

Small Group Ministry Handbook

First Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of the Palm Beaches

This handbook introduces the Small Group Ministry Program (SGM) at First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Palm Beaches. It is intended to be used both by people who are deciding whether they want to join a group, and as a reference for the groups themselves. The handbook cannot possibly accurately describe the magic of this experience. We encourage you, after reading and hearing about it, to try it out for four consecutive sessions to discover what it might mean for you. This handbook covers:

- how to join
- the purpose and history of Small Group Ministry in general
- the structure of the groups, how they are formed, and how they fit into the larger structure of the SGM program and First UU as a whole
- the format of the group meetings
- guidelines for participating in the discussion
- how topics for the discussions are chosen

How to Join

If, after reading this handbook and perhaps hearing more about the groups from members and facilitators, you think you would like to try the experience contact Chari Campbell at charicampbell@comcast.net or (561) 575-7981 or leave your name with the Office Administrator. Indicate what times you are available and the geographic area in which you live. The more options, in terms of time, you provide, the better the Steering Committee can do its job. The Steering Committee forms new groups or places new members in existing groups that are best able to accommodate new members, taking into account preferred days and meeting times, location of the groups, and an attempt to obtain diversity. **Please do not try to select your own group, either by giving only one time option or by just showing up.**

Small Group Ministry in General

The SGM idea has spread quickly through Unitarian-Universalist churches. It was virtually unknown fifteen years ago and now hundreds of churches have programs underway. Of course, there is nothing new about members meeting together in small groups and having discussions. However, the groups of a SGM program have a unique set of features that make them different from study groups, classes, committees, task forces, support groups, affinity groups, or any of the other groups that one typically finds in a church.

- **These groups are people-centered rather than topic-centered or task-centered.** You may get to know people by serving on a committee with them, but

that's not why committees exist. Committee meetings are designed to get something done, not to foster connections between people.

- **These groups are ongoing rather than running for a set term.** Not everyone who joins a group will stay with it for years and years, but the possibility is there if you want it.
- **These groups are not isolated, but part of a program that is integrated with the larger life of the church.**

Purpose

The purpose of SGM motivates everything about it, from the size of the groups, the structure of the program, the form of the meetings, the topics discussed, and the ground rules of discussion. Different churches have used different words to describe the purpose of Small Group Ministry programs, but the same general themes are always present. We chose to express it in this way: Members of a Small Group Ministry group get to know one another by participating together in discussions of topics of universal human and spiritual significance. The sense of community that develops in a group radiates outward, increasing the members connection to the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Palm Beaches, as a whole.

The statement of purpose also explains what SGM is and is **not**. SGM is **not** a debate society or a study group. The point is **not** to convert other people to your opinion or to impress them with your intelligence and knowledge, but to speak your truth so that others can know you, and to listen to others speak their truth so that you can know them. The topics are **not** ends in themselves; we don't talk about, say, community or forgiveness because we want everyone to become experts in community and forgiveness. The topics are means to the end of getting to know each other. By carefully listening to each other grapple with the topics, the participants learn about each other in a different way than they would by serving on a committee or meeting at a purely social event.

SGM is also **not** therapy. The point is to get to know one another, **not** to solve each other's problems or give each other advice. It's **not** "Truth or Dare". People get to know each other **not** by confessing their deepest darkest secrets, but by participating together in personal discussions. The topics are intended to focus the group's attention on the things we have in common, just by being human. And so SGM groups are **not** affinity groups; the topics do not assume any shared special interests or experiences. But everyone was born and everyone one will die. Everyone has successes and failures, loves and losses. Everyone has the same fundamental needs and the same basic emotions. Just being human gives us a great deal to talk about.

Finally, the purpose of a small group is **not** to replace UU's other activities or to cut group members off from the rest of the congregation, but to draw them further in. Many other UU churches have found that SGM does not satiate or exhaust the participants'

appetite for community, but whets it. Having been listened to, accepted and treated with respect in one church activity they are encouraged to try others.

History

SGM evolved out of the covenant group programs created by Christian mega-churches. The original idea was to create a more intimate experience of church so that members would not feel lost and insignificant in a congregation of several thousand. These groups focused on Bible study and saw themselves as recreating the experience of the original Christian cells. Naturally, the Christian mega-church vision could not be transplanted to most UU churches without a great deal of adaptation. For example, bible study was replaced with discussion of universal human topics. The first UU churches to start SGM programs had to do a lot of hard work. Fortunately, several of these churches wrote down what they did and made it available to other churches. Much of this has been put on the web. Our Steering Committee borrowed materials from UU churches across the country and Puerto Rico, and adopted many of Joseph Hill's ideas as we developed this lay ministry. First UU's Small Group Ministry began its groups in March, 2003.

The Groups

This section describes how the Small Group Ministry groups are organized, what you commit yourself to when you join, how to join, the "open chair" concept, and how groups might split in two, or leave the program, and the role of the facilitator.

The Value of Diversity and Stuckness

One reason family relationships are so intimate is that you are stuck with these people. Your siblings, parents, and children may be completely different from you and may even drive you crazy, but you learn to deal with them because you can't replace them. Conversely, they have to deal with you, warts and all, because they are stuck with you. The Small Group Ministry program intentionally incorporates elements of diversity and of "stuckness". You don't get to shop around for your group. You probably will be in a group with people you don't know, and may wind up in a group with some one you initially don't like. Believe or not, this is good. If you could shop for a group, you would enter the meeting in a place of judgment, trying to decide whether these people measure up to your standards or not. Conversely, they would be looking at you from a place of judgment and deciding whether you measure up to their standards. But because participants don't get to choose their groups, there is no point in passing judgment on each other. Make the best of being stuck. Enjoy some diversity in your life. And you may make some new best friends.

The Open Chair

An empty chair is placed in each circle to symbolize the openness of the group to the admission of new members. This concept is especially important in a Church setting because it represents our commitment to inclusiveness.

Group Size and Splitting

Groups should optimally have 6-8 members. If six people cannot be found who want to meet at a particular time, no group will be formed in that time slot. If a group grows beyond 6 to 9 or 10, it may be split. Typically, half the members stay in a group with the facilitator and half form a new group with the assistant facilitator. Splitting a group is one of the more difficult points in an SGM program. On the one hand it is a positive development that proves the program is growing in a healthy, organic way. But on the other hand, it means that some of the people you are accustomed to seeing will not be in your group any more. The experience of other congregations indicates that group splitting is best done by the steering committee, rather than allowing the group to split itself. It is important that groups not split according to factions, and that neither of the new groups feel rejected by the other. Often no one will want to leave a popular facilitator. To be honest, splitting can be a difficult point in the life of a group; having the steering committee split the group minimizes the opportunity for blame and hard feelings. In some cases it just may be better not to split a group.

Committed Couples

Partners choose whether to be in the same group or to join separate groups. We do not have a problem with that. However, we do encourage you, if possible, to consider participating in a different group from your partner. If you are willing to give this a try, you may find it rewarding. You may discover that you will experience your group differently and that your group will get to know you better. Some of our facilitators have found that “separate groups for spouses” creates a positive and energetic dynamic in the group. (Let’s face it; you’ve already heard his or her stories a few times, right?) So try your own group, you might like it!

Commitment

Joining the Small Group Ministry program means taking on the following commitments:

- **You commit yourself to making the group meetings a high priority.** Everyone from time to time runs into unpredictable events (like illness) that make it impossible to attend a particular meeting. But if you know from the outset that you will not be able to attend the meetings regularly, don’t sign up.
- **You commit to give the group and its members a chance.** You may already know a number of the people in your group and may have prior opinions about them. Or you may have prior opinions about people like them, for example, opinions about old people or young people, men or women, or whatever. We ask

that you do your best to put aside your prior opinions and give everyone in your group a chance to surprise you.

- **You commit to attend four consecutive meetings of your group.** In the experience of the congregations that have tried SGM, four meetings are what it takes to give the group a chance. If four two-hour meetings are too much for you to risk on a group, don't sign up.
- **If you continue with the group after the initial four meeting period, you commit to stay with your group through the end of “the season” (the season generally runs October through May, although some groups meet longer).** The seasonal approach allows individual members to fulfill their commitment to the group, and then to decide whether to sign up for the following season. If it becomes necessary for you to break this commitment, please tell the facilitator or a member of the SGM Steering Committee. It's important for us to know the true size of a group when we are making decisions about whether to add members.
- **You commit to abide by the group covenant.** Unitarian-Universalism is based not on creeds but on covenants, agreements about how we will be together and how we will treat each other. Each group will establish its own rules and practices for showing respect to each other. The initial covenant of each group is the "Guidelines for Discussion" listed later in this handbook. Each group can alter these rules as it sees fit, while retaining the goal of honoring the inherent worth and dignity of each individual.

SGM Leadership

The Steering Committee

The Steering Committee is comprised of the current facilitators, and is coordinated by a member of that team. Facilitators are selected and trained by the SGM Steering Committee. The facilitators are church members who have had the opportunity to co-lead or lead sessions with their current facilitator, prior to leading their own group, and who express an interest in spiritual and personal development, and furthering the goals of the SGM Program. The Steering Committee provides periodic training for the new and future facilitators. Facilitators meet as a group, once a month, for skill and program development. In these meetings they compare notes, discuss problems, plan topics, and make any necessary changes to the program. Our group facilitators are Bob Ashmore, Chari Campbell, Mary Rubeiz., Jim Meyer and Richard Keeland.

The Coordinator

Chari Campbell currently serves as SGM Coordinator, and is responsible to communicate with the Church Council about our SGM Program. Program decisions are made by the Steering Committee, by consensus, whenever possible.

Facilitators

Each group will have a facilitator and eventually (if possible) an assistant facilitator. The facilitator's role is very important. Un-facilitated or poorly facilitated groups are easily

dominated by the loudest or most loquacious members, and the check-in period tends to expand until it fills the entire meeting. The job of the facilitator is to keep the group on schedule, to keep the discussion moving in a productive direction, to give everyone a chance to participate, to maintain awareness of the group's rules, and to mediate any conflicts that may arise. In addition, the facilitator models the tact, openness, and respect that are the hallmarks of a successful group. By meeting regularly with the other facilitators, each facilitator links his/her group to the program as a whole and makes sure that special concerns come to the attention of the minister in a timely fashion.

The facilitator is a member of the group. S/he checks in and checks out with everyone else and participates in the discussion. The facilitator is not assumed to be an expert on the topic under discussion, and his/her opinion on the topic should carry no more weight than anyone else's. The facilitator should try to manage the discussion with as light a hand as possible, and the group should respect the facilitator's efforts to keep the discussion moving. When a conflict develops between the facilitator's two roles, s/he should be a facilitator first and a participant second.

The Minister

The minister serves as consultant to the SGM Steering Committee. The minister responds to referrals made by Facilitators concerning the special ministerial needs of group members.

Dealing with Problems

Most problems are best addressed directly. If you have a conflict with another member of your group, try to work it out with that person. If the direct approach doesn't work, take your problem to the facilitator of your group. If your conflict is with the facilitator, you may bring the problem to one or more of the steering committee. The steering committee can decide to move you to another group, either because of a personal conflict or a schedule conflict, but that solution is not recommended.-

The Meetings

Where and When:

Our groups currently meet once a month, typically for two hours. Each group has the option to meet more often, if the group so chooses. Groups decide for themselves where to meet. One popular pattern is for members to take turns hosting the meetings in their homes. This creates an intimate, homey environment for the meetings and divides the work involved in hosting. Another possibility is for groups to meet at the church, which may be a more central location than any member's home. If your group does plan to meet at the church, make sure to call the office and reserve a room. It is advisable to divide the roles of facilitator and host, so that the facilitator can give full attention to the discussion without worrying about the coffee running out.

The Format of an SGM Session:

Opening Words: A short reading that provides a transition from the pre-meeting milling around period to the meeting itself. This may be coupled with a simple ritual such as chalice lighting.

Check-in: Each participant is given the opportunity to tell the group what is going on in his or her life. Each person is encouraged to speak but has the option to pass. Groups and their facilitators have a lot of leeway in deciding how much of their meeting time to allot to check-in. Check-in may vary from a few sentences to a few minutes per person. It may take a group several meetings to decide how it wants to handle check-in, but clear expectations should be established and upheld, with allowance for exceptional situations. In some groups an egg-timer is passed around the circle while each member shares. Some groups rely on the facilitator or a designated time-keeper to help participants know when their time is up. Participants need to realize that consistently lengthy check-ins become a major cause of friction in SGM groups. By using more time for check-in than anyone else, you are making an implicit claim that your life is more important or more interesting than the lives of the other participants. Groups should establish their own norms concerning the level of interaction that is appropriate during check-in. In some groups there is no interaction; only the person checking in speaks. Other groups allow questions or expressions of concern during check-in. In no circumstances should check-in degenerate into uninvited advice-giving, problem-solving, or (worst of all) passing judgment.

Introduction of the Topic: The facilitator reads a word, phrase, or paragraph that introduces the topic. Typically the reading will conclude with a series of questions that invite the participants to relate the topic to their personal experiences.

Discussion of the Topic: The discussion is a group activity through which the participants get to know each other. It is not a debate or an argument, and should never be a monologue. The group is not trying to find an answer or reach consensus about the topic. See the "Ground Rules of Discussion" section. Not all of the questions raised need to be answered by all of the participants, but everyone should contribute something. The questions are a launching point for the discussion, not a quiz. The group and its facilitator need to strike a balance between letting the energy of the discussion flow and maintaining a focus on the topic.

Check-out: This part of the meeting may be called "Likes and Wishes" to emphasize the positive. You are invited to comment on your experience of the meeting, or to say how the meeting has affected your mood or overall emotional state. This is the time to express gratitude for the things you liked about the meeting, or concerns about how the meeting structure is working, and to make constructive suggestions for future meetings. Participants should **not** use the check-out to try to get the last word on the discussion. As in check-in, a person may pass.

Closing Words: The group closes with another reading, usually shorter than the opening words. If a chalice was lit during the opening words, it should be extinguished now. At the end of the reading, the meeting is officially over.

The Topics:

Small Group Ministry is intended to enhance participants' connection with the community, not create islands cut off from the rest of the congregation. For this reason, we would like to keep the groups reasonably in sync. Groups discuss the same topics at more-or-less the same time. If your group has been discussing, the concept of forgiveness, you know that members of other groups either have been discussing forgiveness recently or will discuss it. In this way, the SGM topics can become general topics of discussion throughout the congregation. (Naturally, we expect SGM participants to be able to discuss the general topics outside their groups without revealing anything told to them in confidence by the other participants.)

Topics are selected by the steering committee in consultation with the Minister. Group members are encouraged to suggest topics to their facilitator or to the steering committee, and even to write session plans if they feel inspired to do so.

Groups have some leeway to decide how much advance warning they want to have about the topics. Most groups approach each topic spontaneously, arriving at each meeting without knowing the topic ahead of time. We recommend spontaneity as a way of avoiding an overly intellectual approach to the topic, and we hope that each group will at least try a spontaneous session before rejecting the idea. Keep in mind that purpose of the meeting is to draw each other out, not to have a discussion worthy of PBS. If you do know the topic ahead of time, the best way to prepare is to introspect, relating the topic to your own experiences. Studying for the discussion by reading books or articles can be counter-productive; you may enter the meeting ready to present someone else's thoughts rather than your own, and the other participants will learn little about your feelings and experiences.

Guidelines for Group Discussion:

Given that the purpose of the discussion is for the participants to get to know each other, the guidelines are intended to foster a secure, supportive environment that draws people out and encourages them to say what they really think and feel. This is in contrast to the atmosphere of a debate society, in which people say only what they are confident they can defend. At times there is a natural tension between saying what you think or feel and supporting others in saying what they think or feel. (For example, you may feel that so-and-so is being a jerk, or think that his/her opinion is totally wrong-headed.) Dealing with this tension is a valuable skill that the SGM program tries to teach. If you believe that you must either squelch yourself or squelch someone else, you are probably not seeing all your options. The basic rule, which motivates all the other guidelines, is: **Show respect for others.** Don't assume that others are less intelligent or less informed, or that their experiences are less valuable than yours. Don't abuse or denigrate people who disagree with you. Instead, try to stretch your imagination in a positive direction by picturing how good-hearted, intelligent people could say and think and believe the things you're hearing.

SGM Group Discussion Guidelines:

- **Be clear about issues of confidentiality.** What is said in the group remains in the group. If you want the group to keep something confidential, say so. If you are wondering whether you can tell people something that you've heard in the group, ask.
- **Listen carefully.** Don't be too quick to assume that another participant is saying something you've heard and rejected in the past.
- **Participate, but share speaking time with others.** Don't jump into every gap in the conversation; silence allows people time to introspect and collect their thoughts. But do share your ideas and experiences, even if they don't seem as impressive as those of other participants.
- **Address your remarks to the group, not to the facilitator.**
- **Suspend judgment.** You'll get to know other participants much more quickly and deeply if you listen to them non-judgmentally. No decisions are resting on the outcome of the discussion, so it's not important who's right and who's wrong.
- **Speak for yourself.** When possible, express yourself in first-person statements ("I didn't follow what you just said."), rather than universal pronouncements ("The world doesn't work that way.") or second-person statements ("You're talking nonsense.")
- **Speak to people, not about people.** If you have a conflict with a group or church member, discuss it directly with them.
- **Don't give unsolicited advice.** Not everyone who mentions a personal problem wants the group to offer a solution. Those who do want advice can ask for it.
- **Communicate your needs.** If some aspect of the group is not working for you, say so at an appropriate time. We include time in each session during "Likes and Wishes" for you to offer a constructive suggestion for changes in your group. Either tell the group as a whole or discuss it with the facilitator privately. Don't assume that people know what you're thinking or that they don't care -- give them a chance to do well by you.
- **Be ready to begin at the appointed time.** In order to do this, you may need to arrive early to greet others and get some coffee. By beginning and ending on time, a group shows respect for its members.

Groups Leaving the SGM Program:

Occasionally a SGM group may find that the rules and procedures of the SGM program are too constraining. Perhaps the group wants to choose its own topics, or stop accepting new members, or avoid a split, or organize its meetings in some way that is radically different from the SGM program. The SGM Steering Committee does not impose discipline on such a group. The group's participants are free members of a free church, and they can meet together in any way they choose. We do ask, however, that a group which (by consensus) decides not to be bound by the process described in this handbook

should leave the SGM program and stop calling itself "Small Group Ministry". In making this decision, the group is not leaving First UU.

1stUUCPB has plenty of room for support groups, affinity groups, study groups, or any other kind of gathering that is consistent with Unitarian-Universalist principles. For example, many of our members enjoy participating in our Book Club; the "Creativity Circle"; "HATS", a women's support group; or "The Men's Group". If you desire more information about any of these opportunities, contact the Adult Programs Chair.

Welcome

Having read about Small Group Ministry and seen how we have implemented the program here at First Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of the Palm Beaches, we hope you're as excited as we are and that you're ready to give it a try. We bid you welcome, and wish you best of luck in your new adventure.