

Beyond the Topics: Covenant Groups in Service

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The Covenant Group program at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Asheville, North Carolina is in its sixth year, and we had ten groups in 2009-10. In our initial years, one of the things with which we struggled was the service or outreach commitment that was expected. People had been known to say, “I am already involved in social justice work, I don’t need to do anything with yet another group.” Or someone would comment, “I am here for my own spiritual growth and for fellowship with my circle. If you are talking about outreach, I have ‘been there, done that.’ I don’t want to use precious “topic time” figuring out whether to work coffee hour together or sponsor a child for Holiday Giving.” One or two of our groups were willing enough to offer assistance, but complained that their age or physical condition didn’t allow them to do much more than take up a collection for some worthy cause; that seemed like a poor substitute for real outreach.

Over time, this reluctance has been replaced by group pride and enthusiasm for the service piece of covenant group membership. The change happened gradually. In facilitator meetings, we kept noting that service was part of the covenant folks were signing on to. (Call it a bit of “tough love” by the coordinators!) Also, we kept the requirement small. We asked groups to come up with two projects – one reaching into the larger church, and one reaching into the larger community. We emphasized that these service times needn’t overwhelm group members— nothing long-term, nothing that required huge amounts of effort or planning. It could be something very simple that required only an hour or two of time.

When groups finally accepted the idea of service, they got creative. The group that had a lot of elderly members with limited physical abilities decided to write get-well or support cards to members of the congregation facing illness or hard times. They did this sitting together at a table for a few minutes before every meeting. They also took up a collection and purchased flowers and shrubs for a nursing center. Several of the more active group members did the planting and when it was done, everyone came out to tour the landscaping and visit with residents.

Other groups volunteered to help with CROP Walk registration, Habitat for Humanity luncheons, or distribute Teddy Bears collected during the holidays. Our all-women covenant group did the set-up and serving for the annual Covenant Group potluck, when the covenant groups come together under one roof. Our family-centered group for parents collected vitamins for the children of Haiti and involved their own offspring in that project.

Eventually, things started to flow and even expand. One of our covenant groups, Tides of Change, took service to the next level and truly became a model for the rest of us. This group consists of young adults. Under the leadership of facilitator Laura Hansen and group member Dan Clere, they applied for (and expect to soon receive) a FAITH certification from the North Carolina Wildlife Federation for our church campus. FAITH stands for “Fellowship Actions Impacting the Habitat”, and the credential recognizes in layman’s terms what UU’s know to be an exercise in our seventh principle. UUC-Asheville will be only the second church in Asheville to have achieved this recognition. The covenant group realized that our church grounds were once part of a forest. By providing for wildlife appropriate to our urban location (songbirds, small mammals, pollinating insects) they helped our church make its built environment more sustainable and beneficial to the “interconnected web.” They built birdhouses; they planted native species in our gardens, and much more. This project definitely took more than a

single day of action!

All in all, it turned out to be great for group members to see and work with each other outside the regular sessions where deep sharing occurred over topics. Groups rose to the challenge of finding things that reflected the interests of the members and worked with the skills and abilities of the participants.

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