

Small Group Ministry in Other Settings

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Small Group Ministry (SGM) is a way of life! The concepts and format of SGM can be a *process* for dialogue in congregational committees or task-oriented groups. The small group ministry process adds a *relational* dimension that enhances the functionality of these congregational groups. This makes the use of the SGM process inviting, but the basic elements of SGM must be observed:

- * Small groups - keep the groups to 5-10 participants, including the facilitator.

- * Focus on ministry, caring, sharing, and stories rather than on information.

- * The methodology is dialogue - expect to share and expect to learn.

- * Confidentiality is assured.

Small Group Ministry sessions used in alternative settings are shorter than the usual 2 hours and group size is limited to 8 people. The check-in is specific to the theme or group, there are fewer discussion questions, and the session facilitators are frequently selected for their prior facilitation experience. With these variations, small group ministry as a process can be used in the following ways:

First, the dynamics of SGM can be used to discuss a specific topic that needs attention. For example, a session on feeling safe and what constitutes a safe environment deepens the discussion of safe congregational policies like "two adults with children" or "windows in doors". A session on giving and receiving leads to a discussion of how individual strengths and service can be helpful in volunteer recruitment. A session on leading and following may change how the group perceives the dynamics of leadership roles.

The small group ministry process asks committees and ad hoc groups to engage with the topic first, approaching it from a personal perspective before doing the committee work. This increases the understanding and the appreciation of each other in the committee, and often builds consensus while speeding decision-making.

Second, the SGM process can be used with groups of people meeting for the first time, such as at a district conference. One or two small group ministry sessions during the conference

provide an opportunity for people to feel connected in a deeper way. The sessions may introduce a new topic, or help the group to reflect on material presented during the conference. The SGM process is also helpful when previously small groups combine, consolidate, or grow. For example, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association chapters in Maine and New Hampshire/Vermont use small group ministry at cluster and chapter meetings. The two chapters have a retreat together twice a year, and the small groups are made up of ministers from each district.

Third, small group ministry as a process can be used *with discretion* to increase understanding of a specific topic or issue. For example, at a district Welcoming Congregation conference, several SGM sessions were offered on gender and sexuality issues. They generated dialogue about the program's impact on individuals and congregations that created enthusiasm for developing and enhancing programs in congregations. These sessions were context-related and topic-specific, and facilitated decision-making in this large conference setting. In the congregational setting, the SGM process could focus on the broader issues of oppression, of which gender and sexual affinity are a part. The focus, tone, and questions need to be relevant to the participants or 'target audience'.

Small Group Ministry is a dynamic process that enriches our lives, our congregations and our denomination at a variety of levels. We have just begun to realize its full impact on Unitarian Universalism