

**Lessons from Mature Covenant Groups**  
**An Interview between Reverend Marti Keller and Linda Serra**  
*Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, Georgia*

**Linda:** *Could you talk about your experience with successful and long-term covenant groups?*

**Rev. Keller:** I believe that in almost every case, with groups that have lasted, there is not a single facilitator. At some point in the evolution of a long-term covenant group, whether at a year, two years, or even at six months, the leadership moves into being rotational. In this way, members are not only responsible for participation in sessions, they also connect with the group through the selection of topics. Members come to know each other in several ways, including both their response to, and selection of, the topic. They express themselves by showing what they feel and think is important enough to bring to the group. You express your spirituality, which is a way of going deeper into the group.

For example, whether you share the issues for which you have a passion or take a chance on launching an art project, you express your spirituality. Every person in the group should have one or two opportunities a year to put themselves out there, to trust enough to show where their spiritual quest lies.

**Linda:** *The importance of sharing responsibility for selection and facilitation of the topic is not always recognized. Facilitators I work with comment that when they ask if anyone is willing to facilitate the next session, their request is met with silence. I suggest they engage their members in discussion about moving the energy and commitment to higher levels by rotating leadership.*

**Rev. Keller:** That is one way to open the group to going deeper with each other. There are a couple of tasks that should be shared. It is always important to have someone who reminds members that the time for their session is coming. This need not be a task delegated to the facilitator. In addition, by rotating and expanding leadership, we avoid burning out a single facilitator. The group can agree to allocate the responsibilities in a way that connects members in a deeper way. In a mature group, I believe it is not too much to ask that all members take responsibility for all tasks. I speak as a person who has been in a spirituality group longer even than being in the ministry; I'm in a group now that's been going on since 1994.

**Linda:** *That is so good to hear; it is encouraging. I know you have worked with many groups and trained many facilitators. Could you comment on some of the other issues you've encountered?*

**Rev. Keller:** It is critical for a successful covenant group to keep the reason for being together clear and present. Even successful, long-term groups can verge on becoming a little too social, with an over-emphasis on food and conversation. The focus should be on developing their spirituality.

**Linda:** *Have you been referring to mature groups only, or do you include groups that are just beginning to form?*

**Rev. Keller:** Commitment to maintaining a closer watch over check-in time is healthy for a beginning group. When I start a group, we do a lot of work to ensure that check-in doesn't go on overly long. A lengthy check-in prevents the group from fully exploring the chosen topic. We hold each member's check-in to about two minutes. In an hour-and-a-half session, an hour is a good amount of time to spend on the topic.

As groups mature, I feel they can be less rigid around personal sharing. A mature group has had to observe and learn about the behavior of individual members; how each person approaches check-in and wants to share. They have a better understanding of each member and of the group as a whole, and can permit extended sharing when it is needed. I believe mature groups have the experience necessary to adhere a little less to absolute rules. I know of a longstanding group that can go on for a while with their opening sharing. It is how they connect.

**Linda:** *What are some other good habits you suggest covenant groups consider?*

**Rev. Keller:** In my experience, the more successful groups do not assign lengthy readings before they meet. They present their topics with perhaps only one word, one sentence, or one quote. These are trigger topics that inspire members to more deeply explore their spirituality. Another good habit is "stepping up and stepping back."

**Linda:** *Could you explain that further?*

**Rev. Keller:** People who only participate by listening can be asked to take responsibility for "stepping up" to share their thoughts and feelings. People who tend to dominate can be called upon to explore how they can learn to "step back," to listen and encourage the others to share and to trust. Successful groups ask members to take responsibility for "stepping up and stepping back."

**Linda:** *How do mature covenant groups initiate check-in?*

**Rev. Keller:** I've recently been part of a ministers' group in which we were asked some very simple questions. "Whose are you?" "To what alternative source do you belong?" "With whom are we in covenant?" and "To whom are we accountable?"

Can you imagine being in a covenant group where, after a while, the trigger can just be "Where are you right now"? I've learned that this sort of trigger to encourage sharing and spiritual growth can be as rich as anything else.

**Linda:** *It seems that these questions provide a limitless potential for each member to explore their personal growth. Where else did your ministers' group take you?*

**Rev. Keller:** It was very similar to being in a covenant group. I also learned what I think is an exceptional concept for spiritual development: silence. Give people lots of time to answer the question or respond to the word or quote. Successful covenant groups create more spaces for silence. They hold and incorporate the silence among group members. Parker Palmer, the Quaker author and educator, suggested holding the silence for at least a minute, maybe two. Silence requires trust. It brings your heart into the room.

I'm suggesting that we too often rush our responses. Silence is about the trust between members. Sitting with others for minutes of silence can be pretty scary. I'm learning that silences are just as important as talking, that successful groups keep the topics simple, and the silences longer. But, that is in a mature group.

It is critical for all spiritual development groups to keep their focus on 1) listening, and 2) being totally present. The first step is being physically there in the room with a commitment to the group. Other

members of the group need to know they can count on you and that you have the group's and your own spiritual development as a priority. We build trust through being present for each other.

**Linda:** *Thank you, Marti, for your insights and for sharing your experiences with us.*

- Linda Serra is a lay minister and coordinator of UUCA's Covenant Group program.

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