

Sticky Groups: Small Groups That Work

By Paul Pinson, First Unitarian Society in Wilmington, Delaware

Can you think like the people you want to have participate in your small groups? At First Unitarian Society in Wilmington, DE, we've been trying to do just that. As a strategist by profession, I look at small groups in terms of the outcomes we are seeking – meeting congregational goals and maximum satisfied participation.

Why do people join small groups? How can we make them attractive and “sticky” so that people want to participate and stay involved? Not surprisingly, the answer differs from person to person, so the more ways we can answer those questions successfully, the more participation and satisfaction we will get. The more participation and satisfaction we have, the better small groups meet congregational goals for engagement and communication.

Small groups have always provided an opportunity to meet people, be part of something the congregation is doing, and discuss topics in an environment of mutual respect and support. Often discussions are structured, so people can explore their perspectives on topics that otherwise do not get discussed.

An obvious way to broaden appeal is to broaden the number of themes we address by adding areas of interest over time and focusing on those that gain a following. Of course, it is a balancing act between variety and resources. It's easier if there is an identifiable group with excitement for a topic and leaders willing to prepare their own material. Last semester at First Unitarian in Wilmington, a team took on leadership for a “Metaphysical” themed group. It was oversubscribed and turned into two groups this semester. We've also seen parents of younger children and parents of teens get together to form groups around their common interests. Our Senior Minister leads a group that addresses a theme of Social Justice and Social Action. These groups have broadened our participation beyond the monthly topical groups with which we started.

Another approach to broadening participation is to recognize and incorporate groups that already exist. Our Assistant Minister leads a monthly small group at a nearby senior living facility where many of our older members live. We also have book groups, writing groups, retiree brown bag groups, adult education classes and social groups. We're looking at these groups to see if they might benefit from some small group characteristics so they can be included in our structure and facilitators' gatherings. The advantage would be group recognition within the congregation and the opportunity to stay viable over time.

It is also important to look into some factors that affect willingness to join and “stick” – openness, commitment, and energy. We have small groups that have been around for decades. Some are open, but many only add new members if someone else stops participating or dies.

Although long-term “closed” groups are an important part of congregational life, developing deep trust and sustaining connections, joining such a group may be difficult for some people – especially new people. We have made many of our groups short-term and open. We hope these groups are easier to join because new members can try out groups before signing up for years. Short- and long-term groups will benefit from a process that welcomes new members with introductions and background, because even “closed” groups must change over time to sustain themselves.

Facilitators have an impact on energy and engagement. Facilitation is a valuable skill that can really make a group work. Our facilitators participate in their own group, so they too can share and be connected. Facilitators receive training at the beginning of each semester and support throughout the year to maximize their effectiveness. A key skill we found important to develop is recognizing where the energy is in the group and focus on that, rather than being rigid about the topics and questions in an outline.

We plan to poll participants this year on topics and themes they'd like to discuss in the future. And while we're at it, we plan to ask the people we would like to have participate what would attract them. Small groups can support a comprehensive membership program by helping visitors and new members become engaged in the congregation, providing obvious channels for communication processes, and longer-term connections for membership retention at critical points. For example when children graduate, parents are more likely to stay if they have additional connections to the congregation.

So, listen to your congregation. Ask them what they would want in a small group. Eliminate barriers. Make groups that fit your congregation.