

QUESTIONS

Keeping Groups Focused

CGN April 2009 Most groups use questions as a discussion guide. Others may use only a theme. As a facilitator or as a group member, how do you keep the conversation focused on the topic? How much digression is OK? What do you say or do when a group member criticizes a public figure or a political party? Tell us your stories and your solutions.

Answer from Dean A. Robinson, UU Church of St. Petersburg, Florida:

Our usual procedure is that all three of our covenant groups will have a discussion based on the previous Sunday's sermon. The minister sends to all the facilitators a series of questions to use as a starting point for our discussions.

After a quick review of the previous Sunday's sermon, the group begins by talking about what was said. Then the facilitator will begin reading the minister's questions. On some occasions the group chooses not to answer those questions but will ask/discuss other questions. The facilitator monitors the progress of the discussion and ensures everyone has the opportunity to speak if they so choose. Should the discussion start to move away from the "theme" of the evening, the facilitator will nudge the discussion back in line. On a few occasions the digression is of more interest to the group and the facilitator will have to make a quick decision on what to do: go forward or move back to the main topic. And, yes, we have had instances where after reading the minister's questions the group decided to go in another direction and that's fine. At the outset of the year we agreed to leave politics out of our discussions.

Community Outreach

CGN April 2009 Have new projects or all-church events sprung up with involvement from SGM/Covenant Group participants? Have you as facilitator noticed a correlation between group members being part of an intimate, caring group and a desire to help out in the congregation, in social justice efforts, and/or in the community?

Answer from Dean A. Robinson, UU Church of St. Petersburg, Florida:

In my group we had a discussion on the environment. The group decided to survey how "green" our congregation was and helped to implement ways for both our congregation and our members to become more eco-friendly by changing the janitor's supplies, the office paper discards, and giving members a handout map of local trash drop-off sites.

Our groups have also taken upon themselves to act as a care committee and called and/or checked up on members. They decided to do this after our care committee collapsed and they felt a strong need to carry on this task.

Share A Recent Successful Topic.

CGN April 2009 Send us a paragraph describing a successful session. What made it work?

Answer from Dean A. Robinson, UU Church of St. Petersburg, Florida:

On May 17 our covenant groups will be the worship leaders for our Sunday service. After a good discussion, the topic they decided on was "Community." The decision to take on this task came after finding out that our settled minister was resigning. We had a discussion on what that meant to our groups and our congregation. The groups felt that we ought to talk about *community* as a way to let people know that, although we were losing our minister, we are still a community and we will need to be even stronger during this period of change. Our groups will emphasize that the covenant groups are a way to be in community as we go forward. This all came about because the groups collectively agreed that in these changing times for our congregation we need covenant groups to be a calming influence.

Youth Programming

CGN April 2009 The UU Small Group Ministry Network is working with Lifespan Faith Development at the UUA on small group ministry for youth. Currently there is the SGM for Youth book published by the Network in 2005, and a section on Small Group Ministry in the UUA Coming of Age material. We would like to know:

- Are you using small group ministry (covenant groups) with youth? If so, how?
- Would you be willing to share some session plans that you have developed with the Network? Please send them to office@smallgroupministry.net.
- Are there specific topics that you would like to see developed for youth?

Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Augusta, ME

CGN May 2009: Using SGM

Several congregations have "used" their small groups to help with planning. Others have decided that this is an abuse of the small group ministry program. Rev. Helen Zidowecki says that it's not small group ministry if anyone is taking notes and reporting back. Has your group participated in creating a plan or a vision for your church? How did you experience it?

Answer from Clare Winter, SGM Coordinator for UU Church of the Desert, Rancho Mirage, CA:

I was very interested in the issue raised about using Small Groups to take care of church work.

My experience has been that small groups are full of members (or prospective members) who are involved or ready to be involved in the work of the church. I do not find it useful to try to get the group to take on a church project as a group.

SGM in my view exists to help individuals achieve a deeper spiritual understanding of their own lives and the lives of other members in the group. The resulting spiritual growth has naturally spilled over into the congregational community. My sense is to let it remain that way.

Of course a lot depends on the size of the church and the makeup of the groups. In our small church our group has had two former presidents, two former treasurers, and for those able, members active in church work. SGM then provides a respite from those obligations. I let it be.

Answer from Diana Dorroh, CG News Editor and Program Coordinator, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA:

At my congregation, we have considered using our small groups to do the first step in our strategic plan. They would be answering questions posed by the Southwest District Executive Rev. Susan Smith: "If you were a better UU in a year, how would you know it?" and "If a group in our area were doing a program involving one of our core values, would they contact us?" These could be part of a complete session, and since we have 18 groups, we could reach about half of our congregation quickly and easily. However, our leadership is leaning toward using cottage meetings hosted by our covenant groups and facilitated by members of the Planning Committee. The leaders believe members would miss the opportunities their regular monthly covenant group meeting provides for sharing and ministering to each other. So we'll probably be asking the groups to hold their regular monthly meetings and, in addition, to host a cottage meeting as a service to the church.

CGN June 2009

Question One (a repeat request): Facilitators, what are your questions? Please send them and we'll get answers. You are UU's. I know you have questions. Just send me one at diana_dorroh@hotmail.com.

Answer from Fred Van Deusen, Covenant Group Facilitator, First Parish Church in Concord, MA.

Hi Diana,

I have a question I would like your readers to address.

"What techniques do you use to recruit new members to your group?"

I'll be interested in their approaches. Thanks!

CGN June 2009 What is the minister's role in small group ministry?

If you are a minister, what part do you play in your church's program? If you are a facilitator or program coordinator, what part do you need for your minister to play? If you are a participant in a group, what role do you see your minister playing? If you don't have a minister, how have you compensated?

Answer from Cathy Barnett, First UU Church, Houston, TX.

I am a facilitator of a small group, and have also been a facilitator in the past. To the question: "What role does a facilitator need a minister to play for SGM?", the answer for me is the role of mentor. I think of myself as a junior assistant minister :-), so some input on how to handle different things that come up is very useful. I attended a few facilitator meetings in the past, and it was also good to hear how other facilitators were handling things, but I think that group met too often (once a month). Usually, there are not a lot of problems.

Of course, the minister needs to be available if one of the group members is having a crisis or serious difficulty in their personal life. It's important that the facilitators keep the minister informed about that kind of thing.

Hope that's helpful.

CGN June 2009 E-Mails

How has your experience been with emails sent from individual group members to the whole group, between meetings? On the one hand, it can allow members to keep in touch and to invite other group members to join them at an informal social event. On the other hand, it can be a risky form of communication, where hurt feelings may be hard to mend. Send me your thoughts and experiences.

Answer from Fred Van Deusen, Covenant Group Facilitator, First Parish Church in Concord, MA.

Our group has exchanged email addresses, telephone numbers, cell phone numbers and regular addresses. Group members contact each other in advance of meetings and also occasionally to share something of interest or to invite others to a social event. We do our best to support each other. We haven't had any problems, and it has helped to bring us closer together.

Answer from Dottie Kelly, Branches Group Facilitator/Leader, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

In my Branch group we have exchanged telephone numbers and e-mails during the three years that I have been a member. No one has expressed any objection when asked to exchange this information. The cohesiveness of the group has led to many communications not related to church but needed for support and caring. During time of illness, we want to put into practice the unspoken love we develop through our sharing during meetings. This includes food and visits and offers of help at times. We also as a group plan a party that is offered at our annual church auction fund-raiser. How could any of this be possible if we were only able to communicate by seeing each other at church and at a monthly meeting? . Our individual member-to-member contact that does not involve the group has served to further our bond, such as helping with a special project like a garage sale or helping with a building project for which one is especially qualified. All participation has been voluntary. I would think that we are all adult enough to say "No" to a request by a Branch member just as we would anyone else if we could not help. Not knowing an example of a downside, I cannot comment. Summarily, I don't think a covenant group can be at its most effective without individual communication.

Answer from Bob Dorroh, Facilitator/Leader, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

Although the Small Group Ministry (SGM) programs differ in detail at different churches, they share basic principles. It is important to defend your church's model against changes that are suggested by group members but have not been endorsed by the SGM leadership group of your church.

One example is the suggestion of supplementing the meetings with email communications. I want to raise a particular caution flag about this. Everyone in the group knows everyone else's email address, and it would be ridiculous to say that members should not email each other. However, judgment is required.

Anyone who has used email has learned how easy it is to be misunderstood in an email. Substantive, serious discussions need to take place face-to-face. Since most SGM topics are serious and substantive, or at least they should be, they are not suitable for email. If someone is offended or hurt by an email, and the next meeting is two or three weeks away, what can be done?

A good general principle is: Substantive discussions need to take place face-to-face at a meeting. Any attempt to sidestep this is detrimental to the group.

Once, in my more innocent days, I made the mistake of giving my blessing to using email without giving the above caveat, and here is what happened soon afterward. The incident involved four members besides myself. I will refer to these four as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, even though the members were not all male. The incident occurred during the period of civil and racial tension that followed Hurricane Katrina.

Matthew expressed approval of the police practice of stopping young men who are on the street after dark and questioning them. Mark, an African American member of our group was offended by this because everyone knows that this happens mainly to African Americans. A very heated discussion followed. This did happen face-to-face, and some semblance of peace was restored.

Things might have been OK, except for the following. Almost immediately, Luke emailed to the group a copy of a racially inflammatory letter to the editor and asked the group what they thought about it.

I questioned Luke by telephone about why he had done this and what he had hoped to accomplish. About the same time, Mark's partner John sent a critical email to Luke, who then sent other emails to the group complaining about these two things. The situation became unpleasant, to say the least.

Things might have gone better if Luke had shown the letter to the group at a meeting, but I doubt he would have done this. Sending it by email just stood no chance of any kind of beneficial effect or peaceful resolution. This group no longer exists.

CGN July 2009 What techniques do you use to recruit new members to your group? (submitted by Fred Van Deusen, First Parish Church in Concord, MA.)

Answer from Anne Haynes, UU Church of Bloomington , IN. and Board Member, UU Small Group Ministry Network

We at the UU Church of Bloomington actively recruit new members at the beginning of each Chalice Circles year. We have written and spoken announcements, a "Chalice Circles sermon," signup sheets in the hallway, and other publicity in August leading up to the new year, with a kickoff and orientation meeting in September for all prospective participants. We strive to get between seven and ten participants in each group we are forming (approximately ten groups a year). We also continue running a short article explaining Chalice Circles in each church newsletter until about March, so this tends to attract people who are newcomers to church and serves as a reminder to those who may have second thoughts about joining a group after the kickoff. We stop our announcements in the spring because May is the last month our Chalice Circles meet and we would rather not introduce new group members in the last couple of months.

If we have a group with fewer than seven people, we do try to steer newcomers into that group before any others. The co-chairs of our steering committee work together to try to fill gaps in any groups if someone drops out during the year and the group becomes too small. In our first year we tried combining two groups that were each too small after the year had started, but we do not recommend doing that based on our experience.

Answer from your CG News Editor, Diana Dorroh, Program Director, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge

In Baton Rouge, our groups are ongoing. Some of them have existed since the beginning of our program, about 10 years ago, though the membership has changed considerably in those groups, of course. We use the "Roots and Branches" model, adapted from All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK. Roots is our newcomers class; Branches is the name of our Small Group Ministry program. Roots is taught by our minister, Rev. Steve Crump. During the 3-session class, he repeatedly mentions the Branches program and encourages participants to join a group. At the last class, they are invited to sign up for a specific group. Sometimes group leaders are there to invite them to a new or existing group and sometimes they just give me their requirements and I arrange an invitation later.

Most Roots participants do join a group and the percentage of signups is even higher for people who join the church at the end of the class. About 60% of our 390 members belong to a group and another 10% or so have belonged to one at some point. So, it really is part of our church culture. We have become a church "of small groups," rather than a church "with small groups." And this, in turn, results in greater benefit to the church, as the covenantal acceptance, right relationship and better listening from the small groups spills over into all aspects of church life.

We also have a Sunday in the fall when the group leaders are recognized and the program is promoted. We take signups then and throughout the year from church members or former Roots graduates. In addition, some of our leaders do their own recruiting.

CGN August 2009 Should all small groups in the SGM program of a congregation focus on the same theme--like Bob Hill recommends? Or, should each group select its own topic? For the past three years, we have used the themes "7 Principles," Spirit of Life, and "The Rituals of our Lives" for all groups. Joan Martin, UU Church of Bowling Green Diana

And one answer from your Editor:

I'll give you my answer and then include your question in CG News. It came up at the GA workshop this year. So it's a good question and one that many people are asking. The answer is: Churches do it many different ways and all of them seem to work. There is an advantage to having a common topic and even more value in having it connected to a Sunday sermon. However, it's also true that different groups are in different places and the leaders know better than anyone what type of topic should come next. The leaders in my church program all pick their own sessions from the set of sessions in their Leaders Guide or from the UU SGM Network site. But I write or find and recommend two or three sessions a year that are related to a Sunday service. We haven't developed any expertise in session writing and are happy to take advantage of the fine work others have done. This has worked for our 18 continuing groups. Some ministers write all of the sessions for their church's program. I think that's great and a real gift, but other ways can work too.

CGN November 2009 Question from David Throop
Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church, Houston, TX

Do you have a model on how to start a Covenant Group (CG, our name for our Small Group Ministries) for those doing service to the church?

Some background: We're a ~ 340 member church. We have ~15 active CG, with 100+ adults participating in at least one CG in the last 3 months. We have two Sunday services. When Rev Bob Hill planted the Covenant Group program at our church, 10 years ago now, he highly recommended the Carl George books on small group ministry. George's books mention SGMs

for groups who volunteer for the church - the team that helps with the parking, the ushers, the greeters, but gave no special instructions on setting them up. His examples, such as they are, describe Bible Study groups.

Our church has chronic trouble staffing the ushers and greeters slots. It's our intention to have (4 ushers + 2 greeters) x 2 services = 12 slots per Sunday. We have two couples who often volunteer for both services. We can actually sort of get by with as few as 1 greeter and 1 usher, but it limps and makes us a less welcoming congregation than we'd like to be. Our Membership committee chair emails out a sign-up to a list of about 30 members, but few people respond. Hey, we're a UU congregation near NASA and we've got many introvert members who find ushering / greeting uncomfortable. And they don't find it rewarding.

Is there a way we could make it more rewarding by structuring the ushering / greeting as a Covenant Group? Has anybody else done this? How do you structure it? What about existing volunteers who don't want to join a small group?

CGN December 2009 Response from Dottie Kelly,
Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

We at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA depend on our Branches groups (covenant groups) for ushering/greeting and chancel flowers at two services weekly. We have 20 groups and in the covenant of the groups it states "we affirm our connection to the church through our service on Sunday morning and by working together on a church or community project". Through rotation each branches group could possibly serve only once every year and a half. However, often two branches groups will split a month to assure full coverage. There are introverts here too who do not like to walk down the aisle and pass the basket for the offering, so they often choose to supply the flowers. The main point is that everyone has a chance to participate in some way and it is a team project.

The primary greeting at our church is done in a covered breezeway before a person enters the foyer. These volunteers are extrovert by nature, enjoy welcoming and choose this as their niche of service. The ushers therefore are not alone; we are using the varying strengths of all.

We have not found it healthy to start covenant groups with specific criteria. Part of our members' spiritual maturity is affirming the inherent dignity of all people by getting to know others different from ourselves. The bonding and the support within our groups have been amazing. We do have our Adult Programs groups with specific interests but they are not covenant groups.

CGN December 2009 Response from Diana Dorroh,
Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

David, the problem you describe with ushering and greeting is a critical problem to solve. I don't have any experience setting up a Covenant Group explicitly for ushers. However, as described by Dottie Kelly, in the above article, our covenant groups do provide ushers (2 per service, 4 per Sunday) and flowers and that is a real Godsend. It takes a coordinator, of course, but it isn't a hard job and there has always been a covenant group leader willing to do it well.

So, what should you try? I'd suggest asking the existing Covenant Groups whether they'd be willing to jointly take on the project of providing ushers on Sunday morning. If they take half of the months or half of the slots, that'd be a help. And it's an easy service project for the groups.

Then I'd pray for a dependable and regular volunteer leader or two to organize and take over the Visitor table and train and recruit helpers.

But if you want to try to organize an affinity group around service on Sunday morning, you could have an action/reflection model, where the group discusses the greeting experiences during its regular meetings. I would think that greeting would be more attractive as a ministry than ushering, and the greeting function would benefit more from having the same people every month. Those are just my thoughts.