "I" messages to respectfully reflect to others what I see in their behavior, especially when that behavior might be harmful to self or others.
- Using healthy conflict-resolution skills.

respectful behavior by:

- Allowing and expecting differences of opinions and beliefs
- Keeping what is said in group as confidential, believing that each person's story is their own to share.
- Seeking permission to share someone's story BEFORE I share it (except when their safety or someone else's safety may be at risk).

supportive behavior by:

- Encouraging others' expression of thoughts and ideas - even when they conflict with my own.
- Helping each other to face life issues and needs.

developing our spirituality by:

- Being mindful that the SGM mission is to facilitate individual growth, personal connections and congregational energy.
- Being mindful that UUCV's mission is to transform lives and to care for the world.

- Being mindful of the UU principles and sources of inspiration.

Approved and adopted as the UUCV Facilitators Group Covenant on 9/13/09

Our meetings are held bi-monthly and coordinators meet before each facilitator meeting to plan, and after to evaluate. In the past these meetings occurred the first Sunday of odd-numbered months from 5:00 to 8:00 pm. We met at various member homes beginning with a meal that coordinators would arrange and participants would help subsidize. As our program grew, however, we needed to meet at the Meeting House instead. The format of the meetings includes check in, current small group problem solving, and a training component. Training topics have included the following: Non-Blaming Communication, Deep Listening, Session Planning, Program Evaluation, Sharing Favorite Sessions, Service Projects, Planning a SGM Worship Service, Phases of Groups, and Reframing.

Now that I've outlined the basic structure of our Facilitator meetings, let me also state my belief that part of what makes us remain viable is our openness to change. Specifically, after receiving feedback from various facilitators, we have recently changed our meeting time and length of sessions, and are now meeting after church from 12:30 to 2:30 pm on the 3rd Sunday of every odd number month. While such details may seem incidental, we take individual member requests/needs into account as well as the larger contextual needs of the congregation. For example, what assists us in communicating facilitator details is our Facilitator Listserv. Utilizing this tool offers essential ways not only to inform, but also to discuss issues that arise between meetings. We understand that to sustain and grow any program such details are indeed relevant!

At the beginning of this article I promised both Myth *and* Magic. Having clarified why we in Central PA feel the statement "Facilitator Meetings Don't Work" is a myth, let me share more of the *Magic* that keeps the program strong. At our last meeting, I asked facilitators to write or email their thoughts about what is useful and problematic for them about our bimonthly meetings. Both their comfort in sharing their feedback so candidly and the overwhelming positive response to our meetings, reveals the magic:

Benefits (Likes):

- New ideas, allies, moral support, place to vent
- Strategies for common problems, resource to understand group dynamics, not feeling alone or in vacuum
- Rich, varied and nurturing
- Developing sense of what other groups are like and problem-solving together about shared difficulties
- Nice combination of support, structure and learning new skills

Gripes (Wishes):

- Three hours is too long, too general
- One more meeting to add to my schedule
- Structure is important but we need to be flexible so we can problem-solve about a particular group if needed
- Worried when problematic issue that arose during previous meeting, but pleased at how quickly it was resolved with coordinator intervention

The life of every group, program, and congregation is an ongoing process of challenge and possibility. At UUCV, we experience our facilitator meetings as central to managing this process effectively. As coordinators, we are committed to keeping these meetings useful for facilitators, and in this way, offering them the needed scaffolding to maintain a strong SGM program. I welcome more specific questions, thoughts, or comments related to facilitator meetings.