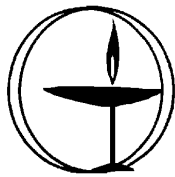


U.U. Small Group Ministry Quarterly



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The Coordinator's Role In Small Group Ministry

Susan Hollister, Devon, PA

A strong Small Group Ministry Program has a person, usually with the title of "coordinator," designated as responsible for the overall Program. This person oversees the Program and the components of the program's support structure: group formation, session topic development, publicity, evaluation, and facilitator support. The extent of **the coordinator's responsibilities is determined by the size of the congregation, and the number of facilitators and groups. In the rest of this article, I'll explore how the coordinator's role varies by program size.**

In a small program which starts with two to four groups, the coordinator might manage membership while the minister develops session plans. Together they recruit and train facilitators and lead the monthly facilitator support meetings. The coordinator writes a column for the newsletter and displays sign-up sheets on the Welcome Table. The minister issues an invitation to join small group ministry during Sunday announcements.

When the program reaches **medium size with five to ten groups, the management responsibilities also expand.** For example, the coordinator and minister may be joined by several facilitators to form a Steering Committee (SC). The functions are **spread out among the team members**, with the coordinator still in the major leadership position. The coordinator continues to manage the database, receive sign-up forms, and place new people into groups. He/she plans the agenda for and leads SC meetings, usually on a quarterly basis. The SC members take turns staffing the sign-up table. With a larger pool of applicants, especially during the fall blitz, the SC works as a team to assign new members to groups and form new groups as needed.

Continuing the description of a medium size program, the coordinator may continue to **write the newsletter column** or delegate this task to another SC member. The coordinator and minister lead **the monthly facilitator meetings** and may have assistance from former facilitators, known as coaches. When the Steering Committee produces publicity literature (i.e. a brochure), usually the coordinator's and minister's names are listed as contact people. The SC plans and staffs the facilitator training sessions and each does a part of the presentation.

The coordinator submits an **annual budget request to the Board for consideration.** Budget monies cover the costs of resource materials as well as appreciation events such as an annual SGM dinner and seasonal refreshments. The coordinator and Steering Committee make long-range plans for Small Group Ministry, evaluate the program at the end of the year, and refine the program as needed.

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The Regular Group Health Check Up For Maintaining Your Group's Vitality

M'ellen Kennedy, Burlington, VT

To keep your group vital and dynamic, consider periodically doing a "group health check up." This is a great way for the group facilitator(s) and the group members as a whole to check in with each other on how your group is going, to celebrate your strengths as a group and to figure out what You can do to make the group even stronger. You may want to spend a meeting doing this instead of having a regular session.

This approach focuses on **maintaining the health** of the group and **on preventing problems** from taking a hold. The group health check up is an opportunity for the group members to **revisit the group's purpose, format and groundrules.** It's a **chance for honest discussion among members about how you each feel the group is working.**

For ongoing groups, it may be helpful to do a group health check up about every six months. For a new group, it's a good idea to do the initial health check up about three months after you start. Usually during the first meeting or a very early meeting, when we develop group groundrules together, I let members know this will be happening. I usually say something like "Let's give these groundrules a try and come back in about three months and revisit the groundrules and the group's overall functioning and see how we feel it's going."

There are many benefits to a regular group health check up. It helps members take responsibility for the group and **develop a strong sense of ownership and shared leadership.** It helps keep the group on track. It provides concrete feedback to the facilitator (or co-facilitators) about the health and vitality of the group. **It helps identify leverage points to strengthen the group. It avoids having to schedule a special meeting to address a concern** (because the health check up is scheduled regularly already). It helps keep the group vital and functioning before a concern gets too big to handle easily. Following are some items that you may want to discuss in the regular group health check up.

1. Revisit the group's purpose. The purpose of a Small Group Ministry Program is usually "Intimacy and Ultimacy," in other words, friendship and deeper spiritual exploration. Is the group meeting these needs for members?

2. Revisit the group's groundrules. Having an agreed upon covenant or set of relational groundrules is an essential component of a healthy Small Group Ministry Program. Usually members set groundrules during an early meeting, if groundrules are not set by the Steering Committee or other leadership team. These groundrules might include items such as

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The Coordinator's Role

By Susan Hollister (Continued from page 1)

Managing a large SGM Program of ten to twenty groups or more can become a daunting task, particularly if each group has co-facilitators and there are more facilitators waiting in the wings for new groups to form. **For this size program, more people may be needed to share the additional coordinating work.** For example, co-coordinators may share the leadership role and the Steering Committee may expand to include two or more ministers, and five or more coaches.

At this level, **adding a staff person to the team is critical for efficient management of group membership and growth.** The staff person takes over responsibility for the database of group members and manages the paperwork involved. The co-coordinators still take responsibility for the formation of new groups, the assimilation of new members into groups, and the overall status and health of groups. Therefore, the coordinators and the staff person communicate on a regular basis to stay on top of the situation.

The facilitators and co-facilitators now divide into two or three different monthly meeting groups so that each group can stay at about ten people. Each meeting is led by either a coordinator and minister or a team of coaches and one of the ministers involved in the program. To mesh with everyone's schedules, one group of facilitators may meet in the daytime and the other two in the evening. Each group has its own covenant.

With a large number of groups comes a large volume of service activities. **As in the small and medium programs, a part of the facilitator support meetings is devoted to a discussion of recent and upcoming service activities.** The coordinators then report the activities in a newsletter article or on an SGM bulletin board, or both.

The co-coordinators call regular meetings of the Steering Committee and plan the meeting agenda. As in the medium-sized program, the co-coordinators of a large program engage in visioning and long-range planning. Evaluation of the program is a team project, and improvements are made on an annual basis.

In the large Program, the coordinators meet with the minister(s) and coaches to plan the monthly facilitator support meetings. They or the coaches send out meeting reminders to the facilitators. They also help organize the education section of the meeting. A coach, a fellow facilitator, the minister, or a member of the congregation can do this training. Individuals with expertise in a particular area, such as listening skills or group development, may take charge of that section of the training.

In every size congregation, small, medium and large, **it is important to promote the SGM program and acknowledge the work and dedication of the facilitators.** The Coordinator(s) and Steering Committee, along with the ministers, plan events such as Small Group Ministry Sunday, Facilitator Recognition Sunday, and a Facilitator Installation Ceremony. They also can host an end-of-the-year dinner for all SGM participants, which is a time for fellowship and a chance to meet and talk with members of other groups.

The Regular Group Health Check Up

By M'ellen Kennedy (Continued from page 1)

sharing the time fairly, listening respectfully and deeply, ending and starting on time, etc. (For suggestions on developing groundrules, see www.smallgroupsministry.net). During the group health check up, redistribute a copy of the groundrules again to each member and read them over. Are they working? Do they need to be modified or fine tuned? Can all of you agree on needed changes in the groundrules? If so, type and redistribute them, and read them again at the beginning of the next few meetings as a reminder.

3. Revisit the meeting format. A strong, healthy group has all of the components of the meeting format (i.e. opening, review of the groundrules and group purpose, short check-in, content/topic of the meeting or session, provocative questions on the topic, discussion, check-out and closing. (See page 4 for more info on the meeting format). Is the meeting working? Are you leaving out any component? What if any changes are needed in the way you flow through the format of the meeting? For example, a common problem with the meeting format, is that members may feel that the check-in has gotten too long and thus there's not enough time left for the actual topic and discussion. Get clear in your group health check up discussion on how you're going to address these needed changes you've identified.

4. Check on how the group is doing on service projects. Service is an essential component of a healthy Small Group Ministry Program (see www.smallgroupministry.net for back issues of the SGM Quarterly for discussion on the importance of and ideas on service projects). Has it been a while since your group has done a service project? Is your group feeling stale or static? (This may have come out in the discussion of group purpose in item 1 above). A service project can help revitalize a stagnant group. If there is resistance to doing a service project, consider doing a session on "Service." (For sample sessions on service, see www.smallgroupministry.net). As a group, brainstorm ideas for what kinds of projects are of interest to group members. Can you agree on a project and a timeline for doing it? Plan also for a group meeting to share about the service project once it's complete.

5. Check on how you are doing on welcoming new members. Having a way to welcome and integrate new members is another essential component of a healthy, dynamic Small Group Ministry Program. Some groups use an empty chair as a symbol and reminder of this component of the program. SGM Programs that overlook or are weak on a way to welcome and integrate new members become cliquish and are separated from the congregation and the ministry of the congregation. (If you've just had a new member join, this might not be the time to address this question because it may make the new member feel uncomfortable). In the group health check up, discuss how are you doing on welcoming new members? Are there concerns or fears about having new people join? If so, you may want to do a session on "the empty chair." Is your group clear on the process in your congregation for attaining new members? Check with the Steering Committee or other leadership for clarification.

(Continued on page 3)

Regular Group Health Check Up (Continued from page 2)

6. Check on what topics group members want to discuss. Brainstorm ideas for topics. Members are more likely to feel involved and have a sense of ownership of the group if they express the kinds of topics which they'd like to cover. In some congregations, members develop their own group sessions on specific topics. If this is the case in your congregation, see who in your group is willing to write a session or find a session on-line for the specific topics which the group would like to cover (Visit smallgroupministry.net for sample sessions and info on how to write effective sessions). In some congregations, the Small Group Ministry Steering Committee or the minister(s) develop the sessions. If this is the case in your congregation, send the brainstormed list of desired topics to the Steering Committee or minister.

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The UU Small Group Ministry Network (UUSGM Network) *Our Mission:* *"To help create healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by supporting Small Group Ministry."*

Board & Staff

Rev. Calvin Dame, President
Susan Hollister, Treasurer
Rev. Marti Keller, Secretary
Diana Dorroh
Walter LeFlore
Rev. Helen Zidowecki



Co-ordinators
Peter Bowden
M'ellen Kennedy

Advisory Board
Rev. Bob Hill
Rev. Glenn Turner

Join the Network!

**For info on joining and benefits of membership,
see the back page of this Quarterly,
or visit www.smallgroupministry.net**

Time to renew? Check your mailing label.

The UU Small Group Ministry Network is a membership-based Independent Affiliate Organization of the Unitarian Universalist Association (see uua.org). The purpose of the Network is to support small group ministry and related shared ministry models in Unitarian Universalist congregations through developing new resources, and networking and training opportunities. We are funded in part by the Fund for Unitarian Universalism.

Welcome New Board Members!

In June at our Annual Meeting at General Assembly, the UU Small Group Ministry Network membership voted on changes in the board. We are deeply grateful to the departing board members, Elizabeth Barrett and Sue Stukey, for their energy, insight and dedication to small group ministry and to the Network. You have helped us immeasurably in our growth in our first few years. Thank You! The Network membership voted in two new board members, Diana Dorroh and Walter LeFlore. We are delighted to welcome them to the Board and are very fortunate for the gifts and wisdom they bring to our important collective work. Their biographical information is below. Join us in welcoming them.

Diana Dorroh, Baton Rouge, LA

I was involved in the startup of the covenant group program at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge in 1999 and have served as program coordinator since then. The program now has about 190 members and 18 groups. I've participated in panels organized by Rev. Bob Hill, at the district level and at GA. I also serve as a volunteer staff Program Director at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge and was a participant at the UUSGM Network 2005 Ferry Beach Conference.

Walter LeFlore, Stow, MA

I've been involved in a small group ministry program for over two years at this point. I was a member of the planning and design team that initially introduced small group ministry to First Parish of Stow and Acton, MA. I'm in my second year as one of many facilitators in a church with over 100 small group members. From my prior professional life as an organization consultant, I have long been a great fan of small group process. I joined the Network Board because I very much want to support congregations using the Small Group Ministry process. If done well, I believe SGM has the ability to not only help but to enthuse and transform the life and spirit of individual congregations.

Thanks to Our GA Volunteers!

The UU Small Group Ministry Network provided a booth at the General Assembly (GA) in St. Louis in June. We offered support, encouragement, information and consultations to the hundreds of visitors who came by. A special thanks to all of our volunteers who helped staff the booth including Elizabeth Barrett, Calvin Dame, Tim French, Susan Hollister, Marti Keller, Susan Linsley, Sue Stukey, Ken Wagner, Jay Wolin, and Helen Zidowecki. We couldn't have done it without You! Hope to see You at GA 2007 in Portland, OR!

We Welcome Your Gift to the Network

For the UU Small Group Ministry Network to accomplish our mission, we need adequate funding. We are funded by the Fund for Unitarian Universalism and by our members. There is much work to be done to support Small Group Ministry in our congregations. And we want to do it! In order to take on the needed research and resource development projects we need your support. We thank our members for their support and welcome additional financial contributions.

**For more info on making larger tax deductible donations,
please contact Peter Bowden at 401-855-0037.**

An Overview of Small Group Ministry (SGM)

*“I pin my hopes to small circles and quiet processes where vital and transforming events take place.”
Rufus Jones*

The Power and Purposes of Small Group Ministry:

Intimacy: SGM helps build community and provides opportunities for friendship.

Ultimacy: SGM provides an opportunity for deeper spiritual exploration and the search for meaning.

Summary Description of a Small Group Ministry Group

Group Covenants: Make these three agreements explicit and clear from the outset:

To engage in service to the congregation and larger world

To abide by a set of relationship groundrules

To welcome new members (either in that group or in the program overall)

Size: 6-10 members.

Meeting Frequency: At least once but more often twice a month. Group meetings typically last about two hours.

Leadership: Facilitators (or preferably co-facilitators) are chosen and trained, usually by a Steering Committee or minister(s). Facilitators are connected to the ministry of the congregation. Facilitators participate in monthly meetings for inspiration in the vision of SGM, ongoing support, skill building, and problem solving. These facilitators’ meetings are lead by the minister(s) and/or lay leadership team.

Method for Welcoming New Members: New people are brought in through continually starting new groups, and/or taking new members into existing groups, and/or dividing large group to form new groups.

Group Duration: Groups may be either short-term (a set number of weeks or months) or may be long-term and ongoing (sometimes for many years).

Composition and Focus: The focus of the group may be general spiritual exploration groups with a mixed membership. Or groups may have a specific focus (i.e. earth-based spirituality). Or groups may have a specific affinity (i.e. men, parents, young adults, etc...).

Meeting Format:

Welcome and Opening: A reading, poem, prayer, or song that helps focus and set a tone for the meeting.

Statement of Purpose: Brief greeting and clarifying of the purpose of the group (“Intimacy and Ultimacy”). (This is important when a group is new and anytime there is a new member).

Review Covenants and Groundrules: Restating the commitments by which the group members have agreed to abide. (This is necessary in the first few months when a group is new and any time there is a new member).

Brief Check-In: Short sharing by each person on a question such as “What are you leaving behind to be here?” It helps everyone become present and gives everyone a chance to speak once before the main body of the meeting starts.

Content/Body: This is the main activity of the meeting and may be a discussion, an experience or an activity. It may use a pre-planned “session” on a particular topic such as fear, hope, guilt, anger, food, community, spiritual experiences, etc... It usually has a few succinct provocative questions to help get the discussion rolling in a focused way. (Sessions are often written by the minister(s) or Steering Committee. Sample sessions are available at www.smallgroupministry.net).

Check-Out: Brief sharing from each person to begin to bring the meeting to a close. It may take the form of “Likes and Wishes”, what did you like and what would you wish for?

Closing: A short poem, reading, prayer, or song that bring the meeting to a close.

Written by M’ellen Kennedy of the UU Small Group Ministry Network

10/06

News From Our Members: Fall Round Up

In the autumn, many of our congregations host a Kick-Off or other event to launch new Small Group Ministry Programs, and to celebrate and recruit members for existing programs. Here is some news from various congregations on their Fall Start-Ups

From Rev. Sarah Clark First Parish in Plymouth, MA

After attending The Small Group Ministry Network Conference at Ferry Beach this summer, I returned to our congregation with much information and inspiration. **We launched the Small Group Ministry Program on September 17 with Small Group Sunday.** The worship service included three speakers each sharing their reflections on Small Group Ministry, and my homily entitled "That I Might Know Your Mind". In the service we honored our facilitators using, with some adaptation, the Installation Ceremony from Rev. Stefan Papa. The children's story was also related to Small Group Ministry.

After the service, we had a table at the coffee hour staffed by facilitators ready to answer questions. Before the service, we had a preliminary sign up of about 12 people, and an additional 12 people signed up that day. During the week, we called people to recruit more participants. So we started our small groups in October with a total of 32 people (including the facilitators) in four groups. Of these, two meet in the morning and two in the evening.

In addition to these four groups, we also have a **group for ongoing support and training of the facilitators** which I am leading. All of the groups are starting with the same session "Friendship" and then will do a session on "Covenant" in which groups set their ground rules. The first facilitator's group will cover the importance of ground rules as well as check ins and a short session on a theme. **We feel we're off to a good start this year with much promise of stronger friendships and deeper spiritual reflection for our Small Group Ministry participants.**

From Ann Davis, Coordinator, Chalice Circles Unitarian Universalist Society of Mill Creek, Newark, DE

I left Ferry Beach on August 16th having spent five days with the excellent trainers from the Small Group Ministry Network. Those days were jam packed with information and spiritual experiences that were shared by instructors and students alike. I left feeling educated, inspired, and energized. As the new Chalice Circle Coordinator for my church, I felt very much enabled to increase the number and the quality of the covenant group program at my church.

Exactly a month after I left Ferry Beach, members of the Chalice Circle Steering Committee and I held a three-hour **training for new facilitators.** Three new facilitators were initiated in the ways of assisting small groups to interact in a manner that develops each person's spiritual understanding and interpersonal intimacy. Eight days later, on September 24th, with the leadership of our minister, the Reverend Nancy Dean, our congregation celebrated Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and **Chalice Circle Sunday.** I dedicated the chalice lighting to the goal of companionship for spiritual growth through small group ministry. Three people spoke about their small group ministry experience with words of encouragement to their fellow congregants to join a group. **Reverend Dean led an installation ceremony in which our roles as part of**

the spiritual leadership and ministry of the church were illuminated and we accepted our commission to take on this position of responsibility. Following the service, a light lunch was offered to the adults who wished to experience a small group ministry session. Child-care was provided with sandwiches to free the parents to attend the "sampler" session. Then, two Chalice Circles were formed with four and five initiates in each. Veteran Chalice Circle participants filled in the groups along with the facilitators to make one circle of 9 and one of 10 people. The topic of the hour-long abbreviated session was "Mentors". **The participants seemed to open up to speak about significant people who have been a guide through life.** Most participants adhered to the "Ground Rules" and interacted with their fellow circle companions in attentive and compassionate ways.

We had fifteen new Chalice Circle members register to join a group. **By early November, I estimate that there will be four or five small group ministry groups join the two that exist in my church.** I am hopeful that we may have our first theme group or groups follow the covenant group format filled with participants from the Earth-Based Spirituality Group.

Two of our facilitators are seriously considering **starting a group at a nearby retirement community** where there is a group of twenty Unitarian Universalist residents. **Our Director of Religious Education will be trained soon, and shortly after that I will be training four or five youth to use SGM format during their youth group discussions.** I am very excited about the potential for strengthening of spiritual growth and emotional bonds of members of our congregation.

From Revs. Mary Ann Macklin and Bill Breeden UU Church of Bloomington, IN

Our congregation started Small Group Ministry by sending two lay leaders and one of our ministers to Ferry Beach in August 2005 for a weeklong training. We came back believing that the program was worthwhile and began a yearlong process of preparing to launch our Chalice Circle programs in fall, 2006.

It has proven more than "worthwhile." We expected to enlist perhaps 10-15% of our membership, or about 40-50 in the initial program. **We were pleasantly shocked when more than 130 persons signed up representing more than 25% of our membership!** Obviously, even in one of the most vibrant of congregations, there are many that feel the need for more intimate times of sharing life experiences and deepening their spirituality. We are thankful some of our lay persons were persistent in expressing such a need, and we encourage our colleagues and other lay leaders to give Small Group Ministry serious consideration as a channel for renewal in our liberal religious tradition. (Continued on next page).

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Announcing!

The UU Small Group Ministry Network Logo & Slogan Design Contest

The Network needs a distinctive logo and slogan to grace its publications and resource materials. Beginning with this issue of the Quarterly, we are conducting a contest. Submit your designs to Susan Hollister at sbhollister@juno.com or to Peter Bowden at 155 Evarts Street, Newport, RI 02840, through December 31, 2006. All entries will be evaluated for originality and aesthetic appeal. The winning logo and slogan will be featured in the Winter Quarterly and its creator(s) will win a year's free membership in the Network.

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Keep Up On Small Group Ministry: Subscribe to the Covenant Group News! It's Free!!

Stay current on news about Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups with the monthly free e-news, "Covenant Group News." This e-newsletter was started by Rev. Bob Hill, author of "The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry" (available at uua.org). It is now published by Peter Bowden, Co-Coordinator of the UU Small Group Ministry Network. He welcome your submissions, questions and ideas for inclusion in the newsletter. If you're not already a subscriber, to sign up, visit our website www.smallgroupministry.net

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Youth SGM Resource Available "Small Group Ministry with Youth"

By the Rev. Helen Zidowecki.
Commissioned by the UUSGM Network

The dynamic Small Group Ministry format can be and has been used effectively with Youth to create powerful group experiences. Drawing on her years of experience working directly with Youth, Helen Zidowecki has created a useful booklet for those wanting concrete help in how do this appropriately and well. This resource includes a session for facilitators, and discussion and session plans for The Five Steps to Building Community and Six Components of a Balanced Youth Program. A total of 25 session plans are included. The resource costs \$25 plus \$5 shipping and handling. All proceeds from this resource, in excess of development cost, go to support the ministry of the UUSGM Network. You can purchase the resource by contacting Peter Bowden at 401-855-0037 or on-line at smallgroupministry.net.

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NETWORK NUGGET

*Has your group's check-in becoming a travelogue,
a restaurant review, or a political diatribe?
Try asking these questions to get back to personal sharing:
What is most on your mind today?
What have you left behind to come here this evening?*

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Small Group Ministry: Up Coming Events

Do You have an SGM event which You'd like to publicize? Please submit events to this Quarterly to mellen@smallgroupministry.net and/or to the Covenant Group News (see previous column). We'd be happy to help You get the word out. Here are upcoming events that we're aware of.

Baton Rouge, LA November 12, 2006
Southwest District Conference Fall conference
Successes and Challenges of Covenant Groups
Workshop leaders: Jonalu Johnstone and Diana Dorroh.
Bring your stories. We will start with a brief review of the critical factors for successful covenant groups and then hear your stories and take time to do some troubleshooting and support. Wrap-up will include identifying some of the themes and common elements in our challenges and successes.

Rindge, NH December 8-10, 2006
Small Group Ministry and Worship Leadership Weekend,
Sponsored by the New Hampshire/Vermont District Church
Leadership Committee. M'ellen Kennedy will be the
instructors on Small Group Ministry. Register by Nov. 20th.
Total cost \$200 including room and board. Contact
nhvt.uu@verison.net.

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Regional Training Conferences

The UU Small Group Ministry Network offers regional conferences to enhance existing and newly starting SGM Programs. **We work with local congregations and Districts to design a workshop tailored to the needs of people in the specific area. The feedback from our conference participants has been excellent** (see Fall 2005 UUSGM Quarterly). **If your district, congregation, or region could benefit from a conference on small group ministry, email us: conferences@smallgroupministry.net.** We also offer workshops for individual congregations wanting to consult with our board and staff to develop new programs and invigorate existing programs. **The UUSGM Network is planning and exploring the possibility of various conferences for the next church year, including one is the Heartland District in Spring 2007.**

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Fall Round Up (Continued from page 5)

We believe our success thus far is the result of good planning, including training such as the Ferry Beach conference. In addition, we invited Dr. M'ellen Kennedy to a weekend consultation with our implementation team in order to overcome obstacles that threatened to derail us. In other words, we refused to give up, believing that this program was worth the effort and cost to do it right. We are very excited about our Chalice Circle program. There will be challenges ahead, but with the commitment of our facilitators, our lay leaders, and the guidance of those in the Small Group Network, we believe the future looks bright for this ministry.

Holding the Vision of Small Group Ministry

Peter Freedman Bowden, Newport, RI

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. Since the turn of the millennium hundreds of congregations have launched new small group ministries, the exact number we do not know. Of the congregations completing the resource needs survey on our website many are stable and thriving. At the same time, a good number are reporting "floundering programs." After launching a program three or more years ago, members are reporting the following kinds of problems:

- * The agreed upon meeting format isn't followed.
- * The check-in time has ballooned to fill the meeting.
- * Groups have become closed and insular.
- * There is a shortage of new facilitators.
- * Due to facilitator shortage, groups are not promoted.
- * Facilitators no longer meet regularly for support.
- * Groups don't engage in service projects.
- * Over time, enrollment has slowly dropped.

I suspect most of you reading this can identify with at least some of these issues. And this is by no means an exhaustive list! This ministry presents many opportunities and challenges. In my consulting work, I find that many of the biggest problems, including those listed above, result from a failure to communicate the vision for this ministry consistently over time. Of this I am certain, as soon as the communication of the vision slips, so too does the ministry.

On my street there are some homes with huge gardens. They remind me of how our congregations launch and maintain their small group ministries. Some have clear visions, plans for what will bloom each season and definite coordination. The gardeners weed. They prune. They make sure the soil is both fertilized and watered. When you look at these gardens it is clear that they were loved and cared for.

Just down the block there is a house that tells a different story. At some point each Spring an entire year's worth of decaying leaves, weeds and garbage are removed. Most of the plants are removed. The mess of the year before is erased. After a big exciting trip to the garden shop a beautiful array of plants and flowers are planted. They look perfect! Mulch is placed. A brand new garden gnome and cute little animals are scattered here and there. For several weeks they have a picture perfect garden.

Then life happens. The weeds start creeping in. Bugs, snails, slugs and grubs do their work. Some plants start growing out of control. Week by week you can see it transform from something worthy of a spread in a Martha Stewart magazine to an eyesore. Before not too long the garden is a wreck. Do I care? Not too much. We go to this house for the barbecues in the back yard. Gardening isn't a priority at this home and we all know it. It's a barbecue house.

I've heard some people say that the Sunday service and the sermon is the real meat of church. If that is so, then some of our congregations launch small group ministries by borrowing the minister, master of the beef, for a time, enlisting

her support in exploring the purpose and vision for this ministry. Often a year is taken to explore, design launch and promote a congregation-wide small group ministry. With great fanfare the group ministry is started. Everyone is clear on what it is about, why we're all doing it, and role of groups in the new and improved vision for congregational life. Some might even go so far as to clearly communicate the role of small groups in transforming our society.

Beautiful. I love a fresh small group ministry. No weeds. Groups and group facilitators are still open-minded. The vision is clear in their minds and hearts. The minister and other small group leadership are right there supporting facilitators. Month after month they strive to make sure the first year is a success.

Then people get busy. While a congregation is exploring, designing and launching a small group ministry it takes a significant amount of energy both on the part of the minister and the lay leadership. Once the program has been launched, it sometimes becomes apparent that the minister can't sustain the level of support that they offered during this "designing and launching" period. Most ministers, if asked, would probably report that their schedules were taxed at the start of a small group ministry program.

Small group ministry enables us to share ministry and build community. At the same time, the reality is that small group ministry doesn't get rid of work. It doesn't save any time. Ministers and lay leaders are always commenting to me that they didn't realize how much time it would take. My response is that a healthy small group ministry can easily grow to a size and complexity that rivals your children's religious education program.

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. (See "The Role of the Coordinator" article on page 1 for ideas on doing this). 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 the message.

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The UUSGM Quarterly

Editor: M'ellen Kennedy

The UUSGM Quarterly provides information, explores issues and shares resources on Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups. It is funded primarily by our members like You and by a grant from the Fund for Unitarian Universalism. Do you have a SGM experience to share, or a testimonial, or an exciting aspect of the SGM program in your congregation? Please send your submissions, your ideas and requests for topics to mellen@smallgroupministry.net.

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