

# The Stow and Acton Model of Small Group Ministry

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**During the spring of 2004, The Rev Tom Rosiello of the First Parish Church of Stow and Acton, Massachusetts, formed a committee to help plan and implement a Small Group Ministry program.** We spent several meetings discussing our intentions and the primary functions SGM would serve for the congregation.

With a congregational population in the vicinity of 250, we had grown a bit too large for most people to operate as if “I can have meaningful relationships with everyone in the church community, as I have done for years.” Like most other on-going communities, natural cliques had formed around friendships, interests and life circumstances. **We also understood that a mid-sized church needed an active lay ministry and that it would become increasingly difficult for any one minister to adequately “minister” to all the needs of the community.**

In a relatively short period of time, the planning committee identified and studied the various benefits of SGM. **We focused on building a program that would help create deeper interpersonal connections across the various dimensions of the church community.** We wanted a program that created a structural mechanism that allowed people to be heard, known and affirmed for their life experiences, viewpoints and feelings. **We believed, and continue to believe, that in creating a safe place for people to become better known and better know others, we minister to each other in significant ways.** Simultaneously, we help strengthen our connection to the community.

**Since one of the important reasons for creating an SGM program was to knit the community together, we designed a structure that all groups would operate under.** We decided that each group would meet monthly for approximately two hours and use the same session plan. We consciously decided not to use an affinity group model or let groups operate independently because we were concerned that approach might tend to segment the

congregation. We wanted to create the possibility that people in different groups could continue to address the month’s session topic at coffee hour or in other settings.

**During the summer of 2005, the majority of the planning group attended a Small Group Ministry training program at Ferry Beach, the UU camp and conference center in Saco, Maine.** The training was offered by the UU Small Group Ministry Network. We were confirming ideas. We also gained helpful insights on the “hows” of SGM and training in group facilitation. **The Ferry Beach SGM Training was a wonderful learning, and bonding experience for our planning group.** We went home with a bucketful of ideas and a definite sense that we were on solid ground in our design and strategies.

**The planning group then focused our attention on training facilitators and planning the implementation stage of our program.** Again, attempting to reach the total church population, we asked facilitators to sign up for different time slots. We offered a small group meeting on virtually every day of the week, including Saturday and Sunday. Meetings were held mostly in the evenings, but we also offered a few during daytime hours.

We sent out informational letters to the entire congregation with sign up sheets, asking for 1st, 2nd and 3<sup>rd</sup> choices for day/time slots. We intentionally did not associate facilitator names with time slots in order to help stay focused on enhancing community. The minister mentioned the program regularly at Sunday morning worship and in other communications. **To our amazement, we had over one hundred people sign up during the first year;** ten groups and eleven facilitators. We expected five or six groups with two facilitators each. The second year’s numbers increased by several people and we increased the number of groups to decrease the size of each group. In January, we began our third year and the program continues to have over one hundred participants.

**When people join a SGM group, they join for a full year. Partially by default and partially by design, our groups go from January to January.** When we returned from our Small Group Ministry training at Ferry Beach in August, the planners realized there was little hope to plan and implement a start up to begin in the fall. In addition, we realized that starting in January allowed us to avoid the typical fall rush; changed schedules, getting committees going and kids into a new school routines. **Each group decides whether it will meet during the summer months.** For those that choose to meet (almost all do), they are provided four to five session plans they can choose from.

**During the second meeting of each program year, each small group is provided a boilerplate covenant that they are asked to agree and commit to.** Initially, there was a great deal of discussion in the planning group about how to handle the issue of covenanting. Although we all agreed we needed one, there were several ideas about how to implement a covenant for each group. **Grounded in our commitment to build a program that helped strengthen connections across the entire community, we eventually agreed to a single covenant, the same for all groups.** It proved fairly easy for even UUs to understand and accept that the overall program would be lessened if significant changes were made to a covenant that was intended to tie all the groups together and to tie the groups to the total church community.

**As part of the covenant, each group commits to engaging in two service projects during the year.** One project of their choice would be designed to benefit the church or congregation, while the other would benefit the greater community. Examples of projects performed include, cleaning a storage room in Fellowship Hall, re-painting jobs, yard clean-up for parishioners who would have difficulty doing that work themselves, and hosting a church-wide Passover Seder meal or other gatherings. Greater community projects have included involvement with social justice work, catering lunch for a local elderly center, making welcome bags for a women's shelter and taking youth connected with Urban Ministries to the science museum.

While sometimes hard to schedule and coordinate, the projects have added a special sense of group connection and an often acknowledged deepened sense of faith.

**At the end of each program year, each group is asked to fill out an evaluation form.** We ask for information on the most and least valuable session plans/topics, along with recommendations for new topics. We inquire about their sense of comfort, safety and connection to the group they were in. We ask if they felt the group worked well or not and what would enhance their experience. We also ask if they would be likely to join and/or recommend that others join another group. Recommendations that have come from participants include, a group that meets twice per month and an intergenerational group. We have also used the SGM format, in a slightly different structure, for a Coming of Age group, with youth oriented subject matter.

**During the life of the program, facilitators and the minister have met once a month.** Initially, we focused a lot of attention on reviewing the last meeting, both how much the group engaged the session content and the group process. We sought to understand what topics seemed to work well and which ones didn't go so well and why. We helped each other think about ways to handle people who were "overly" and "underly" talkative and ways to limit "discussing" instead of simply sharing one's thoughts and feelings. We also talked about ways to lessen the dynamic of people's tendency to talk "to" the facilitator rather than "with" the group. The facilitator's meeting was also used to identify and actually "do" the next session.

**As the facilitators became more accomplished and comfortable in their roles, the facilitators' group started to take on the feeling of being its own small group.** Instead of importing session plans from various external sources, the facilitators have increasingly been writing original plans for our SGM program. **There is a vibrancy that we feel at our church and many of us believe it is, in no small measure, the result of our SGM program.** The program, now in its third year, has provided the opportunity for numerous new or deepened relationships. Many

of our people have really internalized that **you can have meaningful relationships and feel quite connected to people very much different from yourself, to connect with the person and not the position they hold. The skill of truly listening to someone else and valuing their viewpoint, whether or not you agree with it, has carried over to committee meetings and other decision making processes within the church. New comers have a wonderful mechanism for being integrated into the church community.** As we consider the possibility of going to two church services, we can gain some comfort that our SGM program will serve as a bridge and continue to help enhance relationships across our community.