



SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco

Participant Handbook 2007-2008

*Through the connections we weave in these Small Groups
we will strengthen the fabric of our whole community.*

The Small Group Ministries Program

A healthy, vital UU community is made up of people who are deeply connected to the spiritual, intellectual, caring, social, and service aspects of Unitarian Universalism and our own congregation. Like many UU churches across the country, our church has a program called Small Group Ministries (SGM) that supports these connections through intentional practice. The Small Group Ministries program is an ongoing, church-wide engagement and its purpose is to help us better realize our mission as a religious community.

Beginning in September 2007, all church members and friends will again have an opportunity to join a group of 8-12 people who will meet regularly at the church or in homes to engage in:

- **Spiritual seeking.** To deepen our spiritual lives and build on the benefits we receive from our regular worship services.
- **Community-building.** To foster positive connections among newer and long-time members of our congregation.
- **Ministry.** To extend the ministry at UUSF by caring for and ministering to one another.
- **Intellectual exploration.** To expand our understanding of the world and ways to demonstrate Unitarian Universalist principles in our lives.
- **Living our values.** To engage in service projects to benefit the church community, the neighborhood, or the larger society.

All Groups are led by trained facilitators who are UUSF members.

This is the sixth year of our program, running from September 2007 through May 2008 (although many groups choose to continue meeting throughout the summer). Most groups will begin in the last few weeks of September, but additional Groups may be "birthed" later as the need arises. Individuals may be assigned to existing groups during the year as well.

What Participants Say About Small Group Ministries

- 86% of participants surveyed in the past year say it is an **enjoyable and worthwhile use of their time.**
- 96% of participants would **recommend the program to a friend.**
- Almost 70% of participants said participation either somewhat or very much **helped them deepen their spiritual lives.**
- 82% said that participation helped to **foster positive connections amongst themselves and the congregation.**
- 86% reported that participation **helped them to care and minister for others at the church.**
- 90% felt that participation helped **expand their understanding of the world.**
- And finally, 68% felt that participation helped them to **find new ways to demonstrate UU principles in their lives!**

Expectations for Groups and Group Members

Regular gatherings. Groups meet for two hours, twice a month. Small Groups try to meet in comfortable, informal locations—either at a member’s home (provided there is adequate parking, transportation and accessibility) or at our church center on Franklin Street in San Francisco.

Initial commitment. All Group members commit to attend the initial four sessions. Then, those who wish to remain in the program are asked to commit to stay with their assigned group (barring unforeseen circumstances) through May 2008. Those who do not wish to continue may say goodbye at that point with no questions asked.

Respect for Privacy. Small Groups provide a safe environment for members to share their deepest thoughts when they feel comfortable doing so. Respect for each other’s privacy is very important in the Group and caution is called for when interacting with fellow group members in the larger setting of the church community, although fostering friendships among church members is a desired outcome of the program.

Attendance. Each member is very important to the life of the Group. Consequently, Small Group members make attendance at all Small Group sessions a high priority in their lives. If a member cannot attend a particular gathering, he or she is expected to notify the facilitator in advance.

Follow a format. Although each group will develop its own customs, all Small Groups follow a guided format that consists of an opening ritual, check-in, topic discussion, check out, and closing ritual. The amount of time participants spend on each item is guided so that everyone has a chance to participate, share, and listen.

Open membership. From time to time new members may be added to existing groups. An “empty chair” at all Small Group gatherings symbolizes the group's openness and welcome to new members.

Group Norms. Each Small Group will establish ground rules for participation. These, along with the UU Statement of Principles, serve as the foundation for the group's practice.

The Application Process

All UUSF members and friends will have an opportunity to participate in SGM by filling out an application. The application must be received by September 16, 2007. To sign up, please complete the enclosed application, or register online by following the “Apply to UUSF Small Group Ministries” link at <http://www.uusf.org>.

After initial sign-ups, the SGM Steering Committee will make member assignments to groups based on preferences indicated by applicants as well as other factors such as group size. Subsequent assignments after the initial weeks will be made as space becomes available.

Group formation is based on the first UU principle honoring the worth and dignity of every person, and is intended to connect people across age, gender, ethnic, and other differences. Although it is understandable to gravitate toward a group that includes friends and people with whom we have much in common, participants say that the most rewarding experiences result from meeting with people unlike themselves.

In making assignments to Groups, every effort will be made to help with access and childcare concerns. As is church policy for all meetings, childcare can be available if requested. Your particular needs can be indicated on the SGM Participant Application form or brought to the attention of a Steering Committee member before a group assignment is made.

What Small Group Ministries is intended to offer participants:

- A way to deepen our spirituality through shared practice.
- A way to come together to explore important and interesting topics.
- A way to deepen our connections with the congregation.
- A way to organize and practice service to the larger community.
- A way to connect across age, gender, ethnic, economic, and other differences.
- A way to help newer members engage with our community.
- A way to explore and deepen our practice of our shared UU principles.
- A way to be engaged, included, and heard in a safe, nurturing environment.

What Small Group Ministries is not intended to be:

- A social club, although ties between church members deepen through SGM.
- A debate society, although many important topics are discussed
- A support or therapy group, although the atmosphere is positive.
- A worship service, although there is a strong spiritual aspect to the meeting structure and topics.
- A rigid template of activities, although there are general guidelines to follow.
- A closed “fraternity”, although groups must be limited in size to be effective

2007-2008 SGM Steering Committee

Carol Ruley (Chairperson)
Laura Graham
Kate Kuckro
Sandra Niman
Alison Rittger