

Covenant Group Start-up Procedure: A Guideline for Religious Leaders

Based on *A Covenant Group Source Book*, published by The Center for Community Values

The following are suggestions which can be adapted to a congregation's particular situation.

1. Introduce the covenant group concept to the congregation with a sermon or other presentation by the minister, covenant group committee, and/or guest speaker. Covenant groups are a way of enhancing the congregation's ministry to members, potential members, and to the larger world, offering opportunities for growth, caring and connection. (See *A Covenant Group Source Book* for more complete description.) Existing groups within the congregation (e. g., women's group, men's group, book study group) can go on as they are, and should not be urged to conform to this new model.
2. Begin by recruiting covenant group facilitators based on their potential facilitation skills (see *A Covenant Group Source Book*, p. 9). Let candidates know of the one-year commitment which will be asked of those who become facilitators. Characteristics of an effective facilitator include
 - empathy
 - sensitivity to group dynamics
 - maturity
 - regard for others
 - openness
 - flexibility
 - self-assurance
 - absence of self-preoccupation
 - good communication skills
 - commitment to the larger institution to which the groups belong
3. Organize a start-up group for facilitators. In these groups candidates learn facilitation skills and become familiar with the covenant group model by participating in and intentionally reflecting together upon the covenant group experience. Content of the start-up group meetings may include listening skills, building shared leadership, dividing groups, dealing with difficult people, avoiding cliquishness, etc.
4. After the candidates have participated in the start-up group for 4 weeks (including participation in a group project), at the fifth meeting candidates may be asked to reflect upon their experience thus far and to decide whether to become covenant group facilitators.

Clarify with the candidates their responsibilities and commitments as facilitators.

Facilitators are committed to the covenant group process and are mindful of the difference between covenant groups and group therapy, encounter groups and self-help groups

Facilitators are committed to helping the group accomplish its purpose rather than promoting their own agendas

Facilitators are committed to establishing and maintaining appropriate balance of inward reflection and outward focus

Responsibilities of facilitators include:

- Helping the group to develop & maintain ground rules
- Keeping the group on track
- Modeling facilitation skills
- Being aware of group dynamics
- Maintaining shared leadership
- Encouraging participation by all
- Identifying potential co-facilitator
- Paying attention to their group members' pastoral care needs, passing on information to the congregation's religious leader as appropriate

5. Explore with each facilitator what his or her group's initial focus might be. Some groups begin with a clear focus as initially established by the facilitator, and others begin meeting and then collectively decide on their group's focus. Covenant groups continue indefinitely, growing together and exploring different aspects of the group focus or collectively deciding to move together in a new direction.

Covenant Groups can be affinity-based, interest-based, or activity-based. Groups begin with the understanding that the group will collectively decide upon topics and activities to be pursued.

Affinity-based groups might include:

- Young adults
- Moms of pre-schoolers
- Home-schooling parents
- Men's group
- Women's group

Interest-based groups might include:

- Simple living
- Science and religion
- Bible study
- Spiritual exploration

Activity-based groups might include:

- Quilting circle
- Gardening group

6. Help facilitators decide when and where their groups will initially meet. Some groups may meet at the congregation's facility; at the home of the facilitator or other group member; or rotate among group members' homes. Time and place of subsequent meetings will be collectively decided by the group. Groups should meet at least once a month.

7. Work with facilitators to coordinate registration process. Congregation members and visitors are invited to join the group of their choice. Registration is free and open. Facilitators may also recruit members for the group. Initial registration should be limited to a total of 10 persons per group. If more than 10 persons wish to sign up for a particular topic, additional groups can form and a facilitator should be trained for the group. After the facilitators' start-up group is finished, individual covenant groups begin meeting regularly. Over time, groups grow and seed new groups (see *A Covenant Group Source Book*, p. 8).

8. Establish ongoing facilitators' meetings. Facilitators continue to meet as a group with the religious leader on a regular basis (at least once a month) for ongoing support and training. Facilitators will be expected to be sensitive to the privacy needs of members of their groups when speaking generally about the challenges they may encounter. Situations that indicate the need for professional intervention will be discussed with the religious leader privately.

9. Remind facilitators to identify potential co-facilitators within their groups and to discuss such nominations with the religious leader or covenant group committee. Co-facilitators will eventually become facilitators of newly seeded groups.

10. Encourage group growth and division. Groups grow by recruitment (by facilitators or group members) and by referral (by the religious leader or covenant group committee) until they reach a maximum of 12 members. Groups then divide in order to accommodate continued growth.