

## **Covenant Group Work: A Spiritual Exercise To Heal, Transform, and Repair the World**

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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 recoup as 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, personal fears and disappointments, private 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 personal 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:

*\*Martin Buber*, in his reflections upon Judaic 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 the Covenant Group participants. Some individuals learn how to sustain private, personal work without becoming depleted. Others learn how to participate in public accounts of personal 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 personal 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 COOL-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 talks about what he or she experienced. Each describes how he or she felt. These private 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.