

From our Ministers...

Covenant Groups as Community Pastoral Care

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I arrived at Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church in 2005 as the Minister for Pastoral Care. The focus of my ministry is ensuring that each member of the community has support during times of transition, grief, illness or uncertainty. As part of this goal, I serve as the ministerial liaison to our Connection Circle Steering Committee, the body of lay leaders who organize and promote small group ministry in the congregation.

In a large congregation, it is common to have more than one person in treatment for cancer. When I first arrived at the church, I was unsure how to regularly connect with each member in treatment in a way that was respectful and manageable in the hectic schedule of congregational life. Then two members, independent of one another, asked if we had a support group for people living with cancer. This was the catalyst for the founding of such a group. Through meeting twice a month, participants share their worries, challenges and celebrations with each other and reflect on coping with serious illness from a liberal religious perspective.

Along with offering invaluable support to one another, the group members teach me about the questions and concerns of cancer patients. I always feel privileged to be in their company, hearing their stories and witnessing the care they offer one another. This experience taught me that often the best way to support individuals going through difficult circumstances is to bring them in contact with others traveling a similar path.

With the success of our cancer support group, I have since utilized this model by founding covenant groups with a decidedly pastoral focus. At Cedar Lane, we have offered groups for the bereaved and widowed (“Living Alone, Living with Loss”) and for caregivers of loved ones with mental illness (“Sharing Stories, Sharing Hope.”) At the suggestion of our LGBT Task Force, we have also offered a group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people and their allies in an effort to build community and counter feelings of marginalization (“Living the Full Rainbow Flag.”)

A few words about how the groups function: After a facilitator walks a newly-convened group through the covenant-building process and offers some initial suggestions of subjects to explore, the topics naturally emerge from the conversations in the group or by the request of individual members. The facilitator often takes the responsibility of generating some questions about the subject for each meeting and then steps back once the group begins to take hold of the subject in a personal way. Sometimes group members will offer a resource that pertains to the subject or the facilitator will draw on something from our congregation’s library but, for the most part, the “content” of these circles is the lived experience of the individual members and their shared experience with the identity or issue that brings them together.

These groups are short-term, in hopes that if members wish to continue, someone in the group will take facilitator training and lead the group from there, freeing me and other pastoral care providers to start more groups. When creating these groups, we are intentional about recruiting leaders with appropriate training and experience (beyond basic facilitator training) because of the vulnerability of the conversations. (“Living Alone...” was co-led by myself, a social worker and a spiritual director; the

LGBT group was led by myself, another minister and the co-chair of our LGBT task force.) I have found that the intentional practices of a covenant group greatly help in creating a safe space for participants to give and receive compassionate care and fostering an environment that invites genuine spiritual reflection.

There is a mysterious power in the group experience that cannot be achieved through one-to-one connection. With intentionality and care, congregations can organize covenant groups to tend specifically to the fearful and brokenhearted. Based on our experience, I encourage other congregations to found these circles of healing.

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