

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.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Spring 2012