

**QUESTIONS: GROUPS AND SESSIONS**

**SESSIONS: TO RESPOND, DISCUSS OR NOT**

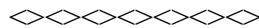
**CGN March 2011 Dick Loescher, UU church in Eugene, Eugene, OR**

Each year several people in our SGM groups, including some of the facilitators, express a wish and request that they would prefer that there be a brief time for open discussion after each individual has completed his or her uninterrupted sharing, rather than waiting until all have shared before having open discussion. I would like to know if any of your SGM or Covenant Groups have tried having open discussion after each individual has shared, and if so, what are the trade-offs (what is gained and what is lost) by having discussion after each person has shared compared with having open discussion after completion of individual sharing by all. If you have not tried this, I wonder what your thoughts and speculations are about the trade-offs of trying this, realizing that very careful time management would be needed to be sure all individuals would get equal time for their individual sharing. Thank you.

**CGN April 2011 Answer from Anne Haynes, UU Church of Bloomington, IN**

I enjoyed reading Dick Loescher's article about how and when to incorporate open discussion in a covenant group meeting. The last year I was a Chalice Circles facilitator, I tried a different alternative. In my previous groups, I had felt there was not enough time for people to chat informally, so I tried something I had heard someone else describe. Our meetings followed the same format as Dick's group meetings, but instead of including back-and-forth discussion in the actual meeting (except for discussion about where to hold the next meeting or other logistics, which we did before closing the meeting), we agreed to end our two-hour meetings 15 minutes early, after check-out and extinguishing the flame. Then we felt free to ask each other questions about things that may have come up in the sharing or just chat to catch up on each other's lives. People seemed to enjoy this, and I would probably want to offer this model with the next group I facilitate.

*Editor's Note:* At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, some of our groups have allowed open discussion after individual sharing during the discussion part of the session. It has allowed people to relate their own experiences to the ones being shared and the groups often reach some new insights. In group process, this is called synergy, of course. As long as each participant is fully listened to and each participant is given the opportunity to speak, I think it can work.



**CGN May 2011 Loretta Carmickle, Co-Coordinator, Small Group Ministry/Covenant Circles, UUC Amado/Green Valley**

Hello Diana --- Since my attendance at the SGM Institute last August, we have been able to start four Covenant Circles based on the SGM model here at our 150-member UU congregation in Amado - near Green Valley, AZ. We will be completing our first cycle at the end of April, when many members leave for points north, but plan to have at least two Covenant Circles meet through the summer and early fall months.

While things seem to be going well in general, we do seem to have a problem with at least one group resisting the "too much structuring" of the model and feel that it hinders rather than promotes intimacy. They would like to take time in the Checking-In time to respond to personal needs expressed, feeling that this is a way to minister to one another.

How should I respond to this? I have tried to emphasize the importance of staying within the boundaries of the model, but there is continued resistance to this.

**From Diana Dorroh**

Loretta, I'm so glad to hear about your success. And, of course people are challenging the model.

Challenges to the model are common, often creative and must be handled. During check-in, we listen to each other and don't respond. This is a profound kind of listening that many people may not have experienced. It is respectful and supportive. Most people do not want solutions to their problems...they want somebody to listen and honor their struggle. Can you imagine everyone chiming in with their take on a participant's divorce? Yikes. It's fine to talk with him or her over refreshments or outside the group, especially if you have some specific information that may be useful.

One way to respond to challenges is to say that this model has worked well in your church. It provides a safe container, within which people can share and grow. Within that model, there is a great deal of freedom, but it's important to keep the container intact.

In our training sessions at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, I tell our leaders to remember that they are authorized to implement our church's model, but not authorized to change it, so they don't have to persuade members to accept it. When the model is challenged, I suggest that they say: "If you'd like to be part of another type of group, I'm sure our Adult Program Chair would consider letting you implement it, but I'm not authorized to change the basic model for our covenant group."

**From Rev. Helen Zidowecki**

I am involved with a long time group that has a pattern of responding during check-in. Since our in depth discussion at the Summer Institute 2010, we have become more intentional in listening. Our responses have been more along the line of "we hear you" and less offering suggestions. In fact, we have really started self-monitoring quite well. And there is the understanding that we can -- and do -- communicate outside of the session. I personally feel that the sessions are freer, because I am not expected to respond. But it takes practice as it is a new way of being with each other, and against cultural expectations."

**CGN June 2011 From Claude VanderVeen, First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee, WI**

I, too, like to stress the practice of listening during check in. Much of normal conversation is listening with some attention, while formulating a response with some attention. Here is a solution that works for my group: we listen with all our ears during check in. Then the facilitator asks the members for "other words", which can be a brief response to a member concern, an insight into the topic of our last meeting, something I forgot to include in my own check in that I feel is important, etc. If a member wants to respond in more depth, then they may covenant to meet after the Chalice Circle. I like to think of "other words" as a postscript. An added plus is

that I don't have to attend too much to not leaving something out on my check in. This second chance helps.

Here is a fun story that I tell my people periodically. I do not know its provenance.

Once there was a Novice who took a vow of silence for 5 years. At the end of 5 years, she still did not speak, nor after 6, then 7 years. Someone gently asked out of concern, and the Novice said, "When I can improve on the silence, then I will speak."

Be well, and thank you for this Ministry.

## SESSION PLAN

### **CGN January 2012. The Session Was A Dud --**

#### **The Reverend Steve J. Crump, Sr. Minister, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge**

So, there you are at the end of a small group meeting. You are the leader/facilitator and you're hearing from some of the group members, more than a few actually, that tonight's discussion topic was, well, a dud. Active listening means precisely that, listening, not moving into a courtroom drama posture of defending a client. So, you listened. Was the evening a waste?

I doubt it. Assuming that the feedback portion of the meeting was not a gripe session, achieving honesty is a sign of the group taking responsibility for itself. Small group session outlines are not created in vacuums. They are written in a context and probably test-driven. In our church, we've written several sessions and when we do, much gets left on the cutting room floor. But a group that is expressing itself with honesty about its needs is a group that is trusting itself and taking responsibility for the group's experience.

Consider again the benefits of the small group. The fact that adults meet for two hours to be together for quality face-to-face meeting is a rare and remarkable experience in our high-tech-low touch-rush-at-the-speed-of-light-world. That's what adults in our society are saying. I consider such precious time an achievement in the post-modern era.

As for disagreements concerning a discussion topic that didn't get an Academy Awards nomination? It is probably best not to worry too much about it. What is done is done. Next month your group will launch another topic. But your group members will be together again. The holy intentional gathering is the main thing.

As we mature spiritually, we learn not to take everything at face value. There is more going on in a small group beyond our awareness and beyond our knowledge than we probably ever realize or will ever fully appreciate. There is more to it than an expression of our likes or our wishes. There is holy meeting. Part of being a good leader is reminding yourself of this reality from time to time.

## GROUPS: FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

### **CGN January 2012 Long-Term Success Is More Attainable with Once a Month Meetings-- Peg Hebert, Unitarian Universalist Church of Concord, NH**

Being on the Northern NE District Small Group Ministry committee has given me the opportunity to speak with many people about their experiences with Covenant Groups. What I

discovered was that while many churches developed programs at about the same time that we did back in 2001, many of these same programs have floundered. Churches that began with 10-12 groups now had 2-3 active groups. People are often astounded to find out that not only has our program not floundered, it has grown from 6 to 15 groups and now includes 150 participants. They want to know what we do that has led to this success.

There are of course, many reasons. But I think a key one is the fact that we only meet once a month and that is what I tell people who ask. Our goal has always been having long term groups that are going to be together for many years so this model works well for that. I know we would have lost people if they were expected to come to a meeting more often. Lives are busy and carving out a twice a month time can be challenging.

If the goal of a program is new groups every year with the opportunity to meet a variety of church members, then meeting twice a month can work. Folks can sign up for the year and at the end, they can decide whether to join a new group the following year. But I have come to feel that long-term success is more attainable with once a month meetings.

## **CGN February 2012 Monthly or Semi-Monthly Covenant Group Meetings?**

### **Editor's Notes: Diana Dorroh**

This month, we begin to explore the program design choice of the number of meetings per month. "Groups must meet twice a month" and "Groups must meet only once a month" are the associated myths.

Meeting at least once a month is one of the basic elements of small group ministry. This decision may have been made years ago by the founders of your program and changing from once a month (monthly) to twice a month (semi-monthly) or vice versa might be difficult. However, as you reassess the goals of your program, you might want to consider making a change.

### **Meeting monthly**

Advantages --

- \*Easier for participants and therefore may allow more people to participate.
- \*Easier for the leaders, as they must also attend a leaders meeting and therefore may allow more people to be leaders

Disadvantages --

- \*It may take longer to achieve deep sharing
- \*If a person misses a meeting, then he or she will "go" two months without a meeting.

### **Meeting semi-monthly**

Advantages-

- \*Bonding and sharing will happen sooner
- \*Missing a meeting only results in a month between meetings, not two months.

Disadvantages-

- \*Fewer people may be able to participate
- \*There may be fewer people willing to lead, as leaders may have 3 meetings to attend per month.

If you are designing short-term groups, say 9 months or even 6 months, you might want to have the groups meet twice a month, so there will be time for bonding and deep sharing to occur.

If your groups are long-term and especially if they meet 12 months each year, you might decide that there will be time for bonding and deep sharing to occur.

If your congregational goal is to provide an optimum small group experience, you'll likely choose semi-monthly; whereas, if you want maximum participation, you'll likely consider monthly meetings.

Please send me your stories and your congregation's choice of the frequency of meetings and the goals achieved by that choice. [Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com)

### **CGN February 2012 Meeting Twice a Month is Ideal –**

**MaryBeth Brizzolara, Chalice Circle Facilitator, Towson UU Church, Lutherville, MD**

We meet twice a month and I think that is ideal. Most of our members have very busy, stressful lives. Sharing is an important part of our meetings, sometimes more important than the session topic. I think monthly sessions would weaken the cohesiveness of our group and, perhaps, result in less regular attendance.

### **CGN March 2012 From Anne Haynes, UU Church of Bloomington, Bloomington, IN**

There is **another alternative** that we use here in Bloomington - meeting every three weeks. We usually have at least one group that meets on this schedule, out of nine or ten total groups. The group is advertised to meet, for example, Monday evenings every three weeks. I've been in a group like this, and it can work well as long as the entire group agrees on all the meeting dates at the beginning of the year. It pulls in people for whom twice a month would be too much and once a month is not often enough.

## **GROUPS: HOW LONG SHOULD GROUPS CONTINUE?**

### **CGN October 2011 Rethinking Program Design Choices -- How Long Should Groups Continue? --Diana Dorroh**

As Editor of CG News and as a frequent volunteer at the UU SGM Network's booth at General Assembly, I've heard lots of stories from ministers and small group ministry coordinators and participants. Some congregations want their groups to continue indefinitely. Some have 9 -- 12 month groups and begin new groups once each year. Others have a mixture of the two formats. This summer, at General Assembly, we heard from a few people who wanted to let some of their groups last longer than a year, but thought that would be a violation of the basic elements of small group ministry. The length of time that groups meet is not part of the basic elements for small group ministry success. <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/basicelements.html>.

So, how do you decide which choice to make? To some extent, it depends on what your congregation's goals are. If you want to maximize participation and you don't have a paid coordinator, you might want your groups to continue indefinitely. If achieving deep sharing and intimacy is important, you probably want to have groups that last for several years. If your goal is to promote connections across the congregation, you would probably design shorter term groups. You might also make that choice if you were concerned about cliques in your congregation.

A note on timing---It can be difficult to convert a group that started as a continuing group to a time-limited group. So, if you are designing a small group ministry program for your

congregation, it's important to give this decision some careful thought. If you have only continuing groups and want to change to time-limited groups, you might want to start your new groups as time-limited and give the older groups the option to convert and with a commitment to end after a year or two.

At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, we do not limit the time of groups though many of them have ended for a variety of reasons. Our goals are to put new members into groups as soon as they take the newcomers' orientation, and to have as many of our 398 church members as possible in the groups. I am the volunteer SGM program coordinator and, to me, restarting 24 or even 8 groups every year sounds more difficult than supporting the leaders as they continue the groups. All of our groups are willing to accept new members, but we do have a few groups that don't follow all the elements of the model. so a time limit might have prevented that problem. Rev. Dr. Justin Osterman makes a good case for time-limited groups in the next article.

I'd like to hear your experiences, problems and solutions with time-limited and continuing groups. Please include your congregation's goals for small group ministry.

[Diana\\_dorroh@hotmail.com](mailto:Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com)

**CGN October 2011 The Case for Time Limits in Small Group Ministry --Rev. Dr. Justin Osterman, Sr. Minister, Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA.**

*Editor's Note: Rev. Osterman submitted this communication in response to the article in the Fall 2011 Quarterly that launched this series on Myths and Choices.*

While I agree that SGMs need not be rigidly restricted to one year in length, the failure to implement time limits on SGMs seriously undermines the effectiveness of this ministry for a number of reasons.

First, SGMs are a breeding ground for new leadership in congregations. The first step up the leadership ladder is very often becoming an SGM facilitator. By limiting groups to a maximum of two years in life span, group facilitators can identify potential new facilitators within their group after one year, mentor them during the second year, and then launch them into leadership of their own group in the third year. A regular obstacle to this leadership development process is that potential new facilitators resist leaving their groups. By failing to limit the length of SGMs, we undermine their ability to cultivate leaders and deprive our congregations of the full benefit of the "first rung" on our leadership ladder.

Second, the aim of SGMs is building "spiritual friendships" and helping members expand their circle of friends in the church. By belonging to a series of time-limited SGMs over the years, people develop a larger circle of friends in the church. If you belong to the same SGM for six years, then you may know 10 people very well. If you belong to three different SGMs over 6 years, then you have a much larger circle of friends in the church. Especially in a church the size of ours (600+ members), time limited SGMs are a real aid in helping members to get to know each other. One goal of SGMs is integrating new members into the congregation. We accomplish this much more effectively when they know 30 people, rather than 10.

Third, contrary to all claims to the contrary, SGMs do become cliques, if they remain closed circles over time. Even when existing groups "open" to allow newcomers to join them, they are gathering people into an existing group culture. Newcomers who do not conform to the culture

do not thrive in the groups. In some cases, closed SGMs even resist new members. If people who bond in SGMs want to meet regularly years after the groups dissolve, then they most certainly may do so; however, enshrining their long-term gathering under the umbrella of an SGM undermines the effectiveness of that ministry.

There are entirely too many UUs who are completely comfortable within their little closed systems -- whether it is their congregation or their SGM -- and they are not helping to grow our faith by only talking to the people that they already know and with whom they feel comfortable. We really ought to be challenging and equipping our members to be more comfortable making new friends and talking about their faith with those people, and SGMs ought to be the very place that they learn to do just that.

I appreciate all that you, and the other volunteer leaders of the UU SGM Network, do to promote the strength and health of SGMs in our congregations. I am mindful, in our moments of disagreement about particular issues, of the words of our Unitarian forebear Francis David, "We need not think alike to love alike."

### **CGN January 2012 Ongoing Groups -- Peg Herbert, Unitarian Universalist Church of Concord, New Hampshire**

The Concord UU church has an amazing Covenant Group program. It was started 10 years ago and has grown from 6 groups to 14 groups and has over 150 participants. Some folks have left but many of the original members are still active in the groups they started in. All meet once a month and have taken in new members when needed.

When the committee designed the program, it was decided that groups would be ongoing. It wasn't until I became more involved with Small Group Ministry at the district level that I learned that there were churches that started their groups fresh each fall. I was intrigued with this idea and, as chair of the facilitators, I mentioned this idea at one of our meetings. The response I got was unanimous. While everyone would like to meet more people, no one was willing to leave their group. The bonds that have been formed are deep, personal and treasured.

It amazes me at how quickly this happens. When I began a 4-week short-term group to give folks a taste of SGM, I expected to ease them into ongoing groups once our time together ended. No way! This group did not want to break up and so five years later, we are still meeting.

We have tried a couple of things to allow for more interaction. One is a Pot Luck Mix-Up. We open it up to both current SGM participants and to people who just want to try it. After sharing a meal together, we break into groups and discuss the night's topic. This has been very successful. The other thing was to offer all the Covenant group members a chance to switch groups if they so wished. I have only had two people take me up on it.

I can see advantages to short-term groups but I think for that format to be successful, this has to be part of the original plan. I know in our church, we will never change!