

Covenant Corner
Growing Small Groups with Intro Sessions
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The mainstay of Small Group Ministry at Main Line Unitarian Church has been about a dozen stable long-term groups with regular attendance and little fluctuation in membership. As participants left groups, their vacancies were filled by new participants. There was no model in place for growth of Small Groups and it was clear that breaking up well established groups was an unpopular idea. In order to grow, we needed to find new facilitators for new groups without dividing groups or extracting new facilitators from established groups. Through discussion with our interim Associate Minister, we decided to grow Small Group Ministry and find new facilitators by offering *Introduction to Small Group Ministry* sessions. New facilitators would be selected from the participants and new groups would grow around these new facilitators. Several current facilitators volunteered to lead the Intro Sessions, which consisted of four sessions every other week, a format similar to our ongoing groups.

The Intro Sessions were a big success; participants were able to sample Small Group Ministry on a trial basis without a long-term commitment. We advertised Introductory Sessions in the congregation's monthly newsletter and in the church bulletin. But the best advertisement was a sermon by the Associate Minister discussing the benefits of Small Group Ministry to the individual and the community. After his sermon, there were sign-up sheets outside the main meeting room for a few weeks. Participants were also able to register via email. The Intro Sessions were so popular that two additional Intro groups were formed. In total, we had five Intro groups meeting on three evenings with 49 participants overall.

After the third Intro Session, several candidates from each group were identified to serve as facilitators for new groups. The Associate Minister personally phoned the candidates and asked if they would be willing to serve as facilitators for a one-year term. In this way, seven new facilitators were selected and trained. The participants in the Intro Sessions were given the choice to continue in their group, and four of the five groups became permanent.

It has been a year since we offered the Intro Sessions. Three of the new Small Groups are flourishing and one has disbanded. Several of the participants in the Intro session have moved into established groups and all the new groups have added members. Overall, the church was able to grow Small Group Ministry by about 20% by adding three new groups and about twenty five participants. We have decided to offer Introductory Sessions every other year with a goal of having 65% participation of the 'active' church population involved in SGM. For our next venture, we intend to diversify Small Group Ministry by increasing participation in populations such as parents with young children. We look forward to the vibrant future of a small group ministry at MLUC that expands and adapts to meet the needs of the congregation.

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