

SGM JOURNAL

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A publication of the UU Small Group Ministry Network

Archives available on www.smallgroupministry.net

NETWORK NEWS



Welcome New Network Members!

Since May 2014, the following congregations have become supporting members: UU Fellowship of San Luis Obispo County, CA; First Parish Church of Groton, MA; Starr King UU Fellowship of Plymouth, NH; UU Congregation of South County, RI; UU Congregation of Columbia, MD; UU Fellowship of Midland, MI; Church of the Larger Fellowship; UU Congregation of Las Cruces, NM; and UU Fellowship of Topeka, KS.

Online Resource Section Revised

Our extensive listings include General Resources, Focused Resources for specific topics, an Online Directory of articles, and an SGM Brochures section. See all at <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public.html>

Call for SGM Brochures

Share your promotional SGM Brochures on the Network website. Send in pdf format to cgneditor@smallgroupministry.net

Members Section On the Web

View SGM information and communicate online with Network member congregations. Now under development, sections are planned for Ministers, SGM Coordinators, and Religious Educators.

Shop the Online Store

Purchase books and CDs from the Network using PayPal, credit card, or debit card. Visit: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/sgmstore>

Network Member Congregations

See your congregation's name on the membership list. Learn who else in your district and region is a Network member and valued supporter.

<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/membership.html>

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Our Mission:

“To help create healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by promoting and supporting Small Group Ministry.”

Who We Are:

The UU Small Group Ministry Network, a UUA Related Organization, is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. We provide support to small group ministry programs in UU congregations through training opportunities, networking, and the development of new resources.

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Archives are available on the SGM Network website.

UU SGM Network Publications

Covenant Group News - A free, bi-monthly e-newsletter bringing you SGM news, resources, and event announcements from congregations, districts, and regions. Current issues are posted online. Subscribe now to receive every issue via email. <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/dada/mail.cgi/list/cgnews>

Connect with SGM on Facebook - Join our more than 100 Facebook members. Share ideas and enrich the small group ministry community. <http://www.facebook.com/groups/158837360893790/>

Order Books & Manuals Online Or By Mail - Pricing & ordering information: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/forsale.html> Online Store: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/sgmstore>

Social Justice Work Through Small Group Ministry - Thirty-four sessions for preparation, action and reflection on topics of multiculturalism, radical hospitality, immigration, racism, marriage equality, and earth justice.

Small Group Ministry With All Ages - Implementation strategies, leader training, session development, and session plans for children through elders.

Facilitator Training and Development Manual - A guide for training and support plus a handbook on CD to customize for group leaders and facilitators.

Spiritual Journeys: 101 Session Plans for Small Group Ministry Programs - Sessions on Spiritual Journeying, Personal Beliefs and Values, Spiritual Challenges, Just for Fun, Being Human, Holidays, and Special Use subjects for life events.

Small Group Ministry for Youth - Twenty-five sessions for middle and high school youth.

New Resource for Small Group Ministry (Chalice Circles)

*Reprinted from the UUA Southern Region Newsletter: Mid
September 2014 Edition*

Small Group Ministries are one of the best ways to grow your congregation. The Southern Region has two new resources for your congregation to use to help keep your Small Group Ministry vibrant. They are the Smart Church - Chalice Circle Handbooks by Connie Goodbread, a Congregational Life staff member. They are designed to help your Chalice Circle Facilitators lead deep discussions. They are each set up as one session per month for ten months. Holidays are worked into the sessions. They are based in the Smart Church philosophy of systems thinking and grounded in Unitarian Universalism.

Download the free handbooks from Southern Region Resources: <http://www.uuasouthernregion.org/resources.html>

Changing Culture Through Small Group Ministry

By Mary Alice Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Newport, RI

First, some history. Channing Memorial Church in Newport, RI, explored the idea of small group ministry shortly after the Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman arrived as our full-time settled minister in 2000. Previously, Channing had been in decline, losing members and with low attendance at worship services. Within a year after Rev. Freedman's arrival, the church was flourishing. Attendance at services was averaging one hundred people. We were glad to see so many newcomers, but we were worried that as we grew, we would lose the familiarity and closeness we had enjoyed as a small congregation.

These were also difficult and divisive times for us in a community with a large military presence as our congregation dealt with 9/11 and our nation at war. We had some contentious meetings. A Small Group Ministry program offered a means for Channing to retain the feeling of connection and ease at being among friends, while discussing complex issues in a safe environment.

We began our small groups in 2003 with seven groups meeting in homes or at church, engaged in what we hoped would become a meaningful addition to church life. Now, some dozen years later, our program is still going strong with 36 or so participating each session, thanks in no small part to the leadership of Bill Peresta, our Small Group Coordinator.

I believe small group ministry has made profound changes in congregational life at Channing. We've learned valuable new interpersonal and leadership skills from being in small groups that we carry over to committee and other settings. First and foremost, we've learned respectful listening. While someone else has the floor, rather than interrupting or planning what we're going to say next, we really pay attention. We try to understand when someone expresses their thoughts or a differing point of view, recognizing they may have valuable perspectives to share.

Most chairpersons now begin committee meetings with a chalice lighting and check-in. This sets a tenor for meetings that reminds us we are part of a spiritual community. Leaders go around the table, inviting each person to speak. This draws out every person, even shy and soft-spoken introverts. Everyone feels they matter and have something valuable to contribute. We have much less conflict at meetings now, as people feel truly heard and also feel safe expressing differing points of view.

Since every first session of a small group is spent writing a covenant, we've become accustomed to setting out our expectations of one another and what the rules will be for our gatherings. Each group figures out: How confidential will discussions be? What commitment will we make to attendance and being on time?

People in our small groups have two hours to discuss a topic in a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere where they can share their personal experiences. By exploring our own life's journey, we get to know one another in a more expansive and deeper way than is usually available to us.

This dynamic fills emotional needs while fostering understanding, and means that people who've participated in small groups now have several friends in the congregation that they know particularly well. To keep the groups fresh, we mix the pot twice a year when new sessions begin, assigning people based on their scheduled availability.

Small groups are an especially welcoming place for newcomers, who can get to know several people from the congregation in a safe and secure setting much more quickly than they ever could in a year of coffee hours. Each of our small groups completes a service project at the end of a session, which also connects people to the larger community and helps participants become aware of different aspects of congregational life.

Small Group Ministry in a Community of Seniors

By Rev. Michelle Collins, First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

For the past two years, I've been leading a small group at a local continuing care retirement community. Over this time, it's turned into a vibrant group that kept meeting even when they told me they wanted a break for the summer. I think small groups meeting in retirement communities have incredible potential, as places for spiritual growth, as places for caring connections, as places for outreach, and as places for folks to engage with Unitarian Universalism especially when they may not be able to get to church as much anymore. We've not been without our challenges though.

Challenge #1: Having an on-site coordinator. Without a member of the community providing both initial and ongoing support, I've found it's difficult to have a group going. In the case of this group, we had a church member who lives in the community and takes care of scheduling the group, sending out reminder notices, and checking in with folks between meetings. We also have the support of a staff member, their pastoral ministries coordinator. I learned how crucial this is when I tried to start up a group at another local community and wasn't able to get it off the ground because I was missing this role for the group.

Challenge #2: What to call the group. In the beginning, we discarded a number of names. Connection Circle – that's what we call them at our church – nope. Too confusing. Small group ministry – nope. Too specific, and they didn't want it to have the 'm' word. It's going on the general community calendar, after all. We settled on "Unitarian Universalist Discussion Group." It names who we are, and the residents reasoned that it was more welcoming to new people who might like to try us out. And we've had a variety of folks check us out, too. And a few even came back!

Challenge #3: What to talk about. We thought we had everything set, and we all showed up for our first meeting. And then THE QUESTION: "So, what are we going to talk about?" At first I suggested we could work with our monthly themed small group sessions the groups at the church were using. The group didn't want that, for sure. "Let's just try something," was my response. I changed the title on the page, and we did a session on wonder, our current monthly theme. And everyone loved it! "Let's do something just like this next time, too," they said.

Over time, we've tried a number of things. We did some sessions on James Luther Adams theology and five smooth stones. We've tried sessions on some of the monthly themes. Over the summer, the group met without me and discussed sermons. For one session, participants told me they wanted something about what spirituality meant, but didn't really want to talk about spirituality in terms of their spirituality. I brought a session about milestones on our spiritual journeys, folks talked about their spirituality, and it was declared the best session we'd had so far.

In fact, several sessions have been named the best session we've had so far. More than just a group, I've seen a community forming. Folks in the group are consistently getting together outside of the group because of their identity as members of the group and the connections they've made during our time together. They're asking what the upcoming monthly themes are so they can think about them ahead of time. When someone new attends, the other group members have invited them to other activities and helped them to get connected. It's a community, and a consistent one.

I still haven't figured out what the group is as far as a category. Is it a discussion group, spiritual growth and engagement, pastoral care, a connection to their heritage and religion, a safe place to talk religion and politics (topics that are universally avoided in the community's dining room), or is it something else? I think it's all of these. One growing trajectory in the small groups movement is groups that are outside the walls of our congregations but are connected with one of our congregations. Retirement and continuing care communities are ideal settings for these groups, and the group members (as well as the group leader) end up reaping many benefits. In some ways, I've found it to be one of the best implementations of small group ministry. I hope that you might consider trying one out in your community, too.

SESSION PLANS: KEEP THEM COMING!

By Rev. Helen Zidowecki, UUSGM Network

A delightful problem faces the SGM Network! Over 600 Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group Session Plans submitted by individuals and congregations are listed in the Network website Session Plan Directory (<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public/sessions/index.html>) In addition there are links from congregations that have sessions on their websites. Such wealth and generosity has led to three Network activities regarding session plans.

The first activity is to make session plans accessible and available through a sort and search of topics and themes. For some time, topics such as Beliefs, Celebrations, Congregations, Life Passages and Witness have been assigned to some session plans. But this addresses only a third of the sessions. To accommodate the growing interest in finding sessions related to specific themes (eg., humor or poetry), a Session Plan Group is creating a key word system to search for topics. In the meantime, we ask that plans submitted to the Network for posting include key words. More specific details are on the website.

Sessions may also be identified through their titles. For example, UU Principles is noted first in the Directory listing, followed by the specific principle. In addition, there may be groupings of session plans from a single source, such as “UU Principles: 1-7” or “UU Principles and Parenting (12 sessions)”. Our goal is to make use of the Directory easy and comprehensive.

The second activity is to develop and publish a collection of session plans for celebrations and special days throughout the year. Several visitors to the Network’s GA 2014 booth signed up to help with this project. We are looking for sessions related to Earth Cycle and other religious celebrations, Congregational and Church Life Celebrations (such as Flower Communion or Child Dedication), and civic celebrations. The working title is *Session Plans Around the Year*. The publication mode we use will allow us to add new sessions on a continuing basis.

The third activity was generated by the suggestion that there be a place on the website to request a session plan a specific topic—one that is not available via sort or search options. Individuals and congregations could respond to requests by sending a topic-directed session for posting in the online collection. In addition, we could form a pool of people interested in writing session plans, an interesting new prospect for networking.

To respond to this article, contact office@smallgroupministry.net

* With suggestions on how to organize session plans for sorting and searching.

* To submit and/or participate in developing *Session Plans Around the Year*.

* With ideas for a request-development partnership.

We look forward to hearing from you. And do keep those Session Plans Coming!

RITUAL AND CEREMONY IN SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

By Susan Hollister, UU SGM Network

Ceremonies are used in small group ministry to mark significant group events and transitions. We invite you to adopt meaningful rituals to enhance the covenant group experience, making the time spent together special and memorable.

The Welcome Ceremony from UU Congregation of Atlanta, GA, can be inserted into the session plan when new members are joining the group:

One at a time, each current member lights a tea light and expresses a wish representing what they have gained from covenant group membership. Then, one at a time, our new members light a tea light and expresses what hopes or expectations they bring to the group. We continue to burn the lights throughout the meeting.

The Farewell Ceremony is used by many congregations to mark the occasion when one or more members are leaving the covenant group:

Going around the circle, express to the departing member what their presence has meant to you and what you will miss most as they leave the group. Our departing member will then express what being a group member has meant and what s/he will miss most.

On the following pages, Covenant Group welcome and goodbye rituals are presented by UUs of the Cumberland Valley in Boiling Springs, PA and UU Church of Bloomington, IN.

Welcoming New Members

By Rebekah Feeser, UUs of the Cumberland Valley, Boiling Springs, PA

Hospitality, defined as *the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers*, comfortably stretches beyond the confines of gender to any Unitarian Universalist, although our "Namely Women" Small Group is indeed an all-women's group. As the current group facilitator, I would punctuate that too often the rituals and ceremonies associated with welcoming—meals, letters, gifts, tokens of appreciation—have been linked to women. Enlisting all the magic of the Wise Women, Men, and Children through the ages to celebrate the *many* forms of hospitality available to us in our UU Small Groups, I invite you to consider ways to welcome new members into your Covenant Group by sharing what has been useful for our group.

Our small group, as well as several others in the congregation, have found the covenant below useful, grounding, and transcendent as good rituals can be. We honor the unknown author each month by reciting this covenant together. Periodically I alter the form—read together, individuals read different sections, one person reads while others listen—so that the message is "sung" a bit differently even while the words remain clearly articulated each time we meet:

*I will listen with my heart; I will speak from my heart.
 If I don't feel like speaking, I have the right to pass.
 What is said here stays here; I will respect confidentiality.
 I will not treat this as group therapy, although our time together is therapeutic.
 I will allow others to speak without interruption.
 I will not give unasked for advice.
 I will allow space for everyone who wishes to speak.
 I will treat other peoples' situations with respect, not treating them lightly.
 I will honor the diversity of thought and feeling and values among us.
 I will honor the times for reflection and quietness.
 I will speak from my heart and I will listen with my heart.*

To welcome a new small group member, I contact the person and arrange to meet with her at a local restaurant. I then email to her the poem "Listening" by Mary-Elizabeth Cotton [published in the Spring 2014 *SGM Journal*] and New Member Information that includes the group name, meeting schedule, leader and member names and contact information, and a list of past topics. I attach a couple of previous sessions as examples, plus a link to *Basic Elements of Small Groups* on the UU SGM Network website (<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/basicelements.html>). *Basic Elements* provides useful background, prompts questions, and directs our conversation when we meet for the first time. Because we all need to feel safe as we listen to each other and share our stories, the concepts of Confidentiality, Covenant, and Deep Listening are carefully reviewed.

I choose to meet with new members before they participate in a first group to entertain questions and deepen understanding of the concepts and the culture of a UU Small Group. My sense from current small group members is that they too feel safe knowing that new members have been prepared in this way.

Opening the door to group participation welcomes new members while modeling and reassuring current members who appreciate knowing that basic group norms have been shared even as we continue to grow month to month into a new group. As Rumi begins his poem "The Guest-House", *(t)his being human is a guest-house, every morning a new arrival*. And as he concludes, *Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond*. Small Groups offer us an opportunity through deeply listening to connect with our commonalities and differences as we awaken our spiritual lives together.

Marking Significant Group Events and Milestones

By Alan Backler, UU Church of Bloomington, IN

At the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, Chalice Circles meet from September to May—twice a month, every third week, or once a month. The Circles then disband and brand new groups form in the fall. Therefore, saying goodbye to fellow group members in the last Circle meeting is a major emotional event. In 2013, co-facilitators Doug Cauble and Bob Taylor developed the session plan below that many of our groups use.

Saying Goodbye

Chalice Lighting

We light this Chalice, the lamp of our heritage, For the Light of Truth, The Warmth of Community, The Fire of Commitment, And the Spark of the Sacred, That call to us to care for the Earth.

Check-in: What you share may be about your physical or spiritual health, cares or concerns for loved ones, or issues you are facing.

Opening Readings

From *Nothing Twice* by Wislawa Szymborska

Nothing can ever happen twice
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive here improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.....

With smiles and kisses, we prefer
to seek accord beneath our star,
although we're different (we concur)
just as two drops of water are.

From *Waving Goodbye* by Elizabeth Spire

We looked out to the future. Our future
selves. You stood dead center
in the globe and raised your hand to stop
the scene, your palm enlarging
Then waving goodbye, we walked,

... backward and away,
farther and farther away—
the globe still gazing on us—
leaving ourselves behind
to live forever in that silver room,...

From *The Walls* by Mark Halliday

So if there is to be a place for you, for you
it must not be located in plaster and tile and space,
it will have to be in that other house,
the one whose door you felt opening just last night
when you dialed from memory and your friend picked up
the phone.

Sharing/Deep Listening

1. How was deep listening for you in this group? Share a moment when deep listening impacted you in a positive way.
2. What did our Chalice Circle mean to you? Share a cherished memory from our time together.
3. Did you notice a change in the group or in yourself since we began in the fall?
4. Now that we are ending, what do you want to say to this group in the way of closure.
5. Discussion of above quotes

Closing Words

Nothing can ever happen twice
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive here improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.....
-Szymborska

Check-out/Extinguish Chalice

Stand and join hands. As we go around the circle, share briefly, in a word or short phrase, what you will take away with you from today's session.

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.

Rituals and tradition provide an opportunity to make important events special and memorable. Rituals add substance and meaning to actions and events at both the individual and social level. With rituals, you can enrich your life and have a sense of belonging to community.

~Denise Lammi and David Wojtowicz

Roots & Branches at Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

By Connections Director Dottie Kelly and Branches Coordinator Joanna Wilson

Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

Roots classes are six-hour informational sessions spread over three Wednesday evenings or three Saturday mornings, held every other month. The first session is dedicated to the history of the Unitarian Universalist movement, and the second to the development of the theology of today...including each of us developing our own.

The last session is an orientation to our Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge. We talk about its journey from a 35 member fellowship in 1951, the purchase of property, the buildings from separate capital fund drives, and even tour the campus. This is when we talk about our governance structure, the pathway and expectations of membership, and our long-standing Small Group Ministry covenant groups which we call Branches.

Our ministers, Rev. Steve Crump and Rev. Nathan Ryan, talk extensively about Branches, urging everyone to consider becoming involved. Since the ministers are not actual members of any Branches group, one of the Branches Coordinators gives personal testimony of the value of belonging to a group. Since its inception in 1999, the Branches program has grown to 24 groups with about 60% of our congregation participating.

The ministers explain not only what a Branches group is, but what it is not: a Twelve-Step group, a therapy group, a social group only. We have those programs including book clubs, but Branches is a mini-church. We learn how to live a covenantal life with a dozen fellow congregants and it translates to a mature relationship with 400 congregants for the benefit of everyone.

The ministers emphasize that we consider Branches an important arm of the ministry to our congregation. Although we have an outstanding Congregational Care team as well as a team of Pastoral Care Associates, most often it is fellow Branches group members who provide the first-line hands-on assistance, be it emotional or practical, needed by a congregant. Branches leaders, who are trained by the ministers, instinctively know when they should notify the ministers about a situation of need.

In the Roots packet for each attendee is a Request for Branches placement form which lists the times and days of all groups and asks the participant to indicate their choices and availability. They can give the form to staff at that time or later, and the placement process begins. Empty chairs are found to fit the needs of the individual. We have several groups for which we provide child care if needed.

We ask for a one-year commitment to the group. When the person asks for Branches placement, no matter how long it has been since Roots, they are sent a document named Small Group Basics which reviews these points, as well as a sample of a Covenant used by many groups.

We are very proud of our Small Group Ministry program and support it with an annual Appreciation Sunday, an annual social event for leaders, and several workshops each year. Retention is high with many people staying involved in a group year after year. Financial support is higher for Branches members than for the overall congregation. You could say that strong Roots produces strong Branches.

Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening
when you'd have preferred to talk.

~ Doug Larson

Short-term Small Group Ministry

By Pauline Broberg, Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, Pennsylvania

Many members of Main Line Unitarian Church (MLUC) participate in Small Group Ministry. Some of our fifteen groups have been meeting for many years. While small groups are a wonderful way to foster connection and spiritual growth within an active church community, church members may be hesitant to join long-term groups for a number of reasons. Some might be worried that they will not fit in with a given small group's social culture. Others might be concerned that they will not be able to forge new connections where long-standing bonds already exist. For others, a long commitment can be a stumbling block. Some who are interested may have concerns such as how small groups are run, how sessions are selected, how privacy is assured, what SGM social projects entail, and how to know when SGM "is working."

To address these barriers, the SGM Steering Committee began offering short-term small groups in the fall of 2013. At present, short-term small groups are offered throughout the year, except during holiday season and summer vacation. The groups meet at MLUC in the evening on easy-to-remember rotating days: in October the group meets on Mondays, in November on Tuesdays, etc. This allows as many individuals as possible to attend on a day that is convenient. Attendees are asked to commit to attending all four sessions offered during a given month. The minimum group size is ten individuals, and child care is offered. The short-term SGM program is led by two trained short-term group facilitators, one experienced and one new, whenever possible. The church offers short-term facilitator training twice a year.

The four topics used are carefully selected from existing material in order to give individuals new to SGM a well-rounded, positive experience. The first session typically offered is an "opener," giving participants a sense of other group members, while allowing them to feel comfortable sharing in a safe environment. The second session goes deeper. A session on happiness, or one's definition of success, for example, may be offered. The third session explores a subjective topic: the search for meaning, ways of pursuing spiritual growth, or ways to cope with stress and disappointment are possible topics. The final session is future-oriented, such as where one would like to be in ten years.

New church members are encouraged to join a short-term small group. During new member classes, participants are introduced to SGM by a facilitator and a SGM group member. A week later, participants in new member classes have an opportunity to try a SGM session as part of their new member orientation. While this session is shorter than normal SGM sessions, it gives participants an idea of what a SGM experience has to offer. During this trial session, participants will hopefully hear things from others that enhance their appreciation of members in the group, and gain insight into the shared nature of human experience. Typically, about half to three-quarters of the participants in MLUC new member classes sign up for a short-term group. Other church members are also encouraged to sign up via MLUC's newsletter. In general, the final short-term group consists of about half new members, and half church members.

Once the short-term small group runs its course, the group decides whether it would like to become a long-term group. Sometimes, in cases where the group chooses not to continue, members of the short-term group will decide to join an existing group. Typically, a SGM candidate is encouraged to try the group for three sessions before deciding whether they want to join the group or not.

The SGM Steering Committee at MLUC has made short-term small groups a viable option for those interested in experiencing SGM. The short-term program has developed into a successful vehicle for introducing MLUC members—old and new—to a rewarding path of connection and spiritual growth through small group ministry.

The paradox is, a structure and format are required if we are to create the community of closeness, sharing, and trust most of us want within an atmosphere of informality.

*~ Adapted from Robert L. Hill, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry**

Taste of Small Group Ministry

By Kathryn Ellis Moore and Ginny Koslow, First Parish Church of Groton, MA

At First Parish Church of Groton, Massachusetts, our SGM Working Group offers a **Taste of Small Group Ministry** prior to each fall and spring series to introduce new participants to our program. In a Taste of Small Group (TSG), we explore a thought-provoking topic through guided sharing and listening in just 30 minutes. Childcare is provided.

We announce TSG and SGM series dates one to two months prior, and have the worship leader mention TSG and coffee hour signups that morning. Our SGM flyer is a separate insert in the order of service. We provide a nice sign-up table at coffee hour with food, flowers and sample SGM materials with "SGM Ambassadors" (prior participants with stickers on their name tags) on hand to share their experience. Sign-ups continue through the office, but we find we get most of our sign-ups TSG morning. Taste of Small Group has greatly increased participation—our program is thriving. The session below was presented this fall to a group of eight, all of whom joined a Small Group.

Holding Fast to Dreams

Chalice Lighting/Opening Words: 1 min

If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth:
the human soul does not want to be fixed; it wants simply to be seen and heard.

If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember:
the soul is like a wild animal -- tough, resilient, and yet shy.

When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out
so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding.

But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself.

~Parker J. Palmer

We light the chalice in honor of the opportunity to spend 30 minutes together and for the opportunities for connection to ourselves and to one another that the Small Group Ministry Program makes possible.

Welcome/Introduction to Small Group Ministry: 5 min

Introduce yourself as the coach: Our role as coaches is to guide the group and keep us on time and on topic as best we can. In Small Group Ministry there are usually two coaches for each group and we will be full participants as well as guides.

The Purpose of Small Group Ministry is connecting more deeply to whatever you experience as holy and connecting more deeply to the other people in the group. Small Group Ministry is a place where the soul may show itself. It is a place for honest conversation about topics and issues we may never get to talk about in the course of daily life, yet which matter deeply.

The Format: Each weekly session has the same format or agenda, though the topics change from week to week. We light the chalice, check in, there's an introduction to the topic, then several powerful questions to reflect on. There is a time for quiet reflection, writing or drawing, followed by a time of deep sharing and listening, a brief check out, and a closing blessing. Today we will experience some of those components, but not all of them, and not with the full time allotment they usually have—but hopefully you will be able to get a sense of what the groups are like as we experience it today.

The Covenant: Small Group Ministry groups are sometimes called Covenant Groups because the most important characteristic is that the group agrees to abide by a covenant or set of agreements. The purpose of the covenant is to make it possible for members to share deeply and from their hearts. The covenant includes such things as respectful listening without interrupting, confidentiality, speaking from our own experience, and committing to attend meetings.

(Distribute) These are the covenants we use in Small Group Ministry.

Today we'll not go through each item or create a covenant together except that we do ask you to listen carefully without interrupting and to keep confidentiality. In this case, confidentiality means that you are free to tell others about your own experience in the group but do not reveal the content of what anyone else shares.

Mini Check-in: 7 min

Now we'd invite you to check in by *introducing yourself briefly* and answering the question:

How is it with your spirit today?

Today each person will have just one minute to check in and we'll keep time for each other by subtly passing the watch to the person speaking when one minute is up. We'll go around the circle one by one, keeping a few seconds of silence before speaking in which we might hold the person who spoke in our thoughts or simply be in the stillness.

As coaches, we'll go first as an example. (Ask the person to your right to keep time for you, trying not to go over one minute.) We'll take a few seconds of silence before starting by sounding the gong. (Model this.)

Topic: TOTAL TIME 18 min Today's topic is Holding Fast to Dreams. We have these quotes to share:

It is never too late to be what you might have been. ~George Elliot

Hold fast to dreams for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams for when dreams go, life is a barren field frozen with snow

~Langston Hughes

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

~Mark Twain

Often when we have a dream, we let reality, or what we perceive to be reality, interfere with the dream. We tell ourselves we don't have the time, money, skills or courage to follow our dreams. It is often easier to believe the person who tells us we *cannot* do something, than the person who tells us we can. When you were a child or young adult, what did you want to be or do when you grew up? Does your life reflect anything of those youthful dreams? What brings you the most joy, the most energy, the most sense of being at home in yourself and in the world?

(Distribute Questions & Read Aloud) These are the questions we'll reflect on in the silence ahead...

1. What are your dreams; what does your spirit long to do?
2. How could you find your passion if you're not sure yet what it is—where might you start looking?
3. Is there anything stopping you from turning your dreams into reality?
4. Are there steps you have taken to step over the threshold and into your dreams?

Silence for Reflection/Writing/Drawing: 3 min

We'll have 3 minutes of silence for you to reflect on these questions and jot down any thoughts you may have. Feel free to only complete the questions that speak to you.

Sharing: 12 min

We invite each of you to share your response as you feel moved, rather than clockwise. And to make sure each person has equal time to share, we'll again use the watch. (*If time* after each person shares, free flowing discussion of the theme is possible. Coaches may need to direct the conversation back to the questions.)

Final Words & Check-out: 2 min

(Thank everyone for coming.) If you haven't signed up for Fall SGM please sign up today. Coaches will contact you to confirm your place in the session.

Usually there's time for a check-out during which people are invited to share how their reflections or something they heard in the group has impacted them or moved them to do something in the week ahead. Today I wonder if there are any final thoughts anyone would like to share.

Closing Blessing to Extinguish the Chalice: 1 min

May the efforts we have made here today to listen with caring and compassion sustain us in the days ahead.

May these efforts bring peace into our lives and into the lives of all those whom we touch.

And now, may love surround us, may joy gladden us, may peace lie deep within.

May our lives and the lives of all those we love go well.

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4303 Swarthmore Road
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