

Preventing Facilitator Burnout

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Facilitators are at the core of our small group ministry programs. Without these steadfast and skilled persons our programs would wane. No one wants to lose a facilitator due to burn out. We have asked several small group ministry programs over the country how they prevent facilitator burn out. Listen to their words of wisdom. You may want to send along some of your own.

Margaret Roseboom, a facilitator of a covenant group at the First Unitarian Church of Oklahoma City states that she has avoided burn out by passing on much of the responsibility of the group to its members. Members take turns hosting the group and contributing refreshments, along with sharing the role of facilitating. When group members have a role in the group, it heightens their sense of belonging.

Also from Oklahoma, Susan Bishop, who co-facilitators the Spiritual Journey covenant group, highlights the importance of the facilitator meetings to share issues and problems, ideas and solutions. She also recommends utilizing strengths and weaknesses when teaming co-facilitators. For instance, a computer savvy person fits well with someone who may shy away from the computer, but has great group process skills. **[congregation-confirm]**

Alex Lukacs and Liz Ladd, Co-chairs of the SGM Steering Committee at the Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon, Pennsylvania

asked about facilitator burn-out at their monthly Facilitators Meeting. The group came up with these suggestions:

1. Good session plans that are written and provided to the facilitators by a separate group of people,
2. Strong ministerial support of the program,
3. Having a “co-facilitator” setup for the groups,
4. Facilitator meetings every month or two months
5. Training sessions for new facilitators
6. Having a clear process in place for working with groups members who have difficulty fitting into a group,
7. Taking the summer off,
8. Conducting all intra- and inter-group communications by e-mail.

Judy Bennett and Chris Clothier co-chair the executive team for the small group ministry program at the UU Church of Bloomington, Indiana. Although their program is only three years old, they are doing lots of ~~right~~ things ~~in order~~ to support and honor their facilitators. Here are a few:

*We dissolve the groups at the end of May (giving facilitators a well deserved rest), and new groups are formed again in September.

*Each August, there is a one day interactive training for all facilitators, in which the ministers play a prime role. This shows the facilitators the importance of their position as lay ministers in SGM. We give each facilitator a binder with guidelines, session plans, and examples of problem solving techniques such as how to handle “difficult people”. Knowledge is empowering, and the well-trained facilitator is less likely to feel over-whelmed and, ultimately, suffer from burn-out.

*Monthly facilitator meetings led by a minister shows their commitment to the program and keeps them aware of what is

going on. Clergy can also help problem solve for the facilitators. The Facilitator Circle is conducted as any other Chalice Circle, but is less rigid about prohibiting the offering of advice as far as problems in the groups are concerned. Facilitators get much needed support, validation and suggestions from this gathering and usually leave refreshed and invigorated about their mission.

*This year we are instituting a Facilitator recognition dinner. The facilitators will be invited to a catered dinner at the end of our SGM year, and will be recognized for their service.

I am so impressed with the “caring and feeding” of facilitators described in the four churches above. In summary we find that facilitators respond positively to:

1. Delegation when appropriate
2. Having some time off
3. Having quality session plans
4. Noting strengths and weaknesses when teaming co-facilitators
5. Quality training, and ongoing support with monthly/bimonthly facilitators’ meetings
6. Ministerial support and presence at trainings and facilitators’ meetings
7. Recognition of facilitators

What are some other ways to avoid burn-out of our facilitators who are at the heart of our small group ministry programs? Our RE teachers are recognized once a year in church...as I put this article together it occurs to me that recognizing our facilitators in church would be a great way to honor them.

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Rev. Jonalu Johnstone, First Unitarian Church, Oklahoma City

We used this as a topic at our January facilitator meeting (and some of our facilitators submitted answers for the January issues of CG News.). Here are some of the factors they named as making a difference, along with my ideas:

1. Co-facilitators are a great way to reduce

burn-out. They share energy, capitalize on one another’s strengths, and support one another in the work of the group. They never feel alone.

2. Sharing responsibility with group members. Whether it’s bringing snacks, hosting meetings, offering opening and closing words, or planning entire sessions, shared leadership helps groups do their best. Several of our groups include in their covenant or ground rules how they will assign various responsibilities within the group. The facilitator does not need to be responsible for everything.
3. We allow leadership to change. If someone wants to let go of the facilitator role, the first place we look for a new facilitator is within the group. Often, someone will step forward, especially if it can be a shared responsibility as described in #1 and #2. At least one of our groups used to change leadership every year. Many of them have experienced leadership transitions. This can enliven a group.
4. Facilitators who attend the every other month meetings with the minister find it a strong support. Hearing other people’s ideas and challenges invigorates them and helps them to realize how much they know.

5. Finally, when it's time for a group to die, we let it die. A facilitator does not need to keep beating a dead horse. If people aren't showing up, aren't enthusiastic, can't keep going, then it's time to find a way to celebrate the group for what it has been and let it stop meeting. This is possible because each year we make an effort to start new groups. We talk about the natural lifecycle of a group, and don't try to force them to be something they aren't.

Those are the hints our facilitators and I came up with. Hope it helps!