

MYTHS

Our Fourth Myth: No Response or Interchange During a SGM Session

CGN April/May 2012

Editor's Note: Diana Dorroh. Some program leaders have included in their congregation's small group ministry model the request that there be no response or interchange of experience during the topic portion of the meeting. Others allow verbal exchanges after all have shared. And yet a third group allows verbal exchange during the entire topic portion, as long as everyone listens respectfully. It is my understanding that these approaches all work.

Allowing verbal exchange allows group synergy to occur and allows participants to inspire insights in each other, as group members explore common experiences and revelations, etc. Group bonding can also occur from this sharing. On the other hand, it may feel like people are not listening, as they piggy back on your experience with theirs. It may also be limiting to the individual's expression and may inhibit deep sharing.

In my own congregation's program, we allow interchange during the entire topic portion of the meeting, though often everyone shares individually first, without any response from other group members. The groups I have participated in and led often experienced commonality of experience and enhanced bonding during this period of interchange.

Does your group's model include interchange during the topic part of the meeting? Please share with the other 1450 of us. Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com.

Response and Exchange -- Rev. Helen Zidowecki, President, UU SGM Network

Maybe the operative words here are "response" and "exchange". One thing that has always struck me about Unitarian Universalists is our attention to words. This goes with the adage that we read ahead in the hymns to see if we are in agreement with the words! So I wonder if the issue is not so much when each of us talk but the intent of our talking. To "respond" may be to give an opinion related to what a person has said. Agreeing or not with another person is not the intent of Small Group Ministry; hearing perspectives and learning as we listen is. When we feel compelled to "respond" we are in danger of changing the tenor of the gathering into a discussion. If "respond" is to ask a "clarifying question", use something like "Can you clarify that?" or "I am not sure that I understand....." rather than reflecting with "I think I hear you say....". The reflection requires a person to respond to your interpretation rather than continuing their original flow of thought. Our use of language is so tricky!

An "exchange" presents the expectation of hearing what others think and being able to share our own thoughts without need for judgment. And certainly my own thoughts change as I listen to others, so that what I say may not be what I might have said earlier in a session.

The intention of the session is to:

- 1) ensure that everyone has opportunity to participate, and to
- 2) be willing and even expect to be changed by the interactions that occur around a topic. This is a long way of saying that the process that a group uses to accomplish this is developed by the group, to meet the intentions. As we have indicated numerous times, the myths occur when there is an attempt to structure the process more than is necessary to meet the intended outcome of intimacy and ultimacy.

Interchange or No interchange -- Loretta Carmickle, Co-Facilitator,
Small Group Ministry/Covenant Circles, UU Congregation of Green Valley/Amado, Arizona

In response to your request for comments from our covenant circles regarding our practices with regard to "interchange or no interchange," I asked our various facilitators to comment and have compiled their responses as follows:

In the course of our three-year history with covenant groups, we seem to have migrated from following a strict "no response" policy to a much more flexible one that varies from group to group. Some groups still proscribe responding during the initial round or two of sharing but open up the last portion of the gathering to a general discussion-like sharing, which seems to work well. The main advantage of forgoing response during the sharing time is that it does away with the temptation to be thinking of a response while the person is speaking, which diminishes the quality of attentive listening.

For those circles that allow responses during the sharing time, it is expected that the responses will be brief and heart-felt and certainly not everyone needs to feel that they should respond to what someone has shared. In addition, there are effective ways of responding nonverbally as well as verbally, indicating that the speaker has been listened to with one-pointed and compassionate attention.

One of our facilitators expressed well the value of uninterrupted sharing, with time, perhaps, being given at the end each sharing for heart-felt responses:

"In covenant circles I've been with, when we've tried to attempt anything like a strict "listening-only" expectation, it seems to me there has been an undesirable, unwelcome tension in the group.

"Yet, I believe it's critical that members understand the beauty and gift of each member having time to speak without interruption. It's especially valuable to many who are either shy or introverts or wish to pause and gather thoughts and go on; it gives them a forum for getting to discover and express their deeper thoughts and experiences on a topic. In a more ordinary social setting, the extroverts and others may leap quickly into a conversation and not even realize the quieter ones aren't feeling comfortable trying to contribute much.

"Verbal and non-verbal responses or even intentional silent pauses can help a speaker feel heard and understood and a bit less as though they've just given a speech and must now relinquish the floor to the next one. We've seen times where one person's sharing elicited a very deep unexpected connection between members not well known to each other. It would have been a shame if it had gone unnoticed due to a prohibition of responding. That kind of special moment is a pleasure to witness."

Finally, a short quote from a covenant circle member: "How freeing it has been to know that I have the time and space to let the words and feelings come out without interruption. But, I need to add that once I have finished expressing myself, I very much appreciate feedback -- knowing that some of my thoughts or feelings resonate with others. "

In conclusion, it does seem that we agree that uninterrupted sharing and attentive listening are the cornerstones of our covenant circles but that time should be allowed for heartfelt responses at appropriate times.

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Response to May/June Topic: Our Fourth Myth: *No Response or Interchange During a SGM Session*
from Evan Rose, Unitarian Church of Los Alamos, NM

One aspect of Covenant Groups that I find particularly rewarding is the practice of deep listening and the connection that I gain with my inner self when it is my turn to speak. During normal conversation, there is a give and take. During normal conversation the speaker is aware of the listener and how that listener is likely to respond. That leads to the common mode of conversation that we all experience daily. Covenant groups take me out of the common mode into a unique and unusual mode of conversation. This mode involves deep listening - where my sole task is to listen and hear the message from my fellow covenant member. I receive this message without the distraction of considering a response to what I am hearing. When I speak, I connect with myself and speak in a manner that does not consider the response that my words might elicit.

In my group, people may speak in their turn and mention that something spoken by another has caused them to think of one of their own personal experiences. This is done with some diplomacy - usually an acknowledgment that they are stretching the rules just a bit.

We do not engage in "verbal exchanges" - which I interpret as a two-way conversation or a group discussion. It seems to me that verbal exchanges "break the spell."