

# SGM JOURNAL

Fall 2017

A publication of the UU Small Group Ministry Network

Archives available on [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)



## The UU Small Group Ministry Network Logo

*The SGM Network logo, designed by graphic artist Erin Malick Thompson, symbolizes the essence of Small Group Ministry. The sequence of talk bubbles forming a circle suggest the aspect of covenant groups in which each person speaks one at a time while the others listen.*

*The overlapping bubbles create a "figure-ground" effect in which the center space sometimes recedes and sometimes comes to the foreground, symbolizing the secure space created by members of the group.*

## Orientation to Small Group Ministry

*By the Covenant Group Steering Team  
Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Durham, NC*

At Eno River UU Fellowship, all new SGM participants attend a required 30-minute orientation session with the minister and CG Steering Team before their first Covenant Group meeting. The session covers meeting format, group covenant, and member expectations, and includes a listening exercise.

Three sessions are offered to accommodate participant schedules: 1 Sunday after church service, 1 Sunday evening, and 1 weekday evening. Orientation session times are displayed at the sign-up table during the month of September.

A reminder email goes out to all new participants prior to the orientation dates, giving location, times, and a description: "This 30-minute session explains how groups work, what happens in a group meeting, and what participant expectations are. The purpose is to ensure that everyone gets the most out of the group experience."

The advantage of these orientation sessions is three-fold: participants know going in how CGs work; they know this is different from a "discussion" or affinity group; and the group facilitator can simply review important points as the session moves along.

This statement is included in the Program Policies: "New program participants are required to attend a 30-minute orientation session with the minister and CGST before being assigned to a group. Content includes program purpose, participant responsibilities, meeting format, covenant, and commitment."

The following instructions are in the Program Guidelines distributed at the sign-up table and posted on the CG webpage:

- Step 1: Fill out an information form with preferred meeting days/time/place.  
Step 2: Attend an Orientation session with the minister and the Covenant Group Steering Team, a requirement of all new participants.*

*Orientation covers program purpose, participant responsibilities, meeting format, covenant, and commitment. Times offered in September: Sunday after service, Sunday evening, and Tuesday evening. Choose what works for you.*

For those joining a group later during the year, orientation is provided in person or by telephone. For an outline of Orientation content, write to [covenant@eruuf.org](mailto:covenant@eruuf.org).

**Who We Are:**

The UU Small Group Ministry Network, a UUA Related Organization, is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. We provide support to small group ministry programs in UU congregations through training opportunities, networking, and the development of new resources.

**Board and Staff***President*

Rev. Helen Zidowecki

*Secretary*

Diana Dorroh

*Treasurer*

Susan Hollister

**Advisory Board**

Rev. Bob Hill

Rev. Glenn Turner

**Journal Editorial Team**

Susan Hollister, Alan Backler, Anne

Gero, Beth Tiewater

**Webmaster**

Erik Zidowecki

**World Wide Web**

[www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)

**Changes of Address**

Send new postal and email address to [membership@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:membership@smallgroupministry.net)

*The SGM Journal*

(ISSN 1945-2683)

is published annually by the UU Small Group Ministry Network and is supported by memberships, donations and resource sales.

Archives are available on the SGM Network website.

**UU SGM Network Publications**

**Session Plans Online** - The SGM Network invites session plans for listing in the Session Plan Directory. Send sessions to [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)

**Covenant Group News** - A free e-newsletter bringing you SGM news and events. Subscribe at <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/dada/mail.cgi/list/cgnews>

**Connect on Facebook** - Share ideas and enrich the small group ministry community. <http://www.facebook.com/groups/158837360893790/>

**Order SGM Books & Manuals Online Or By Mail**

Titles & ordering information: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/forsale.html>

Online Store: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/sgmstore>

**PUBLICATION NOTES**

*Covenant Group News (CGN)* is an electronic newsletter that is several times a year. CGN has been a primary source of writings from those doing Small Group Ministry since it was started by Rev. Robert (Bob) Hill in 1998. Focus: Sharing from people involved with Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups. Thank you for your contributions. Issues are posted on the UU SGM Network website as they are published. They are also added to the Resource Directory of articles. Subscribe at no cost: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/cgnews/about.html>

*The Small Group Ministry (SGM) Journal* is distributed to members of the UU SGM Network, primarily electronically. It is becoming an annual publication targeted at considerations that have come to our attention, especially from the UUA General Assembly booth. Focus: Capturing trends and themes that enhance Small Group Ministry in an ever-changing environment.

Submit articles for the Journal via e-mail at [journaleditor@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:journaleditor@smallgroupministry.net).

Special thanks to our members. You make this community, our website, publications and advocacy for this ministry possible! Not a member yet? [Join us!](#)

*Small Group Ministry Network Facebook* has over 250 members. This is an opportunity to ask questions, share your work with Small Group Ministry, and receive information for other participants.

## The UU Small Group Ministry Network

### BASIC ELEMENTS OF COVENANT GROUPS & CHALICE CIRCLES

**Covenant Groups and Chalice Circles** are intentional lay-led small groups that deepen and expand the ministry of a congregation.

**Small** means a group with a *maximum* of 8-10 people. Groups of this size provide an opportunity to relate on a more intentional level.

**Group** is a gathering of individuals, sometimes selected at random, sometimes selected for a specific interest or characteristic, that meet over a period of time.

**Ministry** is the process or act of caring or being present with another. This relates to the spiritual as well as the physical and emotional well-being of the group participants.

The **Power and Promise of SGM** are Intimacy, Ultimacy and Growth.

**Intimacy** is increased depth of relationship that comes from meeting over time, willingness and ability to *listen* without comment or advice, and to *learn* from others, and willingness to share from the soul, beyond the surface. **Ultimacy** focuses on meaning and significance, rather than details, information or outcome. **Growth:**

Small Group Ministry provides opportunities to grow leaders and the potential to grow churches in numbers, and in generosity, cooperation, and sense of well-being.

This growth occurs when people are connected.

**Three agreements** between the groups and the congregation as a whole are suggested:

- 1) To abide by a set of *relationship ground rules*, frequently call a *covenant*. This includes ways to listen and be heard.
- 2) To *welcome new members* to the group or to the program overall, keeping the groups open to new people and new ideas.
- 3) To engage in *service* to the congregation and larger world. This helps the group deepen its internal relationships, increases the connection with the congregation, and gives from the abundance of the group experience.

**Leadership has two functions and can be done by one person or shared:**

The **Group Leaders** are chosen and trained by the minister(s) and/or designated lay leadership as shared ministry. Group Leaders meet with the minister/lay leadership for spiritual support, enhancing group development, and awareness of new resources.

The **Session Facilitator** leads a meeting of the group, using basic facilitation skills, and assists with upholding the model during the meeting. This can be done by one person or rotated within the group.

The **Session plan** is a guide and a springboard for discussion. The **Standard Format** includes:

- An *opening* reading that introduces but does not guide the topic.
- A *check-in* during which each person briefly shares about such questions as, “What’s most on your mind today?” or “How is it with your spirit today?”
- A time for the *focus* or theme of the meeting with sharing from personal stories, and learning from listening to others, rather than wanting others to agree with a perspective.
- The *check-out* gives opportunity for each participant to say how the session was for him/her.
- A *closing reading*.

## Twenty Years of “Small Groups”

By Rev. Helen Zidowecki

Twenty years ago Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups were emerging within Unitarian Universalism and challenging how we “do church.” Individuals, congregations and Unitarian Universalism itself have grown with the process over the years. Small Group Ministry is the broad concept, and Covenant Groups, Chalice Circles, and other names are used to describe the groups themselves. We continue to expand the use of Small Group Ministry within and beyond our congregations. However, the success of the movement lies in the integrity of the groups themselves.

“Small Groups” or Ministry Groups

*The Small Group Ministry group is critically important to congregation life. In groups we hone our skills in listening and being with each other, and in expanding and enhancing our own spiritual journeys. Influence expands from these learnings in a small group focused on intimacy and ministry out into the congregation as a whole.*

When I speak of Small Group Ministry, I may receive the response, “We have small groups.” My reaction is to say: “That is nice. Are they *ministry* groups?”

Small groups with various functions are critical to congregational life. However, Small Group Ministry has group characteristics that set these groups apart from other “small groups”. General groups provide connection with others with a focus of the group is on an organizational function or specific interest. *Small Group Ministry groups provide connection with a focus on ministry to each other and shared ministry.*

Many groups tend to focus on an outcome, a plan of action, a product. There may be notes and reports. *The ‘product’ of Small Group Ministry is the increased bonding and understanding that each person takes away from a session.* There may be a presumed level of expertise around the function of the group. *The ‘expertise’ is in the sharing of the participants, in personal connection with a topic rather than information or knowledge.*

Facilitators at the UU Community Church, Augusta, ME, gave this description of Small Group Ministry:

- People share of themselves; and are open to the sharing of others.
- The purpose of Small Group Ministry is *ministry*- to be the church with one another; The intent is for Ministry Groups to provide ongoing ministry to its members and to provide an ongoing connection with the minister. This creates a true, church- wide ministry, that the minister him or herself could never hope to create alone;
- It’s a place to explore spiritual questions. Small Group Ministry provides members an opportunity to share our spiritual development with each other; Small Group Ministry tends to not be intellectual, as so many other groups or meetings can be. (The focus is on response from the heart.)
- Small Group Ministry represents a different level of commitment. There’s a *covenant* that goes with it: to create a safe space in which to explore issues that are spiritual and related to meaning of our lives.

### Small Group Ministry Transforms

*The Small Group Ministry process transforms individuals and the congregation. Skills and practices from Small Group Ministry carry into other parts of church life, such as committees and work groups. As relationships develop through Small Group Ministry, participants have increasing understanding of the gifts of more people that can enhance the work of the church, and people work across interests.*

Following are notes from the response of the Small Group Ministry Committee in Augusta, ME, when asked about the impact of Small Group Ministry on other groups within the congregation:

1. Within a few months of starting SGM, we started lighting chalices and taking time for brief check in at other committee and board meetings. We pause to remember the importance of our personal connections. Through SGM, we also learned how to share and to listen as others shared.
2. With the connections made through SGM, and the brief check in at other meetings, the work of committees go more smoothly and may take less time.

3. The concept of service to the congregation and community that is part of SGM carries over to the work of the committees and other groups as being service as well as ministry.
4. There is a sense of shared ministry that extends beyond the SGM groups and involves us all in differing ways.
5. In addition, when we know each other in a different way, we have a sense of how to expand our leadership resources. Leaders have emerged as people feel more comfortable with interactions and their own contributions. And we know more about our gifts.

A note in *The Flaming Chalice* (newsletter) from August, ME (August 2007)

“Our Ministry Groups have helped us be able to talk. Our Groups have helped us learn to listen to one another, and to know that communication in a religious community is more about understanding each other and less about being right or winning. Even though not all of us are active in Ministry Groups, the change has permeated our community over time. I think one reason for this is that membership in a particular group is random, based on availability and the member's schedule more than common interest, age, length of time in our church or already having known one another. Near strangers have come together regularly and forged strong bonds, even if they do not see eye to eye. Those links have become a web as we go about the work of community.

As a long time member of the UUCC, I have noticed a significant change in the tenor of our membership meetings. Particularly as we have struggled with building issues, our recent meetings have been marked by a degree of civility that was not always present. We solve problems and raise concerns rather than argue and try to convince. It is likely that not everyone is satisfied with a particular outcome, but I sense real intention to keep everyone connected to our church. We are truly acting on the Universalist notion that we do not have to think alike to love alike. Small Group Ministry has made a clear contribution to this welcome change.” Kathy Kellison, Small Group Ministry Coordinator.

### **KEEPING THE STRENGTH OF SMALL GROUP MINISTRY**

*Groups exist in a congregation to meet many needs- committees, choir, affinity groups, special activities, theological diversity. Small Group Ministry is valuable in its own right, and it offers improved functioning to all groups within the congregation as the skills of listening and speaking from the heart spread through the community. It is not Small Group Ministry or other groups, but BOTH.*

I have heard it said that “Many of our meetings within the church look like Small Group Ministry.” Or, “we use Small Group Ministry in everything we do.” This may make increase the ease with which people can enter and be part of other groups with common ways of interacting learned through Small Group Ministry. The concern is that Small Group Ministry not be ‘taken for granted’ or assumed to be such an integral part of the community that it does not continue to need tending, support, and resources, and continuing clarity.

If Small Group Ministry is the way we are “doing church” or “being with each other”, newcomers need to have opportunity to participate in Small Group Ministry sessions where learning occurs through experiencing. A number of congregations include the process or specific Small Group Ministry sessions for this group. There can be short-term groups, even around specific themes, such as the UU Principles, that will engage with the process. Using Small Group Ministry with children and youth instills the congregational way of being as they grow in the congregation.

Small Group Ministry cannot be “measured” in conventional ways. The number of people involved or the number of groups may vary from time to time. An additional demographic is the portion of people in the congregation who have been involved over time. The depth of connection and the improvement of communication and community building within the congregation cannot be measured, only experienced. In counting the ‘exposure’ to Small Group Ministry, include specific or short-term programs that use the Small Group Ministry process. The exposure in various areas enhances the relationship process. The part that is difficult to ‘measure’ is the impact on the participants themselves. That can be obtained by asking them, inviting testimonials, and honoring involvement.

*We continue to expand the use of Small Group Ministry within and beyond our congregations. The success of the movement lies in the integrity of the groups themselves where we hone our skills in listening and being with each other, and in expanding and enhancing our own spiritual journeys. This is great testament to group leaders, the Small Group Ministry leadership, and the vision of ministry and the circle of influence.*

## Small Group Ministry: The Critical Role of the Minister

By Rev. Helen Zidowecki, UU SGM Network Board

Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups were envisioned, planned, described by ministers. *Ten Years of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry*, published by the UU Small Group Ministry Network in 2009, contains about fifty articles, of which 75% were written by or with input of a minister. This presents the critical role of the minister in changing the dynamics of a congregation, and working into a pattern of shared ministry.

I was part of the development in the Northeast District, where Rev. Glenn Turner led the ministers in the district in a year-long study of the work of Rev. Carl George, an evangelical consultant around the Meta-Church. This was followed by workshops for congregations in the district. There was an excitement because congregations were learning this together, and there was support for ministers as this was destined to change their ministry.

**The Role of the Minister** within SGM itself has evolved over the years, as noted in “Sharing the Ministry Through SGM” by Rev. Melissa Carvill-Ziemer, *Quarterly*, 2009 Winter. “When we began, I had a significant coordinating role as the minister and I was intimately involved in every step of creation and execution. As our program has grown, we have been fortunate to have a skilled and committed lay leader step forward and assume the coordinating role. She has availed herself of opportunities to receive in-depth training on Small Group Ministry practices and has applied her learning and organizational skills to strengthen our own program. As the minister, I remain actively involved in SGM by attending facilitators and Steering Committee meetings, writing and reviewing sessions, and inviting new participants into our groups. I no longer, however, hold the bulk of the responsibility for making SGM happen in our congregation. We make SGM happen together and in this way we all have the satisfaction that comes when ministry is truly shared.” Rev. Melissa Carvill-Ziemer, then Minister of the UU Church of Kent, Ohio

In discussion with numerous congregations and ministers involved in SGM, the role of the Minister is outlined in *Implementing Small Group Ministry*. “The minister is key in whether and how a SGM program works. Visible support and active involvement of the minister is a factor in success. The role of the minister varies in implementation and stage of the program and the size of the congregation. *SGM is a program of the congregation rather than a program of the minister. However, if the minister is not involved and not supportive, the program probably will not succeed.*”

Major functions of the parish minister include:

- \*Encourages groups to provide ministry to each other. Includes support to groups and referral to Pastoral Care
- \*Advocates for the program: provides resources, possibly including session plans, includes Small Group Ministry in messages from the pulpit, is a resource for all areas of Small Group Ministry.
- \*Shared ministry: encourages shared ministry and may take more of a support rather than administrative role. Assists with selection and development of leadership, including modeling ministry, is available to the lay leadership for group and faith development. Works with a designated lay leader who assumes the coordinating function. *To the degree possible, the structure of SGM is in the hands of laity, especially the facilitation of the Small Group Ministry groups.*

**Extending the Spiritual focus of Minister:** sharing the thoughts and inspiration is an integral part of ministry. Now add to the standard format of sermons, reflections and inspirational services a new form with the creation of groups: session plans.

Small Group Ministry invited leaders and participants into a part of ministry sacred to ministers: spiritual connections and practices. *It called us to place spiritual exploration squarely into the realm of personal interactions, of asking people to engage more from the heart than from the head.* We were doing this in a setting that started by recognizing personal lives that were important enough to warrant time to share as an initial part of the time together. We then needed to look at how we present inspirational material, how we frame the reflections to open out into open-ended responses, not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or a pre-conceived response. The shared ministry, then, takes us beyond just what we do to support or have the program, to engaging both the congregants and ourselves on a different level. It is almost a joke in my home congregation: when I want to explore a thought or a problem, I resort to writing a Small Group Ministry session. Writing for both myself and other to use presents new ways of viewing a topic, and new options. There are many session plans available, both from ministers and from laity. It is delightful to receive session plans submitted for inclusion on the UU SGM Network. There are over 800 sessions listed in the Session Plan Directory on the website. I am truly humbled by the submissions from all over, for two significant reasons: this is a way for ministers to share spiritual reflections in a way that is less formal than a sermon, that engages with topics of life. Ministers are increasingly sharing session plans they have created – and are still creating – over the years. This becomes a living legacy and gives congregants a different way to get to know the minister.

Lay people are creating session plans, individually, or in conjunction with ministers and others in their SGM environment. This increases their role in the spiritual fabric of the congregation. The ministerial legacy, then, is the enhancement of spiritual journeys throughout the congregation.

I had a delightful experience meeting with a small group that was dealing with some relational issues, using the methodology of creating a session plan that considers how we are with one another in a setting, and why. The plan was for the group to critique and ‘field test’ the session plan. It not only brought exploration of the specific concerns, but gave me new insights into facets of the topic. We did this also for a second plan, with such rich contributions. I have suggested to the SGM Committee that other groups in the program engage with this process throughout the year as a new level of connection among groups. We create not only from our own spiritual place, but also so that others can engage. A number of ministers create session plans as collaboration between clergy and laity – another facet of shared ministry.

### **Holding the Vision of Small Group Ministry**

There needs to be a ‘vision-holder’ for SGM, as described in “Holding the Vision of Small Group Ministry” by Peter Freedman Bowden, UU PLANET Ministry & Media, *UU Small Group Ministry Network, Quarterly, Fall 2006*.

“We’ve reached a point in our Association’s small group ministry movement where a large number of congregations have been working with this ministry for years. What happens when our congregations are confronted with the amount of work and care that small group ministry requires? There is a great deal of work related to small group ministry that can be delegated and shared. It is healthy and appropriate for this to happen. *But we must be careful when it comes to vision.* Most congregations that launch small group ministries have their minister as the primary vision caster during this process. The minister’s support of this ministry is perhaps the greatest indicator of its initial success. I think most lay leaders and ministers understand this. Yes, we need the minister to help us sell this to the congregation. Yes, we need the minister to give this airtime from the pulpit. The truth is that the need for holding up the vision never goes away. Small group ministry needs the primary vision caster to continually promote the role of small groups and shared ministry in congregational life. Once the communication fails at the public level, in worship, in newsletter articles, and so on, the entire small group ministry program starts to suffer. This ministry can’t thrive as a behind-the-scenes or invisible ministry. *It takes a strong lay leader or other staff person to uphold the vision for this ministry when the primary vision caster(s) has stopped broadcasting.*”

Diana Dorroh explains working with Rev. Steve Crump to develop the type of leadership and clergy/laity implied by Peter Bowden (“Supporting the Vision Caster,” Diana Dorroh, Baton Rouge, LA, *SGM Network Quarterly Winter 2007*)

“It’s practically an obsession of mine that the leaders need to hear our minister’s vision of SGM and that they need to hear it often, because it is ministry and it is important. The leaders need support and inspiration from the congregation’s spiritual leader. This means scheduling the leaders meetings when he can attend and rescheduling when necessary. Steve always does a wonderful job, but he doesn’t have to plan the leaders meetings or attend meetings to plan the leaders meetings, He just has to read the agenda in my emails or discuss the agenda briefly with me before the leaders meeting and then to be there.

Obviously, this partnership requires trust between the minister and coordinator and a shared vision of a thriving small group ministry program. *But if this trust can be established, it allows the professional minister of the congregation to play the vision casting role.*”

*Small Group Ministry is a program of the congregation rather than a program of the minister. However, if the minister is not involved or does not support or does not make the vision of Small Group Ministry visible, the program probably will not succeed. Conversely, holding the vision that is created jointly with the Small Group Ministry leadership enhances the ministry of the congregation many-fold. The program is vulnerable when the minister and coordinator are not carrying the vision together.*

### **Resources for Ministers/Ministry:**

There are over 40 articles specifically noted to be by and about ministry the UUSGM Network website Resource listing. Additional articles by ministers are ongoing in Covenant Group News and the SGM Journal. We are pulling resources for a minister’s section of the Website for additional interaction. We want to include articles from ministers for *Covenant Group News*, *SGM Journal*, and website notations. Please contact Rev. Helen Zidowecki at [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)

## UUF Winston-Salem LOVES SGM

*By Chris Kelsey and Loretta Arnn, UU Fellowship of Winston-Salem, NC*

In the March 2017 *Covenant Group News*, we wrote of our plans to “restart” Small Group Ministry at the UU Fellowship in Winston-Salem, NC, and we promised a follow-up article. So here we are again.

With the collaboration of a wonderful steering team, we decided to begin in the spring with an “Introduction to Small Group Ministry” - five sessions over ten weeks. We didn’t want to wait until the fall to begin, and felt there would be sketchy attendance in the summer.

We had six groups – five with one leader and one with co-leaders. We opened registration, hoping that we would get some response. Were we surprised! We had 43 people sign up! This meant that we had 50 people engaged in Small Group Ministry, with no coaxing at all!!

The groups met five times, as planned, and included a service project in their being together. Though we offered a “curriculum,” there was varied use of that resource. All of the groups seemed to flourish and the feedback (obtained by electronic survey at the end) spoke of the positives as “the comfort we created, getting to know each other and share,” “balanced and respectful” interactions, and “learning the life stories and attitudes of very interesting but quite different people.”

Asked, “How do you see the Small Group Ministry program benefiting/enhancing the ministry of UUF-WS,” responses were thoughtful and encouraging: “It is such an effective way of connecting with others. I view these programs as being the ministry of UUF-WS.” “It is a great way to have a warm-hearted experience with people at UU. I feel more connected. I now feel a bit more ‘at home’ for the sharing with these people.” “It can help us be more accepting of our differences, especially

as we try to make the UU genuinely more inclusive.” “The groups are a particular way to enable introverts like me to find intimacy, and that’s a large reason for my participation.”

Virtually every participant said they would continue when the new groups form in the fall. One group (the one with two leaders) decided they want to stay together – they were the largest group with twelve members, including the leaders.

In preparation for our “fall launch,” the steering team planned two events. The first, an introduction for anyone in the Fellowship who wanted to know more about SGM, drew 18 people – not very many, but a good start. The second was a “refresher” for people who have been trained to be leaders, but may or may not have led groups. And now we’re ready for our next step – opening our new groups (eight, but one, as you learned above, is at capacity) to the Fellowship. This we will do the next Sundays and groups will begin after Labor Day.

We two continue to offer on-going support to the leaders, along with our amazing staff liaison, Caron Armstrong. We will hold groups for “brags and snags” three times during the next ten months.

It’s such an honor for our steering team and us to bring this lovely and loving program to our Fellowship! We will always feel appreciative to the Small Group Ministry Network for their encouragement, and for sharing their wealth of experience and materials with us!





## The Power of Welcoming All Newcomer Class Graduates into a Group

*By Mark Gilbert and Suzanne Besse, Branches (Small Group Ministry)  
Co-coordinators at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA*

Our Small Group Ministry (SMG) program at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge is one of the largest among Unitarian churches. We call our small groups “Branches,” the name derived from our church’s minister-led orientation program for prospective and new members called “Roots.” This model was created at All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa OK. Our SGM program began in 1999 and continues to grow as does our church membership. Currently 22 groups meet on a monthly basis with more than half of the congregation participating and, since 1999, our church membership has grown from 300 to 475. This model was created at All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa OK, whose staff first encouraged our program in Baton Rouge and shared program materials with us.

Groups meet year round, and although members are expected to commit to a year of participation, most choose to remain with their groups for several years. New members join established groups as others depart. The group I belong to has met since 1999, and only two of the original group members remain, although we are currently at the higher end of the recommended 8 to 12 members.

We strive to abide by the Three Agreements on the UU SGM Network web site, one of which is: To welcome new members, to keep the groups open to new people and ideas. The ongoing Roots orientation classes continue to be the number one way folks find their way into Branches groups. In the three two-hour Roots sessions, participants learn about the Universalist movement and our church, including Branches. Our ministers, Rev. Steve J. Crump and Rev. Nathan A. Ryan, lead the Roots classes and encourage participants to join a group. An invitation to join a Branches group is one of the ways Roots grads are welcomed into the church community. We also require Roots graduation or church membership before someone can join a group. The rationale behind that requirement is that the person will be a better and more committed group member if they have already made some commitment to the church. Most Branches participants who are not already members join the church within a few months of joining a group.

The ongoing placements can be tricky; however, data show the efforts result in better member involvement and retention. Success requires teamwork between the Branches coordinating team, which includes our Associate Minister, Rev. Nathan Ryan and co-coordinators, and the Roots class coordinator who issues the invitation and explains the placement process. Folks can complete a request form in the session or online. They are asked to rank their preferences for meeting days, times, locations, and whether childcare is needed. The information is used to find groups with openings that best fit each request.

You’ll need up-to-date information about the groups and a form or two to make this ongoing process of getting new folks into groups as soon as possible work. It does for us, so I’m sharing some of our best practices and strategies. My co-coordinator, Mark Gilbert, is excellent at tracking data, creating forms, and finding tools to streamline the process. Included below are his descriptions of the tools used to manage files and scheduling.

**Best Practice: Annual One on One Meetings with Branches Leaders.** Once a year the coordinating team led by the minister meets with the two leaders of each group for an update on the status of the group and its members, including the leaders. These confidential One-on-Ones are also an opportunity to find out how the team and church can support the Branches Leaders.

**Tool for Scheduling:** We use Doodle, which makes this task easier than the time-consuming email alternative.

### **Best Practices for Ongoing Placements:**

Up-to-date information about group size, meeting info, and leader contact info is essential.

Personal contact with prospective members is also important. Phone calls and face-to-face conversations at church by the coordinators and the leaders can make entry into small groups easier for new members. All are given a copy of *Branches Basics for Participants* (included in the Training Manual) prior to the first meeting, and leaders are encouraged to include one or more welcoming rituals suggested in the **Facilitator Training Manual**, which can be ordered on the SGM website.

**Tools for Leaders:** All are provided a hard and electronic copy of the **Facilitator Training Manual** and are emailed updated lists of group leaders and member participants. Leaders are expected to report all changes within groups to the coordinators.

**Tool for creating Placement Request Form:** We use JotForm, a free service for up to 100 form submissions per month. It offers tremendous flexibility and makes it possible for folks to fill out and submit forms online. Paper forms are also used and made available at the Welcome Table on Sundays.

**Tools for Maintaining Lists of Group Leaders and Participants:** Information from a word processing file was migrated to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (you can also use an Open Office Calc spreadsheet as well) to allow greater flexibility, such as formatting and adding functions. The spreadsheet is then uploaded to a Google Drive (Note: if you have a Google account or email address you have access to Google Drive) to allow even greater flexibility, including the ability to share the file, edit, and export it in various formats. We also created shared folders in Google Drive to be able to share files among the members of the Branches coordinating team. Our approach may not work for you (*one size does not fit all*), but we hope it may give you some ideas for making the management of your program easier. A former coordinator used a simple low-tech sortable Word table to track this information.

## Conclusion

The main idea we'd like to share is that recommending covenant group participation to newcomer class graduates, welcoming them into your program and making room for them is powerful. It is guaranteed to result in growth to your program and will support membership growth by increasing retention. It requires solid ministerial support and in the beginning, it means continuously identifying and training new leaders, so that you can open new groups. The **Facilitator Training Manual** covers identifying, recruiting and supporting your leaders, as well as training them.. If you have short-term groups, rather than continuing groups, you would need to open new groups during the year. We hope this is helpful and inspiring to you.

## UU SMALL GROUP MINISTRY NETWORK

*Creating healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement  
with Covenant Groups and Small Group Ministry*

### Small Group Ministry Benefits our Congregations and Enhances Our Ministry

- Allows the entire congregation to engage in ministry.
- Encourages personal growth, spiritual exploration, and deep relationships.
- Provides a sustainable experience of *intimacy* (community) and *ultimacy* (spirituality).
- Calls members to live their UU faith by engaging in social outreach through group service ventures.
- Engages members in a spiritual covenant, fostering the skills of hospitality, right relationship, caring, and attentive listening.
- Extends and reinforces the work of the professional ministry and pastoral care team.
- Connects current, new, and long-term members.
- Sustains congregational membership and commitment and contributes to numerical growth.
- Develops congregational leaders and other committed volunteers.
- Provides a forum for discussion of Sunday sermon topics in an intimate setting.

**RELATED ARTICLES** available at [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net).

## Small Group Ministry and Worship

Small Group Ministry is not intended to replace worship. However, the SGM Network receives inquiries about using Small Group Ministry for worship. Some inquiries come from smaller congregations, sometimes when there is not a regular ministerial presence, for summer services, or for bringing a UU presence to a more remote area. Worship and Small Group Ministry are complementary, but the integrity of worship and of Small Group Ministry need to be maintained.

Worship is celebratory, and can be individual in the midst of the gathering. Worship does not require interaction with others. SGM, on the other hand, is based on interactions with people in the group, and with sharing and receiving. This being said, SGM held every week in place of a traditional service may be too intense for some people. It also would exclude the balance of celebration. It is possible to include celebration and singing as part of a SGM session plan. Again, these are complementary.

A suggestion might be to alternate between worship and SGM, one Sunday as worship and one as SGM. The type of service needs to be clear in the announcement of the event.

It is also possible to have some brief common elements for each Sunday regardless of whether it is a “worship” or “SGM” Sunday. For example,

Hymns can be used as part of SGM session plans as well as worship.

The total group can meet afterwards for fellowship time, which could include announcements.

The anticipated time for worship or SGM is an hour (which differs from ongoing SGM sessions of 90 minutes to 2 hours).

When SGM meets, one methodology is to divide the people present into groups randomly. However, consistency within the small groups allows for the bonding to deepen over time. There needs to be a group for people who are not in other groups or are visitors.

SGM works on the premise of a covenant. A standard one can be developed that is used with each group and read as part of the session, an affirmation. Example:

We value our time together and revere each person. We share and we are silent to accept the sharing of others. We speak from our hearts and for ourselves only, without needing to respond or give advice. We hold our sharings in confidence within our circle.

SGM groups are facilitated by trained leaders. This is especially true of the group of visitors or people who are not regularly in groups. It would be helpful to review the format as a way to engage the participants.

We would like to hear your experience on how you have used SGM as the format for a regular congregational gathering, such as worship. Please contact us at [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net). Small Group Ministry and Worship: it is not either or, but how to incorporate the essential elements of both respectively for the spiritual experience of the community.

### Network Member Congregations

Learn who else in your cluster and region is a Network member. <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/membership.html>

## Become a Member of the SGM Network

As a member of the SGM Network you:

Get the current issue of the *Journal* before it's on the website, provide financial support for the SGM movement, receive discounts on publications and Network-sponsored events, and have a voice and a vote at our annual meeting at GA.

Name	
Address	
Congregation	
District	Program Coordinator
Phone	E-mail
I would like to receive the newsletter electronically;      YES    NO	
Congregational Membership (\$100 year) _____	
Individual Membership (\$40 year) _____	
Additional Tax-deductible Donation _____	
Total Enclosed: \$ _____	

**Our Mission:**  
*"To help create healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by promoting and supporting Small Group Ministry."*

Send completed form and check made out to **UU SGM Network** to 4303 Swarthmore Road, Durham, NC 27707.

Download the form or join online at [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)

**UU Small Group Ministry Network**  
**4303 Swarthmore Road**  
**Durham, NC 27707**