

How to Host a Successful SGM Training Session

*By the Small Group Ministry Steering Committee of
Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, Knoxville, TN*

Last summer Larkie Gildersleeve and Judy Ann Langston, members of the Small Group Ministry Steering Committee at Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville, TN, set their GPS and headed to the SGM Institute at The Mountain, the UU retreat center in Highlands, NC. The setting was lovely and the faculty, made up of UU Small Group Ministry Network board members Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Diana Dorroh, and Susan Hollister, were gifted, generous, and inspiring. We left with our batteries charged and planned to attend with a larger group the following year.

We were crestfallen to discover the 2010 Institute would be in California, but then learned that Susan Hollister was willing to come to Knoxville for a weekend of training. Our minister, Rev. Chris Buice, was enthusiastic about the opportunity and suggested we open it up to other churches and host it as a regional event. With two months to prepare, we publicized the workshop on the East Tennessee Cluster listserv and in our church newsletter and announced it in church services. Chris gave a sermon boost of the event. We reached out to the region by identifying and calling contact people at the cluster churches to tell them about the training. Finally, we created a flyer to send electronically to our contacts for distribution within their congregations. We asked that those planning to attend register with us by phone or e-mail, and we asked for a registration fee of \$5 to help with food and drink costs.

A total of 24 individuals attended, including new and experienced facilitators, program coordinators, a minister, ministerial intern, and a pastoral care associate. They came with varying objectives based on the status of Small Group Ministry in their congregations. Since we had talked with each congregation beforehand, we were able to plan for how best to address the differing needs. We included some SGM basics—what small group ministry is and what it can do for a congregation. Susan sent electronically a wealth of materials ahead of her arrival in time for us to assemble into packets.

Our day began at 8:30AM with an overview of SGM, then we broke into groups of six for a Small Group Ministry experience. The afternoon session was devoted to the role of the facilitator, group dynamics, and the covenant. We put on an SGM meeting role play session with a facilitator demonstrating some of the strategies for dealing with difficult behaviors. This particular activity provided an entertaining, often hilarious, interval.

The following morning, after the 11AM service, we provided an information session for people who had been unable to attend an orientation or the facilitator training, but who had an interest in learning about TVUUC's small groups. Susan gave an overview of SGM and answered questions for the attendees, three of whom are now going to join a small group.

We feel quite satisfied with how the event went as well as with the results. Our trainer provided not just content, but also guidance with the planning process. The Westside UU sanctuary was ideal for the training. It was great to meet and interact with the attendees from other churches in the area, some of whom we'll likely work with on projects in the future. Now that we have additional trained facilitators, we have formed three new groups, and expect to further populate those groups and form new ones this summer.

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