

**Invite Every New Member To Join a Small Ministry Group
and Provide Growth and Strength for Your Church.**

Diana Dorroh, Baton Rouge, LA

UU Small Group Network Quarterly, Vol. 4, No.2, Winter 2008

If you're not already doing so, consider intentionally inviting every new member of your religious community to join a small group ministry group. This has the advantage of giving them an immediate connection to eight to ten other community members and a chance to be listened to on topics they may never have been able to discuss with any other group in their entire lives. In James Luther Adams' terms, it will give them a chance for "intimacy and ultimacy." **I predict that it will greatly improve the percentage of new members that you retain.** It gives the church a connection to them, through the group leaders. It also helps the membership committee or other leaders know how the new members' first year is progressing. If you do new member follow-up, you can trust your group leaders to provide the church's connection to their new participants. Then your church can concentrate the formal follow-up on the people who didn't say "yes" to the invitation to join a group. **It is also invigorating for existing groups, giving them a chance to get to know the new and often younger members.** And it will "grow" your small group ministry program. **You may soon find that most of your church members are participating in a small ministry group and that your church community is reaping the benefits.**

These invitations seem to work best when they come from the group leaders themselves, but new community members do not always make contact with a group leader who has an opening in their group. One way to organize these invitations is to make them part of every newcomers class. **The class leader should explain during each session why it's recommended that the participants join a group.** Then you can have some group leaders who have openings attend the last class. They

can invite the new people on the spot. If your existing groups don't have enough openings to accommodate the whole class, open a new group. This requires that you have "leaders in waiting" or a process that allows you to tap new leaders, as needed.

At the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, we've had success with this strategy and we've been able to keep the commitment to offer a small group ministry group slot to every person who takes our newcomers class. Our minister, Steve Crump, conducts the newcomers class and promotes our small group ministry program in every session of the classes. Eight years ago, it meant we had to concentrate on leader recruitment and training, as opening a new group was the norm for the first few years of our program. This training was usually done "just in time" for each set of new leaders. Now we have 17 groups and about 190 people participating. Our membership is 350, so our small group ministry program is more than half the size of our membership. **It has definitely helped with membership retention, made follow-up with new members easier, and has enhanced our church.** We have had a way to immediately process our feelings about events, like 9/11 and hurricane Katrina, as well as our own church issues, in a way that gives each member a chance to be listened to and gives immediate general feedback to the leadership. In addition, the processing is led by experienced lay ministers, our group leaders. **With so many people either in groups or having been in a group, the listening and being in right relationship that is being learned in small group ministry has spilled over into our community.** I'd be happy to talk to you about implementing this at your church. Please feel free to contact me at

Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com or 225-766-2764