

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

This is our Q&A issue. Some questions keep coming up. Here, for now, at least, are our answers.  
Rev. Bob Hill

*Q: MINIMUM READING REQUIRED?*

**QUESTION:** What is the minimum reading and/or training one needs in order to initiate Covenant Groups in a Unitarian Universalist church?

**ANSWER:** My colleague, the Rev. Glenn Turner, has a wonderful bibliography of materials on meta-groups or Covenant Groups. Everything on the list is, I'm sure, worth your while and you may want to read all the books and see all the videotapes he mentions. But that is not required.

What impresses me most about meta-church groups or Covenant Groups (I use the terms interchangeably) is that they are like good Plug and Play components of computer software. (a) They are simple. (b) They let your system function in new and positive ways; they work. And (c) they don't respond well to user modifications.

It is difficult for some of us, I think, to believe in the efficacy of something so simple. Isn't making churches grow extremely difficult? Haven't we smart and dedicated Unitarian Universalists been failing at that attempt for decades? Well, yes, but nevertheless, this is profound stuff that is also plain and simple. Do these five or six things and your church can begin serving people it has never been able to reach before:

- Offer groups of about 10 people meeting regularly in people's home.
- At every one of these meetings, use a format that begins with a check-in and an uplifting reading from a Unitarian Universalist source and end with a check-out and another UU reading.
- In between, encourage the group to focus on any significant topic or activity not counter to UU principles and purposes.
- Have an appointed leader who facilitates each meeting and also meets regularly with the minister (and/or other group leaders).
- Ask group members to covenant with each other about procedure and with their sponsoring church about a way the group can serve the church.
- Invite friends to the monthly meetings and plan for division into new groups once the magic number of 10 members has been reached.

### *TWO HARD PARTS*

There are two hard parts to this for UUs, I think. (A.) One is helping people believe that something so simple can be so bed-rock important, that everything you really have to know about Covenant Groups is encompassed in the six points above.

Here's the other hard part: (B.) ALL of the above elements are necessary. As I said, this is a Plug and Play program and it has worked wonders everywhere it's been tried this way, as far as I know.

But we Unitarian Universalists love to tinker, and I fear we'll hear stories in coming months of church leaders saying "We tried Covenant Groups and they didn't work," when, in fact, they tried a variation which did not include one or more of the key elements.

For those with limited budgets and/or time, I recommend two items for your preparation stage if your church is considering meta-church or Covenant Groups:

1. The Coming Church Revolution by Carl George, \$16.49 (Cnd.), \$12.95 (U.S.).
2. The archived articles of this newsletter available for free either at the SW District web page or the ListBot site. (See instructions below.) Print out Issue #1, at least.

For further study, get Glenn's paper, "Transforming Our Churches With Small Group Ministry." He will send it to you by e-mail. His address: [gturner2@maine.rr.com](mailto:gturner2@maine.rr.com).

Glenn's minimum list includes Carl George's Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership, which probably means he has a higher toleration for Christian terminology than I do.

*Q: CONTENT EXPERTISE?*

**QUESTION:** Does the person who volunteers to be the leader of a Covenant Group need to be a "content expert?" -- Jackie Hall, Hammond, LA

**ANSWER:** Not at all. At minimum, the leader should show up with an opening and closing reading in hand in case whoever volunteered to provide those fails to do so. But, after that, it is the leader's job to facilitate a good discussion and help keep the group on task, including the use of the opening and closing formats. The focus of the group, which may evolve over time, is up to the members of the group as is any material they may want to use.

I'd hope the leader would, first and foremost, model good process and listening skills. Next in importance would be helping the group adhere to their own covenants with each other about behavior, including starting the meetings on time and ending on time.

It will be vital that our leaders don't lead too much. They are to be facilitators, to help keep things on track. They may have to step in sometimes to move discussions along, but it is the members who "own" the group and have the primary responsibility for its success or failure.

*Q: GETTING STARTED, DIVIDING?*

**QUESTION:** I have been following Covenant Group News with great interest almost since the "beginning." What I haven't seen yet, though I may have missed it, is what are the successful ways to start small groups? I am interested in the process of formation, identification of leadership, etc. Initial group formation and subsequent division/multiplication of the groups still has me baffled. Any suggestions? -- Dana Reynolds, Brighton, MI

**ANSWER:** Ideally, the minister or ministers of a church, in consultation with key lay leaders, would select a sufficient number of Covenant Group leaders, get their agreement to be trained

and to serve for a church year, and announce a plan for offering Covenant Groups as options for new and long-term members.

In some groups, particularly groups without ministers, this will have to be modified, of course. When there is no minister, I believe the Board of Trustees or the Executive Committee of the Board should choose Covenant Group leaders.

In practice, it will often be the case that leaders will volunteer themselves for particular topics. The Board or minister should make sure these volunteers are willing to be trained, to stay in close collaboration, and to follow the format of Covenant Groups. A second determination of their suitability for the role will be the responses of church folk. Will a particular leader and her/his Covenant Group focus draw 6-10 people? If so, will her/his leadership be conducive to long-term continuation of the group?

Leaders of the Dallas Fellowship in Oak Cliff asked members to suggest Covenant Group topics and got a long list. Then they found leaders willing to facilitate some of those topics. Then they posted sign-up lists and, several months later, I am told, the Fellowship is considerably revived and has a half dozen or so Covenant Groups going strong. For details, contact the Rev. Don Fielding: [fielding@iglobal.net](mailto:fielding@iglobal.net).

Division of the group? From the beginning, the leader should let people know that if and when they get to 10 regular attendees, they will begin the process of helping to form another group. As soon as possible, the leader should identify a potential leader for the new group when it is needed. Above 10 or so (certainly at 14), the Covenant Group becomes less effective.