

Starting and Nurturing Covenant Groups

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“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world: indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

“It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can seriously help another without helping himself.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

This booklet was written for members and ministers, particularly in Unitarian Universalist congregations, who are interested in starting and nurturing covenant groups within their congregations. I hope it provides you with the basic information you need to understand what a covenant group is, and to get groups going in your congregation. I have been particularly inspired by the work of Bob Hill and Glenn Turner, as well as by my own experiences in working with small groups in congregations. I am confident you will find this approach to be a vitalizing and fruitful activity in your congregation.

What is a Covenant Group

In today’s world, people are looking for community and meaning, and in their searching they often turn to churches. Isolation, transience, pressure, and stress characterize the modern world. Some people arrive at the doorsteps of our churches hurting or emotionally or spiritually bruised. Some folks arrive lonely or seeking help through difficult life transitions. How do we respond to the needs of both long term members and newcomers in our congregations?

The development of covenant groups is one response. A covenant group is a type of small relational group. It is a voluntary gathering of people who come together for a common purpose. What unites the members is a desire for connection with others and a deeper spiritual connection in their lives. They are committed to a shared responsibility to make the group work. The

groups are free of charge and are organized and run by their members with the support of the congregation and the minister that sponsors them.

Many people in congregations are discovering the power and joy of covenant groups. In a covenant group, people talk, learn, work, play, laugh and cry together. Human beings need each other. Humans are of necessity in relationship to other beings. The central concern in a covenant group is the depth and quality of human contacts among members. A covenant group is not a therapy group.

The concept of covenant groups is very simple, easy to introduce into congregations, and yet extremely effective and powerful. Covenant groups result in increased overall membership in the congregations which use them. This is because covenant groups are meeting the basic need for affiliation and spiritual exploration. In a congregation with covenant groups, the minister usually finds that his or her workload in pastoral care is reduced. Members of the covenant groups are ministering to each other through their relationships in their groups. They support each other through the ups and downs, life transitions, challenges, and joys which life brings. In fact, what transpires in a covenant group is lay ministry. In a church that has a minister, for the covenant group approach to be successful, it is essential that the minister be supportive of the idea.

Summary Description of a Covenant Group

Below is a summary description of a covenant group. I will elaborate on each aspect of the group in the remainder of the booklet.

Covenants: Service to the congregation and larger world

Commitment to generate new groups by growing and dividing

Commitment to relationship groundrules

Size: 6-10 members

Growth: When a group grows to ten members it generates a new group

Meeting Frequency: At least once a month

Leadership: Co-facilitators are chosen and trained to facilitate the group with emphasis on shared leadership

Format: Welcome

Opening: A ritual which reminds the group of its connection to the larger congregation and larger purpose

Check-In: Sharing from each person on his or her feeling or thoughts

Covenant: Restating the agreements by which the group members are abiding

Content: Discussing, experiencing, sharing, planning, activity

Check-Out: Sharing from each person

Closing: A ritual which reminds the group of its larger purpose

Group Covenants

The members of the group agree to abide by a set of covenants. These covenants are what distinguish the group from other kinds of gatherings. First, the members agree to **engage in service to the congregation and larger world**. For example, this may take the form of the group agreeing to engage every few months in a service project to benefit the congregation. The purpose of this covenant is to ensure that the group is connected to the congregation. It helps the

group members develop and maintain an external focus for at least part of their activities. This prevents the potential problem of a group being a splinter group or set off from the congregation.

A second covenant is a **commitment to generate new groups by growing and dividing**. When a group reaches a large enough number, roughly ten members, the group will divide and generate two new groups. Other new members can join these new groups and in this way, more groups are generated within the congregation.

A third covenant is to **abide by a set of relationship groundrules**. The groundrules ensure a healthy safe environment within the group. I will elaborate on these in a later section.

Meeting Frequency

Ideally a covenant group meets once or twice a month, but a minimum of at least once a month. Some groups even meet weekly if schedules allow and members wish. A group needs to meet often enough that there is continuity from meeting to meeting. Members need to have the opportunity to get to know one another and to develop friendships. Meeting less than once a month will not allow for this kind of development. The more often the groups meets, the greater the intimacy and sense of connection among members.

Group Size and Growth Pattern

Ideally a covenant group is between six to ten members. If a group is too large, the members feel anonymous and unheard. If a group is too small there is not enough energy and continuity to keep it going. A group needs to be small enough that each person can speak, be heard and be known. The important point is focusing on a group size that enables the group to

accomplish its purpose, rather than getting too caught up on a specific number of participants. As stated above, when a group grows to about ten members it divides and generates a new group.

A group is started with the intention of generating new groups. Members are encouraged to invite and be hospitable to newcomers. Newcomers are encouraged to attend at least three meetings to see what the group is about. Newcomers need not be members of the church. Indeed, church growth happens by members inviting non-members to participate in their covenant groups. Through this process of newcomers visiting and deciding to become group members, the group will grow. When a group grows to about ten members, it divides and generates two new groups. This ensures that groups provide opportunities for new members to connect. This also provides an opportunity for longer-term members to continue to meet and become connected with newer members. This prevents the problem of groups becoming exclusive, cliquish or factional. When generating new groups is seen from the outset as a part of the covenant group experience, members can anticipate and support the process.

Facilitator Selection and Training

Each covenant group has two co-facilitators. The facilitators of the group are selected based on their commitment to the covenant group model. The main role of the group facilitator is to help the group accomplish its task. The facilitator is not there to further his or her own agenda. Specifically, the facilitators convene and facilitate the group meetings. In addition, the facilitators see to it that basic logistics of the group get attended to such as scheduling, publicity, and announcements. The reason for having co-facilitators is that when the group grows to the point of being ready to divide and generate two new groups, one of the two facilitators will accompany each of the two new groups generated.

Characteristics of an effective group facilitator are a commitment to the covenant group mode. An effective facilitator is willing to learn, open to people with diverse viewpoints, emotionally mature, possesses good listening skills and an ability to be objective about his or her own experiences. An effective facilitator is likely to be known and respected in the community, although this need not be the case. The covenant group approach is open to new members and supports the development of new leadership in the congregation. As we shall see, leadership skills are learnable. Thus a commitment to developing leadership and facilitation skills is essential to the covenant group model. Facilitators should be members of the church, although membership in the group in general is open to non-members of the church.

The co-facilitators of the group are selected with the above responsibilities and characteristics in mind. Potential group facilitators can be nominated by the members of the congregation, by self-nomination, by the minister, or by a nominating committee set up for this purpose. The final selection can be done by a selection committee, the minister, or a combined effort between a committee and the minister. The important point is that those making the selection understand the covenant group model and focus on potential facilitators with the commitment and characteristics likely to enable the covenant group model to work.

Before starting, the co-facilitators are trained briefly through reading covenant group materials, by consulting with the minister, or by attending a covenant group training. Preferably, the co-facilitators meet monthly in a covenant group of their own with the minister or other “coach” (as Glenn Turner calls them). This serves as on-going support and training for the facilitators. As the number of groups grow in the congregation, the number of facilitators also grows. The group of facilitators also has between six to ten members. Thus over time there will be increasing numbers of groups of facilitators meeting as well.

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. They own it. 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. We think of leadership as a rare and innate trait. However, for the most part leadership is learned. The skills and knowledge necessary for effective leadership are learnable. 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. 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. Connected to this, leaders in groups with shared leadership are less likely to burnout because they are less burdened by excessive responsibility for the group.

A group that has a clear **purpose, format** and **groundrules**, has laid the foundation for building shared leadership. In a group with a clearly stated purpose, every member, including new members, can share in the work of keeping the group focused on its purpose. In a group with a clearly stated format, everyone, including new members, can help keep the group on track with its agenda and process. In a group with clearly stated groundrules, every member including

new members, can help the group keep within its behavioral agreements. I elaborate on each of these three aspects in the discussion below.

A Clear Group Purpose

Members of a covenant group come together to share, develop friendships, develop spiritually, and serve the larger community. Having a clearly stated and agreed upon purpose is essential for success. Although fundamental, this is often overlooked. 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. Keep the purpose simple at first, as stated above.

A benefit of a 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. If possible, refer that person out of the group to other groups or organizations that do address that participant's concern.

A Clear Group Format

It is important to clarify the format of the group. What is the desired structure of a meeting or gathering? When and how does it start, how does it end, what's in the middle? What are the agreed upon activities and in what order do they occur? The format need not be rigid.

Perhaps a group will actually decide to have some flexibility because the members like variety, and this is fine. Even so, the unspecified format is still a format. At the same time, another group may prefer a predictable format. Below is a detailed example format for a covenant group meeting. Keep the format as simple as possible to accomplish the group's purpose. It may be helpful to write up the format or to post or announce the format at the beginning of the gathering.

The benefit of an agreed on format is that members tend to feel more comfortable when they know what to expect, what will happen when in a meeting. This is particularly true for new members. In addition, people are more likely to go with the flow of the meeting when they know what is expected of them when. For example, if a person wants to share a significant personal experience and knows that check-in is a time for this, that person is more likely to wait and share during the check-in rather than being disruptive at an earlier time in the meeting. A clear format makes it easier for members to follow and to stay on track. It is also easier to facilitate a meeting when there is a clearly agreed upon format.

A Clear Set of Relationship Groundrules

Every group has rules: they are either explicit or implicit. 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.

The purpose of groundrules is to enhance the functioning of the group, not to interfere with it. As with the other aspects of developing the group, keep the groundrules as simple as possible to get the job done. Having explicit rules increases the feeling of safety and can enhance participation. Clear groundrules make it easier to facilitate a meeting and make it easier for all to share responsibility for the leadership of the group because all members understand

what the expected behavioral norms are. When groundrules are explicit, every member can assist the group in keeping to them. Thus, leadership is more likely to be shared.

In the first meeting, the group develops the groundrules together. Members who participate together in the development of the groundrules are more likely to have a sense of ownership and to abide by the rules. Below are suggestions for items that could be included in groundrules. The group can revisit the groundrules periodically to see if they need revising.

Suggestions for groundrules include agreements about the following:

Confidentiality.

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

Not interrupting each other.

Smoking.

Sharing of expenses, if there are any.

Whether starting and ending times are fixed or flexible.

Whether side conversations are okay or are too disruptive.

Seeking to move beyond tolerance to understanding of those with different opinions.

Not attacking people with different views. Asking questions to enhance understanding.

Sharing the privilege and responsibility of helping the group to function.

Not participating in or encouraging put downs.

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

An Example Format for a Group Meeting

Here is an example format for a meeting of a covenant group followed by an explanation of each element.

1. Welcome and Statement of the Purpose of the Group
2. Opening
3. Introduction and Check-In
4. Review of Covenant and Groundrules
5. Topic of the Meeting (discussing , experiencing, planning, activity)
6. Check-Out
7. Closing

1. 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. It need not be elaborate, but should not be overlooked either. A statement of the group's purpose is typically overlooked but is also essential. It is not uncommon for people to come for the first time to a group or a meeting with only a vague and sometimes an erroneous notion of the group's purpose. 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.

2. Opening

The opening is a ritual to mark the beginning of the group's time together. 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, an inspirational reading or a prayer. The reading may be on the theme of the group's activity in that particular session. 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 set aside some of the harriedness with which they may have entered the meeting.

3. Introductions and Check-In

The introduction and check-in is an opportunity for each person to state her name and to speak about something 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 more. Over time, however, all members typically choose to participate in the check-in. Indeed it becomes a central component of the meeting. The check-in is done by one of the co-facilitators inviting each person in turn to participate. A check-in is not a time for debate.

The benefits of the check-in are many. Members learn about each other's lives. Through sharing of stories, members bond with and learn from each other. A person who has come to the meeting with particularly pressing news is given an opportunity to speak early on in the meeting. The physical and emotional states of members 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 defuse 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 an aid to shy or reticent members. If a person has spoken once, she is more likely to speak again. Conversely, if well into the meeting, a person has been sitting silent for the whole time, it is much harder for that person to break into the conversation. With the check-in, everyone gets to speak relatively early in the meeting. Thus shy people in particular are more likely to continue participating. It also serves as an auditory reminder for the particularly talkative members that the other members present need and deserve time to share their views. 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. The check-in sets a tone for valuing all members and equalizing participation.

4. Review of Covenants and Groundrules

Particularly in early meetings and whenever new members are present, it is important that the co-facilitators restate the covenants and groundrules by which members are agreeing to abide. The covenants, as stated above, are to engage in service to the congregation and larger world, to generate new groups by growing and dividing, and to abide by a set of relationship groundrules. I will elaborate on this last covenant. In the initial meeting or meetings of the group, the members develop groundrules together. For the groundrules to become a guide for the group, they need to be remembered and used. It may be helpful to write them and hang them on a wall where they are visible, or to hand them out on a sheet of paper. To be welcoming of

newcomers, it is essential that groundrules be explicit and overt. Groundrules can of course be modified over time to fit the needs of the group as it grows and changes.

5. Topic of the Meeting

During this phase the group engages in a focal activity. This could be discussing, experiencing, engaging in a service project, sharing personal stories and experiences, or engaging in some other activity. In one approach, the content of the body of the meeting is generated 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. It could also be a discussion of a particularly topic. Alternatively, one of the facilitators could pose a significant question for group members to explore together.

6. Check-Out

The check-out is similar to the check-in except that it very brief. Each person can state one sentence or, if time allows, 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. It is done by each person in turn having an opportunity to make a statement. As with other aspects, a person can pass, that is opt to say nothing. The benefits of the check-out are also many. It gives an indicator to the whole group and to the co-facilitators in particular as to how the group is doing. It highlights strengths and gives quick notice on 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.

7. Closing

A closing is a ritual to mark the end of the group's time together. It may be an activity such as a reading, a song, blowing out the candle, an individual or group prayer, standing in a circle, holding hands, or whatever activity the group comes arrives at together.

Handling Difficulties in Groups

Difficulties are a normal part of group life. If you expect that they will occur, you are more likely to take them in stride. The most common type of problems is behavioral difficulties. Difficulties can be prevented to a large extent by attending to and clarifying the purpose, format and groundrules of a group as discussed above. For example, a groundrule stating that the members agree not to interrupt each other can go a long ways toward diminishing this disruptive behavior. When behavioral expectations are clearly stated in groundrules, members are aware of them and can more easily abide by them. This will not avoid problems altogether, but can contribute greatly to a more healthy group environment.

When a problem does arise, the first step toward resolving a problem is thinking clearly and defining just what the problem is. Is it simply an annoyance or is it really a problem that will negatively impact the group? If the problem is a disruptive behavior, defining the problem includes understanding the impetus for the person behaving in the disruptive way. Answer the question "What are some possible reasons why the person is behaving in this way?" Come up with as many reasons as you can. For example possible reasons why a person might refrain from participating in discussion are: she is not interested in the topic, is

bored, is shy, does not understand what is going on, feels unheard or unvalued, prefers to observe and listen, is upset with someone or something in the group, is tired, etc... It is important to recognize that you don't know why that person is behaving that way. You can only guess.

Next in your problem solving approach, try to come up with multiple ways to address the problem given the variety of possible reasons for its origin. Be attentive to implications for the purpose, format and groundrules of your group. For example, a person may be quiet in a meeting because he doesn't understand what is going on. This may mean that the purpose of the group may be unclear or at least unclear to that person. Work on clarifying the purpose may help that person understand what the group is about and thus get more involved. As another example, a person may be quiet because when she does try to speak, she is interrupted. A groundrule about not interrupting may help in this case. As an example of another disruptive behavior, a person may bring up a topic at an inappropriate time in the meeting topic and sidetrack the meeting. She may do this because she does not understand the format of the meeting. Work to clarify the format of what happens when in the meeting, gives the freedom for members to participate at the appropriate time. The next step in problem solving after you have come up with a list of possible solutions is to try the ones you think would be most fruitful.

Ultimately a person who disagrees strongly with the stated purpose of the group or who cannot abide by the Covenants, purpose, format and groundrules of the group, is a threat to that group's functioning. A person who consistently violates these aspects of the group, even when they are made clear to the person, needs be invited by the co-facilitators or minister to take a leave of absence from the group or to depart from the group altogether. If the person

stays, he will be a threat to the group's existence. This is a very rare event in groups and one which you are unlikely to encounter unless you participate in groups for many years.

Closing Comments and Resources

I wish you the best in your endeavor to start and nurture covenant groups in your congregation. I hope that this booklet has given you the basics you need to successfully embark on this effort. I am certain that you will find it rewarding for yourself personally and for your congregation as a whole. Following is a resource list for more information about covenant groups.

Books, Newsletters & Booklets

- Donahue, Bill. 1996. The Willow Creek guide to leading life-changing small groups. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing.
- George, Carl F. 1992. Prepare your church for the future. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming Revell.
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- Turner, Glenn H. Feb. 2000. Transforming our churches with small group ministry. Self-published from the North East District of the Unitarian Universalist Association.
- Ware, Corrine. 1997. Connecting to God: Nurturing spirituality through small groups. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute.
- Wuthnow, Robert. (ed.). 1994a. "I come away stronger": How small groups are shaping American religion. Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans.
- Wuthnow, Robert. (ed.). 1994b. Sharing the journey: Support groups and America's new quest for community. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute.

Organizations:

The Center for Community Values
 5403 S. Ridgewood Ave, Suite 2
 Chicago, IL 60615-5337
 e-mail: ccv@the-ccv.org
 web: www.The-CCV.org