

SGM QUARTERLY

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Connections.....with Steve Becker



A Little Giving

A little giving is a dangerous thing;
an instrument of peace.
When chaos and confusion reign,
invite all to listen-in.

A little giving is a dangerous thing;
it taunts the soul to pardon;
Old injuries are brought to bear
when it's our real selves that we bring.

A little giving is a dangerous thing;
where doubt gives way to chance;
what safe places can our groups provide
when to our faith we cling?

A little giving is a dangerous thing;
Why hold on to despair?
When shared amongst our covenant group,
we can stop longsuffering.

A little giving is a dangerous thing;
Out of darkness comes our light;
When we take the risk
Of sharing, our hearts begin to sing.

A little giving is a dangerous thing;
When sadness swells out heart
When risks are taken to share our pain,
the joy can be long-lasting.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

~Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi

In this holiday season, may we all remember to share the gift of giving of ourselves to our fellow travelers.

Happy holidays!

Steve Becker coordinates the SGM program at Westside UU Congregation in Seattle, WA

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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 GA 2012

Share Social Justice Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group session plans with the UU Small Group Ministry Network: office@smallgroupministry.net

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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We are looking for session plans 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

There will be a Social Justice section on our website and a SGM Social Justice Resource will be available at General Assembly.

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

HOW TO REALLY LISTEN by Peter Bregman

(from the *Harvard Business Review*)

One morning, my wife Eleanor woke up, turned over, and said, "I am not looking forward to this day." I asked her why. What came out is that we were at the start of the Jewish high holy day season, which means colder weather and three weeks of big social meals, long religious services, broken routines, and children out of school. Eleanor didn't grow up with these traditions, and they can be overwhelming. Now, I run a management consulting company; problem solving is what I do. So it didn't take me long to jump in.

"Cold weather means ski season is about to start," I said. "You love skiing. And these holiday meals are fun and filled with people you love — they'll make you feel better. And I'll be with you; you won't be alone with the kids. Also, you know, Jesus was Jewish, so it's kind of your tradition too." Even as I said it, I knew that last one was a reach. It became clear that I was making her feel worse and now she wasn't just sad, she was angry. And when she got angry, I felt myself get angry too. And self-righteous. *Here I am trying to help her and this is what I get?*

But then I smartened up. Instead of giving in to my anger, which would have really blown things up, I shut up and listened. When I did, I began to hear the real stuff, the things that neither of us was actually saying. What I discovered was that she was upset because the focus on mothers during the Jewish holidays taps into her insecurities about motherhood, not being a Jewish mom, and not having time to spend on her own work. I also discovered that my own babbling wasn't so much to help her feel better as to help me feel better. I'm the reason she's in New York City, living through cold winters, and part of a Jewish family.

In other words, by trying to make her feel better, I was doing the opposite of making her feel better. I was *arguing* with her. In fact, most of the time when we try to make people feel better, we end up arguing with them because we're contradicting what they're feeling. Which, inevitably, makes them feel worse. Listening, it turns out, is magic. Not only did it help me understand what was going on with both of us, but it helped Eleanor feel better, too. It made her feel that she wasn't alone in her feelings; I was with her.

All I had to do was listen.

But listening isn't easy. The more we listen to others, the more likely we will react — or overreact — to what they say. Listening, it turns out, is much harder than speaking. We have to allow things we might disagree with to hang in the air. We have to move over a little and create space for those things to linger. That kind of listening takes tremendous courage. But if we're interested in learning —

about ourselves as well as others — then it's worth it. And if we're interested in being connected to others, showing them respect, helping them feel better, and solving problems between us, then it's more than worth it. It's essential. Until people feel heard, they will fight to be heard. But once they are heard, there is little left to fight for, and then we can move on, not as "us vs. them" but simply as "us."

So how do you listen in a way that transforms conversations and relationships?

1. **Actually listen.** And only listen. That means don't multitask. I'm not just talking about doing email, surfing the web, or creating a grocery list. Thinking about what you're going to say next counts as multitasking. Simply focus on what the other person is saying.
2. **Repeat back.** This feels a little silly at first but works magic. If someone says she is angry about the decision you just made, you can say "you're angry about the decision I just made." I know, I know, she just said that. But it shows you're listening and it communicates to the other person that she's been heard. If you don't have the courage to try it with an adult, try it with a child. You'll see what a difference it makes.
3. **Ask questions.** Explore the other person's thoughts and feelings more deeply. And "You don't really believe that, do you?" does not count as a question.

Really listening can feel risky, which seems strange because listening doesn't materially change anything. But sometimes you'll hear things that are hard to hear. Remember that listening is not the same thing as agreeing. And it will never force you to take any particular action. If anything, it will reduce the intensity of people's insistence that you take a specific action. Because in many cases what they're looking for is proof that you've heard them. So if they feel you've really heard them, their need for action diminishes.

As Eleanor spoke, I noticed my own resistance to various things she was saying. There's no question that it's hard to really listen. But once I relaxed into it, I heard her in a much deeper way. That made her feel better. Call me co-dependent, but it made me feel better too. It turns out that sometimes, just listening is problem-solving.

Peter Bregman is the author, most recently, of *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*. He advises and consults with organizations ranging from Fortune 500 companies to nonprofits. He speaks worldwide on how people can lead, work, and live more powerfully. He is a frequent guest on public radio, provides commentary for CNN, and writes for *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, and *Psychology Today*. Peter lives in New York City, and can be reached at www.peterbregman.com,

How to Increase Deep Sharing and Listening in Covenant Groups

Part I – Elements that Enable Deep Sharing

*By Alicia Hawkins, First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico
and Susan Hollister, UU Small Group Ministry Network Board*

At a recent Facilitators Meeting, a covenant group leader asked how to increase the deep sharing and listening in thriving small groups. To find the answers, we sent a set of questions to members of the UU Small Group Ministry Network. Many thanks for your responses! We received a multitude of great suggestions--enough for *three* articles--from covenant group programs across the U.S. We are inspired by their deep spiritual awareness and deeply indebted to the outpouring of wisdom. We truly are a “network,” supporting each other in small group ministry. See the complete list of contributing congregations on page seven. Please send additional ideas to quarterlyeditor@smallgroupministry.net.

Part II in the Spring Quarterly will explore group development and learning to listen and share deeply. Part III (Summer) will cover topic design, training, and the spectrum of deepness. Look for your comments in this issue or in parts to come. We hope you enjoy and learn as much as we have in creating the series.

By “deep” we mean authentic: sharing from a place of honesty, transparency, and vulnerability; telling stories from our own life experiences, and expressing our hopes and dreams as well as our fears and shortcomings. **We do not intend sharing of a nature that is appropriate for the therapeutic, counseling, or support group setting.**

The purpose of covenant groups is two-fold: to bond with one another and to explore one’s spiritual/life journey. As our sharing deepens, bonding and inner journeying may also deepen. As Grace Hirsh of Bradenton, FL, says, “Going deeper depends on a shift from left brain to right brain; less thinking and more feeling.”

Before you read any further, think back to a particularly deep moment you experienced in a covenant group. What was the tone of the group, the facilitator, the topic? What do you think needed to be in place to facilitate that deep moment? Our respondents spoke of elements they felt were important in enabling a group to “go deep.” You may resonate with some of these, disagree with some, and others may surprise you. We invite you browse through all the ideas, then draw your own conclusions.

We have found that there is no agreed-upon order for elements that enable a covenant group to grow in deepness. Wendy Sapp of Chattanooga, TN, makes a soup analogy: “What makes a soup delicious to one person makes it dreadful to another. In the same way, what one group needs to move deeper may not be what another group needs. Some members grow restless with sessions on listening and covenant; they want to move on to the ‘real SGM stuff.’ Others appreciate starting slowly, learning to trust their fellow participants and the SGM model before moving into deeper, riskier sharing.” Sally Hattig and Cathy Olson of Ann Arbor, MI, observe that the level of deep moments varies with groups, their personalities, and the facilitator’s leadership style.

Clear Program Guidelines

Prepare members for the covenant group experience with a comprehensive program description and participant guidelines. This description may be shared in brochures, forums, Sunday services, the church website, and the newsletter. Member guides are often presented at sign-up or in an initial letter to group members. As Dorothy Burns of Pittsburgh, PA, says, “Set an expectation for confidentiality, deep listening, shared speaking time, and not interrupting. Explaining early on that we are not support groups enables members to just listen without feeling pressure to solve the problems expressed. Likewise, explaining that we are not intellectual discussion groups encourages members to share their own experiences rather than current events or media subjects.” Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund of Marietta, GA, reiterate the expectation for experiential conversations: “Going deeper doesn’t occur when topics are discussed on a theoretical level, or the conversation is about someone else’s experience.”

A facilitator in the Southwest District discovered that a sample presentation for the congregation shed much light on the general nature and tone of a group. Some long-time congregants and church leaders expressed surprise to find they were actually drawn to small group ministry now that they knew what it was about and saw the “safe” aspect of sharing. Shirley Williams of Albuquerque, NM, notes that once people understand what covenant groups are about, they come. “Our people are spiritually hungry and there is a real need to communicate at that level.” Members immediately understood the recommendations for communication in the group, says Rev. Ellen Livingston of Montclair, CA, and

went deeper than in ordinary situations.

A Safe Space

The physical and emotional meeting space needs to feel secure for each member. It should be comfortable, calm, and free from interruptions. (Joe Schenk, Titusville, NJ, and Dez Papendorp, Chattanooga, TN) Joe adds: "Creating a safe 'container' includes a quiet space, adherence to a covenant, consistency in attendance, and a common understanding among members to share of themselves in the group." Alan Backler of Bloomington, IN, adds that trained facilitators can play a large role in creating a sense of safety in groups.

The meeting format and the process itself—centering ritual, sitting in silence, a directed check-in, reflection on what was said—help to create a safe space in which to listen and share deeply. (Alan Hollister, Durham, NC) Facilitators in Devon, PA, suggest beginning each meeting with a spiritual practice such as a moment of meditation or silence, holding hands in a circle, music, or sounding a chime or singing bowl, to help move the group from secular time into a sacred space.

"The common ground in deep sharing experiences", says Rev. Margret O'Neill of Buffalo, NY, "is open-hearted listening without commentary, critique or piggy-backing. The facilitator needs to model this as well as speaking about it and teaching it."

"Participants need to feel at ease, as if they matter; they need to feel that they will be listened to and heard." (Elizabeth Asnes, Houston, TX) If a small group is a safe, loving, gentle, accepting place, people who have trouble "going deeper" may be able to gain confidence and share at a deeper level. (Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA) "For those who are shy or introverted, the logistics of the group allow for carving out a space that is just for them. They can pause without interruption to think further about what their view or feeling is, and continue without the party-type of discussion where extroverts and people with strong views may take the stage." (Facilitator, Southwest District)

The Facilitator Sets the Tone

First and foremost in creating a "deep group" is the tone and example set by the facilitator. (Shirley Williams, Albuquerque, NM) Facilitators in Pittsburgh add, "When facilitators share a deep experience, it can help others understand the type of discussion we are hoping to have." Mia Scofield of Albuquerque agrees: "The facilitator can set the tone here by how much and how deep they share, and it opens possibilities to other members by seeing someone else do it."

Alicia gives this example of setting the tone. "At a recent conference I asked the audience to pair up, share an unresolved life issue, and listen deeply to the other person. I gave an example of my struggle in deciding to get a hearing aid, facing my judgments about aging, and memories of communicating with my Dad who was severely hearing impaired. Since I was in the middle of this turmoil, my angst showed in my brief sharing. I didn't share it with the calm wisdom that comes with time and resolution of the issue. It really impacted the audience and the sharing experience that followed. There was such depth of sharing in the room amongst these strangers that one person said it felt like sacred time."

Group members may also set the tone. Facilitators in Pittsburgh shared, "Some of our deep moments have been achieved when one person in the group has chosen to share a more meaningful experience and others have followed suit." Rev. Heather Janules of Bethesda, MD, adds, "Once a member has taken a risk by sharing openly with candor and vulnerability, other members of the group receive an implicit invitation to join them on this level."

A Well-crafted and Agreed-upon Covenant

Covenants are a starting point for creating safety in a group. Going deeper doesn't occur without the safety of clear boundaries. "It is the job of the facilitator to remind the group of the covenants made with each other." (Susan Jordan & Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA) "Individuals are most likely to share in a personal way if they trust the rest of the group to respect their comments. That trust is achieved by consistent adherence to the covenant agreed to, and by carefully following the format planned, giving plenty of space between comments and being comfortable with silence." (Janet Woodward, Seattle, WA)

Occasionally there is resistance to "rules" set forth in covenants, but group leaders have come to value the security that these agreements provide to participants. (Dorothy Burns, Pittsburgh, PA) There needs to be "a covenant developed and agreed to by the members that sets up the expectation for safety in several dimensions, followed by some experience

with folks holding to the covenant, and the practice of listening people into speech with love. The presence and guidance of a trained and skilled facilitator also helps.” (Rev. Margret O’Neill, Buffalo, NY)

“People need to know that what they say will stay in the group, by use of the covenant.” (Ingrid Deckman, Devon, PA) Other ground rules include speaking one at a time, passing anytime on any topic, commitment to deep listening, and being nonjudgmental. (MaryBeth Brizzolara, Lutherville, MD) Following the ground rule of no cross-talk may meet with resistance, but makes a difference in the degree of deep sharing. (Kathryn Warrior, Hillsboro, OR)

Groups may use a generic covenant or one prepared by a steering team: “In our first session we have a careful review of the Small Group Ministry Covenant of Right Relationship, which supports respectful sharing and listening and includes an agreement about confidentiality. Following this covenant helps create an atmosphere of trust, safety and bonding, which increases the likelihood of more open sharing. All members are encouraged to remind the group about the covenant as needed.” (Richard Loescher, Eugene, OR)

Groups often write their own covenant: “At the first meeting, the facilitator explains the structure of a Connection Circle. Together the group creates a covenant that creates a sense of safety and makes deep connection possible. The facilitator drafts the covenant and sends it to the members for approval. The covenant can be referred to as a reminder if the group begins to veer off-course, and it can be changed if the group sees the need to do so.” (Carol Schwyzer, Santa Barbara, CA)

An Atmosphere of Trust and Openness

Consistent format, trust, bonding, and developing connections all help to provide a secure construct. (Sally Hattig and Cathy Olsen, Ann Arbor, MI) Patience is important; it takes time to develop the trust that allows for deep sharing. (Kathryn Warrior, Hillsboro, WA) Group members become more open with each other as they discuss life and death issues. And when sensitive subjects are covered, trust builds when members find that the group embraces, rather than rejects them. (Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA)

As a facilitator in the Southwest District says, trust leading to deeper sharing is further developed when it’s clear that members care about the group, and support one another in times of need. There may be times when group members are affected by startling events or crises, a worrisome diagnosis, or a risky procedure. “These things suddenly put life into perspective and allow caring instincts to be put into effect.”

Compelling Topics

“Good topics are important and often come from ‘where-the-rubber-meets-the-road’ places along each person’s spiritual journey. For a Christian, what does it mean in my life to actually ‘love my enemy;’ for a UU, how can I really promote inherent worth and dignity toward persons who are dishonest or hurtful to others?” (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)

“It seems that any level of sharing depends on how the chosen topic hits the particular group at that moment in their lives.” (Ellie Anderla, Phoenix, AZ) Dez Papendorp of Chattanooga, TN, adds that sharing deepens when the topic has meaning to the participants.

Eliot Chapel facilitators recall that some topics have lent themselves to deep sharing better than others. For a recent session on ancestry, members were invited to bring photos and mementos to share with the group. It opened up a powerful and deeply personal discussion about families and relationships. (Rev. Terry Davis, Kirkwood, MO)

Session topics can have a strong and long-lasting impact on group members. During a session on forgiveness, “one person’s story resonated with the group. It is the session I remember most clearly out of all the covenant group meetings I have attended.” (MaryBeth Brizzolara, Lutherville, MD)

“The topics that have taken folks deep are those that center around emotions: hate, fear, regret, love, anger, pride, disappointment. Other topics are mentors and childhood experiences that bring up memories of people and events. Sessions focused on parents, siblings, and other family members also bring up deep feelings.” (Ann Davis, Easton, MD) Alan Hollister of Durham, NC, agrees: “Deep sharing is elicited by topics that dive into one’s spiritual core and those that elicit an emotional response. For example, ‘What is your greatest fear right now?’” Facilitators in Devon, PA, suggest these topics for depth: evil, death, what to say when there’s nothing to say, patriotism, treasured objects, anger, risk-taking, a two-part session on planning and making life changes, a favorite piece of music.

Good topics can also come from examining universally recognized conditions of this life (gratitude, loneliness, forgiveness, prayer/spiritual practice) as viewed through our own lives. This often leads to better understanding of ourselves, what we have come to believe, and want to stand for. "Hearing others share their thoughts and stories on a topic that I've found interesting or have been wrestling with has been powerfully moving and illuminating for me and for others in our group. In its sheerest form, a good session can result from nothing more than two or three good questions if the questions are interesting enough to provoke self-reflection on a particular topic and inspire sharing a personal story." (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)

In Part II we'll continue our quest for deepness by learning to listen and to share our stories. To be heard deeply by another is truly an amazing experience. To quote Thich Nhat Hahn, "The greatest gift we can give another is our presence."

Small Group Ministries are transforming the religious landscape of Unitarian Universalism in the United States. (Thandeka) They are an effective way of building relationships within our church family along with exploring our spiritual journey; they provide the personal touch we need to feel connected in our lives. Covenant groups connect us in close communities of shared thoughts and experiences and enable us to practice listening and speaking from the heart. "What we've learned is that Small Group Ministry is the single most effective way to provide people with a sense of roots, place, belonging, sharing, and caring." *Effective Church Leadership*, by Kennon Callahan

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

CONTRIBUTING CONGREGATIONS

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 Unitarian Universalist 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 Buffalo, NY
 UU Fellowship at Stony Brook, NY
 San Gabriel UU Fellowship, Georgetown, TX
 First UU Church, Houston, TX

"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. Ears operate at the speed of sound, which is far slower than the speed of light the eyes take in. Generative listening is the art of developing deeper silences in yourself, so you can slow your mind's hearing to your ears' natural speed, and hear beneath the words to their meaning."

-Peter Senge

Emerson Listening Circles

By Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund, Emerson UU Congregation, Marietta, Georgia

In 2008, the UU Congregation of Marietta joined with the Emerson UU Congregation to form a larger, stronger congregation. At that time, Marietta had two active chalice groups. One group contained our own members; the second group was a mixture of congregations. While Emerson had not begun a formal chalice group program, these two Marietta groups continued to meet “under the radar” after we joined the Emerson congregation.

Early in 2011, a steering committee formed, made up of leaders of the Marietta SGM programs and a long-time member of Emerson who had received facilitator training a number of years earlier. We shared with our new minister, Rev. Jeff Jones, our experience with our program and the vision we had for groups at Emerson. Rev. Jeff immediately put the formation of a SGM program on his agenda for the year and the board approved his priorities. We were on our way.

We chose the name “*Emerson Listening Circles*” because it signified our intent to listen deeply to others and to also listen deeply within. Our focus was on listening instead of talking. We felt deep listening was a crucial skill for spiritual development.

Rev. Jeff chose eight facilitators. Two of these folks would receive training, but would be standing-by-for-growth. We felt confident we could create five or six groups of six to ten members. All the facilitators agreed to attend a Listening Circle, lead by Rev. Jeff, once a month. This group was an opportunity for our own spiritual development and also an opportunity to continue our training by sharing joys, sorrows, and solutions about issues arising in our groups.

We developed a plan, created a brochure, and wrote articles for the congregation’s weekly email to members and for the monthly newsletter. We planned logistics for a facilitator’s training run by Rev. Jeff.

Rev. Jeff’s sermon about “deep listening,” was a great introduction for his next sermon about a “wonderful” new program called “Emerson Listening Circles.” A delightful story was performed about the little church on the hill that kept growing and growing, had members who did not know each other, and so on. It made the congregation laugh and pay attention. During his sermon, Rev. Jeff eloquently expressed the value of the Emerson Listening Circle program for members, new UU’s and visitors. At the end of the sermon, he invited the congregation to experience a “Listening Circle” demonstration during the second hour (RE programs for adults). The order of service contained a list of facilitators, their meeting location,

and the room for the demo after the service with sign-up sheets. All of the newly trained facilitators led a one hour session, entitled “Listening.”

We were surprised and delighted to have 72 people sign up. This meant we would not have the five or six circles we hoped for, but NINE CIRCLES! All of our “stand-by” facilitators, with no time to rest, jumped in and began their own groups. One facilitator lead two circles until another recruit attended the October SGM Training at the UU Church of Chattanooga, TN, presented by the UU Small Group Ministry Network.

We have lost a few group members and gained some. We currently have 76 people in our groups, a phenomenal number for a congregation of about 120 people. We believe the circles will be especially beneficial to those new to UU-ism and will strengthen their introduction and involvement while providing an instant collection of sharing friends. We are going to hold the number of groups at nine this year and plan another facilitator training next August.

One of our circles provides child care, removing one of the obstacles for parents to attend. We have also surveyed our groups to discover which meeting places are handicapped accessible. Next year, we plan to begin a group that meets during the day in the hopes it will attract some of our senior members who may not want to attend evening meetings. We are interested in hearing about churches that have youth and young adult SGM programs as well.

Our facilitator meetings are very important to the success of the program. They provide deepening friendships, generate new ideas and instill confidence in all of us. But most importantly, they are an opportunity to practice “Deep Listening” for others in the group and within ourselves, so we can carry “Deep Listening” into all of our groups. We believe these elements in the formation of our SGM program will encourage a program with a “Going Deeper” culture.

We believe our planning, training, the worship services that introduced the program, the marketing, and demonstrations have all had an impact on the level of listening occurring. Our minister-led monthly facilitator circle is also instrumental in maintaining the quality of our listening services. Our program is young. The initial turn-out tells us many are craving the kind of sharing available through a small group ministry program. We know more challenges will develop as the groups mature. We are optimistic that the structure and support we have in place will continue to foster healthy groups. We are also grateful for the help, education and guidance we continue to receive from the Small Group Ministry Network.

Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund are Steering Committee members at Emerson UU Congregation, Marietta, GA

Going Deeper!

By Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Litchfield, Maine

We use the term “going deeper” in Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups. “Deeper” that what? Than brief and usually cursory conversations at fellowship hour on Sunday morning? Than one-on-one conversations where only two perspectives are shared? And why do we want to “go deeper?” Because the human need for connection is increasingly critical as technology occupies our lives? Because so much of our lives are packed with doing to the exclusion of being and reflecting?

Deeper relates to both the Intimacy and Ultimacy of Small Group Ministry. **Going deeper with Intimacy**, or relationships, is directly related to at least three factors: group development, group dynamics, and the Unitarian Universalist perspective. *Group development* occurs over time. There are various descriptions of this, including “Building Community: The Spiral in Small Group Ministry” (*Implementing Small Group Ministry*, GA 2011). As the group moves through phases of bonding, opening, affirming, stretching, and deeper sharing, the character of the sharing changes. We reveal more of our personal experiences, values and dilemmas. *Group dynamics*, set within the perimeters of a group covenant, provide a setting for sharing and exploring. This includes being present, listening from the heart without judgment or need to respond, and willingness to share from experiences and life/spiritual journeys. The *Unitarian Universalist perspective* provides opportunity for connecting within a group that has similar values, such as expressed in the UU Principles or Affirmations. The similar values themselves are bonding. The deeper connection with Intimacy allows deeper explorations that are part of Ultimacy.

Going deeper with Ultimacy is related to at least four factors: the questions, the diversity within the group, sharing from the heart, and reception. *Questions* that open into exploration rather than directing attention towards a particular perspective, and which can elicit response in several directions set the stage for going deeper. Honoring the *diversity* within the group presumes that people in the group hold differing views on almost any topic, based on differing life experiences and stages and worldviews. Ask questions that honor the individual, the group as a whole, and diversity. Diversity is enhanced within a group because of numbers, as opposed to one-to-one conversations, allowing for broader insights. The diversity within a group increases the depth of consideration to a topic. *Sharing from the heart* rather than the head is essential to going deeper. Questions such as “What do you think about.....?” or “What does this mean to you?” asks for analysis. And analysis provides

opportunity for people to take sides, and invites discussion toward specific outcomes or preferences, which is not what Small Group Ministry is about. Focusing on analysis diverts attention from the deeper feelings and needs that come in sharing from the heart. Inviting people to share an experience and to ask how a topic relates to life or spiritual journey sets the expectation of personal responses that do not need analysis. *Reception* to sharing that honors the inherent worth and dignity of the individual, enhances self-reflection, and affirms that the exploration is worth our time and consideration.

The balance between Intimacy and Ultimacy is critical to going deeper. Intimacy provides the comfort and safety for going deeper, and Ultimacy gives structure that keeps us moving forward on our search for meaning. Take time to consider this balance. Take time to assess the importance of each part to the total group dynamic. Take time to reflect on how the group has deepened and what that means to group members.

“Small Groups, Deep Connections” is a favorite saying of the UU Small Group Ministry Network. The size of the groups, the ongoing nature of a group over time, and the focus on ministry or caring for each other are integral strategies in enriching our experience in Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups.

Helen Zidowecki is on the topics committee and leads a covenant group at the UU Community Church of Augusta, ME.

Small Groups, Deep Connections.

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