

A Covenant Group Source Book

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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: Growing Congregations

Small relational group structures have been demonstrated to result in increased overall membership and strengthened commitment to the larger congregation of which they are a part. A congregation, which is organized in small relational groups, is a community of communities, where every member is invited to fully participate in the life of the church.

Each member's primary affiliation is to the congregation as a whole. The small relational group provides face-to-face connections over time with people whose covenant includes a commitment to generate new groups and to serve the congregation and the larger world.

Members of a group support each other through the transitions, challenges and joys which life brings. On a regular basis, the group participates in service activities for the church and the larger community. Through covenant groups, the ministry of the church is thus enhanced.

Covenant Groups: The Pattern

Size:	6-12 members
Growth pattern:	When a group grows beyond 10 members, the planned creation of a second group will begin
Meetings:	At least once a month, perhaps twice a month or Once a week
Format:	Opening: Welcome and statement of group purpose 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. Checkout: 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 generate new groups by growing and dividing Service to congregation and larger world

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.

Covenant Group Meeting Format, cont.

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.

Covenant Group Meeting Format, cont.

Check-Out

The checkout 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 checkout 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.

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 generate new groups by growing and dividing. When a group grows to twelve members, it will divide into two groups. The newly formed groups continue to grow as additional members join. In this way, longer-term members continue to meet and become connected with newer members, thus preventing groups from becoming exclusive or factional. When commitment to growth and division is seen as a covenantal agreement, not only a structural concern, it may be easier for the group to support what potentially might be a difficult process.

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.

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.

Each group is started with the intention of welcoming new members to the group. Many groups will grow and divide to form two new groups within a year. For example, at every fourth meeting of the group, group members might be encouraged to invite a total of two or three newcomers to attend. 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.

When a group grows to about twelve members it divides into two new groups. The original group's leader and co-leader each become the facilitator of one of the two new groups. Planning for the division should begin when the group has reached ten members. It is helpful for the group to agree in advance on a systematic method for dividing itself into two groups. When generating new groups is seen from the outset as a part of the covenant group experience, members can anticipate and support the process.

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.

Leader Selection and Training

Each covenant group has a leader and a co-leader who facilitate the group's process. The main role of the group leader is to help the group stay focused and in line with its covenants, so that the group can accomplish its task. The leader convenes and facilitates group meetings and sees to it that basic logistics of the group are attended to. When the group grows to the point of being ready to divide into two new groups, the leader and co-leader will each accompany one of the two new groups.

Characteristics of an effective group leader include a commitment to the covenant group model and to the larger organization of which the group is a part. An effective leader is willing to learn, has good listening skills, is open to people with diverse viewpoints, is emotionally mature, and has the ability to be objective. An effective leader may already be known and respected in the community, although this is not necessarily the case. The covenant group approach is open to new members and supports the development of new leadership in the congregation. Leadership skills are learnable. A commitment to developing leadership skills is essential to the covenant group model.

Potential group leaders can be self-nominated, chosen by the congregation's minister, or selected by a committee set up for this purpose. The final selection can be made by the minister, through consultation between the minister and the selection committee, or by the committee where there is no minister.

Leaders learn covenant group facilitation by attending special training sessions, by using available resource materials, by consulting with the minister of the congregation, and by ongoing participating in a leaders' covenant group.

Shared Leadership

One of the keys for an effective covenant group is shared leadership. Shared leadership means that all members of the group have a sense of ownership of and responsibility for the group. The members are not guests visiting the group, rather they are at home in their own group. This view of leadership requires that we see leadership differently from the traditional approach. Traditionally we think that only a very small number of special people are leaders and they are born that way. However, for the most part the skills and knowledge necessary for effective leadership are learnable. Thus, members of a group can learn and master the skills and knowledge and thus share actively in leading the group. When this is the case, the group is operating not on the basis of hierarchy, but on a democratic basis of shared leadership.

The benefits of shared leadership are numerous. Groups that operate on the basis of shared leadership are more stable and long lasting. They are less dependent upon the designated group leader. Members in a group with shared leadership are more involved, active, take more initiative and feel more of a sense of ownership. Thus groups with shared leadership are more dynamic and vital than groups based on a hierarchical model. Further, the designated leaders of groups with shared leadership are less likely to burn out because they are not burdened by excessive responsibility for the group.

A group that has a clear purpose, format and ground rules has laid the foundation for building shared leadership. In a group with a clearly stated purpose, every member can share in the work of keeping the group focused. In a group with a clearly stated format, every member can help keep the group on track with its agenda and process. In a group with clearly stated ground rules, every member can help keep the group within its behavioral agreements.

A Clear Group Purpose

A fundamental purpose of a covenant group is to bring people into right relationship with each other and with the larger world. Members come together to share, develop friendships and serve the larger community. Having a clearly stated and agreed upon purpose is essential for success. Groups can flounder and new members can be baffled by lack of clarity in the group's purpose. The group cannot experience the enthusiasm which results from success if the members do not know or agree about what they are working toward.

A benefit of a simple and clearly stated purpose is that those who join the group know what it is they are agreeing to. It is more likely that the group will be cohesive and productive because the members are starting from a clear point of commonality. Those who are not interested in or disagree with the stated purpose can quickly choose not to participate. A group cannot be all things to all people. A participant may want to engage in an activity that does not fit within the purpose of the group, and the group may be unwilling to redefine its purpose. Often, that person can be referred out of the group to other groups or organizations that do address that participant's concern.

A Clear Set of Relationship Ground Rules

Every group has rules: they are either explicit or implicit. When the rules are not explicit, newcomers experience them as covert. A group with covert rules is particularly unfriendly for newcomers who only find out about the rules through the painful experience of breaking them or stumbling over them unexpectedly. Having explicit rules increases the feeling of safety and can enhance participation. This is why the creation of a covenant for group interaction is so important.

Ground rules should be as simple as possible in order to enhance the functioning of the group, not to interfere with it. Having clear ground rules makes it easier to facilitate a meeting and makes it easier for all to share responsibility for the leadership of the group because all members understand what is expected. In an early meeting, the group develops the ground rules together. When the group itself has generated the rules, the group owns the rules. The group can revisit the ground rules periodically to see if they need revising.

Ground rules might include agreements about the following:

That what people hear within the group stays within the group as much as possible.

That a person can pass, that is opt not to participate in a discussion or exercise.

That people not interrupt each other.

How expenses are to be shared.

Whether starting and ending times are fixed or flexible.

Whether side conversations are okay or are too disruptive.

A commitment to understanding those with different opinions.

That members will share the privilege and responsibility of helping the group to function.

That people will not participate in or encourage put-downs.

How time is to be shared, such as only one person speaking at a time.

Whether smoking is permissible at group meetings.

Transforming Ministry: Some Reflections on Loss

By the Rev. Calvin O. Dame,
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME

A year-and-a-half ago the congregation I serve, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Augusta, Maine, launched a covenant group initiative that we call Small Group Ministry. It has been successful enough to nearly match our wildest dreams. We presently have more than half of our members engaged through small groups in building community, spiritual exploration and lay ministry.

Small Group Ministry has had a significant impact on our congregation. People are engaged and energized in a way that I have not seen before in my fourteen years with this congregation. We are finally actually growing, not just adding enough names to stay even with attrition.

Much of our success I attribute to such factors as having a good model, to good planning, to a propitious moment in the life of the congregation, and to strong lay leadership. But a part of our success has to do with the changing nature of my ministry with this congregation as well. In the last few years, I have come to understand that I had to relinquish some of the comfortable and familiar patterns of ministry in order for the congregation and for me to thrive.

And that process of letting go required a new vision and commitment on the part of the congregation, some spiritual and professional growth on my part, and, not to be overlooked, a willingness on my part to enter into a kind of grieving process.

Challenged in part by the ideas that Roy Phillips laid out in his book, *Transforming Liberal Congregations for the new Millennium*, I had begun to see that the pastoral model of ministry, which I had observed growing up and in which I had been trained in at seminary, had significant limitations. It limited the size of the congregation to the number of people to whom I could provide direct pastoral care. It also suggested that professional training and advanced degrees were somehow required for the kind of human exchange we think of as ministry. This limited the participation of the members of the congregation, while at the same time relieving them of responsibility for the quality of the life of the congregation.

The leaders of the congregation and I explored this, and began to change roles and expectations. They began to take more responsibility for administrative work. I began to attend fewer meetings, and concentrated more on my own spiritual life and the worship life of the congregation.

And, I trained and the congregation officially installed our first Ministerial Associates, who began to assist in the pastoral work of the church. And through sermons and the newsletter, we shared with the congregation our changing understanding: that all people

of faith are called to ministry and the professional minister plays a part, but not the only part, in the ministry of the church.

This new perspective led eventually to the congregation's commitment to a covenant group process, and dictated our strong identification of these as ministry groups. Small Group Ministry is the way that people in the congregation come to know and care for one another at a significant and intimate level. The pastoral life of our religious community is now centered in our small groups, and everyone is now empowered to do ministry.

Which brings me back to the grieving. A change like this requires that the professional minister give up something that is dear and close to the heart. Which is not at all to say that I have no role in the life of the small groups. I train and meet regularly with the facilitators. I assign members to groups and okay new recruits. I write the sessions that guide the meetings, using my ideas or the ideas that arise in groups. I arbitrate when it is necessary. All in all, the program we envisioned calls for more ministerial authority than Unitarian Universalists are usually comfortable with, and it has worked well so far.

Where the grief comes in is letting go of the pleasures and the satisfaction of the pastoral role. As ministers, we do not often speak of this. But those of us who pursue the ordained ministry are, by and large, people who care, and who take satisfaction in the appreciation which comes with caring. We want to know what is going on, we want to reach out and touch, we want to use our skills, we are enlivened by the intimacy of ministry.

For many of us in parish ministry, both our training and our inclination impel us towards pastoral care. And giving that up, letting that go, sharing that work of ministry with others is to move into a new form of ministry which requires the death of an old form.

One story: I heard, after the fact, that a young woman's father died. I quickly questioned my informant: it had happened two months ago; the young woman had been upset; members of the congregation had gathered round; she was doing fine. I was devastated. First, I felt inadequate. How come I did not know about this? Did they assume I didn't care? Then I was annoyed. Why did no one let me know? Then, I was hurt. I wanted to be the one who was there for her! I wanted to be the minister! Then finally, I was grudgingly appreciative. This young woman had been tenderly held in the ministering embrace of the congregation. The ministry of our congregation goes on in circles beyond my participation, beyond the limitations of my time and attention.

This is good. And it is difficult, and it goes against the grain of common practice. The *Christian Century* noted recently that the median attendance at worship services in the United States is ninety adults. The article was noting a small decline, but what struck me was the number. The mega-churches which attract so much attention, those with more than a thousand at worship each week, constitute just one percent of the Protestant congregations.

What these numbers indicate to me is that the overwhelming majority of congregations maintain themselves at just that number of participants to whom one person can provide a pastoral presence. Which is just about ninety per Sunday.

This is a dance that both the congregation and the minister step to. And to change it requires changes all around. The congregation needs to have a wider vision cast for them, and they need to move forward toward that vision. And it requires of the minister some honest reflection on how his or her own needs keep a self-limiting model in place.

Sharing ministry requires a letting go, and the sorrow in that letting go is not always acknowledged. But the difficulty of that transition is more than overshadowed by the energy and the enthusiasm which has been unleashed in the congregation as we have embraced a wider vision of the ministry of a liberal religious community, and have adapted a form, Small Group Ministry, by which that vision can be made manifest.

A Brief History: The Roots Of Covenant Groups

**By the Rev. Robert L. Hill,
District Executive, Southwest District, Unitarian Universalist Association**

One can argue that Christianity had its infancy in small-group organization and lost a source of vitality when, in the third century, church buildings began to be put up. Until then, Christians had met almost exclusively in small groups in homes.

The return of small-group focus to Christianity may be attributed to Phillip Jacob Spener, a Lutheran pastor who, according to the Rev. John Morgan, “in 1675 ... initiated small group ministry as a way to reform the church of his time.” This Pietistic reform worked beyond Spener’s expectations, Morgan says, “creating not only revivals in Europe, but spinning off reform among Lutherans, Methodists, Moravians, Quakers, Universalists, and others in the new world.”

The method of reform preferred by Pietists was the small study circle. Morgan says, “In these ‘colleges of piety’ or ‘conventicles,’ as they were called, people met once a week to share their stories, discuss the Sunday sermon, and interpret scripture.”

John Wesley, father of the Methodist movement, re-introduced small, in-home meetings to his churches in the 1700s. These “class meetings” were groups of 10-12 persons focused, as one writer observes, “on the spiritual condition of each member.” The result? Methodist small group ministry brought evangelistic fire to England and then helped establish Methodism as a predominant religion in this country. Currently, Wesley Fellowship Groups are based on Wesley’s “class meetings,” and they follow a format quite similar to our Covenant Group format.

Universalist George de Benneville had a “house church” in the mid-1700s near Reading, Pennsylvania, and there were Pietist-influenced Universalist groups in Rhode Island and the Mid-Atlantic states. For us, the story then skips a few hundred years to modern times.

The Rev. James Robinson credits former UUA President Dana McLean Greeley with planting in his head an idea that has led to a great success story. After a visit to Japan with leaders of a multi-thousand-member religious organization there, Greeley told Robinson that he believed the Japanese group’s success was attributable to their being organized into hundreds of small groups.

Taking that comment to heart, Robinson began small-group ministry after he was called to our church in Brewster, MA, in 1982. Then about average in size for Unitarian Universalist churches, the church is now one of our largest and has enrolled as members about ten percent of the population within easy driving distance. Even after having spun off another

church, Brewster counts about 1,000 adults and children on its rolls, and Jim credits small-group organization as being one key to that success.

The Rev. Brent Smith used a variation on small-group organization in one of our largest churches, All Souls in Tulsa, and grew it larger. The “Roots and Branches” program which began after he was called there in 1990 contributed to the church’s approaching 1,500 in membership by 1999, an increase of roughly 500 adults.

Evangelical Christians have been using small-group or meta-church organization with great success both in this country and elsewhere. The “Willow Creek model” popularized by writer and consultant Carl George has produced churches of 10,000 or more members. Most of the members of these mega-churches meet regularly in groups of about 10 or less in people’s homes and sit together on Sunday (or Saturday night) in their huge worship halls.

With an Association-wide growth rate of less than one percent and our “market share” of those living within driving distance of our societies tending to be much less than one percent, these examples of success through small-group ministries have caught the attention of some Unitarian Universalists, including clergy and lay leaders.

The Rev. Glenn Turner, retiring District Minister in the Northeast District, has been an early proponent on the UUA staff of small-group or meta-church organization. His recommendations are now being heeded in increasingly wider circles.

With roots that go back to early Universalism’s Pietistic reformers, to John Wesley’s wildly successful “class groups,” and even to the in-home churches of Christianity’s first decades, our Covenant Groups cannot be called new. But they are new to modern Unitarian Universalism and we have only begun to tap their possibilities.

We are, I think, poised to create a new chapter in the history of small-group ministry for one simple, profound reason: Better than any other way of organizing that we’ve used, Covenant Groups serve the needs of those who come to us in search of what James Luther Adams identified as universal and fundamental needs, intimacy and ultimacy.

Small Groups Are a Big Deal to Men

**By the Rev. Dr. Brent A. Smith,
Minister, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, MI**

"This is the most transforming experience I've ever been part of," remarked a rough and tumble, Oklahoma cowboy lawyer about three years into the small-group program launched at All Souls Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the early 1990s called "Roots and Branches." I had spent some time investigating why large, mega-churches had been so successful at the end of the 20th century, and came away from those encounters convinced that small group development was one of the principal reasons. In 1994 Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow estimated "that there are over 3 million small groups in this country," and the number has only increased since that time.

Why? And why did another South westerner, this time a "million-dollar-a-month" real estate salesman, comment on his profound experience organizing and leading a small group devoted to building a house together with a working poor family: "I truly believe that if Jesus were alive today he would be working here with us." Small groups are a big deal to men.

Our world is characterized by a breakdown of the bonds that past generations more easily established and maintained: family, neighborhood, village, town, and community. Men form their deepest friendships over longer periods of time, through shared experiences. Because of society's mobility and the discontinuity that it brings, men have difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships. "Contemporary small groups, often meeting under the aegis of large congregations, can be seen as a partial response to the breakdown of indigenous communities such as extended families, villages, or intimate neighborhoods," writes sociologist Robert Wuthnow. Small groups can bring men together to foster commitments to one another in a common understanding and help reinforce in men the value of being faithful to those commitments.

"I understand now," said one man after leading his first small group, "why you've talked so much about the need for men to develop strong bonds with other men." The "reason" for gathering the group with which he was working was learning about liberal religion, and it became the means for helping men address their loneliness and loss of relationships.

Human beings are designed for learning, and yet too many religious institutions in our society are set up to control opinion or group process, or restrict what can be learned. Today, learning is seldom prized for the effect it has on forming character. Yet, men especially connect learning with a deepening of religious faith. They want a larger purpose, meaning, and mission to their lives. A man wants to "make his mark" on history, and much of his identity is derived from the stream of history which claims him.

"I want to give my life over to something worthwhile," one man said to me. "I want that something to multiply my sense of who I am. And I want it to be good for others, in a way that is true to each person." In other words, men want to connect with other men in ways that equip them to deal freely and fully with their life experiences. Men do not want "prescribed" answers. They want to be full and free individuals. But they do not want to be alone, either. Men want the support of comrades who help set the conditions of freedom that allow each man to unfold into a fully functioning, free adult.

Small group involvement, sharing, and the development of common purpose help give men a sense of identity. Men know who they are as individuals through the relationships they form with others and with the groups to which they belong. It is their "team" or their "tribe." But men have difficulty creating these groups. Whether its source is biological or sociological, it is true in my experience: men do not easily initiate connections with other men. They benefit from the fellowship and civilizing influence groups have upon them. But, as a rule men are not good at knowing how to form relational bonds or at initiating the contact necessary to establish them. A church that forms small groups targeted at men--through learning, recreation, building something, or teaching or mentoring something to others--will provide an access to long lasting relationships that men will covet.

"A church that considers itself 'one big family,'" said church consultant Lyle Schaller, "will have a harder time growing than one that thinks in terms of being a conglomeration of groups, classes, organizations, and fellowships. The reason is that the second approach gives newcomers many more ways of plugging into the life of the church."

When the early Free Church pioneers in North America covenanted with one another "to walk together in the ways of God as they are made known to us," they could not have imagined how strong would be the desire today for companionship based in freedom. Many men want to alleviate their loneliness through connecting with others, but not at the expense of the free mind!

Small groups can do this by accomplishing two things: first, by providing a means for men to form mutual, long-lasting relationships that fulfill the best intentions of the Free Church tradition. And, secondly, by providing an atmosphere where personal beliefs can be challenged by history, clarified by practice, deepened by fellowship, and strengthened by the free exchange of ideas.

Covenant Group Work: A Spiritual Exercise to Heal, Transform, and Repair the World

**By the Rev. Dr. Thandeka,
Associate Professor of Theology and Culture,
Meadville/Lombard Theological School**

Covenant Group work is a spiritual practice. It's a workout with an attitude, a three-part routine for community builders. Like most body-building practices, Covenant Group exercises begin with a warm-up, go on to the full workout, and then finish with a wind-down. Each part has its own procedures. No part can be neglected. Here's why.

WARM-UP

The warm-up begins with a downward movement of the mind towards the heart. This movement commences as Covenant Group leaders encourage participants to look within themselves and find stories drawn from the wellsprings of their own lives. This group process brings forth stories about individual victories and defeats, fears and disappointments, insights and concerns. As each person speaks, others listen intently. Everyone speaks. Everyone is heard.

These call-and-response exercises are creative interchanges. They produce, as theologian Henry Nelson Wieman has noted, appreciative understanding of personal differences. Individual identities are acknowledged. No one has to pretend to be just like everyone else.

This collective expansiveness of the group's experience broadens each participant's own sense of identity. Differences are counted as additional insights rather than personal deficits and a sense of awe emerges within and between the participants.

Not surprisingly, religious traditions often describe this sense of awe as the human response to a sacred encounter. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, in his reflections upon life, describes such encounters as the place between "I" and "Thou" where the healing presence of God is felt. Christians describe such experiences as the soul's sanctuary, the place where two or more have gathered in the name of Christ and find Him there in their midst (Matthew 18:20). Humanists like John Dewey affirm such encounters as the ethical content of religious experience. They are the moments when the ideal factors in human experience come to the fore and determine human action.

These awesome experiences create an ethos of trust and safety among Covenant Group participants. Some individuals learn how to sustain interior work without becoming depleted. Others learn how to share in public accounts of individual experiences without being drained of energy. Thus do these warm-up exercises generate within all participants the first spiritual strength of Covenant Group practice: compassion.

FULL WORKOUT

The full workout now begins as the spiritual endorphins of compassion begin to peak. The participants experience a Covenant Group "high." This collective experience of compassion and well-being generated by the participants creates an "overflow" of goodwill. This increase in group energy gives some participants the collective ability to participate in community outreach projects that transport the Covenant Group beyond itself. Others receive the support needed to remain attentive to individual needs in the midst of group outreach work.

Each Covenant Group sets its own agenda for this high-g geared phase of its workout. One group might volunteer to work at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter; another might organize a campaign against sweatshops or for better schools. One group might choose to work as teacher assistants in a public school; another might decide to work with a worship committee to create new rituals for the weekly congregational worship service. The participants decide how they will expend this peak in their energy.

Optimally, they do this outreach work every fourth meeting. By so doing, their collective rhythm is monitored for both overload and under-utilization. This stage of the workout practice produces the second spiritual strength of Covenant Groups: stamina.

THE WIND-DOWN

The slow-down begins as participants return to their Covenant Group site to recount the new personal experiences generated by their outreach project. Each person may talk about what he or she experienced and felt. These individual experiences are listened to attentively. No thoughts or feelings are demeaned. Each person's experience is noted.

Thus does the Covenant Group return to itself full circle. The private, individual experiences born of public encounters with others are shared, acknowledged, and respected. Each individual hears and is heard, affirms and is affirmed. Now a deeper sense of personal insight and group empowerment emerges because participants have discovered the third spiritual strength of Covenant Group workouts: renewal.

In sum, Covenant Group work heals, transforms, and repairs the world. Covenant Groups are three-in-one spiritual routines in which participants practice what they preach -- right relationship.

The Center for Community Values

The Center for Community Values (CCV) is a resource center and networking facilitator for people engaged in relational communities such as covenant groups. CCV's mission is to encourage and equip people to create and sustain relational communities where justice, democracy and human dignity prevail. CCV is a not-for-profit organization incorporated in the State of Illinois, and is supported by individual and corporate donations.

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