

# SGM QUARTERLY

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A publication of the UU Small Group Ministry Network



## CONNECT with SGM via Social Media!

Did you know that Small Group Ministry is active on Facebook? We'd like to call your attention to two pages where you can network with our Network:

- Small Group Ministry Network group: Please post your comments and thoughts, learn about events, and read announcements. <http://www.facebook.com/groups/158837360893790/>
- UU Small Group Ministry Lab: Please exchange ideas, resources and session content. <http://www.facebook.com/groups/343817605638090/>

Also, the *Small Groups, Deep Connections* blog is actively being developed. The blog shares published materials to a larger public, and includes new articles and announcements. <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/wp/>

We hope you will connect with us online to share your ideas, learn from our members, and enrich the SGM community.

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

## Small Group Ministry and General Assembly 2012

Circles of Reflection: Engaging Women in Justice Work  
UU SGM Network and UU Women's Federation  
Thursday, June 21, 10:30 am, Room 227 AB

Learn to use Small Group Ministry to engage with immigration, racial, and economic justice issues as spiritual practice. Participants will receive a resource packet that includes sessions to engage, sustain, and reflect on social justice work ongoing in congregations. The UU Women's Federation will also announce two commissioned grants focusing on immigrant rights and multiculturalism, as well as how participants can obtain funding in future years. *Speakers: Rev. Marti Keller, President, UU Women's Federation and Rev. Helen Zidowecki, President, UU Small Group Ministry Network.*

## Call For Session Plans

See the new Social Justice/Witness listing on our Session Plans Directory <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public/sessions/index.html>

## Contribute sessions that:

- Engage and prepare people to do social justice work.
- Sustain spirit and action
- Provide reflection after action is taken
- Promote social justice as part of living our UU faith
- Focus on issues of immigration and racial and economic justice

Send sessions to [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)

A Social Justice Resource for Covenant Groups will be available in June.

## Birthing: My First Covenant Group Experience

*By Elizabeth Asnes, Thoreau UU Congregation, Stafford, Texas  
and First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Texas*

### 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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### The SGM Quarterly

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The first time I participated in a Covenant Group was in St. Louis during the General Assembly of 2006. I went to see Mary Oliver in the flesh and to hear her read her poetry. There were about 5000 people attending - I usually avoid showing up in places with large crowds - but this time, I wanted to feel what it was like to be among other UUs from around the country. Knowing that I needed an anchor, I was delighted to see Covenant Groups on the schedule.

At that time in my life I was tremendously open to new experiences and new perspectives. My career had come to an abrupt end. My daughter and grandchildren had moved away. My husband, also a poet, had died in 1992. I wanted the exquisite poetry of Mary Oliver to wash over me.

Our Covenant Group promised to meet at the same time and in the same room for the entire week of GA. We came from all walks of life and from a variety of educational backgrounds. There was a gay African American executive who was in the closet for fear of losing his career; a woman who had been diagnosed with breast cancer; a mother of a young child who had left the familiar of her native country to come to America; a lawyer working in the corporate world trying hard to navigate the tough business decisions required of him, while maintaining his personal integrity; a woman who had never graduated from high school and who supported herself and an infant daughter as she worked her way through college.

I learned their stories, not so different from my own, and they learned mine. Our individual stories created a collective that belonged to all of us. We treated each other as we were called to do by recognizing and honoring the inherent worth and dignity of each individual.

When GA was coming to an end, and we knew our time together would soon be over, we each agreed to create a piece of work to symbolize our individual expressions of our Covenant Group experience. I made a small three dimensional collage. In it was a newly born baby, swaddled in a blanket, and placed in a cradle. The collage symbolized the birth of me as a UU. Both the birthing and the collage were possible because of the loving kindness I had received from these deeply compassionate people.

Six years ago, I walked into a Covenant Group room not sure that I could be a Unitarian Universalist. On Sunday, March 18, 2012 I'll present my Coming of Age Service at my Beloved Thoreau Congregation. Family members are coming from New York City, Boston, and California. Friends from First Unitarian Universalist in Houston will hop in their cars to make the short drive to Stafford, Texas. I couldn't feel more blessed. Namaste!

*Small Groups, Deep Connections.*

## Small Group Ministry: What We've Learned

By Anne Gero with Rebekah Feeser, Kit Franklin, and Rev. Roy Reynolds,  
Coordinators of the UUCV SGM Program

Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley in Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania is a regional church that draws most of our 170 members and many friends from a 30 mile radius—with some who travel 90 miles to attend. Our Small Group Ministry program is about ten years old. As a member of a group and part of the coordinating team, I am deeply passionate about the importance of SGM to our congregation.

Currently, we have 11 groups that are spread out through our region. In those small groups we have 93 participants and are about to enroll 20 more in two new groups that will start soon. Additionally, our Religious Education staff have integrated Small Group into our Sunday youth programs. (Those numbers are not included because attendance varies.)

While our SGM program is currently very strong, there have been times when it was not so strong. This article describes some of the key principles that have helped us through the difficulties and challenges as they emerged.

### **Principle One: Small Group Ministry is governed by its purpose**

The primary purpose of SGM is to help individuals develop their spirituality. It requires an intra-personal focus. To better understand, SGM is remarkably different from a support group which encourages interpersonal communication. Lifting up the spiritual growth as the purpose guides the facilitator in group leadership. This is the reason that “cross talk” is all but forbidden. Group members cannot be internal if they are being drawn into discussion or are listening to advice. When a designated speaker is interrupted by another group member, the depth is compromised for all—the previous speaker and the rest of the group. So interrupting is not only a politeness issue, it is also pulling the group away from the purpose.

### **Principle Two: Deep listening is an essential skill for achieving intra-personal growth**

The practice of deep listening, while essential for success, is difficult for most because it is not readily practiced in our culture. In general, our culture promotes talking, not listening. Other challenges for the listener are separating from his/her frame of reference and letting go of critiquing and deciding what to say next. Helping group members achieve deep listening requires a break with the old and the acceptance of new ways. Gloria Steinem said it so well: “The greatest challenge is not in learning, but in unlearning.”

### **Principle Three: Build a structure of support for the facilitators**

Providing training for new facilitators and on-going support is very important to the health and viability of an SGM program. Groups by their very nature are dynamic, which means that things change. Sometimes they change for the better and the leader can ride the wave. Other times, the change could create deterioration. Facilitators need to know how to recognize negative trends and be prepared to intervene.

Our program requires a four hour training for all new facilitators. We also have bimonthly meetings for all facilitators so they can learn from each other, seek support, and engage in problem solving. The Coordinators also provide individual consultation to any facilitators who encounter major problems or concerns.

There are so many other aspects of SGM that could be discussed. I chose these three as the most important to build a good program. I would welcome thoughts or comments about what others see as key to successful Small Group Ministry programs.

*A special thanks to Rev. Duane Fickeisen (Retired), who launched and nurtured this program at UUCV.*

## How to Increase Deep Sharing and Listening in Covenant Groups, Part II

By Susan Hollister, UUSGMN Board, Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC  
and Alicia Hawkins, First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico

In the Winter *Quarterly* we identified six elements that enable a covenant group to grow in deepness: clear guidelines, a safe space, the facilitator's example, a group covenant, an atmosphere of trust, and compelling topics. In Part II we'll explore listening and sharing deeply, the role of silence, elements that inhibit deepness, and the influence of group characteristics. Again, we are grateful to the many people whose comments formed the basis of these articles.

### Learning to Listen Deeply

Mary Schwartz from Albuquerque, NM, calls covenant groups "a ministry of listening." At their core is listening from the heart. Look below at the Chinese symbol for listening. It is made up of characters for eyes, ear, undivided attention and heart. You will note that the mind is not included. Listening from the heart differs from listening from the mind.

If we give the speaker our undivided attention, we've taken a step towards listening from the heart. If you notice that you are judging, analyzing, or evaluating, you aren't listening with your heart. You've made their sharing about you—your assessment, your thoughts. You are listening with your mind. This is the I-it relationship described by philosopher Martin Buber: treating people as objects to be used and analyzed.



In contrast, Buber says, we are in I-Thou relationships when we interact by being open to the other person with no agendas or judgments. We come into relation with the other, focusing wholly on the other. We call this deep listening or sacred listening.

Sometimes we get sidetracked when the speaker's story evokes a strong response. To stay in deep listening mode we can make a note of our response to think about later, then return our full attention to the speaker. To be able to sit quietly when others are sharing is based on the premise that our quiet and patient presence plays a powerful role in healing. Deep listening is a process that we'll be working on for the rest of our lives.

Before one can be asked to listen deeply to others, one must first get in touch with listening deeply to oneself. "To that end," says Daniel DeVaney of East Lansing, MI, "I enter into an early discussion with the group about letting go of culturally ingrained practices of communication: those that rely on interrupting with questions or affirmative declarations that signify paying attention and empathy. It is freeing to be absolved of overtly demonstrating interest. Instead, one is placed in a position to let the other person's words wash over them. As a result, connections and insights will be made that are not otherwise possible."

Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker writer Douglas Steere puts it, "Holy listening—to 'listen' another's soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery--may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another." [Martha House, Georgetown, TX; \* See source at end of article] Alexis Grasso of Stony Brook, NY, agrees with the Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy that the purpose of SGM is to experience "loving your neighbor" through deep listening, which allows us to connect to the heart of the other.

### Learning to Share Deeply

Deep listening creates a safe space and invites deeper sharing. In a sermon at the UU Church of Bloomington, IN, the Rev. Mary Ann Macklin stated, "This kind of deep listening is very different from our typical ways of communicating. Often, I have heard Chalice Circle participants say that this deep listening is initially uncomfortable. But then as the group grows, they learn the gift of 'hearing each other into speech.' (ala feminist theologian Nelle Morton)."

As Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund of Marietta, GA, recount, check-in can be an unforgettable bonding experience when members share personal or family concerns in the safety of their covenant group. It can unleash a torrent of similar experiences. Suddenly everyone realizes they're not alone. "Deeper conversations happen naturally when people commit

to speaking from the heart and feel safe enough to speak through their own stories and life experiences.” (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)

Chris Cleveland (East Lansing, MI) observes that deep sharing is more likely to occur when participants share from their inner being and "bare their souls," and when others are listening sincerely with an open mind and heart. Deep sharing is less likely to occur, she says, when participants speak from their "ego," trying to impress the others.

“In my experience, the deepest moments have been when someone has shared about crises they are facing in their lives. Although we are not a ‘support group,’ the willingness of people to share the immediate concerns of their lives moved us all to a level of intimacy which did not previously exist. The group was able to listen with compassion without feeling an obligation to give advice or to make things ‘right.’” (Penny McDougal, Frederick, MD)

Wendy Sapp (Chattanooga, TN) observes that groups need one or two people willing to take the risk to share deeply. The first can be a facilitator, but better yet if the person is a group participant. Everyone has their own comfort level about sharing; some share profound experiences freely while others hold those tightly inside. Some may share about certain experiences without reserve but keep others private. Once one person takes the risk and shares deeply, others will follow. Being present and listening without judgment or comment, is just as critical for deep sharing as for speaking.

### **Learning to Deepen Silence**

Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words. This process allows others time to fully listen before reflecting on their own reactions. (\*Martha House, Georgetown, TX)

Early in the life of a covenant group, people ask what they can do at the end of someone’s sharing; the silence seems not enough. Some use the hands in prayer mode and a bow of the head. Some say thank you quietly. Others nod and smile. These are all attempts to say, “Your sharing was deep and courageous. Thank you.” Later, as the group settles into the process, someone may comment on how the silence during and after sharing is a powerful sacred time. The intimacy is so rich that silence seems to be the only response.

Wendy Sapp (Chattanooga, TN) adds that silence gives people time to gain courage to speak their truth. It also allows the speaker to take a breath. Silence can be uncomfortable, but it is essential for going deep.

Covenant groups in Albuquerque often read a quote on the power of silence as meetings begin and just before –the deep sharing/deep listening time. Here are some favorites:

*I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. And especially if it’s given from the heart. When people are talking, there’s no need to do anything but receive them. - Rachel Naomi Remen*

*You heard me. You heard me all the way...You went down all the way with me. Then you didn’t smother me. You gave it space to shape itself. You gave it time to come full circle. - Nelle Morton*

*If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal -- tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself. - Parker J. Palmer*

Several facilitators contributed ways to bring a covenant group to a quieter presence. Kate Goss of Manhasset, NY, shares, “Going deeper can happen when the group is comfortable with silence, and gives each speaker room to keep expressing him or herself for a little while. Members seldom get into the deeper matters as soon as they open their mouths. It has to develop, and for that the group has to be willing to listen and not jump in.”

Dez Papendorp of Chattanooga, TN, adds, “Have a moderate to slow-paced session, no rushing through. Let questions sit and sink in the silence, allowing people time to form words for their thoughts.” The meeting format helps to set the tone.

“As we enter the room,” says Carol Schwyzer of Santa Barbara, CA, “most of us are in ‘go-go-go’ mode. Check-in allows people to enter the quiet space of sharing.” Facilitators often find that “a spiritual practice such as music or sounding a chime or singing bowl helps to move the group into quietness.” (Ingrid Deckman, Devon, PA)

### **Elements that Inhibit Deep Sharing**

Not surprisingly, the elements that prevent deepness are the opposite of those that promote sharing on a deep level. Factors cited most often by our contributors are covenant breaches: judgment, side-talking, domination, and overstepping boundaries. Strong opinions or the presence of a “know-it-all” also inhibit deepness. (Rev. Axel Gehrmann, Urbana, IL)

Carol Schwyzer (Santa Barbara, CA) lists these inhibitory elements: not knowing the guidelines; not knowing whether confidences will be shared outside the group; thinking others might interrupt, respond, or try to fix; worry that others will take up all the time or you will not be given enough time; and a sense that you must “bare your soul” against your will.

Additional elements are related to the atmosphere of the meeting space or container. A perception of unfriendliness or coldness from participants diminishes the feeling of safety, as does a format that is overly rigid, and an environment that is too casual or “social” or too stern and strict. Trust and deep sharing are fragile, says Kate Goss of Manhasset, NY. “Any hint of a group member who is not adhering to the ground rules will create conditions where members don’t feel safe enough to go deep.”

Dan Grandstaff of Durham, NC, observes that “if going deep stirs anxiety for people, they will undercut the process by making jokes or diverting the conversation in some way.” He suggests that giving the group time to talk about what comes up for them during silence could lead to deeper sharing. In addition, group members could explore the difference between “safety” and “comfort.” What helps them be more open and what causes them to shut down? “We can never expect to feel comfortable all the time in a group, but an important goal is to always make it ‘safe’ for everyone.”

### **Group Characteristics and Depth of Sharing**

Consistency in all areas seems to foster group development and deep sharing. Kathy Kellison of Augusta, ME holds up regular meeting times and commitment to the group as prime examples. Committed people who show up to the group meetings on time are imperative to the group process and going deeper. (Karen Brown, Swampscott, MA)

“I was impressed at how faithfully the members of my first group attended; it was rare for anyone to miss a session. We developed a bond within the group that still lingers when we see each other at church. My second group was the polar opposite. Several dropped out before we started; others came infrequently or dropped out. We didn’t get a chance to become a cohesive group. In such an environment, deep experience is unlikely to occur.” (Martha Beyerlein, Albuquerque, NM)

Comments from our respondents were mixed on the relationship of group size to deep sharing. Some like 7-9 members, others are comfortable with 10-12. The important thing seems to be having a number that enables all members to open up on a deep level during the allotted meeting time

There were many opposing comments on the topic of group duration. Some suggest that length of time is not important: “I have been in brand new groups where there is a lot of depth if members share a desire to get there.” (Kate Goss, Manhasset, NY) “Groups can achieve deep moments even while meeting in our introductory One Time Chalice Circles.” (Sally Hattig and Cathy Olson, Ann Arbor, MI) “I have seen deep sharing with long-term groups and groups that have just formed, although the newly-formed groups often reach this depth when they know their group is short term.” (Rev. Heather Janules, Bethesda, MD)

Others feel that length of time together is a determining factor: “In my experience, ‘going deep’ happens when the group has been together for a while so that a good level of trust is in place.” (Ann Davis, Easton, MA) “Deeper sharing tends to develop after the group has met 4, 5, or 6 times.” (Richard Loescher, Eugene, OR) Eliot Chapel facilitators were unanimous in their belief that groups that meet over the long-term (versus groups that meet for a year or other specified period) have the best chance of developing the trust necessary for deep sharing to occur. (Rev. Terry Davis, Kirkwood, MO)

Past group experience may play a role: “If group members are practiced SGM participants, deepness can happen. If participants are new to the SGM experience and aren’t comfortable following another’s lead, the group dynamic remains

uncertain.” (Dez Papendorp, Chattanooga, TN) “It helps greatly when some people in the group have had experience in similar groups before and have seen the value of the closeness that developed.” (Facilitator, SW District)

Deepness often depends upon the the facilitator, expectations, and make-up of the group rather than its longevity. “Establishing a culture for deep listening—by the minister, by the training, by the covenant, by the session plans—can lead to deep listening for groups that have long or short histories together.” (Alan Backler, Bloomington, IN) Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund (Marietta, GA) have been in groups where some members shared at a deep level very early, their second or third meeting together. “If this happens, it may set the stage for a more introspective group. However, we don’t believe most individuals or groups are able to go deep without some of the elements in place that we listed earlier.” [See Part I, Winter 2012 *SGM Quarterly*]

“Groups can develop norms that get stronger with time. If the norm is for a ‘not too deep’ level of sharing, it will continue unless the norm is questioned and consciously changed.” (Dan Grandstaff, Durham, NC) “Our experience,” says Richard Loescher of Eugene, OR, “is that depth of sharing is greatly influenced by the particular mix of people in a group, their ‘chemistry,’ and how comfortable and safe people feel with each other.”

“Some identify as affinity groups, and express that their ability to go deep comes from their commonality. On the other hand, some groups have established significant cohesion despite their diversity.” (Kathy Kellison, Augusta, ME)

Deep listening and sharing are vital for moving groups to a deeper level. Perception of a safe, trusting environment and adherence to the group’s covenant are essential. In comparison, group size, mix, and longevity are minor determinants of sharing level. In Part III we will explore training strategies that prepare facilitators to lead sessions of depth and substance. Meeting format, topic selection, session plan design, and the spectrum of deepness in groups will be included.

*Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force..When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life..When we listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other...and it is this little creative fountain inside us that begins to spring and cast up new thoughts and unexpected laughter and wisdom...It is when people really listen to us, with quiet fascinated attention, that the fountain begins to work again, to accelerate in the most surprising way. - Brenda Ueland*

\*Prepared by formation facilitators with considerable help from the writings of Judy Brown, Parker Palmer and the Dialogue Group. Center for Renewal and Wholeness in Higher Education

*Susan Hollister is on the board of the UU SGM Network. She leads a covenant group at Eno River UU Fellowship in Durham, NC, and serves on the steering team. Alicia Hawkins leads a covenant group and is on the steering committee at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM. She is co-author of Heart to Heart and Soul to Soul, collections of 14 gatherings for small group ministry.*

## CONTRIBUTING CONGREGATIONS

### How to Deepen Listening and Sharing in Covenant Groups

UU Church of Bloomington, IN  
 UU Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, NY  
 UU Congregation of Frederick, MD  
 First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor, MI  
 Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC  
 UU Community Church, Augusta, ME  
 Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA  
 UU Church at Washington Crossing, Titusville, NJ  
 UU Church in Eugene, OR  
 Monte Vista UU Congregation, Monte Vista, CA  
 UU Church of Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL  
 First Universalist Church of Minneapolis, MN  
 Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Kirkwood, MO  
 The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, CA  
 Manatee UU Fellowship, Bradenton, FL  
 Emerson UU Congregation, Marietta, GA  
 Cedar Lane UU Church, Bethesda, MD

UU Church of Greater Lansing, East Lansing, MI  
 UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR  
 UU Church of the South Hills, Pittsburgh, PA  
 First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM  
 UU Fellowship at Easton, MD  
 UU Congregation of Phoenix, Paradise Valley, AZ  
 University Unitarian Church, Seattle, WA  
 Towson UU Church, Lutherville, MD  
 First Parish Church UU, Duxbury, MA  
 UU Church of Chattanooga, TN  
 UU Congregation of Green Valley, Amado, AZ  
 UU Community Church, Park Forest, IL  
 UU Church of Sarasota, FL  
 UU Fellowship at Stony Brook, NY  
 San Gabriel UU Fellowship, Georgetown, TX  
 First UU Church, Houston, TX

## Young, Small, Lay-Led, and Covenant Groups Too?

### Small Group Ministry at

#### Harrisonburg Unitarian Universalists

By Sarah Cheverton, David Lane, and Merle Wenger

Here in Harrisonburg, Virginia, our small, lay-led congregation (founded just 20 years ago) might not seem a likely place to find covenant groups taking root. No minister to take the initiative, spread the word, train the facilitators, develop the session plans, recruit the participants. And with the heavy demands that shared ministry places on everyone in small congregations, how many folks (realistically) might be interested in taking part?

As it turns out, the answer to that question is almost 25% of our congregation's current membership of nearly 90 – a percentage we would never have predicted when we inaugurated our facilitator training group at the beginning of 2011 or when we launched our three initial covenant groups last September.

#### Our Journey To Covenant Groups

How did this happen and in such a short time? Actually our journey to covenant groups began as far back as three years ago. At our congregational retreat that year, the need for new ways to be in community with each other figured prominently in the discussions, new ways to connect with each other using the language of the heart as well as the mind. Responding to those discussions, our board invited folks to join a task force to explore possibilities and make recommendations. Three of us did. And for a year we googled and read, debated and discussed, and mid-way during that time decided finally to be a covenant group ourselves to test what we were learning concretely and practically.

With Bob Hill's [Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry](#) as our roadmap, we found the impact of our check-ins and topic discussions increasingly more powerful. And we began to realize the huge importance of the structure itself as a framework for enabling participation. When we agreed not to interrupt, we listened differently because we had to. When we agreed to speak from our own experience, we found ourselves no longer privileged unequally by what we'd read and by how we'd been educated. Equal worth and dignity suddenly meant something radically new and different when the possibility of argument and debate was removed from the process of interaction. We began to see that contention could undermine real connection by shutting down anyone not highly verbal or not comfortable with the cut and thrust of intellectual discussion.

These were the key insights we shared with our board. And we did so by actually conducting an abbreviated covenant group session for the board to observe – our handouts and overviews just made more sense when accompanied by a demonstration. And then, with board support for the for the kind of groups we hoped to form, our next step was to enlarge our task force into a facilitator training group.

By this time, Les and Joni Grady from the Clemson congregation in SC had relocated to Harrisonburg and joined HUU. They brought with them extensive experience in small group ministry and were willing to host and facilitate a pilot training group. In addition to the Gradys, we recruited five others for the enlarged group. These were folks who had previously told us of their interest in spiritual practices/small group options at HUU. This expanded task force, ten in all, met for the next eight months, and at the end of that time six of its members committed to serve as co-facilitators for our three initial covenant groups.

Once we had facilitators, we developed a brochure, advertised via Sunday morning announcements, e-news reminders, and word of mouth, and within four weeks had enough interested folks for three functioning groups in addition to the facilitator training group. This group would continue to meet to provide facilitators with continuing opportunities for their own personal growth as well as for mutual supervision and accountability. We also decided that each group should meet on a different day and time during the month so that as many as possible of our members and friends could take part. To keep the work of facilitators manageable, not only did we decide to have two facilitators for each group, but our co-facilitators often agreed to alternate responsibility among themselves for leading the check-ins and the topic discussions from month to month. For the same reason, we encouraged our co-facilitators to rely on the SGM Network for topic ideas and session plans. But we also developed some original materials ourselves and have begun to share especially successful session plans among our four groups.

#### Expected and Unexpected Results

We learned a great deal in three years, both about ourselves as UUs and about covenant groups. Here are some of our most important discoveries and results so far:

##### *The Development Process*

- Haste makes waste – we took our time and we needed to. Without leadership from above, careful, deliberate steps, one at a time, are essential.
- The task force learned best by actually modeling for itself and others how a covenant group works.



- Structure makes for equality: rather than limiting participation, structure gives everyone equal opportunities to participate.
- A core training group can develop new facilitators and at the same time assure personal growth and mutual supervision for facilitators.
- Having co-facilitators share group leadership accords well with a commitment to shared ministry and makes facilitator recruitment much easier.
- Using SGM Network resources makes session planning productive and manageable.

#### *Impacts for Group Members and the Congregation*

- It takes as many as five or six meetings before participants feel safe, comfortable, or strongly committed to their groups.
- The topics we discuss matter far less than the process we use when discussing them. Uninterrupted speaking, dedicated listening, and personal experience enrich and transform any conversation.
- Over time covenant group members do seem to connect more deeply with each other both during and outside of group meetings.
- Covenant groups provide opportunities to build/rebuild theologies based on “heart-talk” rather than just “head-talk.”
- Covenant groups show us that we actually have more leaders in our midst than we thought we had!
- Covenant groups model productive ways to listen and to speak that can serve as templates for healthy interaction in other congregational venues.

#### **What Next?**

When we began, we had no idea if others would see in covenant groups the kind of valuable and transforming experience that we gradually came to understand that it was. Though our expectations have certainly been exceeded by what has been accomplished, we know that continuing into the future will mean new challenges. Our hope is that over time, the impact of covenant groups can leaven the loaf of our congregational life, can become for us all a spiritual practice that reduces contention and enhances mutual support. We now know it is a powerful tool that can gradually change how we listen and speak and connect with each other. Over time we look to share that understanding as much as we can with everyone interested in its potential both for themselves as individuals and for our religious community as a whole.

*Sarah Cheverton, David Lane, and Merle Enger are original members of the Covenant Group Task Force and continue to participate in group and program leadership at Harrisonburg UU Fellowship in Harrisonburg, Virginia.*

### **UU SGM Network Publications**

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