

Transition and Growth as a Facilitator

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I've been engaged in an insightful journey the last ten months since attending and actively participating in the Small Group Ministry Summer Institute at De Benneville Pines, in California. Synchronicity, or some divine intervention, led me back to an area where I had lived for a year in 2000 while working as a hospice case manager. I moved to the sunny west coast of Florida, continuing my nursing career, while studying acupuncture and oriental medicine where I now enjoy a small private practice. Fortunately I retained my active RN status and CPR certification. Grace Hirsh, a retired RN and UU SGM Network Board member, asked me to join her at the upcoming Summer Institute working as the medical response provider. Would I like to spend a few days in a beautiful UU mountain camp and participate in a rewarding learning experience? I enthusiastically closed my practice for a week in late August and packed up warmer mountain clothes as well as my stethoscope, acupuncture supplies, and some basic herbal remedies.

I flew to Ontario, California to meet Helen Zidowecki and others from congregations around the U.S. Familiar with the area, I helped navigate us to our mountain destination. Our accommodations were breathtaking, with roomy, rustic cabins and a lodge with balconies overlooking the stately Colorado spruces. Our host, Janet, and resident dogs made us all feel welcome.

The itinerary included morning through evening sessions to strengthen facilitator and session planning skills while developing strategies to growing successful SGM groups in our congregations. Presentations and handouts from long-standing successful programs enhanced our learning experience. I was surrounded by strong, confident leaders in the SGM Institute and facilitators with years of experience. I couldn't

have been in better hands as I learned and practiced the skills necessary to facilitate a group of my own.

And, it didn't take much convincing to see my future roll as a facilitator. Twenty-five years ago I completed a master of science in adult continuing education and held adjunct faculty positions while recruiting and counseling students in a non-traditional business management program for working adults in a Chicago area university. I was grounded in androgogy and adult learning styles as well as adult developmental theories. Needless to say, my favorite part of the Institute's itinerary was the daily breakout sessions with our own covenant circle and our team effort to develop a session plan. New to chalice circles, I was initiated into the process of active listening and personal sharing in the supportive environment of seasoned facilitators. I eventually facilitated one of our sessions.

Our mornings began early with substantive hot breakfasts, followed by music, singing and opening rituals. The evenings ended with a closing ceremony with plenty of time to enjoy ourselves and make new friends. I left the Institute with more than a training manual and abundant resources to run a successful program. I was transformed from a passive participant to an active promoter of SGM circles!

I enthusiastically joined a chalice group at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota. It was an evening group to accommodate my work schedule. My joy was that I was one of two older adults in a group of college students and young working professionals. I loved the intergenerational sharing. Led by Molly and Ilene, I was amazed at how easily I bonded with a group that had been meeting for two years. Ilene frequently travels to India for research and recreation with aspirations to becoming a UU

minister. Molly, like my former self, works in higher education.

I soon met Nancy Thomas who is one of the original facilitators trained by their interim minister, Margret O’Neill, who had several years of experience with small group ministry programs in other UU churches. I enthusiastically signed up for an upcoming training session with Nancy, who currently chairs the steering committee. Nancy provided an outstanding learning experience to our group of aspiring facilitators, with abundant handouts organized in a training manual, including foundational articles and sample session plans. I felt blessed to have experienced the Institute’s training a few months prior to learning Sarasota’s program. And I loved that it encompassed many of the theories in adult education.

Each chalice group at UUCS has two co-facilitators and meet twice monthly in groups of seven to ten. The topics are selected by the participants who also help develop the covenant. The commitment is eight sessions, after which they can continue with the same group, join a different group, or take a break from the meetings. Shorter sessions are planned for the summer when people vacation or move to second homes up north. Our snowbirds form a large population at this congregation.

Monthly Saturday morning facilitator groups, led by Nancy, support our roles. She’s recruited an enthusiastic steering committee dedicated to growing participation in the program. Sample sessions are held monthly in conjunction with a Sunday service and popular pot luck lunch. A courtyard table with enticing sign and literature, staffed by facilitators, draws prospective chalice group participants. We meet, greet and spread our enthusiasm to a congregation of 350 members and 75 friends. And I love the outreach to the neighboring community and local universities.

My own experience as a facilitator has been very rewarding. I chose to team with Nancy in another evening group. She offers support and guidance as we share the facilitator roles. One of the

participants, David Ryan, suggested and subsequently led a session plan that he created on the topic of “Helping.” I love getting to know on a personal level the members of my circle group. Our group is open to new members, and we have since added two new participants. We gel beautifully as a group as we listen attentively to each other’s stories.

A year ago I would never have known that my experience in the Summer Institute’s program would have led to such dramatic changes in my life. Thank you Grace.

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