

Strengthening Congregations Through Small Group Ministry

by Laura House-Kelly

For a membership professional, Small Group Ministry is one of the more compelling church programs and is probably the one program to which new members are most often referred. At Main Line Unitarian Church, Small Group Ministries combine several key aspects of a successful membership ministry, including the development of meaningful relationships, the opportunity to explore and strengthen Unitarian Universalist identity, and the ability to work together on a community service project, often within the walls of Main Line Unitarian Church. For many visitors, new members, and long-standing members, Small Group Ministry provides the framework for a deeply satisfying membership experience.

Current research indicates that new members will become engaged in a church only if they make at least three new friends within six months of joining. Further, in the December 2010 issue of the *American Sociological Review*, a study showed that attending religious services, even irregularly, increased overall sense of well-being, as long as there is a circle of friendships within the community. Daniel Olson, an associate professor of sociology at Purdue University, says the findings suggest that "well-being among religious people probably has more to do with having religious friends than going to church." As a membership coordinator, I'm privy to hearing the stories of our visitors and new members—what makes them come back for continued visits? What makes them join? Why do they continue their membership and participation year after year? Involvement in a small group ministry is recognized over and over again as a key factor in a visitor's interest in joining and a member's reason for staying engaged.

As a membership professional, I encounter the value of Small Group Ministry every day. I actively advise and refer new members to Small Group Ministry, understanding that their involvement in a small group will undoubtedly play a crucial role in their assimilation, opening the door to deep and caring relationships within their small group and service opportunities in the larger church community. I also employ Small Group Ministry as a means of further engaging a long-term visitor with an eye towards membership. Wherever one is along their membership journey, the value of Small Group Ministry is profound and lasting.

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