

SGM QUARTERLY

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A publication of the UU Small Group Ministry Network

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News from the Network



Available this month – A new publication from the Network!
Small Group Ministry with All Ages, by Rev. Helen Zidowecki, will debut at General Assembly. Purchase at the Network booth or by mail order. Full description inside.

General Assembly 2011, June 22-26, Charlotte, NC
Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group events at GA include the Network's annual consultation booth, our workshop presentation, and our Annual Meeting. See details in this issue.

Ask Me About My Covenant Group!

Join Network board members and fellow SGM enthusiasts at the Network Booth for conversation and consultation with UUs across the continent. Sign up for 1 to 2 hour blocks at **Booth # 922**. Scheduling begins on Wednesday afternoon. Two orientation sessions will be offered.

Small Group Ministry Institute 2011, August 30-September 2 Camp deBenneville Pines, Angelus Oaks, CA

Leadership development for a successful covenant group program. Designed for Small Group Ministries at every stage and size.

Time to Renew?

Check your membership status at membership@smallgroupministry.net. Download a renewal invoice from our website or renew online via credit card.

Update Your Program's Information

Send updates in contact information to membership@smallgroupministry.net.

Share the Electronic SGM Quarterly

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

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

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.

Take that Risk!

Today's column is dedicated to all those intrepid topic writers and theme teams who will spend this summer scratching their heads to come up with thoughtful session plans.

Why do we write sessions? What are they supposed to do for us? To me, effective session plans create a framework for self-examination, a novel way to consider ourselves in a different light. Offering us mirrors to our spiritual selves, the best topics give us tools to examine our attitudes, test drive our beliefs, and deepen our insight into who we are at our cores. In doing so, we can try out personal statements of faith in a safe place, comparing who we *believe* we are with who we *really* are. Dynamic questions urge us to take a few more steps on our journeys of *becoming*.

What types of subjects make the best plans? When confronted with this task, many writers try to play it safe. Unwilling to hurt anyone's feelings or rock the spiritual boat, they choose safe subjects that lack the ability to evoke self-examination, values clarification, or deepening of faith. People come to our groups with an innate thirst to improve themselves. One way our themes can quench that thirst is to challenge our members to take the risk to look at themselves in novel ways: to put well-heeled attitudes to the test, prize their beliefs through public affirmation, consider the consequences of alternatives, and act on those beliefs.

Take the risk to be edgy. To entice. To provoke.

Have a wonderful summer!

Steve Becker coordinates the Small Group Ministry program at Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Seattle, Washington.

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.

Minister's Page

Learning as Spiritual Practice

by Reverend Dr. Brent Smith

Having created the ROOTS and BRANCHES (RB) small group program in 1991 as Senior Minister at All Souls in Tulsa, I was eager to see if it could help the new start I was involved in ten years later in Grand Rapids, Michigan, All Souls Community Church (UU). Because RB integrates education and fellowship, it might help implant this as part of a new congregation's DNA. "Learning," Merlin tells young Arthur, "is the only thing that never fails." Small Groups can help UU's employ learning as a spiritual practice. Before I arrived, congregants had come to see learning, along with worship, as central to community by deepening the covenant with one another that formed them into a spiritual endeavor. We just needed to decide on what wine needed to be in the new wineskins!

The RB program begins with newcomers completing the four session ROOTS experience for those considering a deeper relationship to the community than attendance at worship. This is taught by the minister, regardless of the size of the congregation! Upon completion of ROOTS, those interested in membership are gathered into a BRANCHES group, meeting monthly or semi-monthly, and led by a longer-standing lay member trained by the minister and a member of a minister-led BRANCHES Leaders group. The BRANCHES small group experience is formed around learning, fellowship, and service. The service component involves BOTH the congregation and the larger community. This teaches practical churchmanship inside and volunteerism outside the congregation. The fellowship component involves BRANCHES groups enjoying the fellowship of one another, fellowship amongst all groups, and serving the congregation by creating fellowship opportunities for all. The learning component is the most important of all. Using materials chosen by the minister and mentored by the BRANCHES group lay leader, this involves reading and discussing primary source material including current and famous historical sermons, documents, and interpretations of classic Unitarian and Universalist theology, polity, spiritual practice, and cultural critique. The aim, guided by the lay leader's direction, is to assist each member in giving articulation to their individual faith, and coming to understand the collective faith identity of the particular, covenanted congregation, and our common Unitarian Universalist tradition. Identity building is the aim, especially helping individuals to understand themselves as part of an historical, theological viewpoint that transcends subjectivity by and through a communal covenant upholding individuality. A faith tradition existed before any of us arrived, a "pool of saints living and dead" into which we dive and are "baptized" in a manner true to "us."

UU's have valued education as far back as the 16th century congregational movements out of which we came. Even the Transcendentalists started out as small group learning, called "Hedge's Club"! And, we revolutionized church school education in the 1900's as part of this "learning" tradition. Yet, in the 21st century, we are somewhat tepid in our educational pursuits regarding religion and our UU faith. We admittedly lack knowledge of our own history, too often treat evangelical Christianity as if its particularity is universal, do not see our theological connections to Judaism, and forget our links to Islam go back to the 1500's! We lack some basic understandings of theology, sometimes reduce philosophy to materialism, and on too many occasions dismiss religious experience as psychological weakness. And we may not realize how knowing congregational polity and why it arose, might assist us in our Board meetings!

A church beginning begs the question of spiritual identity. How are we religious? How are we different religiously from others, especially other liberal religionists? How is our spiritual liberality distinct from politics? Even, how our various congregational cultures are similar and different from one another? This is the pool of questions every congregation swims in. The new one just knows it's wet!

There are religious and theological reasons why we have always viewed science as a friend in the interpretation and meaning of human existence when others have not. There are Unitarian views of the human-God relationship that justified general, liberal education in that the ignorant cannot be free nor unfold in their likeness to the divine. Universalist declarations of God's Love for all yielded public service fruits coveted and envied by other faiths. And the chief challenge of the 21st century – the challenge of connecting with the "religious other" – will be addressed best by those who know spiritually who they are, what forms the shape of their faith tradition, and **through a particular identity**, practice engaging others with a curiosity that is universal and respectful.

And what better way for new and old UU congregations to splash about in spiritual identity than by learning something new together in a companionship of the Spirit yearning to be free?

The Reverend Doctor Brent Smith was a UU parish minister for nearly 27 years, serving our largest congregation, a new start congregation, and is now on the faculty of Grand Valley State University (MI) helping to develop a Religious Studies major and department.

Strengthening Congregations Through Small Group Ministry

by Laura House-Kelly

For a membership professional, Small Group Ministry is one of the more compelling church programs and is probably the one program to which new members are most often referred. At Main Line Unitarian Church, Small Group Ministries combine several key aspects of a successful membership ministry, including the development of meaningful relationships, the opportunity to explore and strengthen Unitarian Universalist identity, and the ability to work together on a community service project, often within the walls of Main Line Unitarian Church. For many visitors, new members, and long-standing members, Small Group Ministry provides the framework for a deeply satisfying membership experience.

Current research indicates that new members will become engaged in a church only if they make at least three new friends within six months of joining. Further, in the December 2010 issue of the *American Sociological Review*, a study showed that attending religious services, even irregularly, increased overall sense of well-being, as long as there is a circle of friendships within the community. Daniel Olson, an associate professor of sociology at Purdue University, says the findings suggest that “well-being among religious people probably has more to do with having religious friends than going to church.” As a membership coordinator, I’m privy to hearing the stories of our visitors and new members—what makes them come back for continued visits? What makes them join? Why do they continue their membership and participation year after year? Involvement in a small group ministry is recognized over and over again as a key factor in a visitor’s interest in joining and a member’s reason for staying engaged.

As a membership professional, I encounter the value of Small Group Ministry every day. I actively advise and refer new members to Small Group Ministry, understanding that their involvement in a small group will undoubtedly play a crucial role in their assimilation, opening the door to deep and caring relationships within their small group and service opportunities in the larger church community. I also employ Small Group Ministry as a means of further engaging a long-term visitor with an eye towards membership. Wherever one is along their membership journey, the value of Small Group Ministry is profound and lasting.

Laura House-Kelly, MSW, is the Membership Coordinator for Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon, PA.

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

From Our Members.....

Small Group Ministry at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene

by Dick Loescher

The Small Group Ministry (SGM) program at the UU Church in Eugene, Oregon, is open to members and friends of the church, and has occurred annually since 2003. This program has had a significant beneficial effect on the congregation in terms of increasing meaningful connections between people, facilitating spiritual and personal growth, and encouraging a culture of respectful listening and sharing. Our church is growing, and now has a membership of 336. In recent years we have had approximately 70 to 90 people participating each year, with 7 to 10 groups of up to 10 people in each group. Many people have been in more than one group.

The current structure and logistics of our SGM program seem to be working well. The SGM steering committee and the minister plan the program and curriculum. Resources that have been helpful to us include SGM workshops, the UU SGM Network web site (www.smallgroupministry.net), and various SGM related publications. Each year we have a different overall theme, and the individual topics relate to the theme. All of the groups use the same session plans.

In the fall of the year facilitators are recruited and trained, and registration (with a voluntary \$10 registration fee) is done. The SGM groups meet for two hours twice a month (mostly in homes, but sometimes at church) from January through May for a total of ten sessions, and then disband. Each group does a service project for the church or the larger community. In the final session each year the participants and facilitators fill out an evaluation form. The SGM facilitators, steering committee, and minister meet for 1½

hours each month from January through May for support, education, and problem solving. This year we added information about nonviolent (compassionate) communication (NVC) to the facilitator training session and the training manual, and incorporated NVC practice into the monthly facilitator support meetings.

Although in the early years of the program each group was asked to develop its own covenant, in recent years all of the SGM groups use an established “Small Group Ministry Covenant of Right Relationship” that was developed by the SGM steering committee and the minister. The guidelines and agreements are listed as strategies to meet our needs and support our values. We also list optional meeting strategies that may be helpful in facilitating group interaction and time management. Based on our experience and that of others, occasional updates have been made.

Information about our SGM program is viewable by going to our church website, www.uueugene.org, clicking on “Groups and Committees,” and then clicking on “Small Group Ministry.” The information available includes: a summary of the SGM program, the Facilitator Training Manual, the Covenant of Right Relationship, the Registration Form, the Evaluation Forms for Facilitators and Participants, and the Session Plans. We are happy to share our experience and documents, and to receive input from others.

Dick Loescher chairs the Small Group Ministry steering committee at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, Eugene, OR.

Building My Credo, Living My Credo

by Bill Mahony

The world is busy – and distracting. How can one hold onto “the spiritual” in the course of living one’s daily life? One answer for me has been through my participation in a covenant group. Through the intimacy of a small group and the power of living intentionally through an agreed-upon covenant, I’ve gratefully appreciated this unique opportunity to share deeply in community and to grow spiritually.

My covenant group would offer a more specific answer to this question of how to hold tightly to one’s core values: Through the spiritual practice of what might be called *building my credo, living my credo*.

Our group, *Tending to Spirit*, was born at Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC in November 2008. We spent a good part of our first year exploring our UU Principles. The intellectual understanding of our seven Principles morphed into colorful, complex, and sometimes difficult challenges when interpreted through the personal life experience filters of nine very different individuals. We listened to each other...and then moved forward on a growing foundation of trust and fellowship, addressing a myriad of issues including loneliness, mindfulness, gratitude, fear, loss, joy, and prayer.

Last May our shared reflections, stories, and viewpoints took an unexpected turn. Several of us attended our Fellowship’s Coming-of-Age service when our high school youth bravely shared personal credos – self-descriptions of who they are and what they believe – with the larger congregation. Inspired by the service, one member posed this question to the group: “Wouldn’t it be a useful exercise for each of us to write a personal credo and share it with each other?” This question was the spark that ignited a flame. The answer was an immediate, unanimous, and passionate “Yes!” And off we went. Five meetings, spread over several months, were devoted to our “credo project.”

Session I: Moral Values and Our UU Faith

As a prelude to identifying our essential core beliefs, each of us reflected on where our personal moral values have come from. Have these values been affected by our UU faith? And, since we’re not a creed-based denomination, what motivates UUs to follow the seven Principles? What single core value among UU Principles might we identify as particularly essential to our fundamental beliefs?

Session II: What is a “credo” and how shall I proceed in building mine?

We were beginning to understand just how difficult it would be to define specifically who we were, and what, exactly, constituted our essential values and beliefs. We committed to continued reflection on this question. As a point of focus, we agreed to condense and distill to a final product of no more than 250 words. There would be no constraint on format, thus allowing a listing of “I believe...” statements, a personal narrative, or the use of descriptive prose or poetry. We also set up a timeline for subsequent related sessions.

Session III: Our Fellowship Mission Statement: What does it mean to me, and how do I personally relate to it?

Wouldn’t the meaning of a church’s mission statement be self-evident? As it turns out, not exactly. Some liked the current emphasis on “community;” others longed for a greater emphasis on “personal journey” and “individual freedom.” Questions arose as to its clarity and specificity. The unexpectedly passionate discussion that unfolded validated the suspicion that a close examination of the stated mission of one’s church can provide a useful stepping stone to resolving, defining, and prioritizing one’s core values and beliefs.

Session IV: Sharing My Credo

Following many weeks of reflection, we met and read our credos, spaced by some moments of silence between readings. A powerful and moving session!

Session V: Living My Credo

With credo in hand, we dedicated a final session to the question: “How are we, at this moment, living out our stated core beliefs and values in the course of our daily lives?” A challenging related question also emerged: “What real-life circumstances pose special challenges for translating my beliefs and principles into tangible, specific actions?”

(Credo continued)

Post-Credo

Our credo project has impacted us positively, including how we've approached our post-credo sessions. Simply put, we've no longer been able to address issues or topics – ranging from remembering loved ones who have died; to reflecting on the “what, why and how” of forgiveness; to reflections on how money impacts our lives – without viewing them through the lenses of our self-defined core values and beliefs.

Building our credos has impacted us in broader ways too, spilling into our workplaces and into our daily routines and relationships. Several of us have shared instances where we can no longer indulge in certain behaviors or attitudes. We are “hounded” (unrepressed smiles noted) by our heightened awareness of what we believe, which in turn pushes us to stretch in the direction of showing our better nature.

In the end, we came to realize that what we had just completed was only one cycle of a process that is ongoing, never-ending. We accept that, at the time of sharing our credos, we offered no more than a snapshot of where we were at that moment. Consequently, we plan to regularly re-visit not only our credos, but also how well we are doing in the living of them.

Bill Mahony leads the Tending to Spirit Covenant Group at Eno River UU Fellowship in Durham, NC.

UU SGM Network Publications

Order forms available from <http://www.smallgroupministry.net>

NEW! *Small Group Ministry with All Ages*, June 2011

Imagine a congregation where all ages are talking together. From its firm foundation in adult programming, Small Group Ministry is evolving to become an inclusive opportunity for all ages to connect, listen, reflect, and learn with each other. From young children through elders, this publication explores small group ministry by age group and with mixed ages and presents ways to make covenant groups an integral part of the movement toward multigenerational congregations. Includes implementation strategies, leader training, session plan development, and sessions for single and multi-age groups.

Network Members: \$20 plus \$6 shipping Non-members: \$30 plus \$6 shipping

Now on CD! *Spiritual Journeys: 101 Session Plans for Small Group Ministry Programs*

With themes drawn from literature, UU liturgy, religious scriptures, and current events, the sessions focus on spiritual journeys, personal beliefs and values, spiritual challenges, holidays, and life transitions. CD format enables the user to print out sessions and/or email them to facilitators and group members.

Network Members: \$15 plus \$2 shipping Non-members: \$20 plus \$2 shipping

ALSO AVAILABLE: *See our website for details*

Small Group Ministry for Youth. Twenty-five sessions for middle and high school youth.

Small Group Ministry 2010: Celebrating Congregations. Over 100 congregations relate their SGM program origins and share their unique challenges and success stories.

Facilitator Training and Development Manual. A guide for training and support plus a handbook for group leaders and facilitators.

Implementing Small Group Ministry. Download from Online Resources on our website.

Small Group Ministry at General Assembly
June 22-26, 2011 Charlotte, North Carolina

WORKSHOP: *Small Group Ministry Across Generations*

Thursday, June 23, 2:45–4:00 PM Convention Center 208 B

Small Group Ministry for multi- and inter-generational participants deepens the search for meaning and relationships within congregations. This workshop explores the lifespan covenant group experience and shares successes, challenges and models of implementing Small Group Ministry for all ages, with a focus on families and elders.

Presenters are:

Rev. Helen Zidowecki, author of SGM books for all ages

Gail Forsyth-Vail, UUA Adult Programs Director, author of SGM books for children

Jessica York, UUA Youth Resources Director, author of SGM book for youth

Rev. Carie Johnsen, developed SGM resources for UUSC and in Augusta, ME



SGM NETWORK BOOTH # 922 – Exhibit Hall

Wednesday 3:00-7:00 pm & 8:45-10:00 pm

Thursday through Saturday 11:30 pm - 7:00 pm

Sunday 10:00 am - 2:00 pm

- ★ Purchase resources: facilitation, program management, sessions
- ★ Share Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group challenges and successes
- ★ Speak with Network board members and SGM program leaders
- ★ Get answers to all your SGM & Covenant Group questions



UU SMALL GROUP MINISTRY NETWORK ANNUAL MEETING

Breakfast Meeting, Saturday, June 25, 7:30–8:30 am

Charlotte Westin Dining Room, 601 South College Street

Meet the Network Board and other Network members. Share your ideas for the Network: what you have found helpful as well as suggestions for next year. Please let us know if you will attend so we can include you in the reservation: office@smallgroupministry.net

*Check the Network Booth for the full agenda and any last-minute changes,
or contact office@smallgroupministry.net*

Small Groups, Deep Connections.

Conference Notations

The Heartland District Assembly, Muncie, Indiana, April 2011

“The district assembly was a great place to display UU Small Group Ministry Network information. I had reserved a table in the display area and prepared a very simple display, using a tri-fold poster board, colorful handouts produced by the Network, and several of the Network's publications for sale.

This was a wonderful way to meet people who stopped to ask questions and exchange ideas about small group ministry. I learned what different congregations were doing with covenant groups, what had worked well for them, and what they needed advice for. People who were not familiar with small group ministry or covenant groups were introduced to the topic. I stayed at the table on breaks between meetings and any other time I had available when the exhibits were open. The logistics made it easy to staff the table, even as a delegate and conference attendee.”

Anne Haynes, UU Church of Bloomington, IN, a Network member congregation

Small Group Ministry at the Northern New England District Conference, April 2011

NNED Small Group Ministry Committee members Peg Herbert and Helen Zidowecki, in conjunction with the district Multigenerational director, Kim Paquette, presented a workshop on Small Group Ministry for All Ages. We used session plans on “Humor” that would be appropriate for various ages. A number of youth attended. We started the discussion of intentionally having Small Group Ministry available for more than just adults as congregations move toward a multigenerational focus.

Both our exhibit and a Table Talk at lunch gave us the opportunity to talk about Small Group Ministry in specific congregations. The District SGM Committee has a flier and will be adding information to the Small Group Ministry section of the District website. SGM is included in the Annual Reports.

Peg Herbert is the contact for the NNED SGM Committee (603-746-3490, pherb46@tds.net)

JOIN THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY SUMMER INSTITUTE

August 30-September 2, 2011

Camp de Benneville Pines, Angelus Oaks, CA

Flier and registration information available at www.smallgroupministry.net

Learn about Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups

Share your experiences.....Make a difference

SPECIAL AT THIS INSTITUTE

- Field Testing Modules for workshops in congregations and on regional basis
- New resource on Small Group Ministry for All Ages

Cost: Lodging and Program Fee: \$350, with \$25 discount for registration before July 1

\$25 discount for UU Small Group Ministry Network members

(from a member congregation, and individual members)

It's true, membership has it's privileges!

As a member of the SGM Network you:

Get the current issue of the *Quarterly* 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 _____

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Program Coordinator _____

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Download the form online at www.smallgroupministry.net

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