

Facilitator Training – Some Ideas

Bob Hill, *Covenant Group News*, April 24, 2000

There is an art to being a small group leader, but it is not especially difficult and the training of Covenant Group facilitators, I think, does not have to be complex.

Ministers (or the lay leaders in charge of a fellowship's Covenant Group program) should choose as facilitators well-respected members who are:

*Willing to meet once a month or more with their groups.

*Willing to implement the Covenant Group approach and rituals (CGNews #19).

*Willing and able to be sensitive to the feelings and needs of other members of their Groups.

*Aware of the difference between leading a group and facilitating, which is to say they should expect to listen a lot and talk only a little while facilitating.

Thom Corrigan and Richard Peace are the authors of a book called "*Learning to Care: Developing Community in Small Groups*" (Pilgrimage/NavPress, 1997). They put some of their advice on the Web and I agreed with much of what I found there.

"Occasionally bring into the discussion some useful information from your own (reflections)," they advise facilitators, but, "keep your comments brief. Do not allow yourself to become the expert to whom everyone turns for 'the right answer'" (p. 92)

Other small group principles (suggested by their list and adapted for our consideration) include:

ASK QUESTIONS. *The facilitator's primary role is to get others to participate.*

Questions may even be useful on those occasions when one needs to **GUIDE THE DISCUSSION.** If someone has gone off on

a tangent others appear uninterested in following, one might ask, "And how is this relevant to our topic tonight?" If the quieter persons in the group are not getting into the discussion, ask follow-up questions to draw them in. For example: "John, how would you answer the question?" Or, "Anybody else have any insights into this question?"

START AND STOP THE MEETINGS ON TIME. If you do people will become more prompt and they'll take comfort in knowing the meeting will end when it is supposed to end.

AVOID TASK-ORIENTATION. We Unitarian Universalists tend to want closure or at least a sense of progress, but Covenant Groups, whether for reflection and discussion or for activities, are not primarily task groups. Whether the group adequately addresses the meeting's topic (or completes a section of a quilt) is not of first importance. Whether the group's trust level grew stronger or was weakened is more important. And, Corrigan and Peace remind us, it is better to cut off discussion when it is going well, anyway. "Leave 'em laughin'" is the stand-up comic's rule, and maybe ours should be "leave 'em wanting more."

MODEL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS. When introducing a question to which others are asked to respond, it's a good idea for the facilitator to be the first person speaking on the question. This will let her/him model good practice by keeping her/his answer to the right length (brief, most likely) and the optimum depth of sharing (friendship-level, not therapy).

"Generally," Corrigan and Peace say, "the aim will be to cause people to recall past experiences and share their memories and resulting insights with the group... to share their stories and to think about the topic..."