

Developing a Roadmap to Covenant Group Ministry

A Seven-Hour Workshop

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Requirements:

Congregation preparation

The congregation's Covenant Group Leadership Team (LT), minister(s), and the staff person(s) who will provide administrative support for this ministry should brainstorm a list of questions about the impact of establishing small groups within the church.

Answering these and other questions will establish policies for your Covenant Group Ministry. The questions should cover such topics as:

- What are the goals of this ministry?
- What will the impact be on existing groups and structures within the congregation?
- What are the congregational responsibilities to the groups?
- What are the group responsibilities?
- Will the groups have leaders or facilitators?

The CCV training facilitator should be sent a list of the questions developed by the Leadership Team (LT), minister(s), and staff person(s) for the congregation's new covenant group ministry program.

Who should attend

- All ministers of the congregation
- All members of the leadership team for covenant groups
- Prospective facilitators for covenant groups
- All coaches (i.e., personal advisors and support persons for one or more facilitators)
- The staff person who will be responsible for assisting facilitators, minister, and members of the Leadership Team as well as all coaches for the congregations' new Covenant Group program

Materials and set-up

- Pencils, pens, and paper

- An easel and easel pad
- Felt-tipped pens
- Chalice or item for opening ritual on a table in the center of the group. The table should be decorated to set the tone for the ritual.
- Chairs arranged in a

Handouts

- “Covenant Groups: What They Are and How They Work” (four-page excerpt from CCV Covenant Group Resource Book)
- “Embodied Practices: Tools for Transformation”
- Copies of this One-Day Training Workshop for Facilitators
- Copies of one of the congregation’s favorite hymns or a spiritually uplifting popular song

The Day of the workshop

The CCV training facilitator should meet with this working group before the Workshop begins to review the checklist and learn of any last minute decisions about the structures in place for developing covenant groups in the congregation.

Workshop Agenda

9am	Opening, song, ritual such as lighting chalice
9:30	Define CCV Covenant Group Model
9:40	Embodied Practices
11:40	Lunch
12:40	Roadmap to establishing Covenant Groups
2:00	Getting Started, Next Steps
3:50	Close
4:00	Leadership Team meeting

Leadership Team Meeting will take place immediately after the Workshop. A Follow up, One-Hour Meeting with the Leadership Team and the minister(s) and staff person(s) immediately following the 7-hour workshop with the prospective facilitators

Workshop Script

Introduction

State purpose of the workshop:

The purpose of this workshop is to create a small group ministry model for _____ congregation that will help you envision and develop the tools you need as facilitators to create and maintain a covenant group program while helping you develop your talents as covenant group facilitators.

Define your role:

You will act as a process guide, a facilitator to help the workshop participants create a covenant group model for their congregation.

Lay out the workshop structure:

The workshop has four parts:

- A very brief definition of covenant groups
- An experiential exploration of why covenant groups are small group *ministries*, i.e. spiritual/religious exercises.
- The mechanics of covenant groups
- The requirements needed for starting covenant groups in this congregation.

Establish trust:

Tell a personal story that demonstrates how and why you became interested in covenant group work. (3 minutes)

Terminology

Say a few words about the terminology. We will be using Covenant Group Ministry (CGM) and Small Group Ministry (SGM) interchangeably.

- Worship = Liturgical practices
- Congregation = Overall group or organization
- Ministry = group leader

Participant Introductions:

Ask each person to introduce herself/himself (30 seconds or less). Note that you will point to your watch if the introduction is longer than 30 seconds. (Do not tell participants what they should say! This way you demonstrate trust in the participants' ability to say what is most important to them.)

Define CCV's Covenant Group Model:

In order to begin the work, you must introduce the group to the most basic components of covenant group work. Use the four-page excerpt from CCV's Covenant Group Source Book, entitled "What They Are and How the Work." Go over the most basic points. This explanation should not take more than one minute! Basically, you should read the first sentence of the first three paragraphs and then very quickly review the "the pattern." Don't forget to note service to the sponsoring congregation and to the larger community as part of the covenant group structure. An example of such a statement might be: A Covenant Group is made up of 6 to 12 persons who meet regularly (usually twice a month) for two hours in each others homes to share thoughts, feelings, and life experiences through attentive listening, engaged conversation and respectful practices that create open-hearted and open-minded engagement. Several times a year, members of the group perform a service to the wider community as part of its covenantal practice of right relationship. Covenant Groups are small group ministries that enhance the quality of life of its members through the ongoing practice of right relationships with self, others and the wider world.

Begin the Experiential component of the workshop:

Notes to the facilitator on timing exercises.

The best way to measure the actual time needed for this exercise (and all the other ones) is to let yourself intuitively determine how high you should count before ending the exercise. You will develop this ability to learn how to sense how much time a particular group needs for a given exercise. Perhaps you will count to 25, 40, or even 100! Trust your intuition and if the number seems excessively high, try to honor it. You will gain skill in this way of gauging the length of time needed for each exercise as you do the work. Remember the rule: Compassionate Patience. It is better to let the exercise last longer than needed than not to allow enough time for participants to discover through their own personal experience how their ability to relax is always present if they simply take the time to call it forth!

Note: We do not recommend that you stick to the arbitrary time of one minute. Rather, we thus suggest the time-length of each session to give you a general sense of how long the session should last so that there is more than enough time for persons to let themselves rest and enter into the experience. Try to use your own sense of gradual relaxation to determine if the exercise is working. Remember, if the exercise does not work for you, chances are it is not working for other persons in the room.

Explain the structure:

You will ask the participants to undertake a very simple series of mental exercises.

Their experiences will provide the group with the content for its discussions. These exercises and discussions will help participants understand why covenant groups are described as small group *ministries*.

Note: Use the fourth exercise only if the group has not had revelatory experiences by the end of the third exercise.

First Exercise – Listening to the Sounds in the Room

- **Sit comfortably.** Invite workshop participants to sit as comfortably as possible in their chairs so that their bodies are relaxed.
- **Listen to sounds in the room.** Ask participants to lower their eyes (as you do the same) and invite them to listen to the sounds in the room. Time: 1 minute.
- **Listen to heart beating.** Now ask the participants to keep their eyes lowered while they shift their attention to the sound of their own heart beating. Ask them to listen to the sound of their heart beating. Time: 1 minute.
- **Listen to Sounds in the Room.** Now ask the participants to keep their eyes lowered, while they again focus on the sounds in the room. Time: 1 minute.
- **Bring focus back to workshop.** Ask the participants to slowly focus their attention on the workshop. Always allow for enough time (perhaps 30 seconds) for persons to bring their attention back to the workshop. Do not rush through this process.
- **Describe experience.** Ask the participants if any of them noticed a difference between the first and second times they listened to the sounds in the room – and if so, to describe the difference. Listen to the responses without attempting to either interpret or reiterate them. Simply smile empathically. You will notice that a few of the participants are amazed by the qualitative difference in the clarity of the sound the second time they listened to the sounds in the room. Some will say they heard their own heart beat (and the heart beats of others) as part of the sound of the rooms. Some will say that they could not hear their heart beat but they could feel it. Some of the participants will be astonished that such a simple exercise could reap such extraordinary results. Some participants will note their inability to stay focused. Many will not have noted a difference. A few will wonder aloud why they allowed themselves to participate in such a silly exercise. A few will remain silent.
- **Final Reflections, Thoughts, and Feelings.** Ask the participants to share with the group any insights, thoughts, or feelings that have come to fore within them because of what has happened to themselves or others during this session. Assure the group that all present will listen deeply and without comment. (It is very important that you do not allow others to comment upon what has been said but rather to listen deeply and, if moved to speak, to speak about their own feelings. This is a tremendously important section of each exercise. It teaches the participants how to listen to what others have said and it also models for them what a facilitator should do: create a safe space so that everyone can speak and be heard.

Second Exercise – The Pen

- **Find a pencil.** Ask the participants to hold a pencil or pen in one of their hands (the hand chosen will depend upon whether the person is left or right handed).
- **Sit comfortably.** Ask the participants to sit as comfortably as possible in their chairs.
- **Empty hand on thigh.** Ask the participants to place their empty hand on their thigh with the palm turned upward.
- **Raise pen and lower it to palm.** Ask the participants to raise the pen (or pencil) above their heads so that the arm is fully extended and the top of the pen points to the ceiling. Now have the participants slowly lower the pen so that it rests in the palm of the other hand. Tell them to let their eyes follow the pen and once it rests on the palm tell them that their eyes must not shift their focus away from the pen. In short, they must stare at the pen. Time: 3 minutes.
- **Bring focus back to workshop.** Ask participants to focus their attention on the workshop again.
- **Describe experience.** Ask the participants to describe what they saw. There is usually a great deal of laughter and delight as the stories unfold. Persons describe “falling in love with” their pens, or seeing the entire world in the pen, or seeing sheer light, or having other “odd,” “unusual,” “strange,” or “mystical” experiences. Some participants will not have noticed a shift at all and will be amazed that others have had such experiences. Some will finally confess that they too had altered states of consciousness although they were first reluctant to acknowledge it. Some persons will express gratitude about these simple introductions to meditation techniques (You should never use words like “meditation” or “mysticism” when introducing these exercises. Only after the group has used such terms does the facilitator note that such simple exercises are ways of focusing and centering one self anywhere at anytime. In the office, during a conflict, etc.
- **Final Reflections, Thoughts, and Feelings.** Ask the participants to share with the group any insights, thoughts, or feelings that have come to fore within them because of what has happened to themselves or others during this session. Assure the group that all present will listen deeply and without comment.

Third Exercise – Finger touching hand

- **Sit comfortably.** Ask the participants to sit comfortably.
- **Hand on thigh.** Ask participants to place the palm of their hand on their thigh again with the palm turned upward toward the ceiling.
- **Point finger to ceiling.** Ask them to raise their other arm over their head and point their index finger to the ceiling.
- **Lower finger to hand.** Ask them to slowly lower their index finger so that it rests on the other hand (where it is most comfortable – palm, wrist, etc.).
- **Focus on finger.** Ask them to lower their eyes and to focus all of their attention on the tip of the index finger so that the mind is aware of what this fingertip feels as it touches the other hand. Time: 1 minute.
- **Focus on hand being touched.** Ask them to keep their eyes lowered and to shift the focus of their attention so that now their entire attention focuses on what the hand that is being touched feels. Focus attention on the spot where the index finger touches the hand and with complete attention focus on the sensations in the hand at that spot. Time: 1 minute.
- **Focus on intersection of hand and finger.** Now ask them to keep their eyes lowered and focus attention on the intersection between the fingertip and the place touched. Focus all attention on the place where the two sets of sensations meet. Time: 1 minute.
- **Bring focus back to workshop.** Ask the participants to slowly bring the focus of their attention back to the workshop.
- **Describe experiences.** Ask the participants to describe what they felt. Many of the participants will be amazed by the power, the energy they felt as they focused on the intersection. The descriptions will be free flowing and filled with amazement.
- **Final Reflections, Thoughts, and Feelings.** Ask the participants to share with the group any insights, thoughts, or feelings that have come to fore within them because of what has happened to themselves or others during this session. Assure the group that all present will listen deeply and without comment.

Fourth Exercise – Bodies from the inside out (optional)

Use the fourth exercises only if the group has not become genuinely excited and moved by their experiences. In other words, try again to engender within each participant and experience that allows the participants to feel deeply without first thinking about ideas and concepts.

- **Sit comfortably.** Ask the participants to sit comfortably.
- **Get a sense of body from inside out.** Ask them to lower their eyes and then try to get a sense of what their bodies feel like from the inside out: how wide do they seem to be? How heavy? How tall? What colors do they see? (This is a particularly tricky exercise and requires the trainer to elaborate – it will be helpful if the trainer has already done this exercise and can thus say – even though I am x height, when I did the exercise the first time I discovered that I felt as if I were y height. Time: 2 to 3 minutes.
- **Bring focus back to workshop.** Call their attention back to the workshop and ask them what they discovered.
- **Final Reflections, Thoughts, and Feelings.** Ask the participants to share with the group any insights, thoughts, or feelings that have come to fore within them because of what has happened to themselves or others during this session. Assure the group that all present will listen deeply and without comment.

Collective group experience as ministry

Ask participants to use their collective experiences resulting from these exercises to discern why covenant groups are often thought of as small group ministries.

- **Were these spiritual exercises?** Ask them whether it makes sense to describe their collective experiences as spiritual exercises (if they keep in mind the root meaning of spirit (Spiritus – Latin, Ruach – Hebrew) as breath.

- **The etymological origin of the word religion**

Following the analysis of historian of religions scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith's book in his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions*, remind participants of the two root meanings of the term religion (Latin: *religio*) as explained below.

Relegere – the attentiveness or carefulness or attitude with which something is done. Thus this term refers to the ritual aspects of religious practice: How the body develops gentle and compassionate attentiveness by breathing deeply and rhythmically (singing), or standing and then sitting again, or kneeling or lowering one's eyes. All of these kinds of experiences focus on the body and the body's ability to pay loving attention to what is going on within it and around it as part of itself. This kind of attentiveness develops into the gentle care with which a body performs an action.

Religare – meaning that which binds a person to a particular deity or creed or set of beliefs. This aspect of religion pertains to belief and the mind. It focuses attention on what the mind thinks and believes. It pertains to the particular beliefs that define the creedal statements of a particular religious tradition. As *relegere* pertains to what the body does, *religare* pertains to what the mind believes. For example, does the mind believe in one deity as opposed to another kind of deity, etc...? This aspect of religious experience thus pertains to the mind and what it is bound to believe.

These two aspects of religion (attentiveness to the body and to the mind) invite persons to pay attention to both what the body does (*relegere*) and to what the mind believes (*religare*). Ask the participants if it makes sense to them to think of their collective experiences during the three (or four) exercises as religious exercises, the ritual practices (*relegere*), or spiritual experiences?

- **Write down understanding of Covenant Group Ministry.** Ask participants what it would mean to them to think of Covenant Groups as small group ministries. Invite participants to write a couple of sentences on their understanding of "Covenant Group Ministry."
- **Share answers.** Invite persons to share their answers and promise the group that their answers will be listened to respectfully, without comment.

Summary statement of experiential portion of workshop:

Remind participants that

- They were asked to let their senses, their own bodies determine what was going on during the exercises.
- They were not asked to think about the sounds in the room but to listen to them. They were not asked to think about the pen in their hand but to look at it.
- The exercises did not require them to form concepts and ideas and then discern what was doing on by means of reasoned reflection, but rather to listen, see, hear, and pay attention to the sights and sounds their bodies sensed.
- Affirm these experiences as ways in which human beings can know without first using concepts or ideas. These ways of knowing can be called body-knowing (vs. conceptual-knowing by means of thinking about concepts and ideas far removed from sensations), and characterized as a way in which we sense the world in which we live such that we move beyond our usual concepts and ideas about the way things are and discovered the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. (Walt Whitman when asked if he believed in miracles, responded: Is there anything else?)
- Talk about the ritual aspect of religious services and the ways in which ritual allows the persons to open their senses and experience the world more deeply as someone in the web of life of which they are a part.
- Invite them to think about covenant groups as ritual acts, ways in which we pay attention to embodied feelings and sensations, as well as ideas of other persons as part of their own caring community.
- Note that Covenant Groups as small group ministries pay attention to the body's ways of knowing as well as to the mind's ideas.
- Make these points as summary statements and logical extensions of what has already been said by the participants themselves. Thus as training facilitator, your role is to lead from behind rather than in front of the group. You will lead the group gently from behind making certain that no one is lost along the way because the group has moved too quickly from one experience to the next. Remember, insight takes time. It is a birthing process. To use another image, you are the midwife.

Note to facilitator: If this morning session has been effective, the members of the group will now be genuinely excited about small group ministry because they will have had a set of individual and group experiences that relaxed their minds and bodies, generated trust (and shared humor) within the group, and helped each member realize in a gently and loving way that he/she needs to pay more attention to their embodied feelings.

The participants, we expect, will have experienced small moments of wonders that have filled them with delight. They will realize that these experiences could not have happened and been amplified so effectively without a shared group experience and the

free exchange of experiences and ideas produced by these experiences. In short, the group experience amplified the experiences of the individual members and thus enhanced those experiences. The participants will be joyous, filled with hope, and excited about the prospective for covenant group work as a small group ministry. In short, the group will have taught itself through practice why covenant groups work!

Instructions for Lunch:

At the end of the morning session, ask the participants to

- Form small groups of five persons whom they do not know very well at all. (Invite them to avoid joining a group in which their closest friends and acquaintances are members.) These small groups should have lunch together.
- Talk about their experiences of the morning. Each person should speak for five minutes or less (25 minutes). Then each person should offer comments and reflections about thoughts and feelings that have come to the fore when listening to the other members of the group (15 minutes). Participants must not comment upon one another's stories and insights. Rather, they should listen deeply and then share their own feelings about what others have said, as revelations and self-disclosures of their own personhood.

Then each person (or groups of two if the person prefers to walk and talk with another person) should go on a walking meditation (10 minutes)

- All the members of the groups should reconvene in an hour for the beginning of the afternoon session.

The Afternoon

Opening

Open the afternoon session with an invitation to participants to center themselves by sitting comfortably in their chairs and listen to the sounds in the room. (1 minute)

Overview

Present an overview of this next part of the workshop.

Part II of the workshop pertains to the mechanics of covenant groups. These mechanics will be established by means of a series of questions, which you as facilitator will pose to the group and which the members of the group will then answer based on the experiences, insights, and discussion from the morning session. In other words, the participants will identify the mechanics necessary to construct their own covenant group model based on their own experiences and identified needs. The goal of this work is to figure out what must happen within their own covenant groups so that the participants in

their groups will have experiences akin to those experienced by the facilitators during the morning session.

Questions

First question: What must happen within your covenant group to ensure that each meeting provides its participants with an experience of *Covenant Group Ministry*? Invite participants to identify the concrete occurrences that must take place in order for this to happen. Invite each person who speaks to write her/his answer on the easel pad.

(This entire process is very orderly. When a person answers the question ask her/him to write a summary of the answer to the question on the easel pad. Never have more than one person standing in line to write her/his answer on the paper.)

Second question: What must you do as facilitator to achieve these goals in your own Covenant Group? Have persons answer the question (using the first person singular pronoun to begin the sentence, i.e., “I must...”) and have each person write her/his answer on another sheet of paper on the easel pad.

Third question: Invite participants to identify a personal skill, which he/she will need to strengthen in order to do the work and then have the participant write the skill on the easel pad. (Each person who speaks must begin her/his sentence with: “I need...”) This exercise goes on until all participants feel that their issues have been identified.

Roadmap to establishing CGM Structures and policies

Emphasize that each group must take the roadmap and make it their own.

1. Identify the need.

One way to identify the need is to set up pilot small groups and assess the response. First Unitarian Church of San José used the 8 week program in Barbara Hamilton-Holloway’s “Evensong” published by _____. This will ensure a firm commitment from congregation leadership.

2. Set up a Task Force team.

This team will recruit the task force. The task force chair (with other team members must) develops a job description for task force members & review with board resident and senior minister.

3. Recruit members of the task force.

Chair, congregation leadership, and/or ministers recruit members of the task force. The members of the task force represent various groups in the congregation, and come with a variety of skills and orientations. Be sure to include members of existing groups that might be impacted by CGM.

4. Set a worshipful tone for meetings.

The task force chair sets a worshipful, purposeful, mutually respectful tone that leads to serious consideration of the impact of CGM on all aspects of the ministry of our congregation.

One way to do this is to open and close each meeting with a liturgical or embodied practice.

5. List issues and unanswered questions.

Task force forms a list of unanswered questions about CGM and the congregation. The questions focus on the following areas:

- Goals of CGM
- Leadership
- Establishing and maintaining groups
- Content and process of the Covenant Group session
- Group responsibilities
- Group functioning
- Congregational responsibility
- Evaluation and Assessment Processes

6. Answer the critical questions.

The task force must meet until all of the critical issues and organizational structures are resolved (this process can take an entire church year.) Be open to researching small groups areas in other faiths or organizations.

One way to work is to break into small teams of three or four to flesh out answers to the questions.

7. Answers become CGM Policy.

The task force as a whole finalizes the answers, which become the policy.

8. Begin Implementation plans.

When about 2/3 of the questions have been addressed, the task force begins specific plans for implementation, including announcing the approach, recruiting leaders, content team, leadership development team, and membership team, creating initial content, and establishing initial groups.

9. Roll out the program.

Roll out the program by discussing it at coffee hour, at various organization functions, and by leading sample sessions.

10. Recruit and train Leaders

Leaders are recruited by invitation only. Use an application process.

- All leaders are trained at a weekend training session
- Ideally, all leaders must participate in six-week CGM program in which they are able to participate and lead various sessions.

11. Develop a new group start-up program.

New groups should meet weekly for 4 sessions to develop momentum. During this time the sessions should increase in depth and personal risk. Also, introduce key policies of CGM.

After the 4 weeks groups can move to a regular schedule.

12. CGM support structure.

Develop a strong support structure for the program. This includes a council that has representatives of 3 teams: leadership, membership, and content.

- Leadership recruits, trains, and supports the leaders. Each leader receives a monthly call. There is a leader gathering once a month that extends the leader training and provides time for networking.
- Membership. This team is responsible for the smooth growth of groups. This is both a database and matchmaking function.
- Content. This team writes the content around which groups meet.

13. Content for session.

Every session includes preparation, order of worship and leader notes. The leader notes guide the leader to smoothly lead the session. They also provide extra context. There must be special session materials for the life events of members and sessions to mark the milestones of the groups. This content may be written by one or more of the following:

- Content team with support from Professional Ministry
- Professional Ministry team forms the content
- Facilitator leaders form the initial content which is then augmented by the members of the group
- Content materials are selected from other resources such as the Center for Community Values.

14. Basis for Covenant Groups.

CGM's may be based in a variety of ways. Your groups may be a mixture of one or more of these:

- Affinity-based groups such as young adults, Moms of pre-schoolers, home-schooling parents, men's groups, women's groups....
- Interest-based groups such as simple living themes, science and religion topics, Bible study, Spiritual exploration...
- Activity-based groups such as quilting circle, gardening....

15. Spiritual basis for all group, team, and Council meetings.

All meetings are treated as worship, including the small group sessions, the leader gatherings, the council meetings, and the team meetings. They all begin and end with embodied practices that gather the group together into a beloved community.

16. Revisit Goals and Policies.

Constantly return to your goals and policies to see that you are on track.

What is really important in the roadmap:

Identify the need/want for this within the congregation.

Commitment from Ministers, and Congregational leadership. CGM changes everything in the church. It changes the way ministers minister. It extends the ministry. It can affect every program in the church or community in the long run.

Goal setting. Spend months working on goals. It is time well spent. "Own" those goals. They are not just pretty words.

Spend time on the structures to make it sustainable. Everything must be written down or else it is just a one-time happening. Leaders need support, content must be written, and a smooth growth process must be developed.

Some of the questions will pertain to the CCV Covenant Group Model:

Invite the leaders of the task force to come to the front of the room to brainstorm with the participants about first steps toward their goal of creating a viable Covenant Group program. This process is very concrete. The leadership team writes the suggestions proffered on the board. The final result should be a list of the first steps that will be taken to develop a Covenant Group program for the congregation.

At the end of this session, the facilitator asks participants to share with the group how they feel. All will listen appreciatively and without comment.

Closing ritual:

Check out time: Each member has two or three minutes to express feelings, thoughts, ideas that have come to the fore during the Covenant Group Meeting.

Focused attention: Invite the participants to listen to the sounds in the room and to one's own heart beat and the heart beat of the group as the presence of the spirit of life itself!

Closing hymn.

Follow up Meeting

Meet with the working group (Ministers and Leadership Team and Staff) after the workshop. Address all the queries listed during the third round of questions that were not satisfactorily answered with regard to the actual structure and operation of covenant groups in this congregation.

Appendices

The various handouts are included here as appendices.

Covenant Groups: What They Are and How They Work

Excerpted from *A Covenant Group Source Book*, Published by The Center For Community Values

Covenant Groups

A covenant group is a small relational group made up of six to twelve people who meet regularly to establish and nurture themselves in their own beloved community. Covenant groups provide an opportunity for group members to build strong relationships with each other and with the larger organization of which the small group is a part.

Covenant groups encourage people to talk, learn, work and play together over time. Members may tell their life stories, offer support, and engage in work to serve the larger community. Covenant groups offer expanding opportunities for growth, caring and connection within a congregation. Covenant groups offer caring affiliative networks, mutual responsibility, leadership opportunities, and a way for people to build and strengthen their communities.

In a covenant group, people experience a relational individuality which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. People experience themselves and each other as part of the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. Together, people establish communities which embody the values of justice, democracy and human dignity. Each person is treated equitably. Each has a voice and is heard. And each person is respected for his or her own intrinsic humanity. The defining purpose of a covenant group is to bring people into right relationship with each other and with the larger world.

Covenant Groups: The Pattern

Size:	6-12 members
Meetings: week	At least once a month, perhaps twice a month or once a week
Format: purpose	Opening: Welcome and statement of group Reading or ritual which ties the group to its larger organization and transcendent purpose

	Review of group covenants
Check-in:	What, briefly, is going on in your life today?
Content:	Experiencing, learning, discussion, planning, action, reflection: it is the group's choice.
Check-out:	How is everyone feeling now?
Closing:	Ritual which ties the group to its larger organization and transcendent purpose

Leadership: Leader and co-leader are chosen and trained to facilitate the group's process. Leaders of groups meet together with the minister as a covenant group for ongoing training and support. Area ministers may also form a covenant group.

Covenants:	Ground rules for the group's relationship and interaction Commitment to welcome new members to the group Service to congregation and larger world
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Covenant Group Meeting Format

A typical covenant group meeting format is as follows. Each component of the meeting is important to the group's relationship and effectiveness.

Opening:

Welcome and Statement of the Purpose of the Group:

The welcome and statement of purpose set the stage for the group. The welcome is essential, particularly when the group has new members. The statement of purpose starts everyone off on the same page. This is particularly important when there are new members and in the early stages of the group's development.

Ritual:

The opening ritual marks the beginning of the group's time together. This ritual ties the group to the larger organization of which it is a part and reminds the group of its transcendent purpose. Ritual exemplifies an embodied spirituality. It is a time for centering and for helping the members make the transition from the busy-ness of daily life to the more intentional and focused activity and discussion of the group. The centering time could be a song, a reading or a prayer. It can be accompanied by a symbolic gesture such as lighting a candle or chalice. If it is effective it will

help the members to relax, center, breathe a little deeper and let go of the mundane thoughts with which they have entered the meeting.

Review of Group Covenants:

Particularly in early meetings and whenever new members are present, it is important that the facilitators restate the covenants by which members are agreeing to abide. For these covenants to be meaningful, they need to be remembered and used. It may be helpful to post ground rules at each meeting.

Check-In

The check-in is an invitation to each person to state her name and to speak briefly about what of significance she would like to share from her life. Other than saying her name, a person can pass, that is, she need not say anything. The group leader facilitates the check-in by inviting each person in turn to participate. A check-in is not a time for discussion or debate.

The benefits of the check-in are many. To be welcoming of newcomers and to help build rapport among members of the group, it is particularly important that old and new members alike introduce themselves. A person who has come to the meeting with particularly pressing news is given an opportunity to speak immediately. Having had the opportunity to share what is pressing on his mind, a participant then is more able to turn his attention to the other business or activities of the group. The physical and emotional states of members may vary and have a strong impact on the dynamics of a particular meeting. In the check-in members can share information on their physical or emotional state at that particular time. This may help to prevent or diffuse problems. For example, a person may be angry because of a problem at work. If the angry person states this, other members are less likely to misunderstand or misattribute the anger.

An additional benefit of the check-in is that it may be a catalyst for quiet or reticent members to participate in conversation and discussion. If a person has spoken once, he is more likely to speak again. Conversely, if a person has been sitting silent well into the meeting, it is much harder for him to break into the conversation. With the check-in, everyone gets to speak within the first few minutes of the meeting. This serves as an auditory reminder for the particularly talkative members that the other members present need and deserve time to share their views. The check-in sets a tone for valuing all members and equalizing participation.

Content of the Meeting

During the body of the meeting, the group engages in what it has come together to focus on. This is a time for experiencing, learning, discussion, planning, action, reflection, or whatever activity the group has agreed upon.

One approach is to generate the agenda for the body of the meeting during the check in: that is, members are invited to state as part of their check in a topic or issue they would like to discuss during that session or the next. The pattern of group meetings might include every fourth meeting a service activity for the church or larger community of which the group is a part.

Check-Out

The check-out is an invitation for each member to make a brief concluding statement, usually one or two sentences. This can be a statement of her impression of the meeting, how she is feeling, something she has not yet had a chance to say, or something she does not want to leave hanging. The group leader facilitates the check-out by inviting each member in turn to make a statement. Members have the option to pass.

The benefits of the check-out are also many. It gives an indicator to the whole group and to the co-leaders in particular as to how the group is doing. It highlights strengths and gives quick notice of potential problems. It clears the air of items that may be hanging. It gives another opportunity for more quiet people to speak. It helps bring closure to a meeting. It underscores the importance and value of each member.

Closing

A closing ritual to mark the end of the group's time together. Like the opening ritual, the closing ties the group to the larger organization of which it is a part and reminds the group of its transcendent purpose. The closing may be a reading, a song, blowing out the candle, an individual or group prayer, or another activity chosen by the group.

Meeting Frequency

A covenant group meets at least once a month, perhaps twice a month or even weekly. A group needs to meet often enough that there is continuity from meeting to meeting. If the group meets less than once a month, it will be more difficult for activities and relationships to carry over from meeting to meeting.

Group Size and Growth Pattern

Ideally a covenant group will have between six and twelve members. A group needs to be small enough that each person can speak, be heard and be known. It needs to be large enough to generate energy and provide continuity.

There are a variety of ways that groups welcome new members and grow. Each group is started with the intention of welcoming new members to the group. Newcomers can be encouraged to attend at least three meetings to see what the group is about. Through this process of newcomers visiting and deciding to become members, the group will grow. As new members come into the group, a group peaks out in size at about ten to twelve members. At that point, new members no longer continue coming into the group. However, all groups over time experience attrition of old members who leave due to various life circumstances. Each time an old member leaves, this can create an opening in the group into which a new member is welcomed, keeping the group dynamic and vital.

Another strategy for welcoming new members is for a well-established group to birth a new similar group. This is done by a co-facilitator of the first group leaving that group, either temporarily or permanently, to help facilitate and get the new group started.

Yet another method for bringing in new members is for the group to divide when it reaches about twelve members, thus resulting in two groups of about six members each. These two groups are then open to new members to join. In practice this approach can be very challenging. However, when generating new groups is seen from the outset as a part of the covenant group experience, members can anticipate and thus are less stressed by the process.

Regardless of the method used to bring in new members, the key idea is that the groups stay open, dynamic, welcoming and not cliquish or factional. The covenant to welcome new members also means a commitment within the congregation to keep developing new groups.

Covenants

The members of a covenant group, early in the group's formation stage, create and agree to abide by a set of covenants. These covenants are a key part of what distinguishes a covenant group from other kinds of gatherings. The primary covenant will be about how the members agree to be in relationship with each other over time. Together, the group establishes a community in which justice, democracy and human dignity are embodied. Thus, the members agree to abide by a set of ground rules for right relationship.

A second covenant is a commitment to welcome new members to the group. Some groups always have an empty chair at each meeting to symbolize and remind themselves of the new members who are yet to come. The purpose of this covenant is to keep the group connected to the larger congregation and to prevent exclusiveness or factionalism. In practice there are a variety of ways of bringing new members into the group.

A third covenant is an agreement to engage in service to the congregation and larger world on a regular basis. This covenant helps to reinforce the group's connection to the larger organization of which it is a part. It helps group members develop and maintain an external focus, providing opportunities for members to put their values into practice.

Excerpted from

A Covenant Group Source Book

Published by

The Center for Community Values

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Second Edition, Revised

Fifteen Embodied Practices for Small Group Ministry

I. The facilitator's techniques used to develop each of these opening exercises (as well as other such exercises) for CGM includes the following fivefold strategy occasionally and, at other times, only steps i – iii:

- i. Concentrate attention on a sense-based experience such as hearing, seeing, tasting or feeling something (rather than thinking about something by means of an idea). When possible, lower or close eyes.
- ii. Spend an extended period of time concentrating on the physical, sensory feeling (usually three minutes).
- iii. Slowly open eyes or shift eye focus back to the group.
- iv. Describe the experience in first person terms.
- v. After all persons who wish to speak have spoken, all members of the group to offer insights based upon what others as well as oneself have said and felt.

The Rule for steps (iv) and (v) is: all comments made by members of the group are listened to deeply, respectfully, empathically and without subsequent comment or judgment. All thoughts and feelings shared are about how one's own experience has been extended, enhanced, or altered by the shared experiences.

Note: Facilitators decide when to use all five steps or just the first three parts. This decision is based on each facilitator's assessment of the particular needs for the group. All time lengths mentioned in the 15 embodied practices are suggestions rather than requirements.

The embodied closing practice for each meeting repeats one small element of the opening exercise such as listening to the sound of one's own breath or focusing on the flame of the chalice (or candle) for a few moments. The embodied closing practice can be as simple as having all the members of the group hold hands for a sustained moment of silence. Facilitators determine what kind of embodied closing practice is most appropriate for a given meeting.

The Exercises

1. Lower or close eyes and listen to a lyrical, gentle, musical selection (CD) such as Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, and gently tap hand or foot to the rhythm of the music. After music ends, slowly open eyes and describe what feelings flowed through you as you listened, rhythmically to the music.
2. Sing a favorite popular song together (like Paul Simon's Sound of Silence), spend three to five minutes writing feelings and thoughts that arose as you sang the song, and then share personal insights that result from this process with the group.

3. Lower or close eyes and listen to the sound of one's own breathe for three minutes and then describe what was heard and felt.
4. Focus entire attention on the flame of the lighted chalice (or candle) in the center of the room for five minutes and then describe what was experienced.
5. Lower or close eyes and concentrate entire attention on the tip of the index finger and its awareness of the room temperature (for three minutes). Describe the experience.
6. Lower eyes and feel (without touching) the pulse in one of your wrists for three minutes and then describe what was experienced. (Rest wrist comfortably on thigh for this exercise.)
7. Lower or close eyes and listen to the second movement (Adagio cantabile) of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor (with eyes lowered or closed) or another lyrically gently musical composition, let one's breath find the rhythm of the music and breath as an accompaniment to the music. Describe the experience.
8. Lower or close eyes and listen to the sounds in the room and focus attention on one of the sounds (three minutes). Describe the experience.
9. Lower or close eyes and focus complete attention on the rising and falling of the abdomen as you inhale and exhale. Describe the experience.
10. Hold a glass of water in one's hand. Lower or close eyes and sip the water and hold the water in the mouth as you identify the various taste components of the water. Take several sips, if necessary (three to five minutes). Describe the taste of the water.
11. Go outside; find a green leaf or plant. Touch it, smell it, feel it (three minutes) in order to return to the group and describe the color green using every sense except sight. What does green feel like? What does it smell like? Etc.
12. Gently press your fingers against your face, resting your chin on the palm of your hand. Let your fingers rest on your cheek. Let your elbow rest on the arm of your chair or prop up your elbow by holding it with your other hand, the arm of which rests on your abdomen. Lower or close your eyes as you focus all of your attention on your cheekbone. Feel your bone without moving your fingers (two minute). Now let your bone feel your fingers (two minute). Now focus on the place where the two sensations meet (two minutes). Describe the experience.

13. Go outside and smell the air. Identify and describe each scent you are able to smell (five minutes). Reconvene and describe the experience.
14. Lower or close your eyes and listen to yourself listening (three minutes). What do you hear? Describe the experience.
15. Close your eyes and focus on the pulse in the center of your forehead (3 minutes). Describe your experience.

Covenant Group Start-up Procedure: A Guideline for Religious Leaders

Based on *A Covenant Group Source Book*, published by The Center for Community Values

The following are suggestions which can be adapted to a congregation's particular situation.

1. Introduce the covenant group concept to the congregation with a sermon or other presentation by the minister, covenant group committee, and/or guest speaker. Covenant groups are a way of enhancing the congregation's ministry to members, potential members, and to the larger world, offering opportunities for growth, caring and connection. (See *A Covenant Group Source Book* for more complete description.) Existing groups within the congregation (e. g., women's group, men's group, book study group) can go on as they are, and should not be urged to conform to this new model.

2. Begin by recruiting covenant group facilitators based on their potential facilitation skills (see *A Covenant Group Source Book*, p. 9). Let candidates know of the one-year commitment which will be asked of those who become facilitators. Characteristics of an effective facilitator include

- empathy
- sensitivity to group dynamics
- maturity
- regard for others
- openness
- flexibility
- self-assurance
- absence of self-preoccupation
- good communication skills
- commitment to the larger institution to which the groups belong

3. Organize a start-up group for facilitators. In these groups candidates learn facilitation skills and become familiar with the covenant group model by participating in and intentionally reflecting together upon the covenant group experience. Content of the start-up group meetings may include listening skills, building shared leadership, dividing groups, dealing with difficult people, avoiding cliquishness, etc.

4. After the candidates have participated in the start-up group for 4 weeks (including participation in a group project), at the fifth meeting candidates may be asked to reflect upon their experience thus far and to decide whether to become covenant group facilitators.

Clarify with the candidates their responsibilities and commitments as facilitators.

Facilitators are committed to the covenant group process and are mindful of the difference between covenant groups and group therapy, encounter groups and self-help groups

Facilitators are committed to helping the group accomplish its purpose rather than promoting their own agendas

Facilitators are committed to establishing and maintaining appropriate balance of inward reflection and outward focus

Responsibilities of facilitators include:

Helping the group to develop & maintain ground rules

Keeping the group on track

Modeling facilitation skills

Being aware of group dynamics

Maintaining shared leadership

Encouraging participation by all

Identifying potential co-facilitator

Paying attention to their group members' pastoral care needs, passing on information to the congregation's religious leader as appropriate

5. Explore with each facilitator what his or her group's initial focus might be. Some groups begin with a clear focus as initially established by the facilitator, and others begin meeting and then collectively decide on their group's focus. Covenant groups continue indefinitely, growing together and exploring different aspects of the group focus or collectively deciding to move together in a new direction.

Covenant Groups can be affinity-based, interest-based, or activity-based. Groups begin with the understanding that the group will collectively decide upon topics and activities to be pursued.

Affinity-based groups might include:

Young adults

Moms of pre-schoolers

Home-schooling parents

Men's group

Women's group

Interest-based groups might include:

Simple living

Science and religion

Bible study

Spiritual exploration

Activity-based groups might include:

Quilting circle

Gardening group

6. Help facilitators decide when and where their groups will initially meet. Some groups may meet at the congregation's facility; at the home of the facilitator or other group member; or rotate among group members' homes. Time and place of subsequent meetings will be collectively decided by the group. Groups should meet at least once a month.

7. Work with facilitators to coordinate registration process. Congregation members and visitors are invited to join the group of their choice. Registration is free and open. Facilitators may also recruit members for the group. Initial registration should be limited to a total of 10 persons per group. If more than 10 persons wish to sign up for a particular topic, additional groups can form and a facilitator should be trained for the group. After the facilitators' start-up group is finished, individual covenant groups begin meeting regularly. Over time, groups grow and seed new groups (see *A Covenant Group Source Book*, p. 8).

8. Establish ongoing facilitators' meetings. Facilitators continue to meet as a group with the religious leader on a regular basis (at least once a month) for ongoing support and training. Facilitators will be expected to be sensitive to the privacy needs of members of their groups when speaking generally about the challenges they may encounter. Situations that indicate the need for professional intervention will be discussed with the religious leader privately.

9. Remind facilitators to identify potential co-facilitators within their groups and to discuss such nominations with the religious leader or covenant group committee. Co-facilitators will eventually become facilitators of newly seeded groups.

10. Encourage group growth and division. Groups grow by recruitment (by facilitators or group members) and by referral (by the religious leader or covenant group committee) until they reach a maximum of 12 members. Groups then divide in order to accommodate continued growth.