

Programming Notes

Budgeting for Small Group Ministry

By Diana Dorroh, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana

As many budgets are being drafted or finalized, it's a good time to consider the actual costs of a healthy small group ministry program (SGM) and how to justify them. The May 2010 Issue of Covenant Group News, available on the UU SGM Network website, presents five categories of SGM program benefits: Connection, Ministry, Maturational and Incarnational Growth, Strengthening and Enriching the Congregation, and Transforming the World. You might consider presenting the entire list to your Board as justification for your small group ministry program budget or for increasing the budget to expand your program. The Board is likely to focus on the most attention getting item: SGM's potential to achieve numerical membership growth. A board member might ask you, "How can small group ministry help us grow?"

A healthy small group ministry program can affect every aspect of church growth. The most tangible ways it affects *numerical* growth are 1) increased new member retention and 2) reduction of membership loss during a crisis. An organized effort to get new members into groups during their first year and keep them there for two or three years can greatly reduce your new member losses. People come to our congregations looking for connection and spiritual growth. Both are easily provided by membership in a covenant group. Over about five years, this effort will result in a program that includes half of your membership. And during an institutional crisis, a large small group ministry program can hold the community together and give members a way of processing their losses. There are numerous stories from congregations that have used these strategies and experienced the benefits.

The costs of a healthy, growing small group ministry program are:

- Ministerial time and energy
- Church Leadership commitment
- Staff Time: ¼ - ½ time paid coordinator, depending on church size
- Leadership Training: \$300 - \$800 each to attend the annual UU Small Group Ministry Institute
- Membership in UU SGM Network - \$100 per year
- Books and Resources: \$20 - \$100

I believe it makes sense to increase your commitment to small group ministry during a period of financial challenge. It's a good deal, because it's shared ministry. The minister shares with the leaders and the leaders share with group members, so the workload is distributed and more ministry happens. Is it free? With a dedicated super-volunteer, it can be free for a short time, but why not dedicate or increase funds this year and build the modest costs into your budget plans over the next few years, so that your church can rely on all the potential benefits of a successful small group ministry program.

Diana directs the covenant group program at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA, where 65% of the congregation belongs to a "Branches" group. Since the program's start 11 years ago, the congregation has grown by 33%, from 300 to 400 members.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Winter 2011