

SGM QUARTERLY

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The Network at General Assembly 2011

June 22-26, Charlotte, NC

Workshop: Small Group Ministry Across Generations

June 23, 2:45-4:00pm, Room 208 B

Explore the lifespan covenant group experience, with a focus on families and elders. Learn how to implement SGM for all ages.

Presenters are Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Litchfield, ME; Gail Forsyth-Vail, UUA Adult Programs Director; Jessica York, UUA Youth Resources Director; and Rev. Carie Johnsen, UU Community Church, Augusta, ME.

SGM Network Booth # 922, GA Exhibit Hall

Network Board members will be on hand to answer questions and share information and resources for SGM programs at every stage. Booth volunteers needed! Sign up now at office@smallgroupministry.net.

SGM Institute 2011, August 30 - September 2

Camp deBenneville Pines, Angelus Oaks, CA

Leadership development for a successful covenant group program. Designed for Small Group Ministry at every stage and size. Details in this issue.

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

Update Your Program's Information

Has your program's coordinator changed? Do you have a new staff liaison? Send contact updates to: membership@smallgroupministry.net.

Calling All Authors!

Share your congregation's SGM innovations, insights, challenges, and successes in the *Quarterly*. All published articles are written by professional and lay leaders currently involved in UU small group/covenant group ministry. A few openings remain for the Summer 2011 issue. We'd love to hear from YOU! Write to quarterlyeditor@smallgroupministry.net with topic ideas.

50 New Session Plans!

The Sessions page on our website continues to be our top resource. With the recent addition of 50 new sessions, the Network now offers over 300 sessions on diverse topics, contributed by individuals and congregations to share with the SGM community.

Share the Electronic *SGM Quarterly*

Opt for the eco-friendly e-*Quarterly* and forward each issue to program leaders and facilitators: membership@smallgroupministry.net

Connections.....with Steve Becker

Who We Are:

The UU Small Group Ministry Network 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 and related shared ministry models in UU congregations through developing new resources, networking, and training opportunities.

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The SGM Quarterly is published four times a year and supported by donations and memberships. Archives are available on the SGM website.

Putting the “C-A-R-E” in Extra-Care Needed

Congregants who need “extra-care” require additional respect and patience. Facilitators must create an inclusive environment for all. How can we do this? Here are some suggestions:

Come in mentality

- Develop and keep a policy that everyone is welcome. When new people inquire about your program, ask what aspects most interest them. This often leads to an exchange about what the prospective member is seeking from such a group.
- Watch for red flags: people who have trouble accepting the model or group premises, people who seek a different type of group, such as those needing therapy, people seeking to use the group to meet unrelated needs (like finding a girlfriend), etc.
- Offer individual orientations before joining a group to determine the person’s needs.
- Discuss potential problems with your minister.
- Keep and respect the “empty chair.” Do not close groups.

Attitude

- Positive attitudes offer warmth, acceptance, and willingness. Facilitators should be willing to accept a wide variety of sharing and opinions, maintain a caring attitude even in the face of challenging behaviors, and know when to get help.

Respect

- Aretha Franklin was right. Even the most cranky, difficult, complaining person deserves to be shown respect. How to do this with extra-care?
- Pay attention to the person. Look at them. Listen actively. Let them know you understand what they are trying to say.
- Rephrase what they are asking for in your own words to assure the person you “get” what they are saying.
- Avoid “exclusive” language like:
 - “We always do it this way.”
 - “Our members in the Thursday group have been together a long time.”
 - “We are all good friends.”
 - “We don’t see a need to change things.”

Expect “living by the covenant”

- When challenged, facilitators should use the covenant as a reminder to everyone how they have all agreed to treat each other. You may need to discuss what an item means, give examples, ask others to share their interpretations, and be blatantly clear about how they are expected to act in the group. An effective facilitator can ask a challenging member how willing they are to “live” by their covenant, and, if not, offer them other resources to meet their needs. If this strategy does not work, the facilitator should ask the minister to talk to the person, and, if needed, explain that they cannot participate.

Steve coordinates SGM at Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Seattle, WA

Minister's Page

James Freeman Clarke and the Legacy of Small Group Ministry

By Reverend Paul Johnson

Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, New York

After serving seven years as minister of the Unitarian Church in Louisville, Rev. James Freeman Clarke (1810-1888), gathered a new congregation in Boston. On April 27, 1841, 46 charter members signed the membership book underneath this covenant: "Our faith is in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and we do hereby unite ourselves into a Church of the Disciples, that we may co-operate together in the study and practice of Christianity."

The new congregation was committed to three guidelines suggested by Clarke: the social principle, voluntary financial contribution rather than sale of pews, and congregational participation in worship. The first of these might well be considered a forerunner of the Small Group Ministry movement. Clarke believed that their covenant required them to know each other better than they would if they only met for worship on Sunday mornings and so he organized other sorts of social gatherings to engage three elements of human nature—intellect, affection, and will.

Every other Wednesday evening, a discussion was held in the homes of members to engage the intellect. Among the topics discussed were these:

- (1) There is no instinctive, intuitive, or direct knowledge of the truths of religion, either of the being of God or of our own immortality.
- (2) Is sin a negative or a positive evil?
- (3) Shall we maintain and urge our opinions always, or sometimes concede for the sake of union?
- (4) What is the sphere of woman, and how shall she be best educated to fill it?
- (5) What are the principles and ideas peculiar to Protestantism, as distinguished from those peculiar to the Church of Rome?
- (6) What is needed by Unitarianism, at the present time, to give it greater influence and success?

A lecture series on Sunday evenings included Temperance Reform, The Peace Movement, the Anti-Slavery Movement, and Education. Wednesday evening meetings at the church were intended to engage the heart rather than the intellect. Clarke described them as follows: "At these prayer meetings, and conference meetings, where we endeavor to speak from our inward experience, rather than from our reflections, a holy influence often seems to extend itself, as one speaker after another, in a few simple words, unfolds his deep convictions and trials, joys, and hopes.

Bible study groups, led by Deacon Herbert, engaged intellect and emotion with topics such as "The Aim of Life," Nicodemus and the New Birth," "Miracles," The Twelve," and "The Sermon on the Mount." Each person's thinking and experience, including that of the leader and minister, were brought to bear on the topic under discussion. The result was a group understanding superior to that of any individual. This "polylogue," an interesting and entertaining way to elucidate a subject, very much demonstrated Clarke's approach to learning. Everyone had something to offer and enriched the understanding of the group.

A third class of meetings, designed to enable the exercise of the will, involved more practical effort. For instance, women of the church met on two afternoons every week during the winter to cut out material to be given to poor women to make clothes for their children.

The exercise of the will engendered by the meetings and lectures led the congregation to establish these benevolent programs: a temporary home for the destitute, a retirement home for African American women who had worked as domestics, a home for pregnant unmarried women, and significant financial and volunteer support for the New England Hospital for Women and Children. *(continued on next page)*

During the 47 years Clarke served the congregation, it steadily grew in membership. The final building during Clarke's tenure was dedicated debt-free on February 18, 1869. Built at a cost of \$70,000, it seated 1500 people and was a fulfillment of Clarke's dreams. All of his basic congregational theories, including the social principle, remained intact. Sunday attendance often exceeded 800, and on occasion the sanctuary was filled to capacity. Membership reached 598 in 1871.

Clarke's theology drew upon a very broad epistemology. As he phrased it: "The Bible, human history, the soul itself, Christian experience, reason--all are sources of Christian knowledge, but none are infallible, nor were meant to be." Clarke firmly believed, in line with his social principle, that a congregational dialogue is possible which uses all of these means of religious knowledge. "The union of many minds in the earnest investigation of truth, will produce deeper and broader results, than the solitary efforts of any individual mind, no matter how superior he is to each of them. The only way in which every side of a truth can be seen is in the combined investigations of many different intellects. Their varied tendencies of thought, their diverse experience, modify and correct all individual one-sidedness and eccentricity."

Covenant Corner

Growing Small Groups with Intro Sessions

By Ingrid Deckman, Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, Pennsylvania

The mainstay of Small Group Ministry at Main Line Unitarian Church has been about a dozen stable long-term groups with regular attendance and little fluctuation in membership. As participants left groups, their vacancies were filled by new participants. There was no model in place for growth of Small Groups and it was clear that breaking up well-established groups was an unpopular idea. In order to grow, we needed to find new facilitators for new groups without dividing groups or extracting new facilitators from established groups. Through discussion with our interim Associate Minister, we decided to grow Small Group Ministry and find new facilitators by offering *Introduction to Small Group Ministry* sessions. New facilitators would be selected from the participants and new groups would grow around these new facilitators. Several current facilitators volunteered to lead the Intro Sessions, which consisted of four sessions every other week, a format similar to our ongoing groups.

The Intro Sessions were a big success; participants were able to sample Small Group Ministry on a trial basis without a long-term commitment. We advertised Introductory Sessions in the congregation's monthly newsletter and in the church bulletin. But the best advertisement was a sermon by the Associate Minister discussing the benefits of Small Group Ministry to the individual and the community. After his sermon, there were sign-up sheets outside the main meeting room for a few weeks. Participants were also able to register via email. The Intro Sessions were so popular that two additional Intro groups were formed. In total, we had five Intro groups meeting on three evenings with 49 participants overall.

After the third Intro Session, several candidates from each group were identified to serve as facilitators for new groups. The Associate Minister personally phoned the candidates and asked if they would be willing to serve as facilitators for a one-year term. In this way, seven new facilitators were selected and trained. The participants in the Intro Sessions were given the choice to continue in their group, and four of the five groups became permanent.

It has been a year since we offered the Intro Sessions. Three of the new Small Groups are flourishing and one has disbanded. Several of the participants in the Intro session have moved into established groups and all the new groups have added members. Overall, the church was able to grow Small Group Ministry by about 20% by adding three new groups and about twenty five participants. We have decided to offer Introductory Sessions every other year with a goal of having 65% participation of the 'active' church population involved in SGM. For our next venture, we intend to diversify Small Group Ministry by increasing participation in populations such as parents with young children. We look forward to the vibrant future of a small group ministry at MLUC that expands and adapts to meet the needs of the congregation.

From Our Members.....

Dream versus Reality

*By Lyssa Andersson, Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn
Swampscott, Massachusetts*

“Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation.” This is how I felt ten years ago when I was first made aware of the concept. I wanted this for my congregation; I wanted this for me. For five more years, those of us who experienced the introductory SGM workshop were still too busy with our other congregation-based interests to really take the reins of small group ministry development. Finally, I realized it was up to me, and so I began. And then there were two; another church member signed on with me and we moved forward. Over the next year, we recruited three more, and we had the critical mass to really do this. We were all believers that “Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation.”

We planned and strategized, wanting to make our covenant groups as close to the model as possible. Bob Hill’s book, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time*, was our Bible. We had a dream of groups multiplying year-to-year, with coordinated sessions and simple logistics, with satisfaction and spontaneous spiritual growth among the group members as covenant groups became the heart of our congregation’s culture. Did that happen right away? No, of course not. Did we accomplish our dream? Yes we did; we had covenant groups! Only two groups, yes, but *we had two groups*...and, “Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation.”

During our first year, one group member struggled with the contemplation of divorce or relocation; one nearly lost a grandchild to cancer; one found love (but with someone far away); one found a way to speak for the first time about serious family issues; one returned to the church building for the first time since disaffection a decade before; one dared to contemplate entering the ministry; one came to grips with the fear of dementia with aging; and on and on. Could these events have occurred without small group ministry? Of course. Could anything have replaced the support and non-judgmental presence of the covenant group? “Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation.”

As coordinator (now retired), implementation team and facilitators, we made a lot of good decisions. We also made mistakes. When the facilitator of one group dropped out, it was almost impossible to place the group members in another group, because they had become a clique instead of a covenant group. We “relaxed” our expectations of attendance for the summer, and had a difficult time getting things moving again in the fall. We sent out luscious invitations to the congregation at regular intervals to enhance our membership, and got very little response. We didn’t insist on facilitators meeting regularly among themselves. We expanded into three groups, but were not able to sustain the membership, and went back to two. But along with our mistaken moves, we held true to our original dream, and little by little, our ranks have expanded, our place in the church culture is solid, and satisfaction and spontaneous spiritual growth among our members is a reality. “Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation.”

In addition to being printed exclusively on white paper, which makes it easier to copy and is a cost-savings for the Network, the newsletter is now printed on eco-friendly, recycled paper.

Only through our connectedness to others can we really know
and enhance the self. And only through working on the self can
we begin to enhance our connectedness to others.

- Harriet Goldhor Lerner

Finding the Heart of Small Group Ministry

By Tracy Blanchard, First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Several years ago we sought to revitalize Small Group Ministry at First Parish in Cambridge as some of the groups had become “closed” and most had disbanded. We decided to adopt a more formal model to take us in new directions.

Our planning team met monthly to think through every aspect of the program we call Covenant Groups. Initially we tried a small pilot program, and in three years have grown to seven groups of 9-11 participants. Yet we still had groups fail or lose many members. By the end of spring 2010, our team was exhausted by nearly constant work, and we decided to take a “time out”.

We were encouraged in this decision by our newly-called Associate Minister, Rev. Lilia Cuervo. Rev. Cuervo had been instrumental in the building of the SGM program at San Jose UU Church in California, a program we knew to be rich and thriving. We wanted to learn from her perspective and experience; we desperately needed to go beyond the administrative details to the heart of SGM.

Rev. Cuervo and our Senior Minister, Rev. Fred Small, led us in an expanded facilitator training in September, focused on the spiritual components we felt were vital to Covenant Groups. In October we had our first retreat, a growth experience for all of us—in our relationships with each other, with the program, and with our own concepts of ministry.

Our first step was to eliminate the planning team, a small group managing publicity, registration, session writing, and service projects. Instead, all the facilitators now share these vital administrative tasks. Next we spent time examining the San Jose’ model and our own program design. We also incorporated some of its ritual and liturgical elements into the conversational space we had already created for a blend that is appropriate for our New England setting and culture.

Feedback from program evaluations and personal conversations showed that in the groups that had failed, we had not properly conveyed or developed a sense of commitment to process and program. We heard time and again from these participants that their goal was to “make friends” or have “discussions.”

Alternatively, in the groups that succeeded, participants understood that Covenant Groups were sacred spaces of their own making in which they could be truly heard and accepted, and where they could practice hearing and accepting without the need to fix or advise. Their goal was *spiritual growth*.

We changed our language, in person and in our promotional materials, to emphasize spiritual over social growth. We adopted the San Jose’s model of “preliminaries” as a teaching tool to convey the mission and culture of small group ministry more effectively. We also incorporated some of its ritual and liturgical elements into the conversational space we had already created for a blend that is appropriate for our New England setting and culture. Rev. Cuervo has consistently brought more spirituality to our monthly meetings with body prayers, meditations, and beautiful altars, reminding us that our committee meetings should embody ministry

We launched our new program in January 2011 with a renewed sense of purpose, ready to reap the abundant rewards that our Covenant Groups continue to provide.

Small Groups, Deep Connections.

Lessons from Mature Covenant Groups
An Interview between Reverend Marti Keller and Linda Serra
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, Georgia

Linda: *Could you talk about your experience with successful and long-term covenant groups?*

Rev. Keller: I believe that in almost every case, with groups that have lasted, there is not a single facilitator. At some point in the evolution of a long-term covenant group, whether at a year, two years, or even at six months, the leadership moves into being rotational. In this way, members are not only responsible for participation in sessions, they also connect with the group through the selection of topics. Members come to know each other in several ways, including both their response to, and selection of, the topic. They express themselves by showing what they feel and think is important enough to bring to the group. You express your spirituality, which is a way of going deeper into the group.

For example, whether you share the issues for which you have a passion or take a chance on launching an art project, you express your spirituality. Every person in the group should have one or two opportunities a year to put themselves out there, to trust enough to show where their spiritual quest lies.

Linda: *The importance of sharing responsibility for selection and facilitation of the topic is not always recognized. Facilitators I work with comment that when they ask if anyone is willing to facilitate the next session, their request is met with silence. I suggest they engage their members in discussion about moving the energy and commitment to higher levels by rotating leadership.*

Rev. Keller: That is one way to open the group to going deeper with each other. There are a couple of tasks that should be shared. It is always important to have someone who reminds members that the time for their session is coming. This need not be a task delegated to the facilitator. In addition, by rotating and expanding leadership, we avoid burning out a single facilitator. The group can agree to allocate the responsibilities in a way that connects members in a deeper way. In a mature group, I believe it is not too much to ask that all members take responsibility for all tasks. I speak as a person who has been in a spirituality group longer even than being in the ministry; I'm in a group now that's been going on since 1994.

Linda: *That is so good to hear; it is encouraging. I know you have worked with many groups and trained many facilitators. Could you comment on some of the other issues you've encountered?*

Rev. Keller: It is critical for a successful covenant group to keep the reason for being together clear and present. Even successful, long-term groups can verge on becoming a little too social, with an over-emphasis on food and conversation. The focus should be on developing their spirituality.

Linda: *Have you been referring to mature groups only, or do you include groups that are just beginning to form?*

Rev. Keller: Commitment to maintaining a closer watch over check-in time is healthy for a beginning group. When I start a group, we do a lot of work to ensure that check-in doesn't go on overly long. A lengthy check-in prevents the group from fully exploring the chosen topic. We hold each member's check-in to about two minutes. In an hour-and-a-half session, an hour is a good amount of time to spend on the topic.

As groups mature, I feel they can be less rigid around personal sharing. A mature group has had to observe and learn about the behavior of individual members; how each person approaches check-in and wants to share. They have a better understanding of each member and of the group as a whole, and can permit extended sharing when it is needed. I believe mature groups have the experience necessary to adhere a little less to absolute rules. I know of a long-standing group that can go on for a while with their opening sharing. It is how they connect.

Linda: *What are some other good habits you suggest covenant groups consider?*

Rev. Keller: In my experience, the more successful groups do not assign lengthy readings before they meet. They present their topics with perhaps only one word, one sentence, or one quote. These are trigger topics that inspire members to more deeply explore their spirituality. Another good habit is "stepping up and stepping back."

Linda: *Could you explain that further?*

Rev. Keller: People who only participate by listening can be asked to take responsibility for “stepping up” to share their thoughts and feelings. People who tend to dominate can be called upon to explore how they can learn to “step back,” to listen and encourage the others to share and to trust. Successful groups ask members to take responsibility for “stepping up and stepping back.”

Linda: *How do mature covenant groups initiate check-in?*

Rev. Keller: I’ve recently been part of a ministers’ group in which we were asked some very simple questions. “Whose are you?” “To what alternative source do you belong?” “With whom are we in covenant?” and “To whom are we accountable?”

Can you imagine being in a covenant group where, after a while, the trigger can just be “Where are you right now”? I’ve learned that this sort of trigger to encourage sharing and spiritual growth can be as rich as anything else.

Linda: *It seems that these questions provide a limitless potential for each member to explore their personal growth. Where else did your ministers’ group take you?*

Rev. Keller: It was very similar to being in a covenant group. I also learned what I think is an exceptional concept for spiritual development: silence. Give people lots of time to answer the question or respond to the word or quote. Successful covenant groups create more spaces for silence. They hold and incorporate the silence among group members. Parker Palmer, the Quaker author and educator, suggested holding the silence for at least a minute, maybe two. Silence requires trust. It brings your heart into the room.

I’m suggesting that we too often rush our responses. Silence is about the trust between members. Sitting with others for minutes of silence can be pretty scary. I’m learning that silences are just as important as talking, that successful groups keep the topics simple, and the silences longer. But, that is in a mature group.

It is critical for all spiritual development groups to keep their focus on 1) listening, and 2) being totally present. The first step is being physically there in the room with a commitment to the group. Other members of the group need to know they can count on you and that you have the group’s and your own spiritual development as a priority. We build trust through being present for each other.

Linda: *Thank you, Marti, for your insights and for sharing your experiences with us.*

- Linda Serra is a lay minister and coordinator of UUCA’s Covenant Group program.

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- ⊖ Learn about and practice Small Group Ministry through hands-on workshops, presentations, daily group sessions, worship, and networking
- ⊖ Explore the impact of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups in congregations
- ⊖ Learn to lead your congregation's Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group program
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- ⊖ Create and select effective sessions, including the use of art, music, and movement
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\$25 discount for registration before July 1 and \$25 discount
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To register, visit www.smallgroupministry.net and click on Conference Registration

To learn more, contact Helen Zidowecki at office@smallgroupministry.net or 207-582-5308

More information will be sent when registration is received.

Visit www.smallgroupministry.net for information on this and previous Institutes.

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