

# SGM JOURNAL

summer 2018

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.*

## What's in a Name?

*Did you know there were so many names for Small Group Ministry groups in UU Congregations across the country?*

### **Group Names:**

Covenant Groups  
Branches  
Sharing Circles  
Connection Circles  
Connecting Circles  
Covenant Circles  
Chalice Circles  
Fellowship Circles  
Chalice Groups  
Chalice Communities  
U & I Groups (Ultimacy and Intimacy)  
I & U Groups (Intimacy and Ultimacy)  
Community Circles  
Sharing Circles  
Growth Groups  
TIE Groups (Together in Exploration)  
UUnity Circles  
Inreach Groups  
Spirituality Circles  
Spiritual Connections

Don't see your group name on the list? We want to hear from you! Send your group name to [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)

**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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**World Wide Web**

[www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)

**Changes of Address**

Send new postal and email address to [membership@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:membership@smallgroupministry.net)

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is published annually by the UU Small Group Ministry Network and is supported by memberships, donations and resource sales. Archives are available on the SGM Network website.

**PUBLICATION NOTES**

*Covenant Group News (CGN)* is an electronic newsletter that is several times a year. CGN has been a primary source of writings from those doing Small Group Ministry since it was started by Rev. Robert (Bob) Hill in 1998. Focus: Sharing from people involved with Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups. Thank you for your contributions. Issues are posted on the UU SGM Network website as they are published. They are also added to the Resource Directory of articles. Subscribe at no cost: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/cgnews/about.html>

*The Small Group Ministry (SGM) Journal* is distributed to members of the UU SGM Network, primarily electronically. It is becoming an annual publication targeted at considerations that have come to our attention, especially from the UUA General Assembly booth. Focus: Capturing trends and themes that enhance Small Group Ministry in an ever-changing environment.

Submit articles for the Journal via e-mail at

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

Special thanks to our members. You make this community, our website, publications and advocacy for this ministry possible! Not a member yet? [Join us!](#)

*Small Group Ministry Network Facebook* has over 250 members.

This is an opportunity to ask questions, share your work with Small Group Ministry, and receive information for other participants.

## Connecting Through Small Group Ministry

By Susan Hollister

*Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Durham, NC*

As the UU Small Group Ministry Network's membership coordinator, I correspond with new and renewing members and often get to meet and talk with them at the Networks' booth at UU General Assembly. Having this personal relationship with Network members is very meaningful to me and energizes my work with small group ministry.

Small Group Ministry is built on personal interactions and deeper connections, the very essence of intimacy or a sense of community and belonging. Twenty years ago, Covenant Groups and Small Group Ministry evolved in UU circles with the enthusiasm and sharing of a small group of people, primarily ministers. This relationship broadened as lay leadership developed to be more of shared ministry. Much has been written about the connections found in Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups that have changed lives and congregations.

A gift of small group ministry is that everyone involved can give and receive. Articles have been contributed to the Network publications, including Covenant Group News (CGN) and the SGM Journal. Session plans have been sent in for the online directory. This June at General Assembly SGM Booth in the Exhibit Hall, we noted comments that were heard several times.

Several people had been involved in groups in more than one setting and carried experiences from setting to another, sharing ideas and learning along the way. This includes people moving to a new place and starting groups.

Congregations use materials from other congregations, such as session plans. When these are adapted, increasingly acknowledgement is given to the original source.

Small Group Ministry was noted in planning calendars, such as, "I can't do it at this time because that is when my small group meets." Commitment to being part of the group is increasingly evident.

How have you shared and what have you received? Your presence and sharing in your own group is a gift of yourself, and an expression of openness to others. When have you talked about the importance of your group to your own life journey with someone, possibly encouraging them to participate? When have you given a testimonial about the experience? Or written an article for your congregation's newsletter?

Your thoughts about the strengths and challenges of Small Group Ministry, whether you have had groups for years or are just starting, and how small group ministry keeps people connected with the community can be shared in workshops and conference. You are invited to join SGM Network Facebook and interact with other participants. Inquiries that you have may be directed to [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net). We look forward to talking with people at the SGM Booth at General Assembly. This gives us ideas about trends and things that are evolving in Small Group Ministry.

New and renewing members of the UU Small Group Ministry Network receive a copy of the latest *SGM Journal*, along with *Implementing Small Group Ministry*, and are provided with information about the Network and the website. This is also an opportunity to make the personal connections that are so vital to enhancing small group ministry as it evolves. It also gives the Network an idea of resources needed.

The Network is increasing the opportunity for members to interact. Information that accompanies your membership and renewal is added to the Profile of your program on the Members Section of the Network website. You will be given a code so that you can see the information that other members have submitted, and they can see your information. Members can follow-up with other members on items of interest.

## Small Group Ministry by the Numbers

The founders of the Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group movement in the late 1990's brought the focus of spiritual deepening with small group relationships in congregations to Unitarian Universalism. From the very beginning, there was the question of, "Who is doing –or involved with – Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups"?

At General Assembly 2010, the Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network invited congregations to submit a profile or brief description of their experiences with Small Group/Covenant Group Ministry.

Of the 151 congregations that were included in the General Assembly publication *Celebrating Congregations*, 89 submitted information about their programs, and others had submitted session plans and/or articles and resources to the Network. The congregations were from 38 states, Canada and Mexico, and the world-wide perspective of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. They range from congregations involved with Small Group Ministry since 1998 to some that are in the process of starting a of starting a program. They cover all sizes of congregations, from 72 members to 1650 and the Church of the Larger Fellowship with 3500 members.

In preparing for the General Assembly 2018 Networking Session on Small Group Ministry, we noted congregations that have connected with the Network in some way, or that are known to be involved with Small Group Ministry at some level. Our counts are incomplete, but as of this publication show:

- **Congregations:** Over 425 congregations are known to the Network to be or have been involved in some phase of Small Group Ministry, from exploring to having ongoing programs, including forty-eight states, four Canadian Provinces, Australia, England and Mexico.
- **Session plans:** Over 1000 session plans from congregations and individuals are on or linked to the Network website, and more are waiting to be added.
- **Articles:** Over 400 articles involving at least 200 individuals
- **Subscribers to Covenant Group News (CGN):** 600
- **Network Facebook:** 270

The Network is continuing to connect with congregations and other organizations that are involved with Small Group Ministry. This includes reviewing websites, inviting people to contact the Network, and trying to increase connections through the UUA Regions.

We frequently measure impact by the number of groups and number of participants in those groups. Counting the number of people who *engage with SGM* in the small groups would give a broader picture of impact. For example, Augusta had an intergenerational series throughout the year. One session included five options of topics co-facilitated by an adult and a youth. About half of the participants had not experienced Small Group Ministry! Using statistics to define or demonstrate effectiveness or impact undermines the impact.

To capture this, we need to include:

- Number of ongoing groups and participants – as presently
- Participants in short-term or series of meetings, such as session on the UU Principles, etc.
- Note special events, such as using Small Group Ministry in events that use session plans

While there may be some duplication, the intent of the data is to indicate where Small Group Ministry is involving people within the congregation, and possibly where its use can be increased.

*The importance is not the statistics but the impact made by those that are represented by the statistics.*

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## Starting Small Group Ministry in a Lay-Led Congregation

By Gary Borg

*Pilgrim House Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Arden Hills, MN*

Pilgrim House UU Fellowship, a lay-led congregation, is a new member of the UU Small Group Ministry Network. Initially a group four of us met to talk about how people could connect with one another.

In early 2016, a visiting ministerial candidate suggested we try covenant groups. We invited two more group members and started a trial group using “Heart to Heart” by Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins.

Each covenant group meeting has a facilitator and the content for each meeting is based on a theme such as compassion, friendship, gratitude, and loss just to name a few. Members of the group make a commitment to share deeply, build connections, practice deliberate listening and to respect each other’s sharing and thoughts

There is a covenant or ground rules that we all agree to and each meeting follows a preset format. Our meetings have been lasting about 1.5 hours. Members are expected to commit to coming to the meetings, doing the assigned reading in the book (short chapters) ahead of time, and to be respectful of the format and each other’s thoughts. Groups may decide to use other books or readings as they wish.

In the summer of 2016, another group was formed. In the fall, more members signed up and we were able to start a third covenant group. In the fall of 2017, we started a fourth group. Groups meet after the Sunday program. They have been well attended and this will be our fourth year starting in September.

For a congregation of about 85 members, this response seemed to indicate that covenant groups were filling a need. Some groups have also used Robinson & Hawkins’ “Soul to Soul” and “A Mayo Clinic Handbook to Happiness.” The latter resource has practical exercises on acceptance, meaning, and forgiveness. It’s all about finding happiness when things are going very wrong, but it is also important when things are going well.

We were providing little support for our groups, we lacked a good plan for evaluating group success and were looking for advice on finding session plans. An initial contact with the Small Group Ministry Network resulted in a conversation with Helen Zidowecki. We followed up with a conference call with Helen and representatives from our covenant groups. The calls resulted in a wealth of ideas. Most importantly, it energized our group members. We also now have ideas for developing a strategy to make our covenant groups more effective.

Thanks to those of you who contributed to and supported Small Group Ministry over the years, and to Helen for her advice.

## Growing Your Covenant Group Program

Tips on how to grow Covenant Group/Chalice Circle programs in UU congregations:

1. Post a link to a couple of sessions on the congregation's website so folks can see how a meeting works.
2. Be clear that the groups are about sharing personal and life experiences. They aren't classes or debates. See Theodore Parker UU's description under "What are the goal of UU congregations?" <http://www.tparkerchurch.org/small-groups/>
3. Have Covenant Group members give a brief testimonial about their CG experience during a Sunday worship service. (Male and female.)
4. Have a sign-up table during Coffee Hour to coincide with the testimonials.
5. Offer a short "try it out" CC session before or after a Sunday service.
6. Have a required 20-minute orientation session for all those new to CG/CCs. Include a listening exercise.
7. Highlight that service to the congregation and community is part of the CC program, part of the group covenant, and a way to connect while working together. There is a list of examples on page 32 of the SGMN *Facilitator Training Manual*. (Available for sale from the UU Small Group Network webpage)
8. Consider adding "Connections & Responses" (before Likes & Wishes) to the session format, a time when group members can respond to what others have shared.

Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen:  
reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.

This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always,  
for every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting,  
after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

- from *The Seven of Pentacles* by Marge Piercy

## SMALL GROUP MINISTRY TODAY

*Twenty years of dedication and growth*

What draws people to a congregation, and what keeps them connected? This is what, twenty years ago, Rev. Bob Hill, Executive Director of the Southwest District, and Rev. Glenn Turner, of the Northeast District asked as they started looking at the issue of growing UU congregations. Both Bob and Glenn were aware of the statement made about 1980 by James Luther Adams, a prominent Unitarian Universalist minister, that people come looking for *Intimacy* and *Ultimacy*.

Glenn Turner had introduced “relational” focus to the congregations in the Northeast District, tied in with *The Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* by Kennon Callahan. Callahan focused on the *relational keys* and the *functional keys*. The logistics of keeping a church running (functional keys) were to support people and connections (relational keys). Add to this evangelical Christian leader Carl George’s Meta-Church movement, which focused on groups of 10 people within congregations or congregations made up of small groups. The title of Bob Hill’s book, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World, Ten at a Time*, is a direct connection to this evangelical approach. It was the focus of Bob and Glenn on these factors - growth, relations grounded in Intimacy and Ultimacy, and the use of small groups - that created Covenant Groups (Bob Hill’s term) and the Small Group Ministry (Glenn Turner’s term) movement.

Thandeka, who has been part of Small Group Ministry since its inception, wrote this in the Foreword of Bob Hill’s book published in June 2003:

*“Small Group Ministry is the hope of our movement. This Guide to Small Group Ministry documents, explains, describes, and encourages the small wonders in our lives that make believers of us all. Bob Hill knows that our Unitarian Universalist belief in human dignity is not a creed; it’s a liturgical practice. He knows that we are a community of communities, a congregation of congregations, a people who practice right relationship as Small Group Ministry for ourselves, for each other, and for the world. Seeing is believing.*

*As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm right relationship as a reverential act. This affirmation is our covenantal act together as a noncreedal people. This is our religious history. Today, we are doing it ten at a time as an embedded ritual practice of our congregations.*

*Why does the new form of Small Group Ministry work so well for us today? Why is this ministry transforming our religious movement? Why do so many participants feel new joy and fulfillment and discover new meaning in their lives when they follow the simple, covenantal procedures for practicing right relationship in these small group settings?*

*Thanks to Bob’s book, the answers to these questions are at hand. The techniques, models, references, and suggestions needed to understand, practice, develop, or simply to begin this work are right here. Bob’s answers are not doctrinal. They are as concrete as a human heart that is no longer lonely, warm as the place of human embrace that rekindles the sacred ground of our faith.*

*Bob had to write this book. He could not remain silent because this movement in our midst has transformed him. He’s really a Covenant Group practical evangelist. As a minister, he’s got the vision; as a district executive, he attends to the structural issues and concerns; and as a veteran journalist, he records the detail. The transformative power of his work is in its concreteness. Salvation is not theory here. It’s meeting time. Community action. Personal commitment. Praxis. It’s the place where the stranger is no longer alone.”*

The Basic Elements of Small Group Ministry that are available in the *SGM Journal Fall 2017* and are on the Network Home Page are based on the descriptions of Bob Hill in his book and the writings of Glenn Turner. The Basic Elements give the parameters and intent of Small Group Ministry, with implementation varied to meet the interests and needs of the congregation or organizing group. Bob Hill’s book remains a classic in this regard: defining the elements, and giving feedback from those who developed programs around organizational issues. *Implementing Small Group Ministry* from the Network provides options that have been shared over the years.

At this twenty-year mark in the life of UU Small Group Ministry, we have gathered reflections and comments and have noted trends over the years as Small Group Ministry has evolved – and continues to evolve.

## Observations and reflections on twenty years of Small Group Ministry

### **The change and challenge in ministry.**

The work of Bob Hill and Glenn Turner coincided with the emergence of “shared ministry” that broadened ministry from being the purview of the minister to the including congregants in a process of congregational life. Both Bob and Glenn defined the role of the minister to include selecting and training facilitators, and meeting with them regularly, developing session plans. As Small Group Ministry has grown, lay leadership has developed, such as in the role of the Coordinator. This person shares these functions with the minister as determined in their respective setting.

Shared ministry and the changing role of the minister was discussed in “Small Group Ministry: The Critical Role of the Minister” *SGM Journal Fall 2017*, and may be summed up as:

*“Shared ministry encourages the minister to take more of a support rather than administrative role. Assists with selection and development of leadership, including modeling ministry, is available to the lay leadership for group and faith development. Works with a designated lay leader who assumes the coordinating function. To the degree possible, the structure of SGM is in the hands of laity, especially the facilitation of the Small Group Ministry groups.”*

### **Ministry is different from other groups in the church.**

Ministry is act of caring or being present with another. It relates to the spiritual as well as the physical and emotional well-being of the group participants, and the balance between Intimacy (community) and Ultimacy (spiritual exploration) is crucial. Listening without needing to respond frees us to interact from the heart. Moving this listening practice to the topic of the sessions allows the sharing of another to increase our understanding without the need to agree or discuss. This practice is a spiritual way to confront the expectation to respond. Indeed, being open to the sharing of others allows space for connecting. We can extend the practice of sharing at the beginning of a session into our consideration of a topic. In this respect, we share from our own perspective, rather than in response to another’s sharing. This ultimacy, or considering topics of importance enhances the spiritual and ministerial way of living and interacting.

### **Leadership roles are defined.**

*Group Leaders* see the overall health of the group and connects the group with the congregation. They are chosen and trained by the minister and/or designated Small Group Ministry Coordinator as part of shared ministry. Group Leaders meet with the minister and coordinator for spiritual support, enhance group development, and awareness of new resources.

*Session Facilitators* guide the session in accordance with the basic elements of Small Group Ministry. Increasingly, groups are rotating the facilitation role among the group members; those who are interested in leading a session are able to do so. Group members may take leadership roles in other parts of the congregation.

### **Resources show the growth, breadth and influence of Small Group Ministry.**

The Network website has a library of sessions and other useful information.

The UUA website has: Small Group Ministry (<https://www.uua.org/small-group>), also [Virtual \(Online\) Small Group Ministry for UUs of Color](#)

### **Reflections on SGM from GA 2018:**

*While our small groups can be used to explore aspects of UUism, it’s not a setting for indoctrinating or convincing someone that some particular way of thinking is right. In these times of political and social activism, with its increasing stridency, small groups provide a safe sanctuary where civility and respect for differences can be nurtured.* Glenn Turner

*Moving beyond our congregation’s walls, we can harness what we’ve learned to engage our communities with today’s justice issues and their underlying spiritual, moral, and ethical questions. Small group ministry can be Unitarian Universalism’s engine as we work to face the challenges of our time. To use it, we must take our calling, the power of this ministry, and our potential seriously.*

Peter Bowden

*I am committed to amplifying our UU small group ministry movement out in the world, because as one younger woman writes: “we’ll be safer and stronger together.”* Marti Keller

## 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).

### 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>

Online Store: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/sgmstore>

## SGM AT GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2018

Small Group Ministry was one of the Networking Sessions on Friday evening at General Assembly in Kansas City. During this session, Thandeka and Connie Grant introduced their new venture, Love Beyond Belief.

Like other forms of small group ministry, Love Beyond Belief small groups create within us and among us direct experiences of care, support, and love that prompt acts of lovingkindness.

What distinguishes Love Beyond Belief small groups from other forms of small group ministry? The inclusion of embodied practices and the deep awareness of emotion within the spiritual context. Love Beyond Belief small groups establish a setting in which the entire group holds each individual in an environment of love. This experience of Love Beyond Belief prompts acts of lovingkindness for self, others, and the world.

An embodied practice may be deep breathing, or guided meditation to a deeper place of focus. It is from this place that a sense of energy of love permeates sharing and interacting. See <http://revthandeka.org/love-beyond-belief-thandeka.html> for the total program.

The Exhibit Hall Booth provides for a variety of conversations. Since 2013, over forty percent of the four hundred twenty-five congregations that are known to the Network to be involved with Small Group Ministry have connected at the GA SGM Network Booth, some for several years.

Several people from smaller congregations asked how Small Group Ministry could help them. This is a change from, “I’m from a small congregation, so we don’t need SGM.” Booth visitors also confirmed how Small Group Ministry created deeper connections within smaller congregations.

It was exciting to hear people who were part of SGM in one congregation talk about moving and experiencing SGM in another congregation. Some waited to see what the new congregation’s program would be like. Others shared from their previous experience in their new location. And at least one used previous experience to start SGM in the new location. This is true networking!

That Small Group Ministry is part of daily life was evident in hearing people talk about “scheduling around” the time that their groups meet. People also mentioned resources that they have used in session plans, such as Heart to Heart, Soul Matters packets, and others. The question that was specifically raised by one person was, “What do we use after we use (a specific resource)?” We discussed the concept of creating their own program, using session plans and other resources from congregations that are on the Network website. So many options!

We look forward to seeing you at General Assembly in Spokane in 2019!

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## Join the SGM Network Team!

The UU Small Group Ministry Network invites you to become part of the Network Team!

- Participate in visioning the future and functions of the UU Small Group Ministry Network. Share your thoughts on how Small Group Ministry can be enhanced.
- Connect with Network members who are new or would like to talk about their programs and options. This would be primarily by phone and electronic media.
- Plan, lead or participate in Small Group Ministry Workshops or Facilitator Training.
- Assist with publication of the Covenant Group News (CGN) or SGM Journal, and other publications.
- Assist with SGM Session Plan management, such as making session plans more accessible.
- Continue documentation of congregations that have Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups, and making connections as needed.
- Interact with ministers, SGM coordinators, religious educators and others with specific interests in Small Group Ministry.
- Provide consultation to congregations and other groups on a planned basis.
- Coordinate or assist with the Network presence at General Assembly, including the Exhibit Hall Booth and presentations.

Team Meetings are planned quarterly via electronic conferencing. We would like to schedule the first Network Team Meeting in January 2019.

Interested in joining the Network Team? Please send your information to [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net) by December 31, 2018.

**I'm interested in being on the team!**

**Name:**

**Contact Information:**

**Address, phone number(s), e-mail address:**

**Involvement with Small Group Ministry:**

**How you would like to be involved with the Network Team:**

## Become a Member of the SGM Network

As a member of the SGM Network you:

Get the current issue of the *Journal* before it's on the website, provide financial support for the SGM movement, receive discounts on publications and Network-sponsored events, and have a voice and a vote at our annual meeting at GA.

Name		_____
Address		_____
Congregation		_____
District	Program Coordinator	_____
Phone	E-mail	_____
I would like to receive the newsletter electronically;		YES NO
Congregational Membership (\$100 year)		_____
Individual Membership (\$40 year)		_____
Additional Tax-deductible Donation		_____
Total Enclosed: \$		_____

**Our Mission:**  
*"To help create healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by promoting and supporting Small Group Ministry."*

Send completed form and check made out to **UU SGM Network** to 4303 Swarthmore Road, Durham, NC 27707.

Download the form or join online at [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)

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**UU Small Group Ministry Network**  
**4303 Swarthmore Road**  
**Durham, NC 27707**