

## Covenant Groups – The CLF Way

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**Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF)** is a congregation of Unitarian Universalists found all over the world. It's a sort of "church by mail." Our members may be isolated by chance or by choice, but **through the CLF we maintain a spiritual connection to our religion for ourselves and our children.** Many of our members are active in local congregations as well as the CLF. The CLF also encourages the growth of small congregations and provides support for ministers and people of other faiths. For more info on CLF check out our website at [www.uua.org/clf/](http://www.uua.org/clf/)

Many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations have been adding Covenant Groups or Small Group Ministry to their programs – **small groups that meet regularly to share in deep discussion of topics which are presented by a trained facilitator.** The Church of the Larger Fellowship, decided in 2002 to explore the innovative possibility of creating Covenant Groups, which could "meet" via e-mail and function in much the same manner as the live, in-person groups meeting in UU churches. **Under the able leadership of the CLF minister for lifespan learning, Lynn Ungar, a pilot group of covenant leaders hammered out the details of transforming an in-person format into a structure that could thrive in the world of e-mail.** Instead of a group of people meeting together for two hours, our online groups take about three weeks for each session, allowing time for opening words, check-in, reflection and discussion on the session topic, evaluation of the session and a closing reading.

I was fortunate enough to learn about the CLF's plans for establishing electronic Covenant Groups in December of 2004, and joined the leaders' group in its final planning for the launch in January of 2005. Having had two years experience facilitating a local Covenant Group, **I was familiar with the format and knew what to expect from an in-person session; but none of us knew how well the e-version would work. Today, we're all proud to reflect that this creative effort of the CLF**

**to provide additional linkages between its members has been quite successful.** I asked the members of my Margaret Fuller Group to comment on what our electronic format offers them. Here are some of their remarks:

*"Our messages seem almost like a scrapbook. And we've never seen the people or places."*

*"One of my needs is to be challenged. This medium is great because it is less threatening than direct conversation, and the time lag gives perspective to some questions and answers."*

*"I like the long distance Internet sharing because we can all communicate on our own time. We can write—or read—when we're awake early, or sleepless, or in different time zones."*

*"I came to this group out of a deep desire for a suspension of those Yankee rules about not sharing deeply or exposing vulnerable thoughts and feelings. I came out of a desire to hear and be heard. I came for intimacy, and with curiosity about the degree to which it is possible over this medium."*

*"I've shared more deeply with this group in a short time than I do with a face-to-face group. I like our variety, our responsiveness to one another, our connections at different points on different topics. I really wish you could all come over for a summer picnic."*

*"I rely on this group as a regular part of my spiritual practice now. Thank you all for being part of this beautiful covenant."*

*"I like the ordered, calm, and worshipful nature of this group. We may chat between and on the side (don't all UUs?), but this is truly one of my worship experiences. This is sacred time for me. ...I like knowing each person, our struggles, our commonalities, our differences, our dreams."*

*"I feel the spirit of fellowship in the voices of this group...nice! And I do 'hear' you—imagining the tones of your voices, the cadences in your laughter, I even imagine that I hear the pauses as you take a breath and ponder a response... feel those warm cups of tea/coffee as you read and reflect."*

*"Even though we don't meet face-to-face, we develop a rapport with other members,*

*acquiring with time a strong impression of each personality and their life situation. It has been a pleasure to participate in this creative CLF adventure, and to see how much satisfaction and warmth it can bring into lives scattered all over the globe.”*

**Although our group members may be halfway around the world from each other, the sense of spiritual companionship that is the central purpose of covenant groups, comes through loud and clear.**