

On-going or Time-Limited Groups—Which Is Better?

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Is it better for Covenant Groups to meet for a year and then “reshuffle” everyone into new groups, or for groups to be ongoing so they create a deeper bond and sense of identity? This is the question we faced at the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (ERUUF) in Durham, North Carolina.

ERUUF launched its Covenant Group program almost 10 years ago using the “on-going groups” model. As members moved or dropped out, new members were added. When a group dwindled or dissolved, we assigned remaining members to other groups. And when there were more people waiting to join than spaces available, we launched new Covenant Groups. This model has worked well at ERUUF where we have grown the initial pilot program to 14 groups, with about 150 people actively participating. For many members, their Covenant Group is a core part of their ERUUF experience.

We were aware, however, that the on-going groups model had its disadvantages. It was not always easy for newcomers to integrate into a closely-bonded circle, despite our open chair policy. If a group developed problems or became lax in their commitment, it was sometimes difficult to get them back on track. In addition, some people found it intimidating to commit to a group which had no end point.

We discussed the advantages of the “start over each year” model, but most of our groups were well-established and some had been in place for 10 years. It did not make sense to force them to dissolve and reshuffle. We made the decision to do both. Existing groups would continue as they were, and new Covenant Groups would form as “year-long” groups. We started two groups the next year. One, a daytime group,

struggled with low membership and dissolved at the end of the year. The other group flourished, decided they were unwilling to disband after a year, and morphed into an on-going Covenant Group. Back to the drawing board, we decided to offer a second type of group that would last for only a year. In contrast to Covenant Groups’ twice-monthly meetings and two annual service projects, it would meet once a month and do one service project. To avoid confusion, we called this group a “Chalice Circle.” We made it clear that becoming an on-going group was not an option. If Chalice Circle members wanted to continue past one year, they could either join an existing Covenant Group or be assigned to a new Chalice Circle. In our view, the Chalice Circle offered several advantages: preparation for Covenant Groups, the chance to experience community in a small group for a finite period of time, and the opportunity to meet and get to know more people, thereby expanding the circle of connections within the congregation.

We are now almost at the end of the first year of our Chalice Circle experiment. We had 12 people in the first group, which is a little larger than ideal. The commitment to once-a-month meetings has been a little harder to maintain than the more frequent meetings of Covenant Groups. We do not yet know how many will choose to join an on-going Covenant Group or continue in another Chalice Circle, but it has clearly been a positive experience for everyone.

We’ve learned that there is a place for both on-going and time-limited groups at ERUUF. They each meet slightly different needs, while providing an experience of community for everyone who participates. We’re still experimenting, and probably always will be,

with how to keep small groups healthy, lively, and meaningful. We especially like being able to cultivate new members and new leaders, and to offer options that meet our members' diverse needs. We plan to keep offering both on-going Covenant Groups and year-long Chalice Circles. That's what works for us.

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