

SGM QUARTERLY

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A publication of the UU Small Group Ministry Network



NEWS FROM THE NETWORK

UU SGM Network Receives Grant from Fund for Unitarian Universalism

The Network was the proud recipient of a generous grant from the UUA Fund for Unitarian Universalism in June 2011. The grant enabled us to discount SGM Institute 2011 registration, subsidize ground transportation to Camp de Benneville Pines, and develop and field-test comprehensive SGM training modules on-site.

New Publications from the Network!

Small Group Ministry with All Ages, in book and CD format, is now available. And, by popular request, *Spiritual Journeys: 101 Session Plans for Small Group Ministry Programs*, is now available in CD format. Download order forms from our website.

Upcoming Training Workshops

Small Group Ministry training workshops will be given in Northern New England, Metro New York, Southwest, and Southeast Districts this fall. See page eight for details and locations. To arrange an event for your cluster or district, contact the Network at office@smallgroupministry.net.

Membership Renewal

Network membership renewal can be overlooked when SGM program leadership changes. Be sure your membership is current to continue receiving the *Quarterly* and publication discounts. Check your congregation's status by writing to membership@smallgroupministry.net.

Online Resources from the SGM Network

The Network website, www.smallgroupministry.net, posts information about upcoming events, articles by leaders in the small group ministry movement, an extensive selection of session plans, and complete archives of *Covenant Group News* and the *SGM Quarterly* journal.

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Our Mission:

"To help create healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by promoting and supporting Small Group Ministry."

Connections.....with Steve Becker

Who We Are:

The UU Small Group Ministry Network, a UUA Related Organization, is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. We provide support to small group ministry programs in UU congregations through training opportunities, networking, and the development of new resources.

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is published four times a year by the UU Small Group Ministry Network and is supported by donations and memberships. Archives are available on the SGM Network website.

Oh, the Rewards of Joining!

Recruitment efforts for Small Group Ministry are underway! Here are a few ways of motivating prospective congregants to join our Small Group Ministry programs:

Did you know:

1. SGM participation is one of the UU Principles
2. SGM adds 9 years to the average member's life span
3. Membership in SGM is one of the 10 commandments
4. SGM participation is tax deductible
5. Forget Botox, SGM makes you look like a kid again

In all seriousness, we know how much Small Group Ministry enriches our lives. As David Brooks of The New York Times wrote, "Joining a group that meets even once a month produces the same happiness gain as doubling your income." And, belonging to a small group is one of the most important decisions you'll make about your spiritual life. Small Groups can help people do three important things: connect, change, and cultivate. These are the basic ingredients for healthy small group community. Has your small group made an impact on your life? Share your experience with others – it's the best sales tactic there is!

Here's to bringing Small Group Ministry to the lives of more people this year!

Steve Becker

Steve coordinates SGM at Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Seattle.

To listen fully means to pay close attention to what is being said beneath the words. You listen not only to the 'music,' but to the essence of the person speaking. You listen not only for what someone knows, but for what he or she is.

— Peter Senge

From our Ministers...

Covenant Groups as Community Pastoral Care

*By Reverend Heather Janules, Cedar Lane
Unitarian Universalist Church, Bethesda,
Maryland*

I arrived at Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church in 2005 as the Minister for Pastoral Care. The focus of my ministry is ensuring that each member of the community has support during times of transition, grief, illness or uncertainty. As part of this goal, I serve as the ministerial liaison to our Connection Circle Steering Committee, the body of lay leaders who organize and promote small group ministry in the congregation.

In a large congregation, it is common to have more than one person in treatment for cancer. When I first arrived at the church, I was unsure how to regularly connect with each member in treatment in a way that was respectful and manageable in the hectic schedule of congregational life. Then two members, independent of one another, asked if we had a support group for people living with cancer. This was the catalyst for the founding of such a group. Through meeting twice a month, participants share their worries, challenges and celebrations with each other and reflect on coping with serious illness from a liberal religious perspective.

Along with offering invaluable support to one another, the group members teach me about the questions and concerns of cancer patients. I always feel privileged to be in their company, hearing their stories and witnessing the care they offer one another. This experience taught me that often the best way to support individuals going through difficult circumstances is to bring them in contact with others traveling a similar path.

With the success of our cancer support group, I have since utilized this model by founding covenant groups with a decidedly pastoral focus. At Cedar Lane, we have offered groups for the bereaved and widowed (“Living Alone, Living with Loss”) and for caregivers of loved ones with mental illness (“Sharing Stories, Sharing Hope.”) At the suggestion of our LGBT Task Force, we have also offered a group for lesbian, gay,

bisexual and transgendered people and their allies in an effort to build community and counter feelings of marginalization (“Living the Full Rainbow Flag.”)

A few words about how the groups function: After a facilitator walks a newly-convened group through the covenant-building process and offers some initial suggestions of subjects to explore, the topics naturally emerge from the conversations in the group or by the request of individual members. The facilitator often takes the responsibility of generating some questions about the subject for each meeting and then steps back once the group begins to take hold of the subject in a personal way. Sometimes group members will offer a resource that pertains to the subject or the facilitator will draw on something from our congregation’s library but, for the most part, the “content” of these circles is the lived experience of the individual members and their shared experience with the identity or issue that brings them together.

These groups are short-term, in hopes that if members wish to continue, someone in the group will take facilitator training and lead the group from there, freeing me and other pastoral care providers to start more groups. When creating these groups, we are intentional about recruiting leaders with appropriate training and experience (beyond basic facilitator training) because of the vulnerability of the conversations. (“Living Alone...” was co-led by myself, a social worker and a spiritual director; the LGBT group was led by myself, another minister and the co-chair of our LGBT task force.) I have found that the intentional practices of a covenant group greatly help in creating a safe space for participants to give and receive compassionate care and fostering an environment that invites genuine spiritual reflection.

There is a mysterious power in the group experience that cannot be achieved through one-to-one connection. With intentionality and care, congregations can organize covenant groups to tend specifically to the fearful and broken-hearted. Based on our experience, I encourage other congregations to found these circles of healing.

UU President Morales' Vision As Seen Through Small Group Ministries

*By Reverend Judy Tomlinson, Associate Minister
UU Congregation at Montclair, New Jersey*

We are at a crossroads in American religious life. While millions yearn for a spiritual home and for community, most people don't belong to a religious institution. The major denominations have been shrinking for decades and even the evangelical churches have stopped growing. Some even ask if there's a future for organized religion in America.

We are also at a crossroads in Unitarian Universalism. As UUA President Peter Morales has noted, Unitarian Universalists are an ever-shrinking percentage of the US population. Yet he also says we are uniquely positioned to appeal to an America seeking spiritual connection without the accompanying dogma.

Morales has offered a three-part formula for future UU success: to get religion, grow leaders, and cross boundaries. In my experience, I have found that small group ministries, and especially covenant groups, are a remarkably effective way to intentionally connect President Morales' vision with the mission of growing our denomination.

By "get religion," Morales means UUs should claim our religious experience and find ways to articulate it.

To give this context, recall that we ask our young teens to do this in Coming of Age every year. Certainly, we adults should be as willing as our youth to discuss our beliefs with authenticity, without expecting ourselves to have all the answers. Covenant groups are an excellent forum for this exploration, since one of the three major parts of the covenant group process is to share our beliefs and to talk about that which moves us and in which we have faith.

Morales' second recommendation is that we find ways to grow more leaders, and that this will encourage congregational growth. Covenant groups provide a great opportunity to identify, select, train and often install new people into the

congregation's lay ministerial leadership. In this way, these small groups help leaders learn to trust their gifts. In turn, members begin to trust and respect their new leaders.

What's more, covenant group leaders are specifically charged with identifying and developing new leadership from within their group, to make sure that, as the group grows and divides, new leaders will emerge who are ready to guide the group. So we are intentionally identifying and cultivating lay leadership within our congregations through these programs, including everyone from committee chairs to board members.

Crossing boundaries is Pres. Morales's third recommendation – that we reach beyond our comfort zone and gently enter each other's lives. In the process, we can get to know people of all ages, colors, and economic backgrounds.

This is an important part of all small group ministries. In these groups we join together and connect with one another on a personal level. There are many opportunities for personal sharing in an atmosphere of attentiveness and respect.

In recent years, Unitarian Universalists have begun to shine our light with advertising campaigns, with our social witness and by just talking with friends and colleagues about where we go on Sunday mornings. Through these activities and by participating in small group ministries in their various forms we can become, as Peter Morales says, the religion for our time.

Small Groups, Deep Connections.

Facilitator's Toolbox

Show Instead of Tell

From "Initial Facilitator Training" by Susan Hollister, SGM Institute, August 2011

One of the facilitator's leadership responsibilities is to model behavior and responses in the covenant group setting. At the group's first meeting, model check-in by going first. Speak for about two minutes and share a significant experience. Then turn to the person beside you and say their name, indicating that it's their turn.

Help the group transition from surface to transparent communication by modeling openness. Take off your mask, let the group see the real you, and they'll begin to do the same.

Also model *deep listening* for the group; that is, listening without interrupting and without the intent to respond. "Listen as if the speaker is the most important person in the world. Listen for what lights the speaker up and gives enjoyment to his or her life. Also listen to what is being said from the heart ('I feel') as opposed to from the head ('I think')." (*The Art of Facilitation, 1995, pg. 25*)

Respectful listening will be a new concept for some group members and may take some practice. Having others *just listen* rarely happens in our busy world. The experience is affirming and builds trust among group members.

At the first meeting **only**, be the first person to respond to a question. This sets the model for length and content. Use "I" statements and talk about personal experiences and feelings. Model speaking to the entire group and making eye contact with each person. After sharing, be silent and wait for another person to speak.

By the second meeting, *remain silent* after asking each question. Allow the group time to process and reflect on how the questions relate to their lives. Many groups purposely allow one minute or more of silence after each question is read.

Silences are normal and desirable in a small group. It means the members are taking time to reflect before answering. Facilitators are guides; we participate, but we allow the group members to do most of the talking.

Learn to welcome and be comfortable with the silence; it is a gift to each other, a sacred space in time. Resist the urge to fill the silence with chatter—it will be distracting to the group. Even a comment as innocuous as "Next" will be received as an invasion of reflection time. The group will respond when they're ready. Observe when people start looking up, a cue that they're ready to move on.

Thank You to Our Members!

In our seven years as a member-based organization, your support has enabled us to:

- ★ Sponsor workshops and a consultation booth at General Assembly since 2004.
- ★ Maintain an informative and up-to-date website.
- ★ Train hundreds of facilitators, program coordinators, and ministers to launch and sustain small group ministry programs in congregations in the U.S. and Canada.
- ★ Publish 8 successful books—*Small Group Ministry for Youth, UU Small Group Ministry, Implementing UU Small Group Ministry, the Facilitator Training Manual, Celebrating Congregations, Spiritual Journeys: 101 Session Plans for Small Group Ministry Programs, Ten Years of UU Small Group Ministry, and Small Group Ministry with All Ages.*
- ★ Sponsor six SGM Summer Institutes.
- ★ Publish our e-newsletter, *Covenant Group News* and our *SGM Quarterly* journal.
- ★ Maintain the Covenant Groups list serve on the UUA website.
- ★ Apply for and achieve tax-exempt status as a charitable organization.
- ★ Continue the legacy of Rev. Glenn Turner, Rev. Bob Hill, and many other clergy and lay leaders who embraced the concept of small covenanted groups in UU congregations.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our co-founders, Calvin Dame, Peter Bowden, and M'ellen Kennedy, three visionaries who saw the need for a SGM support organization and worked to establish the UU Small Group Ministry Network in June, 2004. Thank you to all who continue to help make the UU SGM Network a success!

From the Board...

SGM Model and Myths

By the UU Small Group Ministry Network Board of Directors

Staffing the Network Booth at General Assembly is like having a window onto the world of small group ministry. We learn a great deal about program beginnings, vibrancy, declines, and restarts. This year in Charlotte was no exception. We heard great success stories as well as challenges and misconceptions. It is the misconceptions or “myths” that we’ll introduce in this issue. This theme will be continued in *Covenant Group News* over the next several months. To follow and to contribute to the topic, subscribe to *CG News* on www.smallgroupministry.net.

Small Group Ministry Model

1. Small Group Ministry (SGM) is intentional lay-led small groups (recommended maximum of 10 people) that focus on ministry.
2. These small groups build deep relationships (*intimacy*), foster spiritual exploration and search for meaning (*ultimacy*), and contribute to personal, congregational, and leadership growth.
3. Three agreements between the groups and the congregation provide the program’s foundation: to abide by a set of relational ground rules called a *covenant*, to *welcome* new members into groups, and to engage in *service* to the congregation and the larger world.
4. Group leaders/facilitators are chosen and trained by the minister or coordinator and meet with the minister, coordinator, and other leaders for support and connection.
5. Groups use a standard format that includes opening words; personal check-in; reflection, sharing, and dialogue on a chosen topic; an ending check-out; and closing words.

These are the elements that are essential to small group ministry. Variations in how the basic elements may be implemented are outlined in the publication, *Implementing UU Small Group Ministry*, available on the Network website. The variations include program name, meeting place and frequency, group duration and composition, and session topic selection. *Variations are choices that individual congregations make in implementing the model, but they do not define small group ministry.*

Myth # 1: Groups must dissolve after one church year. This misconception most likely grew out of a one-year commitment that group members may be asked to make, the desire to form ever-expanding connections among congregation members, and the fear of clique formation. A clique is defined as a narrow exclusive circle or group of persons.

In actual practice, there are groups of varying duration across the denomination. Congregations have 4, 6, and 9 month groups that dissolve at term’s end and new groups are then formed. There are also groups that last indefinitely, but with changes in facilitator and group members. Some congregations have both: groups that meet for the nine month church year then dissolve, and groups that are on-going. *(Continued on next page)*

Many have argued that long-term groups have developed the intimacy and mutual pastoral care that sees them through the highs and lows of life. Others contend that the opportunity to belong to a different group each church year develops multiple deep relationships.

In either case, it is important to make clear at the program's inception that leaving one group and joining another is acceptable and even encouraged, so that members will not feel that they are "deserting" their original group. Making connections with multiple groups of people must be perceived to be the acceptable norm for the program. Congregations often ask everyone to re-commit for the coming year, with the expectation that some will remain in the same group, while others will move to a different group of wonderful people.

If members of a long-term group are active participants in the congregation, uphold their covenant, are engaged in service to the congregation and larger community, welcome new members, alternate facilitators, and take care of each other in times of need, what would be the motivation to break up the group?

If, on the other hand, a group has become isolated from the congregation; substituted group meetings for Sunday worship service; stopped using the meeting format, become "closed," refusing new group members; or has no plans for service activities, it is not actually engaged in small group ministry. In this case, the group may elect to leave the SGM program, but stay together as an affinity or purely social group.

Comments on this and future topics may be directed to Diana Dorroh, Editor of *Covenant Group News* at diana_dorroh@hotmail.com.

Upcoming Myths

- A. Only ministers can direct Small Group Ministry programs.
- B. Facilitators Meetings are covenant groups for the facilitators/Facilitators Meetings don't work.
- C. Groups grow larger than 10 members, then split.
- D. Groups meet once a month/Groups meet twice a month.
- E. Group meetings are cancelled when the facilitator is unable to attend.
- F. If you can't arrive on time, don't attend the SGM meeting
- G. If you don't have anything to say or share, you don't belong in SGM.
- H. No response to comments during topic sharing.
- I. Significant changes to the program cannot be made without a complete restart.
- J. Food is prohibited.
- K. A service project doesn't count if there is not 100% participation.

In addition to being printed exclusively on white paper, which makes it easier to copy and is a cost-savings for the Network, the newsletter is now printed on eco-friendly, recycled paper.

UU SGM Network Publications

Order forms available from <http://www.smallgroupministry.net>

NEW! *Small Group Ministry with All Ages*, June 2011

Explores small group ministry by age group and with mixed ages, and presents ways to make covenant groups an integral part of the movement toward multigenerational congregations. Includes implementation strategies, leader training, session development, and session plans for single and multi-age groups from young children through elders.

Book: *Network Members: \$20 plus \$6 shipping Non-members: \$30 plus \$6 shipping*

CD: *Network Members: \$15 plus \$2 shipping Non-members: \$20 plus \$2 shipping*

Now on CD! *Spiritual Journeys: 101 Session Plans for Small Group Ministry Programs*

Sessions on Spiritual Journeying, Personal Beliefs and Values, Spiritual Challenges, Holidays, and more. Themes drawn from art, literature, UU liturgy and hymnals, current events, and religious scriptures. June 2010.

Network Members: \$15 plus \$2 shipping Non-members: \$20 plus \$2 shipping

ALSO AVAILABLE See website for details

Small Group Ministry 2010: Celebrating Congregations. Over 100 congregations relate their SGM program origins, challenges and success stories.

Small Group Ministry for Youth. Twenty-five sessions for middle and high school youth.

Implementing UU Small Group Ministry. Download from Online Resources.

Facilitator Training and Development Manual. A guide for training and support plus a handbook on CD to customize for group leaders and facilitators.

Events & Resources

Healing and Transformation in Small Groups with Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy

September 24, 2011, First Church in Barre Universalist, Barre VT

October 8, 2011, UU congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, NY

October 29, 2011, First Unitarian Society of Newto, West Newton, MA

Topics include nurturing spiritual growth, cultivating respect, creating a compassionate group environment, and facilitation as a spiritual practice. Designed for facilitators with one or more years of experience. For more information, see *Events* on the Network website: <http://smallgroupministry.net/events.html>.

UU Small Group Ministry Program Development & Renewal with Peter Bowden

October 14-16, 2011, U Bar U Retreat & Conference Center, Mountain Home, TX

Designed for clergy and lay leaders seeking to strengthen congregation-wide SGM programs. Will focus on small groups as an integral part of congregational life and turning facilitators into small group leaders and partners in shared ministry. For further information and registration, see *Events*, <http://smallgroupministry.net/events.html>.

Small Groups, Big Returns with Rev. Helen Zidowecki, SGM Network President

October 15th, 2011, UU Church of Chattanooga, TN

Designed for adults and youth. Focuses on infusing congregations with a solid multi-generational program, and includes an integrated SGM experience for teens and adults. Topics include developing a healthy long-term program, the roles of program leaders, and addressing program issues. Information and registration available at <http://uuc.org/small-group-ministry-workshop>.

Southeast District RE Training for Small Group Ministry and Listening Circles

November 4 - 5, 2011, UU Fellowship of Winston Salem, NC

Presenters are Peter Bowden and Martha Niebanck. Look for further information to be posted on Event Announcements, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/events.html>.

Conference Notations

The SGM Network at General Assembly 2011, Charlotte, NC

The Network again sponsored a booth at General Assembly 2011. About 20 wonderful volunteers, plus several Board members, worked together to staff the booth. We noted that small group ministry was mentioned at more workshops, presentations, and plenaries this year, and concluded that small group ministry programs are an increasingly important part of our churches' organizations, as well as their ministries.

In talking with more than a hundred people about their covenant group programs, we noticed a few things:

- * Most people had a specific question about a well functioning program.
- * More ministers stopped by this year.
- * Many people reported trouble with their leaders meetings. Often the complaint was poor attendance.
- * Some program choices made by congregations were not working out for them. We began to call these small group ministry myths (see article in this issue).
- * A few programs had "strayed" from the basics of the small group ministry model.

Our GA Planning Committee-sponsored workshop, *Small Group Ministry Across Generations*, featuring Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Gail Forsyth-Vail, Jessica York, and Rev. Carie Johnsen, was well attended. The topic of small group ministry for children and youth reverberated through other presentations during the week.

The UU SGM Network Board is currently discussing our role at Justice GA in Phoenix in 2012. We encourage each of you to attend and connect with hundreds of other UUs involved in small group ministry.

Thank You, Booth Staffers!

We salute the generous volunteers from the following congregations who helped staff the Network booth at General Assembly 2011: UU Fellowship of Wilmington, NC; Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA; Community Church of Chapel Hill UU, Chapel Hill, NC; Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC; UU Church of Delaware County, Media, PA; UU Community Church, Augusta, ME; First Church of San Diego, CA; Tennessee Valley UU Church, Knoxville, TN; Manatee UU Fellowship, Bradenton, FL; UU Congregation of the Catskills, Kingston, NY; UU Church at Washington Crossing, Titusville, NJ; UU Congregation of Las Vegas, NV; and UU Church of Peoria, IL. Join us next year in Phoenix!

Summer SGM Institute 2011, Camp de Benneville Pines, Angelus Oaks, California

Participants from UU congregations in AZ (Phoenix), CA (Escondido, Santa Barbara, Santa Rosa), FL (Bradenton), IN (Bloomington), LA (Baton Rouge), ME (Augusta), NC (Durham), OR (Hillsboro) and PA (West Chester) joined together for the 2011 Institute.

Comments from participants:

"Coming to the Small Group Ministry Institute has far exceeded any expectations I had. I have gained knowledge and deeper understanding of the SGM program and how it works. I found the depth and richness of sharing that occurred in our small groups a blessing. It has been a transformative experience for me."

"I feel bathed in SGM knowledge, connectedness with others in this work and have this group as a resource as I continue on my SGM journey".

Participants were asked to develop a plan for SGM in their own congregations: deciding on timing for introducing SGM into the congregation, SGM and ministerial transition, revitalizing a program, and celebrating what is going well. The insights of the Institute came from the sharing as well as from the resources presented.

Session plans created at the Institute will be on the website soon. "The Evolution of Small Group Ministry" will be included as a series in *CGN*. If you would like more information on the content or the Institute, contact office@smallgroupministry.net.

It's true, membership has it's privileges!

As a member of the SGM Network you:

Get the current issue of the *Quarterly* before it's on the website, provide financial support for the SGM movement, receive discounts on publications and Network-sponsored events, and have a voice and a vote at our annual meeting at GA.

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