

# Reports from Ferry Beach, 2005

From August 13-19, 2005, the UU Small Group Ministry Network offered the first ever, weeklong UU training on Small Group Ministry at the UU camp, Ferry Beach in Saco, Maine. **The week was a complete delight!** Thirty-five lay and professional leaders attended from as far away as Washington state, Arizona and Louisiana as well as the Northeast and Midwest

## Report From A District President Ken Wagner, Marlborough, MA

This past summer, I had the great fortune to participate in Small Group Ministry Week at Ferry Beach. The week featured perfect weather, good fellowship, and most of all, the opportunity to participate in a workshop entitled “**Transforming Congregations With Small Group Ministry**” facilitated by the Small Group Ministry Network.

I attended the workshop as one of a team of eight small group facilitators from our congregation, First Parish Church of Stow & Acton, Massachusetts. Our SMG program is about a year into its life, with about 100 of our approximately 250 members participating in groups since January. **We committed as a group to attend the workshop to benchmark our progress against successful programs from other congregations; to increase our awareness of the challenges we will face as our program evolves and matures; and to gather the insight and wisdom of our fellow Unitarian Universalists** who share the vision that SGM, when done well, has the potential to transform, not only congregations, but the communities around us.

During the week, we had the opportunity to learn the essential elements of a successful SGM program, how to plan and implement a new program, how to expand and enhance an existing covenant group program, how to identify and train facilitators, how to write effective SGM sessions, and how to incorporate SGM practices into relational religious education. Apart from the formal sessions, we had a wonderful time sharing stories, moving experiences, hilarious mistakes, astonishing songs, exotic haikus and quiet walks on the beach.

**However, the most moving and powerful experience of the week was a feature very inconspicuously described in the SMG Network materials as “Hands on Small**

**Group Experience.”** We were formed into small groups, and conducted actual one hour sessions each day using common small group topics. Despite being together for less than a week, and despite the workshop nature of the exercise, I emerged connected to six very special people in a way I wasn’t before Ferry Beach. **If any of us didn’t fully grasp the power of small groups before this experience, we certainly came out the other side comprehending it.** We need to enlist this power in our religious life.

**Fifteen years ago, I found an authentic religious experience in Unitarian Universalism,** one that has changed my life and re-energized a passion to seek truth, not only in solitude, but in the love and support of a religious community. I am grateful to those who directed me to this religious tradition; **I am disappointed I didn’t find it sooner.** I don’t think my experience is unusual or uncommon - we owe it to others to let them know we are here.

Within the Clara Barton District, we have begun a conversation about the **growth** of our denomination within the district, whether that growth is thought of in terms of numbers, depth, influence or impact on the world. As the president of the district, I am convinced that any growth strategy must include programs to strengthen our congregations, to feed people what they hunger for within our religious communities, and to strengthen our visibility within and our impact on our wider communities. **The world needs our tradition and our message. Small Group Ministry is an answer.**

## Report From a Reluctant Minister Rev. Bill Breeden, Bloomington, IN

When my co-minister, Rev. Mary Ann Macklin, suggested that I should attend the SGM training at Ferry Beach, Maine, she might as well have suggested I go to a Chinese

Restaurant and have a dose of MSG. Unlike Mary Ann, I am not a fan of Chinese cuisine even without MSG, and, unlike Mary Ann, **I am not a fan of training programs.** I envisioned being asked to role-play and otherwise overcome my introversion in ways that drives me to the boundaries of my willingness to be nice. My love of the sea and the voice of the tides provided little comfort as I boarded the plane to join those small group ministry advocates for a week. “Jesus! Can’t this be done in a couple of days?”

Having grown up in fundamentalism, I know what conversion is. **Consider me converted. SGM is one of the most powerful, invigorating ways to “be a church”**, and it is no wonder the mega-churches across this country are growing astronomically. It is time for the liberal religious tradition to rediscover what it means be with one another and to love one another. As Francis David said, “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.” I would add that we cannot love alike so long as our primary way of being together is defined by our thinking rather than our loving, our differences rather than our common humanity. SGM provides a structure for “being” together in a new way.

**I encourage the professional ministers in the UUA to give SGM serious consideration. Be forewarned, once started, it may be difficult to contain.** My Pappy used to say, “If a church gets on fire for Jesus, folks’ll come around to watch ‘em burn.” Well, my theology has changed radically since I heard Pappy say that, but the principle is sound. When people find good news they tend to share it and others come to the fire to be warmed. Come on in from the cold. **Small group ministry will give you a fire around which to gather and to be. It has the potential to make Unitarian Universalism a revolutionary rather than a revolutionary movement.**

### **Elizabeth Cobblah, Maynard, MA**

When SGM was in its first year at our church, First Parish of Stow and Acton Massachusetts, **eight facilitators including our minister attended the SGM conference at Ferry Beach, Saco Maine. It was a thoroughly enjoyable, meaningful and engaging week spent within a sandy block from an ocean**

**beach. Sense of community was strong. The spirit was pleasurable and supportive.**

**Workshops and conversations addressed many concerns we had as newly launched facilitators and helped us mark our channels.** We got to know what we could relax about and what to pay attention to as facilitators. We got to know the importance of SGM in individual lives and in the organization of the church. We got to know the bare bone essentials of SGM and the flexibility within that structure. **Our confidence rose as our understanding of self and community deepened.**

**The variety of workshops offered something to everyone.** Sometimes it was difficult to choose between the one we wanted and the one we thought we needed but several workshops were repeated so we didn’t feel we missed anything. **The staff members – five ministers by training or by calling, covered different aspects of SGM so that they functioned smoothly together as the distinct fingers and thumb of a creative, caring hand delivering a strong program and clear message.** Among the discussion and workshop topics I recall were life-spanning religious education, varieties of prayer and ritual, using the arts in SGM, right and left brain integration for spiritual growth, session-writing, SGM’s impact on church function and emotional health.

**Being part of a small group that met daily after lunch was valuable in giving us an SGM experience different from the one at home.** It expanded our concept of the program and gave each person a mooring while at Ferry Beach.

**The pace of the conference was ideal and included time for reflection, rest, beach-going etc between meetings and workshops.** Many of us sensed that time moved very slowly while there. Though the content was full and rich, it could be savored. **We all came away with vital kernels of understanding that have been sprouting and taking root in our lives and churches.** An image of self as a vessel ready to receive, to carry and to offer, is one of many that has stayed with me. We all probably felt the duo, **intimacy and ultimacy**, a *raison d’être* and an outcome of the program.

**Experiencing it, learning to cultivate it, being embraced by August warmth and fellowship at the ocean’s edge were almost**

enough to sustain some of us for several years!

### **Marcia Lewton, Port Townsend, WA**

**Thinking ahead to the stimulation of a weeklong workshop on Small Group Ministry persuaded me to recruit my friend LaVaughn, get congregational backing and sign up.** But when the time came to fly from one coast to the other and settle into a dormitory, I got grouchy. **I'm too old to go to camp!** How can I pack four pillows into an airline bag?

Then came an e-mail from a friend who loved her stay at Ferry Beach. She instructed me to give the table an extra bang when singing the Quillen Shinn song. **Camp songs? Table banging? Oh dear.** And I'd have to eat what was put in front of me. Gizzards and tripe, no doubt.

It didn't get any better after I arrived. I'd survived the trip, but now it was time to test out Ferry Beach. **The weather was much hotter than usual and people were splashing around in the ocean.** I took off a shoe and tentatively placed one tender white foot on the burning sand, then quickly withdrew it back into the shoe. The Atlantic, pah. They can have it. I'll take my cool Puget Sound beaches any day.

**This couldn't be any worse than a week in the hospital, and I'd lived through that. I could do it.** You know how all this had to turn out. No, I didn't pack up and leave. I couldn't leave LaVaughn there to face it alone. Besides, she had the rental car. So I settled in. **After a meal or two I had to admit that the food was better than hospital food, quite a bit better. Enough variety that anyone could make appealing choices.** No gizzards. And enough activity that I could take seconds and still lose a little weight, what with our dorm room being on the third floor.

But I still hadn't found out what these folks were going to teach us. **We'd have to do a lot of that weird stuff UUs do instead of pray, no doubt.** The place was crawling with ministers. No telling what they'd demand. What if we had to sing hymns? Fortunately there was a schedule of workshops and events to choose from.

**Coming from a congregation with Small Group Ministry already in place, I was**

**able to find classes that added information and skills, while folks new to the program could go into it from the beginning.**

**In addition to plenary sessions and workshops, we formed our own Small Groups, which were conducted just like the ones we would be attending back home.** There were informal porch talks covering whatever participants wanted to bring up. Braver souls than I could join in an early morning dip in the ocean and attend chapel, if they still felt up to it.

**As the week wore on, I began liking people I didn't think I could possibly stand. Small Group Ministry will do that to you.** Participants from all over the country brought suggestions on how they dealt with some of the persistent issues. **The teachers were inspiring.** After all, they were still enthusiastic even after years in the program.

**We had free time for part of each day.** People kindly overlooked my bad attitude and accepted me into groups exploring nearby areas of Maine and taking walks on the beach (adequately shod, of course). **There was time to further my friendship with LaVaughn and to have deep conversation with some amazing UUs.** We all contributed wine for pre-dinner Social Hours. At the end came our opportunity to get even for all that hymn singing. **The last evening together included a Talent Show, and LaVaughn and I got to sing extremely rude parodies of some least-favorite UU hymns.** Ahhh, sweet revenge!

When we got back home, new groups were being formed and training would be necessary. **We were immediately pressed to deliver the knowledge we'd acquired to the other SGM facilitators. But we were ready: we'd been through boot camp!**