

# SGM JOURNAL

Vol 12 No 2

Spring 2016

A publication of the UU Small Group Ministry Network

Archives available on [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)



## The UU Small Group Ministry Network Logo

The SGM Network logo, designed by graphic artist Erin Malick Thompson, symbolizes the essence of Small Group Ministry. The sequence of talk bubbles forming a circle suggest the aspect of covenant groups in which each person speaks one at a time while the others listen.

The overlapping bubbles create a "figure-ground" effect in which the center space sometimes recedes and sometimes comes to the foreground, symbolizing the secure space created by members of the group.

## NETWORK NEWS

Revitalize, Strengthen, and Grow your  
Small Group Ministry!

**General Assembly June 22-26 Columbus, Ohio**

BOOTH # 807 – Exhibit Hall

Open Wednesday through Sunday

### VISIT THE SGM NETWORK BOOTH AT GA

- Purchase resources: facilitation, program management, sessions
- Share SGM/Covenant Group challenges and successes
- Speak with Network Board members and SGM Program leaders
- Get answers to all your SGM & Covenant Group questions

### Booth Volunteers Welcome

### Welcome New Network Members!

Since July 2015, the following congregations have become supporting members:

UU Fellowship of San Luis Obispo County, CA  
UUs of Central Delaware, Dover, DE  
Sepulveda UU Society, North Hills, CA  
River Road UU Congregation, Bethesda, MD  
First UU Church of San Antonio, TX  
UU Congregation of Santa Fe, NM  
River of Grass UU Congregation, Davie, FL  
Arlington UU Church, Arlington, TX  
UUs of Clearwater, FL  
First Church UU, Leominster, MA  
UU Church of Charlotte, NC  
UU Church of Birmingham, AL

One Island Family – Southernmost UU Congregation, Key West, FL  
UU Congregation of Asheville, NC  
Oak Ridge UU Church, Oak Ridge, TN  
Holston Valley UU Church, Johnson City, TN  
Foothills UU Fellowship, Maryville, TN

### Network Member Congregations

Learn who else in your cluster and region is a Network member.

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

## Reflections On Covenant

*By Jim McCrae, Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Durham, NC  
Given during Sunday Worship Service, March 20, 2016*

### 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.

### Board and Staff

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### Changes of Address

Send new postal and email address to

[membership@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:membership@smallgroupministry.net)

### The SGM Journal

(ISSN 1945-2683)

is published seasonally by the UU Small Group Ministry Network and is supported by memberships, donations and resource sales.

Archives are available on the SGM Network website.

As a human living in the web of life on planet earth, I am never alone. I am always in relationship with others. I define myself and the world around me through my relationships. The discernment and clarification of the nature of my relationships with others takes up a significant share of my thought time. As I become aware of the relationships around me, I learn how to be in the world. I need to know the boundaries and the strength of those relationships. This is not a one-time exercise that results in me knowing who I am, but an ongoing process of observing and refining.

Like Escher gazing at his image in a crystal ball, the image gracing the order of service two Sundays ago, my perception of the world is distorted by the physical and mental circumstances constituting my own private lens. What I take to be the real world is a very narrow slice of that world limited to what my senses can capture and filtered through my personal story and experiences. The more I can leverage the experience of others the more refined my world view becomes.

One way to integrate the experience of others into my world view is through reading books by authors I trust. Consider the first time you read "Romeo and Juliet" or one of its many retellings. Shakespeare's depiction of a thicket of relationships and their tragic outcome holds up a cautionary mirror of the world we know. We cannot help but feel that the players could have behaved another way toward one another; that another outcome was possible if only those characters could agree to be in relationship in a more understanding and compassionate way.

The most important way I discern and clarify my own relationships is through the sharing of personal experience within the circle of my close relationships. When I listen to a friend's personal story or hear how that friend felt about some experience we had in common, I have the opportunity to add to or adjust the impact of my own perceptions on my understanding of the world.

A covenant is an explicit promise to a circle of friends or a larger community that we will behave toward one another in certain ways. Together we promise that our relationships with each other will be bounded and defined by certain rules of conduct. An important element of this promise is that we will share our experiences as honestly and as clearly as possible. When I enter into such a covenant, I am more ready to accept the stories and experiences of others in the community. I have the opportunity to see the world not just through my own narrow field of perception but through the experiences of others that I trust.

Through this practice of dialogue in covenantal relationship, I have the opportunity to correct for some of the distortion inherent in my own private lens. I emerge better prepared to help the larger community understand that other outcomes are possible if only we can agree to be in relationship in a more understanding and compassionate way.

## The Role of the Minister in Small Group Ministry

By Alan Backler, Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, Indiana

In his presentation, *Strategies and Solutions for Small Group Ministry Challenges*, at the General Assembly in June 2008, Rev. Russ Savage identified the essential characteristics of successful small group ministry. One of these was the involvement of the minister.

Since the original planning and formation of SGM, what we call Chalice Circles at UUCB, the ministers have always been involved. The ministers conduct the training of facilitators in the late summer. They offer a sermon on deep listening and its role in SGM as registration begins in the fall. The sermon is accompanied by testimonials from congregants about their experience in Chalice Circles. The monthly meetings for facilitators, which focus in part on sharing our experiences in our Circles, are run by the ministers, who often facilitate their own Chalice Circles. Chalice Circle participants are informed that ministers are available if a serious pastoral concern arises in a Circle. In the last few years, we have adopted a monthly theme-based approach. It is often the ministers who create session plans for the Chalice Circles related to these themes.

Rev. Savage argued that, “ministerial support provides visibility, legitimacy, and even prestige to the SGM program”. Based on our experience, we at the UU Church of Bloomington support that viewpoint fully and encourage congregations to involve the minister in SGM.

Unfortunately, as the results of the small group ministry survey indicate elsewhere in this issue, nearly half of the respondents reported that their minister was not involved at all with their SGM program. In many other congregations, the survey indicates, the role of the minister in SGM is limited.

“Implementing Small Group Ministry” describes the minister’s role as key in whether and how a Small Group Ministry program works. “Visible support and active involvement of the minister is a factor in success. The role of the minister varies during the implementation of SGM, at each stage of the program, and with the size of the congregation. The minister does not do this alone: *Small Group Ministry is a program of the congregation rather than a program of the minister. However, if the minister is not involved and not supportive, the program probably will not succeed.*”

[http://www.smallgroupministry.net/implementing/implementing\\_oversight.php](http://www.smallgroupministry.net/implementing/implementing_oversight.php)

**For ministers with limited time, here are suggestions for supporting the congregation’s Small Group Ministry:**

- Give opening words at Facilitators’ Meetings
- Provide session topics to facilitators and program coordinators
- Recognize the coordinator/steering team and facilitators during a Sunday service
- Invite Sunday service testimonials from group participants to coincide with the sign-up period.
- Advocate SGM participation during the annual start-up season
- Publicize covenant groups’ service projects
- Form a liaison with Membership to place new members in covenant groups

### UU SGM Network Publications

**Session Plans Online** - The SGM Network invites session plans for listing in the Session Plan Directory. Send sessions to [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)

**Covenant Group News** - A free e-newsletter bringing you SGM news and events. Subscribe at <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/dada/mail.cgi/list/cgnews>

**Connect on Facebook** - Share ideas and enrich the small group ministry community.  
<http://www.facebook.com/groups/158837360893790/>

**Order SGM Books & Manuals Online Or By Mail**

Titles & ordering information: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/forsale.html>

## Covenant Groups - A Gym For the Soul

By Rev. Joanna Fontaine Crawford, Live Oak  
UU Congregation, Austin, TX

From the foreword to Listening Hearts, Fourteen  
Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing by  
Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins (Skinner  
House, 2015) Reprinted with permission

I felt as lifeless as one of those Middle Eastern deserts you see in *National Geographic*, just hill after hill of hot sand, without a tree or a bit of vegetation to break up the view. My baby daughter had just completed six months of chemotherapy for kidney cancer. She was returning to health; my spirit was not. I had lost all faith and sense of meaning. As far as I was concerned, not only was there no God, there was no purpose. I had no answers to any of the important questions of life.

Feeling so deeply alone, I began attending a covenant group at my home church. The gentle atmosphere, the support of the other members as they listened without correcting or debating, and their willingness to be vulnerable and share their stories allowed me to find my own answers—ones that fit my “new normal.”

Slowly but surely, my parched spirit healed. The shallow, facile theology that had made up my previous worldview began to fade away. Held in this compassionate group, I was able, one by one, to put together the beliefs that I found to be true and life-giving. In that covenanted group, I could test new ideas by voicing them aloud, while being afforded the privilege of hearing the other group members voice their own tender beliefs.

When rough times came again, as they inevitably do, I had developed by then a solid foundation to help me weather the storm. I owned a tested system of belief and an internal strength that was fed by a group, committed to creating sacred space in our time together.

Some say that covenant groups (also called chalice circles or small group ministries) are a conversion experience. Both through my personal experience and my experience as a

minister witnessing others in their first covenant group, I have found this to be true. In addition to my story, I can tell you about countless others and how covenant groups have transformed their lives. But when you experience it firsthand, it makes you want to shout from the mountaintops about the power of the small group.

A covenant group is like a gym for the soul. As a participant, you get to exercise “what it means to be human,” to use a phrase from Unitarian luminary James Luther Adams. Your mini-community models mutual respect, as members practice deeply listening to one another. Your spirit becomes stronger as you stretch to accommodate new ideas, as you wrestle with your own conclusions, and as you learn how to compassionately hold the space for another member to process their own experiences.

Join or form a covenant group. Your life will be better. You will be better.





## UUA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

General Assembly (GA) is the annual meeting of our Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). Attendees worship, witness, learn, connect, and make policy for the Association through democratic process.

Anyone may attend! The theme this year is **Heart Land: Where Faiths Connect.**

<http://www.uua.org/ga>

### MEET US IN Columbus, Ohio ~ JUNE 22-26

**General Assembly 2016 – UU Small Group Ministry Network Booth # 807  
Greater Columbus Convention Center**

Meet, Greet, and Share

The GA Booth is a great place for conversation and for meeting others interested in and involved with Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups. You are key to providing opportunities and enhancing SGM/CG in congregations and throughout Unitarian Universalism!

Resources from the Network will be on display and can be ordered at the Booth.

Get involved with the SGM Network

**We invite active Network members to serve on our Board of Trustees.** Partner with the Network to support small group ministry programs in UU congregations. This is a working Board that manages membership, finances, resources, publications, consultation, and training for SGM programs.

**What role would you like to play with the SGM Network? What gifts and talents do you bring?**

**Talk to us at the GA Booth about opportunities to help keep the SGM Network strong.**

Staff the Booth

Network members are invited to be Booth Assistants and Booth Volunteers. Information and application forms are available on the UU SGM Network website [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)

Contact [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net) immediately to apply!

## Small Group Ministry Survey: Early Patterns Emerge

By Anne Gero, Publications Team, UU Small Group Ministry Network

In early February 2016, the SGM Network Publications Team sent out a survey to all SGM Network members and Covenant Group News subscribers. We've learned a great deal from the responses and very much appreciate your participation. Your collective input has pointed to the need for support programs that the SGM Network will put in place later this year. (Editor's note: See the mentoring concept introduced on page nine.) In this article, we report some of the preliminary findings of the survey.

This is a qualitative survey that is analyzed by searching for the patterns that emerge (or don't emerge) in the responses. In doing this search, I was surprised by the number of informative issues that were raised. This article addresses 4 issues that were discovered, followed by a description of the patterns. Then it offers a brief discussion of possible implications for our programs, and some alternatives for consideration.

### Key Findings

#### 1. What is in a name?

While the acronym for the overall program is SGM, less than half of the respondents in our study used Small Group Ministry in their program name. A large number were named Covenant Groups followed by Chalice Circles, with many named quite uniquely. For example, some were identified by their meeting time and others by what they aspired to achieve; e.g., Spirituality, Wisdom, etc.

Clearly, a variety of names were chosen that work locally. What occurs to me is that a shared name communicates that the programs are all a part of one community. The SGM community then can be understood as a large entity that shares goals, resources, and needs and could better work together for some purposes and common concerns.

Please understand that this is my opinion and I do not yet know what others think about this. I am guessing that there might be some push-back because of an attachment to their name. There are ways to finesse this "either/or" dynamic. If all programs used SGM as prefix to their chosen name, both names could be used. For example, SGM: Chalice Circles at (Church name.) How about using both?

#### 2. Where are the Ministers?

The survey asked if the Minister was able to be involved in the SGM program. The responses varied widely. Nearly half of the respondents indicated that their Minister was not involved at all with their SGM program.

Others respondents identified a variety of ministerial roles that were covered by their ministers. For example, about one-fourth were consultants, as needed. Some ministers only attended the monthly meetings with the facilitators. A few of the ministers were described as involved in all program activities.

Ministerial involvement with the SGM Program has long been described as an important factor for the success of the program. While involvement of ministers may support a wide variety of purposes, I would suggest that one of the main purposes would be that the group members may identify ministerial needs that they pursue with their Ministers. This is the Small Group Ministry.

#### 3. How are the new facilitators trained and how are the existing facilitators supported?

The survey data revealed that there may be a strong relationship between having a Program Coordination Team and a commitment to training and on-going support of facilitators.

Half of the respondents indicated that they did not have a Coordinating Team. Further review revealed that most of these same programs also did not offer initial training to new facilitators. They also were not likely to provide support to the facilitators by holding regular meeting sessions with them.

Facilitating groups can be complex at times. Understanding group dynamics and knowing how the purpose of the group determines how to lead a group is essential. While group facilitation is interesting and important, guidance should be available, as needed. Without the support, it is likely that there may a higher turn-over of facilitators.

#### 4. Are you ready to dream about the future of your SGM Program?

Respondents to this survey indicated the year their Program began. The range was from 2001 through 2016. Earlier groups were much more engaged in thinking about what changes might be developed by 2016. Groups with short histories found it difficult to think about new goals. Most either did not list dreams about the future or just hoped there could be more of what they were developing now.

Programs that have been in place for several years had a variety of wishes and dreams for the future. Creativity governed their list of ways to do outreach, ways to recruit members, ways to form partnership in the community, and many more ideas about how to enhance their SGM program.

These results suggest that this type of question regarding the future is more pertinent to Programs with a significant history. Perhaps reports from them could later be shared with the “younger” programs .

Overall, it makes sense that if a Program is young and has not completed what is needed in getting established, that thinking about ten years ahead would not likely be a priority.

Another approach to consider would be to develop a generic mission statement for all Small Group Ministries. Mission statements provide a framework to evaluate choices. When a proposal is made to enhance or expand a program, the leaders can hold the idea up to the mission to see if they are compatible.

Thank you for reviewing these findings and remarks that I have made about these survey findings. We would welcome your thoughts and suggestions. Write to us at [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)

## UU SMALL GROUP MINISTRY NETWORK

*Creating healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement  
with Covenant Groups and Small Group Ministry*

### Small Group Ministry Benefits our Congregations and Enhances Our Ministry

- Allows the entire congregation to engage in ministry.
- Encourages personal growth, spiritual exploration, and deep relationships.
- Provides a sustainable experience of *intimacy* (community) and *ultimacy* (spirituality).
- Calls members to live their UU faith by engaging in social outreach through group service ventures.
- Engages members in a spiritual covenant, fostering the skills of hospitality, right relationship, caring, and attentive listening.
- Extends and reinforces the work of the professional ministry and pastoral care team.
- Connects current, new, and long-term members.
- Sustains congregational membership and commitment and contributes to numerical growth.
- Develops congregational leaders and other committed volunteers.
- Provides a forum for discussion of Sunday sermon topics in an intimate setting.

**RELATED ARTICLES** available at [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net).

**Rev. Dena McPhetres:** *Small Group Ministry Magic for Ministers*, Winter 2007, SGM Quarterly journal  
**Rev. Steve Crump:** *Congregational Benefits from a Successful Small Group Ministry Program*, Spring 2009, SGM Quarterly journal  
**Rev. Steve Crump:** *Unintended Consequences of Small Group Ministry*, April 2010, Covenant Group News

## The Impact of Small Group Ministry on Ministers

*From Anne Gero, SGM Journal Editorial Team*

In his article, *The Role of the Minister in Small Group Ministry* (page 9), Alan Backler presents a comprehensive and compelling overview of the importance of the minister's involvement in the congregation's SGM/Covenant Group program. Small Group Ministry often serves to support the minister's needs in a different way. As an example, I include the response from my minister, Rev. Aija Simpson, in Boiling Springs, PA.

### Small Group Ministry Helped Me Choose

*Reverend Aija Simpson, Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley*

A little over three years ago I was in the throes of the ministerial search process. For those of you who have never experienced a search (either on the ministerial or congregational end) this is the process by which we try to discern which ministers are the best fit for which congregations. Search is many things: exciting, exhausting, comprehensive, and time-consuming to name just a few. When you are reviewing ten to fifteen 100 page packets of information, the congregations can start to blend together. You have to prioritize key areas to focus on.

Small Group Ministry was one of those areas for me, which is why I was delighted when I discovered that the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley had over half of its membership enrolled in Small Groups. This told me that this was a community that had deep connections to each other and took their spiritual development seriously. Ultimately I found many things to love about UUCV, the congregation I now serve. And I was right, one of its greatest strengths was, and continues to be, its Small Group Ministry Program.

**An Invitation to Ministers:** The SGM Journal Team invites ministers to share a short statement that reflects your own experience with Small Group Ministry. Send to [journal@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:journal@smallgroupministry.net) We look forward to hearing from you.

### Knoxville SGM Institute: Truly a Partnership!

Thanks to Tennessee Valley UU Church for hosting the UU Small Group Ministry Institute 2016, April 1-3, in Knoxville, TN. Thirty people from nine congregations participated. The richness came from the active sharing, the energy of being together, and the wealth of wisdom and experience that was evident. The Institute was a partnership between the TVUUC and the SGM Network that we would like to see replicated. The Institute ended with Rev. Chris Buice's Sunday sermon on SGM, followed by sign-ups for groups at TVUUC!

The Institute occurred at TVUUC's request, with their assistance, and the vision of a program for the area. This was an experience of partnering, a type of support mentioned in another article in this Journal. The SGM Network is developing guidelines for such partnership in other locations.

#### **There were numerous benefits in a partnership between the local area and the UUSGM Network:**

- We were able to include the interests and needs of the area.
- Participants co-led workshops along with the Network.
- Area congregations were included, leading to further support and collaboration in the region.
- Institute participants gained energy, enthusiasm and ideas from each other.
- The hosts celebrated Small Group Ministry in their own church.
- Rev. Buice' sermon emphasized the importance of SGM within the congregation, and was followed by an opportunity to sign-up up to join a Small Group.
- The host congregation increased leadership among their own members though planning and hosting the Institute.
- We were able to involve Regional personnel. Christine Purcell, Congregational Life Staff of Southern Region, offered greetings. We look forward to more communications with her about regional SGM workshops and conferences.

Creating a conference of any type takes work. Collaboration and sharing the functions made it possible. This sharing included space, people, and financial resources. Thanks again, Tennessee Valley, for requesting and working with the Network on the Institute. Please contact the Network with your interest in having a program for your own and surrounding congregations, at [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)



## SMALL GROUP MINISTRY SUPPORT

By Rev. Helen Zidowecki, UU SGM Network Board

The UU SGM Network has long recognized the need for various types of support for starting, enhancing, or rejuvenating Small Group Ministry programs in UU congregations. The need for support also was expressed by many respondents to our recent survey. (Survey results are reported on page six of this issue).

The UU SGM Network is considering ways to make available support systems such as Networking and Partnering, Mentoring, and Consultation. We solicit your input about the types of support you may need for your congregation. Your suggestions will help us to develop effective systems of support for SGM/Covenant Group programs.

**Networking and Partnering.** We all are involved in Networking: the sharing of session plans, articles about our respective programs, and participation in conferences and educational programs. “Partnering” is structured Networking over a period of time. Partnering can occur among churches geographically, such as clusters; or with like characteristics, such as size; or program characteristics, such as Small Group Ministry with Young Adults. This can be done between congregations with established programs and those who are starting programs.

**Mentoring** is a relationship in which one person or group takes special interest in helping another person or group develop a successful program over time. This is more individualized than Partnering, and focuses more on one party, the mentee. This could happen between SGM Coordinators. Effective Mentoring is characterized by mutual respect, trust, understanding, and empathy. Mentors share life experiences and wisdom, as well as technical expertise. Both the mentor and mentee contribute equally. The mentee has responsibility for the relationship, seeks advice from the mentor, and is willing to listen to this advice. In addition, the mentor must be able to act in the best interest of the mentee.

**Consultation** is directed more at preventing or resolving concerns. It is usually time-limited and directed at a particular situation. Consultation provides expertise and resources toward a resolution of a situation in some manner.

The UU SGM Network proposes a support system making partnering, mentoring, and consultation available to beginning, re-starting, established, and faltering SGM programs. Together we’ll explore options, make discoveries from experience, and share the excitement of moving forward. Mutual support increases understanding of how we implement SGM and its impact on participants and congregations. Engagement in support systems, both providing and receiving support, strengthens both parties.

We invite your responses to this proposal for mentoring and support. Send us your comments and suggestions about the areas of support that would be most helpful. How would you like to be involved in either providing or receiving support? Tell us at [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net). We look forward to launching support strategies for SGM programs across the denomination.

### Join the Booth Team!

- Share your experiences
- Talk about SGM/Covenant Groups
- Answer questions
- Recommend resources

*Qualifications: Knowledgeable about the UU SGM Network, member of a Covenant Group, and enthusiastic about sharing the SGM model.*

**GA Booth Assistants:** Shifts are 2-4 hours, *with modest reimbursement.*

**GA Booth Volunteers:** Shifts are 1-2 hours.

*Booth Assistants/Volunteers will work with the **Booth Coordinator**, a member of the UU SGM Network Board.*

**UU Small Group Ministry Network GA 2016**  
**General Assembly – Columbus, OH – June 22-26**

To apply, respond to [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net) by **June 10, 2016.**

## The Making of a Homegrown Small Group Ministry Institute

By Linda Randolph, Judy Ann Langston, Lorraine Smith, Toni Powell, and Suzanne Brown, Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, Knoxville, TN

### **How It Came To Be**

The Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church Small Group Ministry program member (and chair) of our SGM Steering Committee, Judy Ann Langston, went with two other church members to a weeklong Institute at The Mountain in 2009. Judy Ann returned “re-energized” to implement new ideas for strengthening the SGM program she helped begin in 2000.

Now our program needed new facilitators, new small group members, and new steering committee members. An experience such as that offered by SGM Institute seemed the most effective way we could make that happen. Sending church members to such an event would require some funding, which was not plentiful in our church budget. However, for the 2015-16 fiscal year, our Program Council received a block grant to fund worthy programs and activities, and advertised for proposals for mini-grants. The SGM Steering Committee wrote a proposal explaining the need for a good orientation and training program for members and asked for funding to attend an SGM Institute. We received a grant, which would provide funds to supplement three people to attend.

And then, Uh-Oh. We couldn't find any information about an Institute to be offered in 2016, and after a lot of discussion about unsatisfactory alternatives, Judy Ann called UU SGM Network President Rev. Helen Zidowecki, whom she first met at the 2009 Institute. Helen told us that a 2016 Institute was not planned, but she suggested that TVUUC hold an Institute for the East Tennessee Cluster of five area UU churches in coordination with the SGM Network and its faculty.

Our reaction: What a wonderful solution! BUT then: How to even begin? What to do? Working together with the Network made it possible for us to get started and proceed with some confidence that we were doing what was needed to put on an Institute.

We knew that church support would be critical. In describing this opportunity to our minister, Rev. Chris Buice, we were met with nothing but wholehearted enthusiasm. He considers our TVUUC small group ministry program essential for members of a congregation for the intimacy and ultimacy. He immediately reserved the Sunday of the event for the service to be focused on small group ministry. Ultimately, both Helen and Chris spoke to the effectiveness of Small Group Ministry for

inclusion and support of members in church. We also planned (and held) an information and sign-up table after the Sunday service on April 3 and each Sunday for several weeks.

### **What We Did**

Our second source for support was, of course, the SGM Network faculty comprising Helen, Susan Hollister, and Diana Dorroh, with conference calls and emails over a three-month period. Helen asked what outcomes we wanted, what topics or foci for the Institute. On reflection, our committee agreed that we needed training for both experienced and potential facilitators, and a revitalization of our SGM leadership and program. This clarification guided the Network team in how they chose and organized the sessions for the Institute, and also provided the direction we needed for our part.

### **Setting a date & planning facility needs:**

We all understood that a week-long Institute was desirable but that we had to work with what was possible for prospective attendees, which would be a weekend event. Helen worked out a curriculum of essentials that would fit that time frame. Our steering committee picked a date when there were not other church events and reserved the church for Friday afternoon and evening, all day Saturday, and a room in which to meet on Sunday morning before the service. Our final decision was April 2, 3, and 4.

Our facility could accommodate both large and small group sessions, in the manner of an Institute, but we had to decide how many participants we could comfortably accommodate, support, and afford. We considered the number of facilitators we would need, how many meeting spaces would be required, the curriculum, how many attendees we might expect, and how many meals for how many people. We agreed on 35 attendees as a good number, which proved to be just about right.

Working with the Network faculty we estimated costs for transportation and accommodations for presenters, photocopying costs, office supplies, and meals for all participants. When we had our estimates in hand, Helen worked out a draft budget and who should pay what, taking into account what funds TVUUC had available, and financial assistance from the Network. We set a registration fee -- \$40 per, if members of the SGM Network, \$65 if not. In the course of registrations, four new congregations joined the Network.

**Registration:** The SGM Network agreed to handle registration. They set up an online registration process, which also included payment, and our committee was able to access the program to monitor how many had registered at any point in the process.

**Lodging:** We were able to get some discounted rates at area motels and also made use of our own UU Home Hospitality program with both options included in our registration form and promotional flyers.

**Meals:** This turned out to be a major satisfaction factor for our participants, thanks to a couple of talented cooks in the congregation and one generous member who coordinated the whole effort. We paid for this service to save us energy to both support and participate in the event. The typical comment we heard was, “Best food I ever had at a weekend conference.” Having meals and snacks that people enjoyed helped offset the energy depletion that can occur with a weekend event.

**Promotion:** Having identified who we wanted to serve in our own congregation—SGM leadership, current facilitators, potential facilitators and contributing members—we did specific outreach to these populations. We encouraged our group facilitators to attend, along with those group members they suggested as good potential facilitators. We also ran articles in our newsletter describing the upcoming opportunity and posted a few flyers around the church.

We identified individuals at each of the other four churches of the East Tennessee Cluster, told them about the Institute and sent a personal email with a promotional flyer attached. Our minister promoted the event to members at ET Cluster meetings and through emails.

Helen contacted the Southern Region, and through Christine Purcell, Congregational Life Staff, the event was posted on their web site, which resulted in attendance from two churches outside the cluster. As a bonus, Christine also attended.

**Supplies:** We handled the photocopying of the handouts on our end at an office supply store. We also agreed to handle supplies needed and actually wound up using very little—a bit of easel paper, some name badges, and some markers.

**Assistants** In addition to outsourcing meals (within the congregation), we also paid for our church assistant administrator to help out with registration on Friday evening and for a church sexton to help out on Saturday with rearranging some of the meeting rooms for different sessions and other miscellaneous tasks. Just as with the meals, having this kind of assistance relieved our own steering committee attendees to spend their time attending.

### ***How it went--Reflections***

As it turned out, the weekend we picked for the Institute was also the weekend that the city of Knoxville held two major events that presented conflicts for a number of prospective attendees, who then asked to attend only some of the sessions offered on Saturday. We declined those requests because of the value of the cohort experience, which was a planned part of the experience, mirroring the experience of belonging to an SGM group.

It was both fun and beneficial to interact with other SGM leaders and facilitators from other churches. One attendee had recently taken over the responsibility to revive her congregation's SGM program; another was a newly appointed SGM program leader. Both experienced and new leaders, facilitators, and SGM members got to hear how other churches' programs were structured and what strategies had proved successful, and not, along the way. We have made some valuable new contacts, something like a support network, for further questions and ideas. Institute participants also were able to better get to know members from their own home churches.

For TVUUC's program, we gained two new members to our own steering committee.

We have also had two attendees volunteer to facilitate new groups. The Institute provided a valuable opportunity for SGM group members identified as potential group facilitators, as the breakout sessions were a safe and supportive setting to practice group facilitation.

The TVUUC Steering Committee came away with a basic plan for expanding and improving the effectiveness of our program. We are developing a mission statement with the minister, after which we can work with him on what he sees as priority goals that will most benefit the congregation.

Next year we will set strategies to achieve goals, with minister and staff support. We expect that we will add to our group formats by offering some shorter-term groups, perhaps topical and perhaps as an introduction to small group ministry. In short, we are excited and feel renewed energy for changing up our program.

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