

Contingency Planning For Covenant Groups

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Since June of 2005, we at Bay Area UU Church in Houston, Texas, have had a number of unforeseen incidents ranging from the mundane to the monumental. For example, two of our covenant group members had a house fire. We had to evacuate because Hurricane Rita threatened our area. The leader of one of our newly founded groups had a personal emergency taking her out of town – and she did not yet have an alternate leader to facilitate a scheduled meeting. Another group with co-facilitators was almost unable to meet because one facilitator got sick and the other had a personal emergency. I don't think we've faced everything that could go wrong, but we've had a lot to think about!

This tells me we need to plan for contingencies. These are the sometimes unpredictable, but often identifiable, circumstances that can disrupt single meetings or whole small group ministry programs. When Hurricane Rita threatened, many of our groups were unable to meet for two weeks or more. And what we learned is that if we had planned for some of these possibilities, we would have better served our members and the congregation as a whole. So here are a few brief guidelines for contingency planning.

In your SGM Steering Committee or planning group, first, brainstorm all the possible events you can think of that might disrupt your group's activities. At this point, don't throw out anything. Does your group meet outdoors? Will a storm disrupt your meeting? Then it's a contingency to plan for. And don't think that any event is too small or too unlikely to cause problems. In a small group, one member missing can make meetings difficult – especially if that one member's the facilitator!

Next, try grouping contingencies together by looking for common threads between them. Are there warnings for some of the contingencies you face? Many weather-related emergencies may be forecast hours to days ahead, giving your group time to prepare. Others may occur with little or no warning. A waterline break in a church restroom could quickly render the building

unusable: would you be prepared? Other disruptions may be planned well in advance. Sometime this fall or winter, we'll be expanding our facility, and once we break ground, portions of the church –including parts where a number of our groups meet – will be unusable. All of these different contingencies may call for different responses, but some of those responses may be remarkably similar.

Third, look for alternatives. Some may be obvious, like moving a meeting from the church to someone's home or vice versa. Others – like how to meet people's needs to talk about their experiences despite being scattered to the four winds – may take more creative problem solving. In any case, look for all the alternatives you can.

Fourth, decide which alternatives make the most sense for your group. If a facilitator gets sick, you might be able to borrow a facilitator from another group for a meeting. Or, if you have coaches who assist or mentor your facilitators, you might call upon them to lead a meeting. But some groups talk about sensitive issues in their members' lives and are reluctant to accept outside facilitators. So set some criteria for evaluating your alternatives, then decide which work best.

Finally, be sure to document your contingency plans! Everybody may know what the plans are, but crisis or time-sensitive situations have a way of making people forget things. If they're written down somewhere, that's less likely to happen. The documentation doesn't have to be terribly detailed, but it does have to exist to be useful.

In closing, let me offer one more reason to make contingency plans for your covenant groups: to stimulate planning in the congregation as a whole. My experience is that organizations don't do a good job of contingency planning unless someone within champions the effort. Good contingency plans will enable you to continue meeting your group members' needs despite whatever life throws at you. And the example you set may get your congregation to take matters more seriously.