

**Starting WellSprings Congregation with Small Group Ministry**  
**An Interview with Rev. Ken Beldon**  
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**When Ken Beldon accepted the appointment as lead minister of the new WellSprings Congregation in the summer of 2005, he embraced the foundational element of this new faith community: commitment to small group ministry. This congregation actually started meeting using SGM for a year and a half before conducting their first Sunday morning worship!** A truly revolutionary approach to starting a church. Ken had initiated SGM at his former church in Florida, having been introduced to the concept at General Assembly and through workshops given by Rev. Calvin Dame and others. **Ken knew first-hand the benefits of small group ministry: significant relationships, new member retention, and spiritual deepening. In addition, SGM was the ideal vehicle to allow time for discernment of the new congregation's DNA—it's core identity.** Even before growth and planning tactics, a small group of committed people covenanted to grow together spiritually, get clear on their mission, then follow through with the larger creation of WellSprings. As Ken says, "We could only hope to share with others what we already possessed ourselves."

Soon after his arrival in August, 2005, Ken gathered focus groups of people from the area to discern the vision for liberal religion in the community, located in the northwest Philadelphia suburbs. **The initial small group, the Planting Team, sprang from that process and was devoted to building a healthy, vibrant community that would grow.** Made up of both long-time Unitarian Universalists and unchurched seekers, the Planting Team met weekly for seven months, focusing on personal spiritual growth and the development of WellSprings' core values and beliefs. Their charge was to provide the breadth of UUism people love, as well as the depth of spiritual growth and sense of purpose they seek. It's a different way of beginning than some have been

accustomed to in UU congregations. **Initially, it was "church as small group."**

The Planting Team spawned four new groups in May, 2006. **These small groups for spiritual growth were named Springboards, which refers to "diving in" as well as to a starting point.** Springboards used the ten week curriculum called "Listening to Our Lives," centered around recurring themes of spiritual life: god, morality, person gifts, dealing with suffering, the fullness of life, service, and sources of inspiration. The groups met twice a month through September, with an additional session to discuss next steps.

On completion of Listening to Our Lives, group members had the opportunity to engage in gifts discernment, assisted by Kathy Ellis, Director of Equipping, who joined the Staff in September, 2006. Kathy facilitated their discovery of motivations and aspirations and helped to connect their unique gifts with areas of service. A major objective at WellSprings is to define areas where people can serve effectively while growing personally at the same time. **Congregational leaders grew directly out of the initial Springboards small groups, going on to serve on teams to further prepare for WellSprings' launch.**

**The staff and founders of WellSprings were intentional about starting with small groups.** Life change happens, says Ken, when people really get down to the nittygritty. "We know, day in and day out, it's about incorporating the DNA into our lives beyond Sunday morning. **Small Groups are our opportunity to make connections with the whole of our lives.**" SGM allows people to apply spiritual practice to their everyday lives. It is the large vision, not numbers, which define congregational growth. **A congregation will grow when people are growing spiritually and in service and interpreting religion in their own calling. Numbers will follow.** "Growth," Ken believes,

“is about never sacrificing the personal.” Sunday worship services started at WellSprings in late January of 2007. Now, just five months later, 80-100 adults and youth attend services each week.

**A second generation of Springboards began in March.** Each of the four groups concentrates on a particular theme: Praying, Living, and Loving; A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity; Not so Random Acts of Kindness; and Meditations from Buddhist Traditions. Kathy Ellis and Ken lead two of the groups; the meditations and creativity groups are led by congregation members with interest and experience in the area. Leaders design the curriculum with guidance from Kathy and Ken. The groups will meet weekly for twelve weeks, either in homes or at the church; meetings last two hours.

**Ken and Kathy set the expectations for group covenants at the initial Leader Training: trusting, showing up, keeping in touch, and treating what is shared with discretion.**

Additional training, such as interpersonal relationships, continues at monthly Leader meetings where Ken and Kathy act as coaches. The meetings are also a time to identify future leaders and to reflect on members’ spiritual growth and life transformation.

**In contrast to the so-called “marathon model” where small groups continue for years at a time, Ken describes WellSprings’ model as more like weight lifting: stress and release; intense, but short-term.** People know going in that they will have twelve intensive, wonderful weeks in which to grow spiritually and get to know people. It will come to an end, but there will be another small group to connect intimately with. Ken says, **“Instead of defining the small group experience in a scarce way—like there may never be another group like the one I know now—we offer an abundance of opportunities for people to grow and connect.”** Springboards will be a growth engine for the congregation; new folks will always find a place in a small group as generations of Springboards continue. Future themes are Adult Children as Caregivers and Money & Meaning.

**All Springboards focus on practice and include “homework” between meetings.** For example, members of the Not-So-Random Acts of Kindness group report back on what acts of kindness they performed in the community since last time. Members of the Meditation group report on their progress during the week. The reporting takes the place of check-in in the meeting format. Members tell their stories as they describe what meditation is bringing up for them; or the fears, tentativeness, and joys resulting from acts of kindness. In this way, the content is used to reveal the depth of members’ lives. In addition, it provides the opportunity to share strengths, be held accountable, and encourage each other to continue doing and growing.

**Service is built into the content as well, particularly in the Kindness group.** Ken’s weekly Kindness practice is to leave lunch money for the next person in line at the local sandwich shop. One group will donate materials for seedbeds and planting materials to gardeners at the Gleanings Program farms, WellSprings’ community service partner. Other groups are planning a free car wash and a riverbed clean-up. WellSprings intends to be “a go and do kind of congregation,” one that answer’s people’s yearning for connection. **As Ken says, when we drop a pebble, we never know how far the ripples will go.**