

SGM QUARTERLY

Vol 8 No 4

Summer 2012

A publication of the UU Small Group Ministry Network

NEW From the Network

Social Justice and Small Group Ministry

Social Justice Work: Preparation, Action, Reflection Through Small Group Ministry reviews the social justice process and presents session plans for use at each phase. Designed to enhance the focus of the 2012 Justice General Assembly, the 34 topics include *Radical Hospitality, Multiculturalism, Standing on the Side of Love, Immigration As A Moral Issue, Hotel Earth, and Ethical Eating*. Explore faith, relationships, and meaning in the context of social justice. Available at General Assembly and by mail order. See ordering information on page four.



Small Group Ministry & General Assembly 2012

Circles of Reflection: Engaging Women in Justice Work

UU SGM Network and UU Women's Federation

Thursday, June 21, 10:30 am - Room 227 AB

Learn to use Small Group Ministry to engage with immigration, racial, and economic justice issues as spiritual practice. You will receive a resource packet that includes Small Group Ministry sessions to engage, sustain, and reflect on social justice work ongoing in congregations. In addition, the UU Women's Federation will announce two commissioned grants focusing on immigrant rights and multiculturalism, as well as how participants can obtain funding in future years. *Speakers: Rev. Marti Keller, President, UU Women's Federation and Rev. Helen Zidowecki, President, UU Small Group Ministry Network.*

UU SGM Network Annual Meeting: Friday, June 22 at 2:15pm. Write to office@smallgroupministry.net to attend.

CONNECT with SGM via Social Media

Share your ideas, network with members, and enrich the SGM community.

Small Group Ministry Network Group. Post your comments and thoughts, learn about events, and read announcements. <http://www.facebook.com/groups/158837360893790/>

Small Groups, Deep Connections Blog: Shares published materials to a larger public, and includes new articles and announcements. <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/wp/>

UU Small Group Ministry Lab: Exchange ideas, resources and session content. <http://www.facebook.com/groups/343817605638090/>

In this issue:

News and Notes.....	1
Facilitators as Artists.....	2
Facilitator Growth.....	3
Network Publications.....	4
From Our Ministers.....	5
Deep Sharing and Listening Part III.....	6

Our Mission:

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

When Good Facilitators Become Artists

By Margaret Edwards, Chalice Circle Coordinator

Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

Who We Are:

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

Board and Staff

President

Rev. Helen Zidowecki

Secretary

Diana Dorroh

Treasurer

Susan Hollister

Members-At-Large

Steve Becker

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

Linda Serra

Advisory Board

Rev. Bob Hill

Rev. Glenn Turner

Quarterly Editorial Staff

Beth Tiewater, Susan Hollister

Webmaster

Erik Zidowecki

World Wide Web

www.smallgroupministry.net

Changes of Address

Send new address and email to

membership@smallgroupministry.net

The *SGM Quarterly*

(ISSN 1945-2683)

is published four times a year by the UU Small Group Ministry Network and is supported by donations and memberships. Archives are available on the SGM Network website.

Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church is just completing its first church year of Chalice Circles, with seven groups, eight trained facilitators, and some 44 church members as group participants. It's been a learning experience for everyone!

Initially, we were all beginners, and it took some time to bring us all on the same page as we developed group covenants and became comfortable with the basic concepts of covenant group behavior. Each month the facilitators met together, usually with Rev. Robin Tanner, who provided us with monthly session plans. In these meetings, we shared our mutual concerns and ways to handle problems. But not everyone necessarily felt comfortable following the same path. Each group – together with its facilitator – was developing its own personality. And the facilitators in turn were responding with their own uniquely creative ways to make the chalice circle experience more meaningful.

So what is the coordinator to do when the chalice circles start to deviate from one another? For us, the answer was to confirm that as long as the basic elements of the groups' covenants were met, especially the use of silence, deep listening, and speaking from the heart, each facilitator was free to modify their meeting sessions however they found most meaningful. A truly UU approach!

To give just a few examples: Several facilitators added centering rituals, such as a guided meditation. Some decorated the chalice table with a tablecloth, more candles, or other meaningful objects to help convey reverence for the process. One of our caring facilitators, a skilled teacher, concentrated on being sensitive to the learning needs of her group members, tweaking the readings and questions, or adding new material to enhance understanding of the the session topic. Yet another facilitator, with a talkative group, chose to move the check-in time to the end of the session, rather than make an issue of over-long check-ins cutting into the main meat of the session.

Our dedicated facilitators have earned our respect this year. It has been refreshing to see them guide their Chalice Circle sessions in a way that is authentically their own. And in the process, it has helped all of us to become better leaders.

Transition and Growth as a Facilitator

By Cindy Evans, D.O.M., R.N., M.S.Ed.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota, FL

I've been engaged in an insightful journey the last ten months since attending and actively participating in the Small Group Ministry Summer Institute at De Benneville Pines, in California. Synchronicity, or some divine intervention, led me back to an area where I had lived for a year in 2000 while working as a hospice case manager. I moved to the sunny west coast of Florida, continuing my nursing career, while studying acupuncture and oriental medicine where I now enjoy a small private practice. Fortunately I retained my active RN status and CPR certification. Grace Hirsh, a retired RN and UU SGM Network Board member, asked me to join her at the upcoming Summer Institute working as the medical response provider. Would I like to spend a few days in a beautiful UU mountain camp and participate in a rewarding learning experience? I enthusiastically closed my practice for a week in late August and packed up warmer mountain clothes as well as my stethoscope, acupuncture supplies, and some basic herbal remedies.

I flew to Ontario, California to meet Helen Zidowecki and others from congregations around the U.S. Familiar with the area, I helped navigate us to our mountain destination. Our accommodations were breathtaking, with roomy, rustic cabins and a lodge with balconies overlooking the stately Colorado spruces. Our host, Janet, and resident dogs made us all feel welcome.

The itinerary included morning through evening sessions to strengthen facilitator and session planning skills while developing strategies to growing successful SGM groups in our congregations. Presentations and handouts from long-standing successful programs enhanced our learning experience. I was surrounded by strong, confident leaders in the SGM Institute and facilitators with years of experience. I couldn't have been in better hands as I learned and practiced the skills necessary to facilitate a group of my own.

And, it didn't take much convincing to see my future roll as a facilitator. Twenty-five years ago I completed a master of science in adult continuing education and held adjunct faculty positions while recruiting and counseling students in a non-traditional business management program for working adults in a Chicago area university. I was grounded in androgogy and

adult learning styles as well as adult developmental theories. Needless to say, my favorite part of the Institute's itinerary was the daily breakout sessions with our own covenant circle and our team effort to develop a session plan. New to chalice circles, I was initiated into the process of active listening and personal sharing in the supportive environment of seasoned facilitators. I eventually facilitated one of our sessions.

Our mornings began early with substantive hot breakfasts, followed by music, singing and opening rituals. The evenings ended with a closing ceremony with plenty of time to enjoy ourselves and make new friends. I left the Institute with more than a training manual and abundant resources to run a successful program. I was transformed from a passive participant to an active promoter of SGM circles!

I enthusiastically joined a chalice group at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota. It was an evening group to accommodate my work schedule. My joy was that I was one of two older adults in a group of college students and young working professionals. I loved the intergenerational sharing. Led by Molly and Ilene, I was amazed at how easily I bonded with a group that had been meeting for two years. Ilene frequently travels to India for research and recreation with aspirations to becoming a UU minister. Molly, like my former self, works in higher education.

I soon met Nancy Thomas who is one of the original facilitators trained by their interim minister, Margret O'Neill, who had several years of experience with small group ministry programs in other UU churches. I enthusiastically signed up for an upcoming training session with Nancy, who currently chairs the steering committee. Nancy provided an outstanding learning experience to our group of aspiring facilitators, with abundant handouts organized in a training manual, including foundational articles and sample session plans. I felt blessed to have experienced the Institute's training a few months prior to learning Sarasota's program. And I loved that it encompassed many of the theories in adult education.

Each chalice group at UUCS has two co-facilitators and meet twice monthly in groups of seven to ten. The topics are selected by the participants who also help develop the covenant. The commitment is eight sessions, after which they can continue with the same group, join a different group, or take a break from the meetings. Shorter sessions are planned for the summer when people vacation or move to second homes up north. Our snowbirds form a large population at this congregation.

Monthly Saturday morning facilitator groups, led by Nancy, support our roles. She's recruited an enthusiastic steering committee dedicated to growing participation in the program. Sample sessions are held monthly in conjunction with a Sunday service and popular pot luck lunch. A courtyard table with enticing sign and literature, staffed by facilitators, draws prospective chalice group participants. We meet, greet and spread our enthusiasm to a congregation of 350 members and 75 friends. And I love the outreach to the neighboring community and local universities.

My own experience as a facilitator has been very rewarding. I chose to team with Nancy in another evening group. She offers support and guidance as we share the facilitator roles. One of the participants, David Ryan, suggested and subsequently led a session plan that he created on the topic of "Helping." I love getting to know on a personal level the members of my circle group. Our group is open to new members, and we have since added two new participants. We gel beautifully as a group as we listen attentively to each other's stories.

A year ago I would never have known that my experience in the Summer Institute's program would have led to such dramatic changes in my life. Thank you Grace.

Small Groups, Deep Connections.

UU SGM Network Publications

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

Social Justice Work: Preparation, Action, Reflection Through Small Group Ministry Our newest publication combines the three-phase process of Social Justice work with the principles of Small Group Ministry. Features covenant group sessions on multiculturalism, radical hospitality, immigration, racism, and earth justice, plus a guide for creating session plans from workshop materials, curricula and other formats.

BOOK *Network Members: \$15 plus \$6 S&H Non-members: \$25 plus \$6 S&H*

CD *Network Members: \$15 plus \$2 S&H Non-members: \$20 plus \$2 S&H*

Small Group Ministry with All Ages Implementation strategies, leader training, session development, and session plans for children through elders.

BOOK *Network Members: \$20 plus \$6 S&H Non-members: \$30 plus \$6 S&H*

CD *Network Members: \$15 plus \$2 S&H Non-members: \$20 plus \$2 S&H*

Soul to Soul: Fourteen Gathering for Reflection and Sharing Topics such as addiction, aging and personal resilience offer new opportunities to explore life issues with others. *Skinner House Books, \$14.*

ALSO AVAILABLE

See our website for details.

Facilitator Training and Development Manual

A guide for training and support plus a handbook on CD to customize for group leaders and facilitators.

Spiritual Journeys: 101 Session Plans for Small Group Ministry Programs

Sessions on Spiritual Journeying, Personal Beliefs and Values, Spiritual Challenges, Just for Fun, Being Human, Holidays, and Special Use subjects for life events.

Small Group Ministry for Youth 25 sessions for middle and high school youth.

Implementing Small Group Ministry

Download from Online Resources.

Weathering Change Through Small Group Ministry

By Reverend Robin Tanner

Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

Nearly a year ago our congregation, the Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church, was growing at about 34%. Sundays were packed, but not many people knew each other as they looked out across the sanctuary. Longtime lay leaders were wondering how they were going to meet all these new people and the Membership Council was wondering how they would connect so many new members to other people. After some consideration, lots of conversations with congregational consultants and lay leaders, the answer seemed right in front of us: Small Group Ministry.

Within weeks of making the decision, we discovered we had a trained facilitator among our lay leaders. Together, the two of us selected six other lay leaders that we thought demonstrated skills with empathic listening, group facilitation and interest in building relationships. We sent a letter to each person detailing the skills we thought they would bring to our program. By the springtime, we had built a team and brought in a Small Group Ministry trainer. After a trial with a few groups, by fall we launched our full program called Chalice Circles. Each group has 7-10 members, meets monthly and follows our congregation's theme-based calendar. Nearly one in three members is now in a Chalice Circle.

In the last nine months, our small congregation has undergone some mighty changes. We went from one service to two services, continued growing, put together a long-range planning team, and it seems we changed nearly every council and committee in some way. Yet, our members are better connected now than ever before. Pastoral care requests have gone down from about twelve hours a week to three hours. We've raised our pledges. Members, even in the challenge of two services, are meeting each other. We are better connected because of Small Group Ministry. We are learning how to be together as a congregation in a new way with new faces and new stories to share. We have our challenges for sure, but thanks to our Chalice Circles we have a way forward through those challenges: together.

A Social Justice Resource for Small Group Ministry

See the new Social Justice/Witness listing on our Session Plans Directory:

<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public/sessions/index.html>

Sessions on Social Justice Include:

- Peacemaking Concepts and Definition
- Radical Hospitality
- Racism
- Citizenship
- Service – Living our Beliefs
- The Good We Do
- The Destiny of our Democracy
- Peace and War
- Humanism and Environmental Destruction
- Social Responsibility
- Ethical Eating
- Faith in Action

These sessions:

- Engage and prepare people to do social justice work
- Sustain spirit and action
- Provide reflection after action is taken
- Promote social justice as part of living our UU faith
- Focus on issues of immigration and racial, economic, and earth justice

This spiritual journey is often characterized by an intense passion for justice and liberation, especially in the face of exploitation and deprivation.

The desire for justice is motivated not merely by the plight of appalling suffering, but by a deeper sense that love and well-being must prevail in the end.

– Diarmuid O'Murchu in
QuantumTheology

How to Increase Deep Sharing and Listening in Covenant Groups, Part III

By Alicia Hawkins, Albuquerque, NM, and Susan Hollister, Durham, NC

In Parts I and II we identified the elements that enable or inhibit deepness and explored silence, listening, and sharing deeply. This final article in the series will focus on the meeting structure and materials, preparing participants for the covenant group experience, training facilitators to lead sessions of depth and substance, and ongoing support through regular facilitators meetings.

Preparing Participants For a Deep Experience

First, be clear about what a small group ministry is and isn't. Groups have many purposes. There are teaching groups for learning something new, advocacy groups for acting on one's passion, and affinity groups for joining with others of a like interest. In contrast, covenant groups are relational groups that focus on sharing and being open to one another. Their purpose is to bond with one another in deep ways while looking at our spiritual/life journey.

Carol Schwyzer of Santa Barbara says, "When people indicate their interest in a Connection Circle, we communicate as much as we can about what the groups are; that the groups are not social in the ordinary sense, but they can expect to make deep connections with fellow group members."

Create a website, participant guidelines, and a brochure that outline the program in enough detail to give clarity to prospective members and convey the purpose of the program. Consider offering a mini-group after church to give congregants an idea of the process.

Alan Backler shares that before the Chalice Circle Kick-off at the UU Church of Bloomington, IN, both the minister's sermon and group members' testimonials focus on deep listening. Participants know what they are getting into and these expectations are reinforced by the group covenant.

Despite clear program guidelines, challenges may arise early in the life of the group; perhaps a suggestion to scrap the topic or change the format. This is the "storming" stage of group development to use Bruce W. Tuckman's terminology, when a member either disagrees with the design or suggests a "better" way to run a meeting. Prepare facilitators to manage such challenges using non-judgmental language.

For example, Susan responded in this way when faced with a format question: "We have many opportunities to talk one-on-one, but not many group experiences. Here we learn to share our thoughts and experiences in a group of 10 people, and we learn to really listen to each other. So let's trust the process and see where it takes us." The outcome was greater understanding, a more cohesive group, and a willingness to engage with the group purpose and format design. Continuing with Tuckman's model of group development, the next stages of norming, then performing can happen when the group agrees on the goal of being a safe place to share and sees that the structure ensures this safety.

Training Facilitators to Foster Deep Listening and Sharing

"The initial training is important, but ongoing support for the facilitators is essential." (Alan Backler, Bloomington, IN) Although deepness may be introduced at an initial training, "thoughts on 'how to go deeper' need to be part of ongoing training." (Rev. Axel Gehrmann, Urbana-Champaign, IL)

Some respondents question the notion that deepening can be taught. "The tone and example set by the facilitator are subjective and hard to measure or train. However, it can be discussed in training and examples of 'good tone' and 'bad tone' can be modeled. Even more effective is to ask trainees to reflect upon their own experiences and ask what characteristics of the facilitator encouraged them to share deeply." (Shirley Williams, Albuquerque, NM)

The impact and insights of a covenant group may extend past the meeting, Daniel DeVaney (East Lansing, MI) suggests. "Invariably in a quiet moment there will be additional insights—and usually more connections—as the entire covenant discussion has time to breath like a fine wine." In the same way, training for depth may be more productive after groups and facilitators have had some time to breathe and deepen.

Training Content

The basic points to cover in the initial facilitator training include the purpose and design of Small Group Ministry, the facilitator's responsibilities, problem-solving strategies, and where to go for help when needed. Supplement facilitator trainings, handbooks, and meetings with a discussion of the elements that foster deep listening and sharing. Refer to Parts I and II for this information.

A list of recommended training manuals is included here:

- *Small Group Ministry Facilitator Training Manual*, Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, OR, <http://www.uueugene.org/small-group-ministry-sgm>.
- *Together in Exploration (TIE Groups) Handbook for Facilitators*, UU Congregation of Santa Rosa, CA. Contact: Carol Kraemer, CarolUU@zonedoc.net.
- *Covenant Group Facilitator Manual*, First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, NM. Contact: Alicia Hawkins, ahawkabq@comcast.net.
- *Facilitator Training and Development Manual*, UU Small Group Ministry Network: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/forsale.html>.

Many of you responded with specific suggestions of facilitator responsibilities.

We have grouped them here by content:

Explain Meeting Format

- Make sure participants know the reasons for listening without interruption or judging others, before we even begin sharing. (Chris Cleveland, East Lansing, MI)
- An uninterrupted check-in is helpful. (Rev. Alex Gehrman, Urbana-Champaign, IL) It signifies that we're listening with full attention.
- The candle lighting and opening reading convey the message that this is different from simply another meeting. (Gehrman)
- Think of members' responses as "interlogue," a term suggested by Alan Hollister (Durham, NC) in place of dialogue or discussion. "Interlogue links with the emotional content of the interaction: What is the ultimate meaning of what you say and what you are to each other?"

Develop and Follow a Covenant

- Never underestimate the importance of "process." That includes developing a covenantal consensus and having all group members commit to this way of treating each other. (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)
- The leader helps create the "safe container" by reminding members of the pertinent covenant points. (Joe Schenk, Titusville, NJ)

Manage the Process

- A caring leader lays out the structure, not trying to control, but rather letting the dynamics unfold. (Gehrman)
- Adjust the structure to meet the needs of the group. For example, develop a technique for time-keeping when needed. (Gehrman)
- Be sensitive to how much a person wants to share, allowing space, but not prodding. (Gehrman)
- Part of the facilitator's role is to be sensitive to and encourage members who risk sharing something deeply personal for the first time, and to manage any discomfort that becomes evident. (Kathy Kellison, Augusta, ME)
- Acknowledge the courage of a group member who shares deeply. Make going deeper a positive attribute for the group. This could be done during likes and wishes if the opportunity is missed earlier. "I liked when Joe shared at a deeper level. The whole group followed him." (Susan Jordan & Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA)

Model Behavior and Responses

- Making newcomers feel welcome, comfortable, and accepted sets a standard for compassionate interaction. (Gehrman)
- Jumping into the regular format and assuming the new member will 'catch up' is not very inviting. The integration process for new members should include a review and discussion of the covenant, and perhaps a look at what current members value in the group. (Kellison)
- Facilitators can explain the kind of sharing we are looking for, and model it when sharing begins. (Carol Schwyzer, Santa Barbara, CA)
- Model a check-in that is more about thoughts and feelings and less about places and events. Also model a moment of silence and reflection between speakers, as well as between topic questions.

Redirect as Needed

- Use gentle reminders and policing by leadership and the group at large to keep on topic and within the covenant. (Schenk)

- When conflict arises in a group, facilitators need to know when to reach out for support and guidance from the minister and/or SGM program coordinator. (Kellison)

Plan Service Projects

- Our “deepest” groups are those who have done service projects together: working on a church fundraiser or charity event, painting, or supporting a group member with meals and phone calls during a challenging time. (Kellison)
- Service seems like a basic, simple concept - we help someone or some group. But it is actually quite complex spiritually, emotionally, and culturally for both the server and those being served. (Carolyn Brown, Albuquerque, NM)
- Working side by side towards a common goal creates strong bonds among group members. Spending time together outside the structured meeting format, seeing each other’s gifts and talents in a different context, and reflecting on the completed project renews the group’s energy and sense of purpose.

Share Leadership

- Sharing leadership may help the group go deeper. (Gehrmann)
- Take turns lighting the chalice, giving opening and closing words, and leading the topic discussion.
- Have the group choose some of the session topics. (MaryBeth Brizzolara, Lutherville, MD)

Meeting Structure

The structure of the meeting may play a role in achieving deepness. Some groups present the topic at the meeting. Others present it at the end of the previous meeting and give quotes and questions to start the thinking process. Daniel DeVaney of East Lansing, MI, comments that when people are given questions prior to the meeting, they are able to ponder and let them gently marinate until the meeting. I (Alicia) find myself thinking about the topic at traffic lights and when I’m driving; this is helpful and deepening for me. Several congregations, including Albuquerque and San Jose, use the “ponder ahead of time” approach. See their websites at <http://uuabq.org/covenant.html> and http://sanjoseuu.org/FUSJC_SGM/index.html for examples.

Some congregations use several rounds of sharing. “The deepest sharing and insights occur after the surface level sharing is peeled away and there is so much more food for thought. When we didn't have or make time for that third round, I felt we missed an important opportunity to get the most from the discussion.” (Shirley Williams, Albuquerque, NM) Here is a brief description of the three rounds of sharing:

Round I - A question is asked about the topic which can be answered briefly.

Round II – This sharing may include something you felt about this topic, a way you grew, something that touched you, a story you want to share. This longer sharing is more feeling-oriented, from-the-heart sharing.

Round III – This is a more general discussion, however there is still no cross-talk. This time may also be used for a ritual or may be a more conversational time. Those who are speaking should be aware of others wishing to speak.

Topic Design

Consider starting new groups with “getting to know you” topics—families, spiritual journeys, favorite things—and progress to topics that center around emotions, values, and universal life conditions. The UU Church in Eugene, OR, intentionally uses graduated topics. “Topics for the first few sessions are easier to share about as the group is getting acquainted. Topics that are emotionally charged or more difficult to share about are used in later sessions, when the group members have become more comfortable with each other.” (Richard Loescher)

Several congregations have a theme for the month or year as a way to “go deeper” in their covenant groups. “Discussion topics address that theme—something like chapters in a book—all of which lead to the build-up of the story.” (Meg Menks, Frederick, MD) Meg continues, “As we go through the months addressing the theme, group members draw on earlier discussions and make new connections and discoveries about the topic. Insights move from person to person as this happens. Deepening occurs when we witness others make leaps of insight or feeling.”

Each group meeting at The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, CA, has a theme with readings and discussion questions provided by the minister. These are the themes for the Sunday services as well. Carol Schwyzer says, “They are like lenses for looking at our lives and experiences in different ways.”

Involve group members in topic choices, another way to share leadership. “One of my groups wanted a topic that

wasn't among our resources, so we created it. It was deeper for its intentional individual molding to us and responding to our wishes." (Facilitator, SWD)

Crafting Questions

Educating leaders/facilitators to develop and use topics and curricula which allow for the sharing of life experience versus "what I think" discussions can promote deeper sharing. (Penny McDougal, Frederick, MD)

Several facilitators commented on the "art" of writing questions. Groups can get off track when people teach or theorize or stay "in their heads." Write questions to encourage sharing from the heart: "In your experience, how ...?" or "Was there a time in your life when...?" (Carol Schwyzer, Santa Barbara, CA) "Going deeper depends on a shift from left to right brain; less thinking and more feeling. Phrase questions so that they elicit personal memories." (Grace Hirsh, Bradenton, FL)

The basics of writing questions include open-ended questions which avoid a yes or no answer, and staying in the heart realm rather than the mind by asking for a recalled memory, experience or life event. "Tell a story about a time you experienced forgiveness," rather than "What is needed for forgiveness to happen?"

Facilitators Meetings

Ongoing training can deepen the experience of the facilitators and their groups. "An effective way to train facilitators is to give them the experience during monthly facilitator meetings." (Ann Davis of Easton, MD) "Use the model to teach the model," says the Rev. Glenn Turner, one of the early Small Group Ministry leaders and writers. Facilitator sessions can follow the format of a covenant group meeting. As Rebeka Feeser of Boiling Springs, PA shares in Covenant Group News (March 2012), the meeting includes check-in, current small group problem solving, and a training component.

In the early days of the Covenant Group program in Albuquerque, facilitators did the upcoming session as part of the facilitators meetings, explaining what was happening as it happened. Later, just portions of the session, such as a ritual or one round of sharing, were played out with the facilitators.

High Quality Facilitators Meetings

Although not always possible, clergy presence at meetings highlights the importance of the small group ministry program. Using small group ministry principles, the minister or program coordinators model the skills of listening, accepting and supporting. The facilitators, in turn, minister to their groups in the same way. Consider creating a covenant for facilitators similar to a group covenant as suggested by Rebekah Feeser, Boiling Springs, PA. See her example at <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/cgnews/index.php?n=133>.

There's more to being a good facilitator than learning skills. Focus on asking why we are facilitators and what is the purpose and value of covenant groups. Carol Schwyzer of Santa Barbara, CA, suggests asking facilitators to write down what covenant groups have meant to them.

Mini-Training Topics for Facilitators Meetings

1. Using silence to deepen the covenant group

- This input from Rita Weathersby, University of New Hampshire, may help introduce the power of silence in our inward journeying:
 - Busyness is probably inversely related to the depth of our spirituality. Silence as a spiritual practice, whether it is meditation, reflection or prayer, challenges the busyness of our lives in a fundamental way.*
- Ask facilitators to share ways their groups experience silence: candle lighting, pauses after a person's check-in, three minutes of quiet, pauses during and after sharing, extinguishing the candle.
- Ask facilitators to share ways that help their groups enter into silence: quotes to introduce the time of silence, walking in silence, prayer beads, walking a labyrinth, listening to music, visualizations, meditations, closing eyes or focusing on the flickering of the candle, creating a quiet sacred space with the candle lighting. Try a new way of moving into silence at each facilitators meeting.
- Share ways others have found helpful in deepening the experience of silence:
 - o During facilitator meetings at Emerson UU, the minister asks us to pause for a moment of silence after each person checks in. In our small groups, when someone is distracted from going deeper, offer a moment of silence to quiet the group. (Susan Jordan & Vicki Ecklund, Marietta, GA)
 - o Silence may be a sign that a person IS going deeper. (Susan and Vickie)

2. Sacred Time

- Introduce the concept of sacred time with this article from Thandeka in the January/February 2005 UU World Magazine:
Sacred time is not the opposite of profane time. Sacred time is the opposite of fleeting time. Fleeting time is the kind of time in which we are distracted, racing around and trying to catch up as we fall further behind; it's working at the computer while a friend talks to us on the phone. By contrast, sacred time is noticing a shift of tone in a person's voice and asking what's wrong; it's full presence, paying attention in the moment. It's what happens in a covenant group when we discover how to stay present to life again.
- Brainstorm on moving from secular time to sacred time in our covenant groups. The chalice lighting has this as its purpose. Find chalice lightings at Worship Web: http://www.uua.org/worship/by_topic.php?topic=Chalice%20Lightings.
- Consider using a ritual such as this one at the start of the meeting:
The group sits around the chalice candle. Those on the east side read the first line, etc.
East: Brother Fire, we invoke warmth. May our hearts be open to each other.
South: Father Air, we invoke inspiration. May our words be wise and kind.
West: Sister Water, we invoke the flow of life. May we have courage.
North: Mother Earth, We invoke groundedness. May we all be here in spirit as well as in body.
Leader: Spirit within, we invoke depth. May we remember all we value. (light chalice) - Rev. Christine Robinson

3. Listening

A. Role play this visual exercise, using cups and a teapot of water on a tray, while the leader narrates this story: *A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's overfull! No more will go in!" the professor blurted. "You are like this cup," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"* This lesson can be applied to listening: the cup of your mind must be empty in order to receive the words of others.

B. This 10 minute exercise focuses on listening to self as a precursor to listening to others. Read the following quotes or print them on a sheet of paper:

Before one can be asked to listen deeply to others, one must first get in touch with listening deeply to oneself.
-Daniel DeVaney of East Lansing, MI

The practice of deep listening should be directed towards oneself first. If you don't know how to listen to your own suffering, it will be difficult to listen to the suffering of another person or another group of people.
- Thich Nhat Hanh

Put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard. *- Anne Sexton*

Hand out paper and pencils or markers, telling the group the papers will not be shared. Ask each person to draw a circle and divide it into sections with parts of his/her life: work, personal issues, family, spiritual life, relationships, etc. Have participants look at each segment and draw in a word or picture that represents the issues and questions that come up for them. Next, ask the group to close their eyes and listen to this first part of the Mindfulness Meditation: *May I be filled with loving kindness, May I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be whole.* Sit in silence for a few minutes, then ask group members to share any insights realized from the exercise of listening to one's self.

C. In this two-part exercise, facilitators sit in groups of three. Each person relates an issue they need advice about while the other two listen without responding. Next, each person shares what happened in their minds while they listened, and how it felt to be unable to give advice to the other two.

D. This 30 minute exercise focuses on deep listening and also strengthens bonds within the facilitator group. Each person will have one-on-one sharing with every other person using questions such as these:

- Why are you drawn to the covenant group experience?
- What led you to become a facilitator?
- In what ways have you been changed by the covenant group experience?
- What's going well in your group?
- What do you think could be working better in your group?
- In what area of facilitating do you feel the most and least competent?

Set up a double row of chairs, about a foot apart, facing each other. Each participant faces another group member, sitting knee-to-knee. When the leader gives a question, one person speaks and the other listens. After 1-2 minutes, participants switch roles using the same question. With each new question, participants rotate to the next chair. The last chair in one line does not rotate. ****Further details are available from ahawkabq@comcast.net.****

We close with these words from Mark Nepo, poet and philosopher: *To listen is to continually give up all expectation and give our attention, completely and freshly, to what is before us, not really knowing what we will hear or what that will mean. In the practice, to listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness to be changed by what we hear.*

The authors wish to thank all of you who shared information and ideas with us. We couldn't have written this series of three articles without your generous responses and interest. Our goal has been to gather and share the collective real-world experience of ministers, facilitators, group members and coordinators to write a practical and useful guide to deepening covenant groups. We have loved the process of collaborating and weaving all your comments together into a tapestry of wisdom.

CONTRIBUTING CONGREGATIONS

UU Church of Bloomington, IN
 UU Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, NY
 UU Congregation of Frederick, MD
 First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor, MI
 Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC
 UU Community Church, Augusta, ME
 Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA
 UU Church at Washington Crossing, Titusville, NJ
 UU Church in Eugene, OR
 Monte Vista UU Congregation, Monte Vista, CA
 UU Church of Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL
 First Universalist Church of Minneapolis, MN
 Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Kirkwood, MO
 The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, CA
 University Unitarian Church, Seattle, WA
 Towson UU Church, Lutherville, MD
 First Parish Church UU, Duxbury, MA
 UU Church of Chattanooga, TN

UU Congregation of Green Valley, Amado, AZ
 UU Community Church, Park Forest, IL
 UU Church of Sarasota, FL
 UUs of the Cumberland Valley, Boiling Springs, PA
 UU Fellowship at Stony Brook, NY
 San Gabriel UU Fellowship, Georgetown, TX
 First UU Church, Houston, TX
 UU Congregation of Santa Rosa, CA
 Manatee UU Fellowship, Bradenton, FL
 Emerson UU Congregation, Marietta, GA
 Cedar Lane UU Church, Bethesda, MD
 UU Church of Greater Lansing, East Lansing, MI
 UU Church of Greater Lynn, Swampscott, MA
 UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR
 UU Church of the South Hills, Pittsburgh, PA
 First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM
 UU Fellowship at Easton, MD

“Deep listening is miraculous for both listener and speaker. When someone receives us with open-hearted, non-judging, intensely interested listening, our spirits expand.” - Sue Patton Thoele

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 _____

Address _____

Congregation _____

District _____

Program Coordinator _____

Phone _____

E-mail _____

I would like to receive the newsletter electronically; YES NO

Congregational Membership (\$100 year) _____

Individual Membership (\$40 year) _____

Additional Tax-deductible Donation _____

Total Enclosed: \$ _____

*We rely on donations
from members and
supporters like you!
Your continued
financial support
allows us to better
serve our members.
Please consider
making a tax-
deductible gift to the
Network.*

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

Download the form online at www.smallgroupministry.net

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