

**First Parish Church of Stow and Acton**

**PARTICIPANT'S HANDBOOK**

***For***

**SMALL GROUP MINISTRY**

Welcome to Small Group Ministry. We hope Ministry Groups will become an important part of the life of our religious community, and that participants will establish new and deeper connections with one another. We hope this handbook will help you to make a successful transition into the Small Group Ministry.

Welcome,

Tom Rosiello

**What's Small Group Ministry About at First Parish Church of Stow and Acton?**

We believe that SGM will aid us in better realizing our mission as a congregation and a religious community. We hope the SGM will help to create a vibrant and vital religious community by providing resources in these four areas:

**Worship:** Worship is a central part in the life of our congregation. Small Group Ministry is intended not to replace, but to augment and strengthen that shared Experience.

**Community:** Ministry Groups meet the need for connection and intimacy that is both a deep hunger in our society, and essential to the ongoing life of the church.

**Learning:** People come to the church seeking spiritual growth, seeking to know themselves, to grow in their understanding of the world and to ponder age-old questions of faith, how to live, what to believe, what meanings we can decipher from the mystery of life, and how to act in accordance with these meanings.

**Service:** A life of faith is a life of service. As human beings, we seek to be of use, and a healthy congregation needs to provide avenues through which we may serve

**What Happens at an SMG Meetings?**

The meetings are focused on a collection of sessions developed within our congregation and by other UU congregations who have embarked on a Small Group Ministry Program. Topics include forgiveness, spiritual practices, loneliness, living simply, fear, healing. Groups will all follow the same order of topics. Session plans are simple.

**Opening Words and Chalice Lighting:** Opening words are chosen to gather people, help settle folks down, serve to remind people of the special opportunity of the gathering, and usually reflect the topic of the evening. A member of the group will light a chalice.

**Check-in:** Participants share news of what has been happening in their lives. Each group develops its own customs as to the length of sharing, and how to respond. This portion of the meeting may expand from time to time when circumstances call for it.

**Topic/Discussion:** A short introduction lays out the topic, and presents questions to elicit thoughtful discussion and reflection.

**Likes and Wishes:** This is a positive format for feedback. This may not be included every time.

**Closing Words:** This brings the formal session to an end. Groups are encouraged to start and end on time.

**Who Is In Charge of the Small Group Ministry?** The Minister, aided by a Steering Committee of Facilitators, has developed the guidelines and procedures for the Small Group Ministry Program. The Minister and facilitators will edit and/or write new outlines as needed. The Minister will meet monthly with Group Facilitators for discussion and guidance. They will develop recommendations to enhance the program and the role it plays in the life of our church. The Minister is in charge of assigning members to groups.

**Where Do Groups Meet?** Each group will meet initially at the church. They may decide later to meet in a member's home.

**How Long And How Often Do Meetings Last:** Sessions are designed to be two hours long, and it is important the members be respectful of the time. Each group will meet monthly.

**What Is Expected of a Ministry Group Participant?** Participants are expected to bring a willingness to share, and a desire to learn. What has emerged as the most important expectation that Participants have for one another is to give the meetings a high priority. While no one can make every meeting, members are asked to make every effort to attend.

**What Does the Facilitators Do?** The facilitators facilitate the life of the group. They make sure meetings begin and end on time. They ensure that members who miss a meeting are contacted. During the meeting, they read from the session plans and guide the discussion, or delegate someone to do so. They meet monthly with the minister and other facilitators and help to maintain the connection between individual groups and the larger church.

**Who Will Know What I Say?** There is an expectation of confidentiality within groups. Each group will discuss their level of comfort around confidentiality, and develop a covenant regarding the expectations of the group. The covenant will be reviewed by members from time to time. When there are significant pastoral concerns, a Facilitator may ask if he/she can share that concern with the Minister.

**How Does Small Group Ministry Grow?** We will always be in the process of forming new groups as new people become interested in joining. Groups are limited to 8-10 members. As groups reach their size limit, experienced group members, or facilitators-in-training, will be asked to start a new group. As the circumstances of members' lives change, the membership of a group will change. While it is sad to say goodbye, new members will be warmly welcomed and expand the circle of connection. Current plans call for groups to be re-structured about once a year.

**Is Small Group Ministry Therapy?** No. While participants in groups may often feel better connected and happier in their lives, SGM is not therapy. Professional therapy is readily available in our community. This SGM program offers connection, reflection, community and spiritual growth.

**How Does The Idea of Service Fit In?** The idea of service has been woven into the design of the small group ministry program from the beginning. We ask that over time every group take on some kind of service to the church and to the community. This may take on the form of assuming an existing opportunity for service, or creating a new one. Service beyond the group is important for two reasons. First, it helps to offset the natural tendency of small intimate groups to become self-absorbed and disconnected, and, second, because a necessary aspect of a growing spiritual life is service.

**Why Call It Small Group Ministry?** Over the years, we at First Parish Church have come to envision the ministry of the congregation as being widely shared. The called and settled minister is an important component, certainly, but so is the ministry of the laity. The ministry of our religious community is the work of the whole community.