



SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF SAN JOSE

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) October 17, 2001

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1. Purpose and Goals of the Small Group Ministry

1.1 What goals are we attempting to reach by establishing small groups?

To develop a growing network of small groups that:

1. Draw us into mutual ministry
2. Strengthen our congregation
3. Deepen our understanding of Unitarian-Universalist principles and values
4. Continuously develop lay leadership
5. Challenge us to action and spiritual growth
6. Express our principles and values in the community
7. Help members identify their own calling and expression of lay ministry

1.2 In what way is the small group ministry to be ministry?

The SGM is ministry in that:

1. It enables us to discover what we really value, and encourages us to express those values in our actions,... transforming our society
2. Its primary emphasis is to care for people---to serve them, encourage them to spiritual growth, and meet their needs for affirmation and acceptance.
3. It creates an open, supportive, nurturing environment that promotes and facilitates spiritual growth and mutual, interactive care for one another.
4. It offers opportunities to search and grow at our own pace and in our own way through telling our stories, learning, loving one another, and contributing ourselves and our resources.
5. It offers an open chair, recognizing that everybody needs a place to experience community. Excitement and enthusiasm arise as lives change and new people enter into meaningful relationship in community in which everybody is cared for.
6. It provides a quality of caring and intimacy that many people long for.
7. Although its leaders are not trained to be professional counselors, it provides opportunities for members to be referred to sources of the appropriate care they require.
8. In the small groups we can identify and use our spiritual gifts.

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1.3 What is the relationship (if any) between the small group ministry and evensong groups current committees/action groups in the congregation? (Worship Associates, Social Action Committee, etc.) current affinity groups in the congregation? (Mens groups, etc.) the adult education ministry of the congregation?

Groups that meet for a limited period, like adult education classes, will be separate from the Small Group Ministry. Existing long-term groups are encouraged to explore a range of options in relation to the Small Group Ministry. Materials are available to assist groups in this decision-making process. Current groups may choose to:

1. Transition into SGM groups
2. Send leaders and/or representatives to the monthly Leadership Community Gatherings
3. Adapt their meetings to include the elements of worship and deep listening, in addition to the regular business of the group
4. Use some of the resources that the Small Group Ministry Council produces
5. Continue completely outside the Small Group Ministry “umbrella”

2. Leadership

2.1 Do all small groups have a leader & a co-leader? Yes

1. Role of Leader
 - a. Act as local representative of the lay ministry of our church
 - b. Express and model the goals and purposes of the SGM
 - c. Mentor the Co-leader
2. Role of Co-leader
 - a. Assist the leader in leading the group
 - b. Learn to lead

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2.2 Who is responsible for recruiting leaders?

1. The SGM Council has primary responsibility for recruiting leaders.
2. Ministers and current leaders encourage, identify key members, and recruit future leaders.

2.3 How are leaders recruited?

1. Announcement via Monthly Leadership Community Gathering, worship services, and newsletter.
2. Candidates submit applications.
3. A subset of the SGM Council and the Ministers select leaders.

2.4 By what criteria are leaders selected?

1. Commitment to the greater good of the congregation
2. Good listener
3. Ability to express and represent a UU perspective
4. Church member
5. Ability manage group dynamics
6. Respect for individuals' spiritual paths
7. Commitment to spiritual growth for self and others
8. Ability to commit to a term of two years (a re-application is required every two years)
9. Participation in initial and continuing leadership training

2.5 Is training required for leaders and co-leaders? Yes

1. Training will include:
 - a. SGM leadership Guidelines and responsibilities
 - b. Where to go for support
 - c. Mission and goals for SGM
 - d. SGM FAQ
 - e. Asking open ended questions that lead to thinking more deeply
 - f. Standard group process
 - g. Practice of Leadership in a "group of leaders"
 - h. Working with folks with special care required
 - i. Content ideas and themes
2. Training is organized and directed by SGM council.
3. Continuing training is provided through the monthly Leadership Community Gathering, the SGM web site, books, and tapes.

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2.6 What are the responsibilities of leaders and co-leaders toward their groups, toward one another, and toward the congregation?

1. Leader

- a. Gather the group.
- b. Explain the rules and responsibilities of group members when a group is forming and meeting for the first time. Also remind group of responsibilities as required (such as when a new member joins).
- c. Promote awareness of the programs, activities, and governance of the church.
- d. Attend monthly Leadership Community Gathering.
- e. Facilitate the group process and interactions of group members, including defining the topic such that there is a meeting focus. Ensure the goals and purposes of SGM are met.
- f. Encourage and facilitate the group's stages, including adding members, releasing members, and birthing.
- g. Encourage mutual care-giving.
- h. Reflect on the group and its processes with the co-leader.
- i. Call group members when they miss a meeting or do not call in to state they are not attending.
- j. Contact minister(s) or pastoral care associate(s) when the leader has knowledge of a situation requiring support beyond the scope of the SGM group.
- k. Keep meetings on track:
 - 1) Gently intervene when a member talks too long.
 - 2) Encourage quiet members to speak or ask for opinions as appropriate.
 - 3) Keep track of time (or have someone else help track time) for each section or portion of the meeting.
- l. Facilitate choosing the topic for each session
- m. Facilitate annual group self-assessment.
- n. Facilitate selection of the meeting time and location.
- o. Look for potential new members for the group and invite them. (The SGM Council assists with matching groups and new members.)
- p. Look for potential new leaders within the group and within the congregation.

2. Co-Leader

- a. Attend monthly Leadership Community Gathering.
- b. Facilitate when the leader is absent.
- c. Reflect on the group and its processes with the leader.
- d. Provide support and feedback to the leader.
- e. Share decision making with the leader.
- f. Prepare to step into a leadership role.

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2.7 What do we disallow leaders and co-leaders from doing?

Leaders and co-leaders may not:

1. Allow the group to function as a therapy session. (A therapy group focuses on advice giving, personal problem solving.)
2. Promote philosophies that are contrary to UU principles and values.
3. Allow disrespectful behavior within the group.
4. Use the group as a platform for the leader's own perspective.
5. Dominate the group.

2.8 What is the Leadership Community Gathering, and what happens in it?

1. Monthly meeting of all small group leaders, co-leaders, and other lay leaders
2. The gathering has three components: worship, presentation, break-out groups
3. Led by Ministers and other key leaders
4. Presentations may include trainings, upcoming themes, goal setting, or evaluation
5. Visioning, Huddling, and Support
6. Helps develop and reflect the goals and programs of the congregation

2.9 What is the Small Group Ministry Council, and what does it do?

1. The SGM council consists of: At least one minister, representatives of teams (content, leadership, logistics teams)
2. The SGM Council supports and guides the SGM
3. Recruits leaders, subset of Council selects leaders
4. Gathers and prepares content for groups
5. Plans, reviews, & improves Leadership Community Gathering
6. Plans and implements annual evaluation process
7. Maintains the SGM Registry (integrated within the church data base) that contains:
 - a. Leader name, time and location of meeting
 - b. Co-leader
 - c. List of members
 - d. Date last new member was introduced
 - e. Status as to whether the group feels ready for a new member, whether they are close to birthing.
 - f. Focus of group if any
 - g. Attendance

2.10 How is SGM Leader's and Co-Leader's service completed or terminated?

1. Terms are two years in length with a possibility of renewal by applying to the SGM Council.
2. Leaders and co-leaders who are not able to fulfill their responsibilities as listed in 2.6 or violate prohibitions in 2.7 will be asked to step down by the SGM Council.

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3. Establishing and Maintaining Groups

3.1 Who is responsible for establishing groups?

1. The SGM Council is responsible for establishing groups and ensuring that those who wish to be part of a SGM group can do so.
2. The SGM Council determines the needs for various types of groups (general interest or special interest groups) and the number of groups of each type.
3. The SGM council recruits the group leaders.

3.2 How do people join a group?

There are multiple avenues for entry into a group:

1. Continuous open enrollment
2. By invitation by members of the group
3. By recommendation of the SGM Council and agreement of the group
4. During the periods of “Reforming/Reshuffling”

3.3 How does group membership relate to church membership?

Reflecting on the SGM mission statement, it is important that group leaders be church members, but group members are not required to be church members.

3.4 How is the diversity of the congregation expressed in the small group context?

The SGM program encourages opportunities for different sectors of the congregation to come to know one another at a deeper level. To the extent possible, all SGM groups are encouraged to reflect the diversity of the congregation.

3.5 How often can a group absorb a new member, and how is a new member integrated?

1. 2-3 new members per year.
2. New members are integrated into the group using a session that allows all to tell their individual and group stories, deepening and revealing different facets for ongoing members.

3.6 How and when do groups birth?

1. An expectation of growth and birthing is an integral part of the initial formation of the group.
2. When the group reaches about 12-14 people, it is ready to birth.
3. The SGM Council makes available a birthing process that facilitates discernment, decision, transition, celebration, and re-integration.
4. The leadership of the two newly forming groups is determined by the SGM Council.
5. The congregation recognizes and blesses the newly formed groups in an all church ritual. This supports/encourages other groups approaching the magic number to birth.

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4. Content & Process of Gatherings

The purpose of the content and process is to create gatherings that invite intimacy, allow for serious engagement with religious and spiritual topics, and lead toward expression of our principles and values in action. The intention is to obtain a balance of the personal and the thought provoking.

4.1 What is the content of SGM gatherings?

1. The core of the content is the group's shared life stories in response to thought provoking UU oriented themes, and the insights we draw from them.
2. SGM meetings are generally structured around worship, intimate connection with one another, radical listening, exploring a theme together, and openness to what comes next.
3. The materials to support these include meeting outlines, openings, songs, readings, questions to prompt discussion, closings, and ceremonies for group transitions (beginning, bringing in new group members, sending members forth, birthing new groups, transitioning leadership, and ending groups).

4.2 What is the process of the SGM gatherings?

The process usually consists of:

1. Lighting the chalice
2. Opening ritual (song, chant, responsive reading)
3. Brief Check-in (optional)
4. Reading(s) with evocative questions
5. Silent moment
6. Sharing on topic (radical listening)
7. Discussion (optional)
8. Close out sharing (ritual way to close: reading, song, silence, giving thanks)
9. Likes and wishes
10. Closing ritual
11. Informal socializing

4.3 Who is responsible for the content?

The SGM content team continuously develops and maintains materials for small groups. In developing the content, the team may draw on materials that are produced by the UUA, by other churches, by SGM groups within our church, by the church at large, by sources available on the Internet, and other written and audiovisual materials.

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4.4 Do we want all groups to be on the same topics/themes, and is any coordination desired with worship topics? Why can't each group just decide on its own topics?

1. New groups are required to follow an initial series of four sessions, meant to help groups to develop momentum, trust, intimacy, and become familiar with the Small Group Ministry process.
2. When groups are exploring the same topics, opportunities for meaningful conversation and connection are multiplied throughout the congregation. Therefore, the SGM council, under the guidance of our ministerial staff, suggests themes and content that are shared in the monthly Leadership Community Gatherings. The leaders then work with their groups to incorporate the themes and content as appropriate.
3. In addition to the ample selection of materials provided by the SGM Council, all small groups are encouraged to develop their own materials and themes approximately 15% of the time (i.e. about one meeting out of 6 or 7).
4. The leaders are asked to express the desires of their groups for future thematic emphasis through the monthly Leadership Community Gatherings.

4.5 If a group wants to develop its own themes/ topics, is any approval or oversight needed? If approval and oversight are needed, how are they provided?

1. No prior approval is required for the topics chosen by a particular group. However, each group must keep in mind the Purposes and Goals of SGM in this church and the prohibitions applied to leaders in Section 2.7.
2. In order to enrich the general list of topics, group leaders and co-leaders may share the topics developed by their groups during the monthly Leadership Community Gatherings.

4.6 How is the SGM content made available to the small groups?

1. All materials are made available in a SGM content library.
2. All soft copy material is also posted on the SGM content web page.
3. Themes and materials are shared in the monthly Leadership Community Gatherings.

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5. Group Responsibilities

5.1 Is there a recommended frequency of meeting?

Groups are encouraged to meet weekly during the first 4 weeks. After that groups are encouraged to meet during the first and third weeks of each month to help coordinate with other church meetings and functions.

5.2 Is there a required or recommended involvement in the congregation?

1. As one of the purposes is to strengthen the congregation through participation in SGM, members of each group are encouraged to attend Sunday worship services in addition to SGM meeting. This strengthens the congregation as a whole as well as providing the opportunity for members of different groups to share their experiences with one another, to cross-pollinate at coffee hour.
2. While not requiring specific congregational involvement, each group is encouraged to actively and concretely express its ever-deepening understanding of UU principles and beliefs through service to the congregation.

5.3 Is each group expected to make certain commitments to the wider community? If so, what are the expected commitments?

1. Groups have a life cycle all their own and each small group experiences defined and different phases of growth. Energy for service will become available and will be a natural outgrowth of each group's maturity.
2. Beginning groups are much like seedlings which must be nurtured carefully in order to take root. During this phase, groups nurture their fledgling relationships and the beginnings of trust among members as they share their own stories. Each group may experience a period where their attention is more inwardly focused.
3. As time passes and groups become more established, members derive energy from their relationships with each other and from the love experienced within the group; then their energy is more outwardly directed. As groups mature, there is a natural urge to express this energy towards our congregation, our community and the world at large. Finally, as all plants must bear fruit, each group will, as a part of its natural life cycle, come to a place when it is time to birth and create a new small group. This birth furthers our goals of strengthening our congregation and our commitment to our community.

5.4 How are the financial needs of the groups met?

The church is responsible for basic supplies and expenses, such as copying. Otherwise groups are responsible for any additional expenses, such as refreshments, special retreats, etc. Each group can decide how such additional expenses will be handled.

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6. Group Functioning

6.1 Is each group member expected to make certain commitments to the group, to the congregation, or to the wider community? Yes:

1. Commitment to the Group

- a. Maintain basic UU principles
- b. Fully participate as you are able and in your own mode of expression
- c. Be present in mind, body, and spirit
- d. Be open to knowing others; be open to knowing yourself
- e. One person speaks at a time, while all others listen respectfully
- f. Maintain confidentiality when requested and when appropriate
- g. Respect each other by asking permission to give feedback
- h. Minister to each other
- i. Welcome new members to the group
- j. Commit to attend meetings for at least 6 months
- k. Begin and end meetings on time
- l. Let the leader and/or co-leader know when you cannot attend

2. Commitment to the church

- a. Folks participating in SGM should share, as appropriate, their experience with new members and others interested in the SGM concept
- b. It is not a requirement to make a commitment to work on community projects to participate in a Small Group. However, it is believed that working as a group on community projects will enhance the SGM experience
- c. A participant does not need to be a member of the church

6.2 Is the group expected to make certain commitments to each member? If so, what are the expected commitments?

1. Provide the opportunity for every member to fully participate in their own way
2. Provide the opportunity for every member to be heard
3. Contact a member when they do not attend
4. Respect the form of interaction defined by the activity. For example, radical listening versus group discussion
5. Provide a period for personal discussions after the meeting

6.3 What are the group meeting logistics?

1. Determine a location and time for each meeting
2. Chalice available at each meeting in an altar setting with circular seating (including candle and matches)
3. Bell available at each meeting
4. Tissue and water (or other drinks) will be available at all gatherings
5. Create a space that will not be interrupted by normal daily distractions (children, phones, pagers, spousal units)
6. Extra copies of materials and pens/pencils, program material

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7. Congregational Responsibilities

7.1 What resources are made available to the small groups?

1. Small Group Ministry Council
2. Trained leaders and co-leaders
3. Monthly leadership community gatherings
4. Themes
5. Content
6. A chalice for each group
7. Administrative support (copying, database maintenance, etc.)

7.2 What support does the congregation provide to the groups and the SGM as a whole?

1. The congregation supports SGM groups with their blessings and encouragement for group births, transitions, and activities
2. The congregation holds the groups to the SGM policy
3. The congregation supports the ministers and other staff 's contribution (time commitment) to the Small Group Ministry efforts

8. Evaluation and Assessment Processes

8.1 What needs to be evaluated?

1. Leaders
2. Co-Leaders
3. Content / Format
4. Leadership Training / Gatherings
5. SGM Council
6. Participation statistics
7. External perceptions
8. Review of policies (annual)

8.2 What evaluation process is used?

1. Annual survey to SGM group members to provide feed back on the process to the SGM Council
2. Leadership group contacts selected members of SGM group to obtain direct feed back on leaders (once or twice per year)
3. Groups perform their own self evaluation on an annual basis
4. Any individual may provide feedback to the SGM council at any time
5. The SGM Council creates an annual report