

SESSION PLAN GUIDELINES AND CRITIQUE

From *Small Group Ministry With All Ages*, UU Small Group Ministry Network, 2011

“Keep a sense of perspective. Small group ministry is about connecting people, deepening our spiritual lives; creating community, strengthening our congregations and creating opportunities to serve. We are not creating graduate theological courses, nor should we mimic New Age fads. Small group ministry sessions should aim to provide real questions to engage real people in discussions that matter in living our real lives.” Calvin Dame

There are many sources of Session Plans. The UU Small Group Ministry Network invites people to share session plans on the web site. The web site also lists resources and compilations of session plans, Network publications and other congregations with collections of session plans.

You may want to create session plans for your own congregation and setting. Session plans can be written by the minister, by a designated person or a committee, or by a group. There is a broader approach to a topic when more than one person is involved in developing a plan, because of diversity of experience. It is also helpful to have diverse groups try out the session plan in order to receive a variety of responses.

Developing Session plans can:

- *Start with the openings or closings or readings, and draw the questions for the focus from these.
- *Start with the questions or activities for the focus and select the openings and closings to match.

***Keep it simple.** Groups meet for two hours, at most, and a good part of that time goes, appropriately, to checking in and connecting. Therefore, topics need to be focused enough to allow depth. The balance is to name the topic specifically enough to focus without directing.

***Sessions plans are facilitator friendly.** This includes minimal preparation on the part of the facilitator. Occasionally the group needs to be alerted to specific plans, like bringing poetry. The facilitator guides the group process and is not in the role of the ‘expert’ during the session.

***Groups need variety and topics need to be diverse.** This diversity is in the breadth and the seriousness of the topics. Sessions are by their very nature “uneven.” The questions, the intensity and activities around the topics will vary. Sessions will also be received differently from group to group, and by the participants of a group. Plan in such a way that topics give a mixture of levels of intensity. For example, use a lighter topic such as Humor or Music interspersed with a more intense topic of Life Changes or Facing Difficulties.

Specific considerations in using Small Group Ministry sessions with specific or mixed age groups include:

- *Topics can appeal to various age groups. Session plans written with one age group in mind can be broadly written to include other age groups.
- *Topic titles can be changed to appeal to broader age groups. In reality, not all titles are going to appeal to all age groups, nor should they. But look at all topics as options.
- *The questions and activities are related to the developmental level of the group. The more that we can use questions with all ages, the more conversation can occur among the age groups.

***It is important how we frame the questions.**

Questions open into discussion rather than direct attention towards a particular conclusion or telescope an answer. As you look at a question, can you imagine discussion going in at least a couple of directions?

Questions elicit responses of the heart and spirit. Questions that ask for opinions, comparisons, and what we think are eliciting responses from the mind, which is the expectation in discussion groups. However, the ministry focus of Small Group Ministry sessions calls us to respond from beyond or deeper than the rational. This is where sharing from the soul occurs, where deeper understanding of each of us as individuals occurs, where we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person.

***Keep the number of questions in a session to a minimum.** Three questions at most are suggested, and two may be plenty. This depends somewhat on the questions themselves. Too many questions prevent responding in any depth in a meeting. Plan the session for one meeting. It is difficult to return to where a group has left off after a break.

***The flow between the opening/closing readings and the Topic questions is smooth.** The intent of the reading is to support exploration of the topic. The materials are consistent in a focus and do not include thoughts that take participants in multiple directions.

***Opening and Closing Words and other readings reflect Unitarian Universalist principles and values.** Materials do not need to be written by Unitarian Universalists but need to be consistent with our commonly held values, such as those expressed in the Affirmations and Sources (also called The Principles and Purposes). These are found in the hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993) but the latest version, with the addition of a tradition, is in *Singing the Journey* (2005).

***People who have differing perspectives and life views are able to engage with the topic.** Expect that people in the group and the congregation hold differing views on almost any topic. Ask questions that honor the individual, the group as a whole, and diversity. The session plan provides an openness or invitation to sharing. The question to consider is who might be excluded by the session plan and, if someone is excluded, how can the session plan be inclusive, or whether it should be used.

***The words that we use, how we communicate, is critical to developing intimacy in a group.** We develop our views of the world precisely to live and even survive in it. In doing so, we develop language that may be alienating.

In preparing session plans, and in the sessions themselves, we can be aware of simplifying language. This can carry over to how we talk. Nonviolent Communication work of Marshall Rosenberg, also called Compassionate Communication, focuses on simplifying communications. *Words that add to or complicate phrasing deprive us of the ability to communicate simply and without judgment.*

Consider *adjectives of judgment*: a ‘good’ way to do this, or a ‘good’ way to get there, can become “a way” What is a good way for one person may not be a good way for another person. The valuative word causes a pause, even if slightly, and disrupts the flow of meaning.

‘Lead-ins’ and *insertions* cloud communication:

“I know that I am not as experienced as you, BUT.....

“I know that the sun is shining now, BUT

“AND I know that you know this, BUT.....”

“HOWEVER,.....

Lead-ins and insertions are a challenge for a response and distract the listener.

Absolutes may not be absolute! The words such as “always”, “never”, “ever”, “only” and “whenever” cloud observations. They are generally not needed for the meaning to be clear.

One of the first concepts in Nonviolent Communication is “observing without evaluating”. Look at what can be observed in time and context. We each differ from other people because of different situations in life, different experiences, different exposures and differing abilities—period. Looking at what shapes our stories and sharing is an ongoing consideration in Small Group Ministry. The more that we can do this from a perspective of objectivity, the more we can encourage intimacy to develop. It is easier to relate with language that is direct, that flows smoothly and does not require interpretation.

On a personal note, technology helps here. I tend to write by saying first what I feel or think about the content, then go back and delete the value statements and work in other parts of nonviolent communication. Rereading and rewriting helps to delete wording that detracts from what I want to say. The essence: If I were the person reading my writing or hearing me, is what I am saying as objective as I can make it?

In Unitarian Universalist humor we mention that we read ahead of where we are singing to see if we agree with the words. The same idea follows here: we react to judgment and absolutes. Let us pay the same attention to our clarity of language so that the listening and understanding in our Small Group Ministry sessions and congregational life may be enhanced.

***Take time to critique a session plan as it is being written or considered for use.** The following Critique of a Small Group Ministry Session Plan is based on the above guidelines.

CRITIQUE OF A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY SESSION PLAN

1. It is helpful to critique plans as you develop them, or as you review available plans. Following are some things to consider.
2. While the critique can be done by the creators or selectors, it may be helpful to have someone less directly involved in the creation or selection of the plan to also review it.

Session Title:

Date:

Keep it simple enough to focus. Comments:	Yes No
The plan is facilitator and group friendly. Comments:	Yes No
When you look at the questions, can you imagine discussion going in several directions? Comments:	Yes No
The questions elicit responses of heart and spirit. Comments:	Yes No
The number of questions is manageable for the group, time and topic. Comments:	Yes No

The flow between the opening/closing readings, other wording, and questions is smooth. Comments:	Yes No
The wording of the session plan is consistent with UU values. Comments:	Yes No
The session plan is appropriate for the age group(s) with which it is being used. Comments:	Yes No
The session is inclusive. Comment: Who would be excluded by this plan?	Yes No
The language is inclusive, objective and not judgmental. Comment:	Yes No
Other comments and suggestions:	