

## **The Making of a Homegrown Small Group Ministry Institute**

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### ***How It Came To Be***

The Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church Small Group Ministry program member (and chair) of our SGM Steering Committee, Judy Ann Langston, went with two other church members to a weeklong Institute at The Mountain in 2009. Judy Ann returned “re-energized” to implement new ideas for strengthening the SGM program she helped begin in 2000.

Now our program needed new facilitators, new small group members, and new steering committee members. An experience such as that offered by SGM Institute seemed the most effective way we could make that happen. Sending church members to such an event would require some funding, which was not plentiful in our church budget. However, for the 2015-16 fiscal year, our Program Council received a block grant to fund worthy programs and activities, and advertised for proposals for mini-grants. The SGM Steering Committee wrote a proposal explaining the need for a good orientation and training program for members and asked for funding to attend an SGM Institute. We received a grant, which would provide funds to supplement three people to attend.

And then, Uh-Oh. We couldn’t find any information about an Institute to be offered in 2016, and after a lot of discussion about unsatisfactory alternatives, Judy Ann called UU SGM Network President Rev. Helen Zidowecki, whom she first met at the 2009 Institute. Helen told us that a 2016 Institute was not planned, but she suggested that TVUUC hold an Institute for the East Tennessee Cluster of five area UU churches in coordination with the SGM Network and its faculty.

Our reaction: What a wonderful solution! BUT then: How to even begin? What to do? Working together with the Network made it possible for us to get started and proceed with some confidence that we were doing what was needed to put on an Institute.

We knew that church support would be critical. In describing this opportunity to our minister, Rev. Chris Buice, we were met with nothing but wholehearted enthusiasm. He considers our TVUUC small group ministry program essential for members of a congregation for the intimacy and ultimacy. He immediately reserved the Sunday of the event for the service to be focused on small group ministry. Ultimately, both Helen and Chris spoke to the effectiveness of Small Group Ministry for inclusion and support of members in church. We also planned (and held) an information and sign-up table after the Sunday service on April 3 and each Sunday for several weeks.

### ***What We Did***

Our second source for support was, of course, the SGM Network faculty comprising Helen, Susan Hollister, and Diana Dorroh, with conference calls and emails over a three-month period. Helen asked what outcomes we wanted, what topics or foci for the Institute. On reflection, our committee agreed that we needed training for both experienced and potential facilitators,, and a revitalization of our SGM leadership and program. This clarification guided the Network team in how they chose and organized the sessions for the Institute, and also provided the direction we needed for our part.

**Setting a date & planning facility needs:** We all understood that a week-long Institute was desirable but that we had to work with what was possible for prospective attendees, which would be a weekend

event. Helen worked out a curriculum of essentials that would fit that time frame. Our steering committee picked a date when there were not other church events and reserved the church for Friday afternoon and evening, all day Saturday, and a room in which to meet on Sunday morning before the service. Our final decision was April 2, 3, and 4.

Our facility could accommodate both large and small group sessions, in the manner of an Institute, but we had to decide how many participants we could comfortably accommodate, support, and afford. We considered the number of facilitators we would need, how many meeting spaces would be required, the curriculum, how many attendees we might expect, and how many meals for how many people. We agreed on 35 attendees as a good number, which proved to be just about right.

Working with the Network faculty we estimated costs for transportation and accommodations for presenters, photocopying costs, office supplies, and meals for all participants. When we had our estimates in hand, Helen worked out a draft budget and who should pay what, taking into account what funds TVUUC had available, and financial assistance from the Network. We set a registration fee -- \$40 per, if members of the SGM Network, \$65 if not. In the course of registrations, four new congregations joined the Network.

**Registration:** The SGM Network agreed to handle registration. They set up an online registration process, which also included payment, and our committee was able to access the program to monitor how many had registered at any point in the process.

**Lodging:** We were able to get some discounted rates at area motels and also made use of our own UU Home Hospitality program with both options included in our registration form and promotional flyers.

**Meals:** This turned out to be a major satisfaction factor for our participants, thanks to a couple of talented cooks in the congregation and one generous member who coordinated the whole effort. We paid for this service to save us energy to both support and participate in the event. The typical comment we heard was, “Best food I ever had at a weekend conference.” Having meals and snacks that people enjoyed helped offset the energy depletion that can occur with a weekend event.

**Promotion:** Having identified who we wanted to serve in our own congregation—SGM leadership, current facilitators, potential facilitators and contributing members—we did specific outreach to these populations. We encouraged our group facilitators to attend, along with those group members they suggested as good potential facilitators. We also ran articles in our newsletter describing the upcoming opportunity and posted a few flyers around the church.

We identified individuals at each of the other four churches of the East Tennessee Cluster, told them about the Institute and sent a personal email with a promotional flyer attached. Our minister promoted the event to members at ET Cluster meetings and through emails.

Helen contacted the Southern Region, and through Christine Purcell, Congregational Life Staff, the event was posted on their web site, which resulted in attendance from two churches outside the cluster. As a bonus, Christine also attended.

**Supplies:** We handled the photocopying of the handouts on our end at an office supply store. We also agreed to handle supplies needed and actually wound up using very little—a bit of easel paper, some name badges, and some markers.

**Assistants** In addition to outsourcing meals (within the congregation), we also paid for our church assistant administrator to help out with registration on Friday evening and for a church sexton to help out on Saturday with rearranging some of the meeting rooms for different sessions and other miscellaneous tasks. Just as with the meals, having this kind of assistance relieved our own steering committee attendees to spend their time attending.

### ***How it went--Reflections***

As it turned out, the weekend we picked for the Institute was also the weekend that the city of Knoxville held two major events that presented conflicts for a number of prospective attendees, who then asked to attend only some of the sessions offered on Saturday. We declined those requests because of the value of the cohort experience, which was a planned part of the experience, mirroring the experience of belonging to an SGM group.

It was both fun and beneficial to interact with other SGM leaders and facilitators from other churches. One attendee had recently taken over the responsibility to revive her congregation's SGM program; another was a newly appointed SGM program leader. Both experienced and new leaders, facilitators, and SGM members got to hear how other churches' programs were structured and what strategies had proved successful, and not, along the way. We have made some valuable new contacts, something like a support network, for further questions and ideas. Institute participants also were able to better get to know members from their own home churches.

For TVUUC's program, we gained two new members to our own steering committee. We have also had two attendees volunteer to facilitate new groups. The Institute provided a valuable opportunity for SGM group members identified as potential group facilitators, as the breakout sessions were a safe and supportive setting to practice group facilitation.

The TVUUC Steering Committee came away with a basic plan for expanding and improving the effectiveness of our program. We are developing a mission statement with the minister, after which we can work with him on what he sees as priority goals that will most benefit the congregation.

Next year we will set strategies to achieve goals, with minister and staff support. We expect that we will add to our group formats by offering some shorter-term groups, perhaps topical and perhaps as an introduction to small group ministry. In short, we are excited and feel renewed energy for changing up our program.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2016