

Small Group Ministry (SGM) Handbook for TVUUC

Small Group Ministry is intentional lay-led small groups that deepen and expand the ministry of a congregation. The **basic elements** of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry have evolved from the experience of many people in diverse congregational settings.

Goals of SGM

To maintain and grow a network of small groups that:

- That draws us into mutual ministry
- Strengthen our congregation
- Deepen our understanding of Unitarian Universalists principles and values;
- Continually develop lay leadership
- Challenge us to action and spiritual growth
- Express our principles and values in the community
- Help members identify their own calling and expression of lay ministry

Organization and Functioning

a. The steering committee, comprising about four members, is responsible for organizing small groups, placing members into groups, and offering orientation classes for prospective members and training for group facilitators.

b. The steering committee offers an orientation or introductory class for those who think they may be interested in joining an SGM group. This session offers an opportunity to experience a small group session, which follows a typical small group program, after which individuals have a good idea of what SGM is all about and whether they want to participate.

c. The steering committee identifies potential group facilitators and offers facilitator training for those individuals who are interested. This training is a requirement for all facilitators. Skills and characteristics to look for in a facilitator include the following:

- Members of the congregation or with strong commitment to UUism
- Good sense of self and presence
- Relationally oriented rather than strongly individualistic
- Preference for facilitative style rather than a teaching style
- Positive outlook
- Emotionally healthy (not dealing with stress situations like death, divorce, or active alcoholism, depression, etc.)
- Enjoy working with people
- Team players
- Hopefully, some experience with groups

SGM Sessions and the Orientation/Intro Session

The typical SGM session content is shared life stories related to the particular session topic and the insights we draw from them.

The session follows a program, which usually consists of:

1. Lighting the chalice
2. Brief check-in
3. Session topic, which includes opening words and a reading with evocative questions
4. Member reflections on the reading and questions
5. Likes and wishes (about today's session)
6. Closing words related to the session topic

The SGM orientation class follows the same format as the typical SGM session although the topic may be oriented more specifically to the new-to-SGM participant such as: personal history or background, spiritual path, or, one's spiritual journey to University Universalism.

SGM member commitments and responsibilities

There are expectations for each group member to make certain commitments and assume certain responsibilities for the other group members. Each member should

- Agree to a **group covenant*** of mutual respect and caring
- Make attendance a priority
- Provide the opportunity for every member to fully participate in his/her own way
- Provide the opportunity for every member to be heard, without interruption
- Avoid cross talk
- Contact the facilitator or group when they do not attend
- Keep personal discussions for after the meeting

Facilitator Training

Facilitator training includes:

- SGM facilitator guidelines and responsibilities;
- Where to go for support;
- Mission and goals for SGM;
- Standard program structure and group process;
- Difficult personality styles and strategies for dealing with each;
- What facilitators do not do:
 - a) Allow the group to function as a therapy session (a therapy group focuses on advice giving, personal problem solving)
 - b) Allow disrespectful behavior within the group
 - c) Use the group as a platform for the facilitator's own perspective

d) Dominate the group

Responsibilities of the facilitator

The facilitator has a specific and important role for a small group. Sometimes there are co-facilitators who may alternate planning and facilitating meetings. The facilitator often encourages group members to assume maintenance of the group over time, through example and through group discussion of the group's **covenant**.* Responsibilities of the facilitator(s) include:

Role of the Facilitator

- * Understanding general concept of Small Group Ministry
- * Being responsible for managing group process issues
- * Helping group establish their **covenant*** (what they agree to as a group)
- * Clarifying group expectations
- * Encouraging participation
- * Dealing with the logistics/time of meetings
- * Attending monthly meeting with Minister or Coach
- * Modeling openness and caring
- * Facilitating group decision-making
- Notify/remind group of meeting time and place
- Explain the rules and responsibilities of group members when a group is forming and meeting for the first time
- Facilitate the group process and interactions of group members
- Prepare or adapt a program for each meeting with a topic **for focus***
- Solicit group input for session topics
- Encourage mutual respect
- Model openness and caring
- Contact group members when they miss a meeting or haven't informed the group that they won't be attending a meeting
- Contact minister(s) when the facilitator has knowledge of a situation requiring support beyond the scope of the SGM group
- Keep meetings on track:
 - a) Gently intervene when a member talks too long;
 - b) Encourage quiet members to speak or ask for opinions as appropriate;
 - c) Keep track of time (or have someone else help track time) for each section or portion of the meeting;
- Help group establish their covenant (what they agree to as a group)
- As a form of group self-assessment, periodically review the group covenant, as needed; (Note: see good example of an SGM covenant as presented in *Heart to Heart*.*) Encourage group members to assume responsibility for tracking and self-monitoring, allowing each person to speak with deep listening and without interruption.

***There are multiple resources** to assist facilitators in planning programs. Following are URLs for two web sites that are frequently used, each providing session programs created, used, and contributed by SGM facilitators:

The First Unitarian Church of San Jose small group ministry website offers helpful information and resources for facilitators along with a wealth of sessions accessible by topic. The URL for the site is:

The Unitarian Universalist (UU) [Small Group Ministry Network](#) is dedicated to creating healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by supporting and promoting Small Group Ministry. Their website includes extensive resources, with newsletters, [session plans](#), consulting services, and more. The URL is <http://www.smallgroupministry.net>

Two books by [Christine Robinson, Sr. Minister at Albuquerque UU and Alicia Hawkins], each contain session programs ready-made for a small group to work through, both available from Skinner House Books and Amazon. Com:

Heart to Heart: Fourteen gatherings for reflection and sharing
Soul-to-Soul: Fourteen gatherings for reflection and sharing

Heart to Heart also includes a ***group covenant** [page 5] used at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. Each of the sessions was field-tested by the SGM groups at First Unitarian.