

## **Resurrecting Small Group Ministry: The Story Continues**

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In the previous issue of the SGM Journal you perhaps read the first installment of the story of resurrecting small group ministry (SGM) at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, CT. Consider it a case study, which may provide some wisdom of experience if you too are in a congregation where small group ministry has once been, has faded, and you hope to begin again. Count on three chapters. Hopefully there will be many more chapters, but we invite you to share your own accounts of launching and of resurrecting this transformative form of ministry embraced not just in the UU world, but across faith traditions.

To bring you up to date, at the UU Church in Meriden we are building on an earlier form of SGM and on my experience as minister launching SGM successfully in another UU congregation (where it continues alive and well). As of the initial chapter, the SGM Coordinating Team was in place and we were inviting folks to serve as facilitators and co-facilitators. An introductory article ran in the congregation's November newsletter. Launch Sunday was projected for December 15, when we would focus on SGM in the worship service and follow the service directly by an abbreviated experience of SGM open to all, with the option of signing up at that time for groups that would begin to meet in January.

Murphy showed up along with his Law, though not in the extreme. Many years ago, Peter Bowden told me that in launching Small Group Ministry, "Start as you wish to continue." That counsel proved valuable in my prior experience, and I have passed this on to our Coordinating Team. Not having the facilitators completely in place in December and with the holidays consuming prime time, we postponed the launch Sunday until January.

"Intimacy and Ultimacy," the two nodes of Small Group Ministry dynamics, comprised the common thread of worship on Sunday, January 15. Led by our community minister Rev. Rick Klimowicz and me, as members of the SGM Coordinating team, we noted that:

"Today we're launching and, for some of you, re-launching, a form of ministry that invites each of us to fill our well and share the water. What does this mean?"

What it means unfolded in song, story, readings, a collaborative sermon, and the post-service sampling of a SGM session. The service was well attended, and the post-service mini-session drew 24 participants. Many others expressed their interest but were not able to stay.

By that time we had identified seven facilitators, enough for four groups—two adult groups, one intergenerational group (adults and teens), and a group designed singularly for parents of Coming of Age (COA) youngsters, with their SGM curriculum drawn from our UUA Coming of Age resources. Each group except the COA parents meets twice a month—two on weekday evenings and one on a Saturday morning. SGM sessions will convene this first year through early June.

All participants are invited to a potluck on May 30. At this event, we'll share experiences, evaluate the structure of SGM (like/change/let go), and set the vision for next year's SGM, which will commence in early October. The Coordinating Team is identifying who will continue as facilitators and who will join as new facilitators and is determining meeting times that will begin in early October and again, run through early June. Current participants will have enjoyed an early choice of groups for next year, with

additional congregants and friends signing on directly after this event so we will be ready to recommence in the fall.

But let's back up to the facilitator training. Our Community Minister and I led this critical launch segment in mid- January, shortly after SGM Sunday. We allowed a full Saturday morning for this, with an understanding that SGM facilitators were also committing to meet with us once a month, to address common experiences and challenges and to enjoy their own SGM session, albeit abbreviated.

February marked the first group sessions, with 37 members and friends participating. The Coming of Age parent group began a few weeks later than the other groups, given the challenge of fine-tuning the overall COA schedule. All groups are meeting at the church, with the exception of the intergenerational group, which meets regularly at the home of one of the co-facilitators. The first session addressed "How we are named"—an in-depth approach to getting to know one another. The second session addressed "Purpose and Promise" and was geared toward finalizing a Behavioral Covenant for each group, using a template provided by the Coordinating Team. Each group adapted it to their needs, with a given that all groups would commit to two service projects before year's end—one for the benefit of the congregation and one for the benefit of the larger community.

Comments of facilitators and participants have been encouraging. Facilitator Diane Szymaszek reported after the first four sessions:

"I feel as each meeting takes place we are becoming more comfortable with each other and connecting more and more. ...I can only imagine what it will be like after many more times together."

The Coordinating Team has thus far led two monthly facilitator meetings, not counting the initial facilitator training. Participation has been 100%. Facilitators with the guidance of the coordinating team are in the process of crafting a Facilitators' Covenant, a corollary to the Behavioral Covenant adopted by each group. The Coordinators Team has met monthly since November to ensure that we will indeed "continue as we begin" and that the beginning continues with the promise I have reported.

Small Group Ministry at UU Meriden is now in its third month. Groups are continuing with session plans that address "Letting Go" (early April) and "Hope" (late April) and are planning their service ventures. What will these service ventures be? With what enthusiasm will participants engage in them? How will folks reflect on their SGM experience thus far? How many current facilitators will opt in for the autumn? What will be the impact of a facilitators' covenant? How will SGM contribute to the vitality of the entire congregation? Stay tuned.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2014