

## Recruiting New Members for Your Small Group Ministry Program

Small Group Ministry continues to transform congregations and to deepen the spiritual and community life of the people who participate. One important challenge for congregations, however successful their program may be, is the recruitment and retention of new group members. A common report is that following an initial period of enthusiasm as a program is planned and introduced, participation in the groups begins to wane and the overall number of groups declines. Or, the number of groups and group membership holds steady, but Small Group Ministry does not fulfill its potential to be a dynamic resource in the wider life of the congregation.

The first consideration in recruiting new members lies in the vision that the leadership in a church, both lay and professional, shares about the place of covenant groups in the life of the congregation. The more central that vision is to the goals and aspirations of a congregation, the easier it is to recruit and retain members. When there is a shared understanding of the value of small groups in the ministry of the congregation, and a commitment to promoting this part of congregational life, then interest will remain high and there will be people for new groups and members to replace the natural attrition in older groups.

And, while there may or may not be anything we can codify as "best practices," I do think there are ideas and approaches that can foster growth and connect more people to groups. When someone says their church started with five small groups but now they are down to three, these are the questions I ask:

- Is an invitation to investigate Small Group Ministry, a regular part of the welcome at worship?
- Does SGM have a regular column in the newsletter, a SGM news where group members can share their excitement, new leaders be introduced, upcoming topics be announced, group activities celebrated?
- Are there SGM brochures in the brochure rack?
- Do your facilitators meet regularly for training, fellowship and support?
- Is there attractive information on you website?
- Do you celebrate your facilitators a couple of times a year in the course of worship, maybe thank them for the important work they do?
- Is Small Group Ministry included in the letter that goes out to visitors as an important opportunity to

get to know people that the visitor might want to know about?

- Do you celebrate your group's Service Projects in the Sunday service, in the newsletter, or on the bulletin boards?
- Is there a Small Group Ministry Bulletin Board, maybe with pictures of people engaged, working and having fun?
- Is there a sermon once or twice a year taking about the promise of SGM?
- Is there a Sign-up table at Fellowship Hour that Sunday and maybe a couple of other times a year?
- Do you have well publicized "Drop In and Try Out SGM" events from time to time?
- Is SGM mentioned in your weekly newspaper listings?

These are particular ways that a congregation can promote Small Group Ministry. The congregations that I know of with vibrant programs regularly incorporate some mix of these practices and think of new ways as they go along. My congregation in Augusta includes almost all of these approaches. Every newsletter includes a chatty article, every welcome on Sunday includes an invitation, every service projects get some accolades.

And, I have to say; we get new members the old fashion way as well. We ask people if they would like to be in a Small Group. We look for people who seem in need of the warmth and embrace of this particular ministry. We look at a group and think whom they might need for some balance, and then we make a phone call to see if we can connect the right person.

In the end, I don't think it is complicated, I think it is a matter of taking seriously the promise of Small Group Ministry, and then applying those church practices we know will help a program be successful.

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Originally published in the Fall 2004 issue of *The SGM Quarterly*, the journal of the UU Small Group Ministry Network.

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