

Celebrating Our Tenth Year of Covenant Groups

By Arlene Miles, Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo, New York

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo (UUCB) began its tenth year of Covenant Groups by celebrating with a scrumptious potluck dinner on March 16, 2013. The evening began with socializing and partaking of the food and drink. For this part of the evening people sat where they pleased, the majority choosing their own covenant group, although there was some mingling of groups.

The second part of the evening was a traditional Covenant Group Session, entitled "Taking Stock." The topic choice was the joint effort of the task force who planned the event and our Interim Minister Rev. Margret O'Neill, who used as a resource a SGM Session Plan developed by the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, Maine. Facilitators and Covenant Group members were randomly divided into five groups. Instead of the usual check-in, each person stated their name, attendance at UUCB, length of time in a covenant group, and gave an adjective, beginning with the first letter of their first name, that described them. This was an effective way to begin.

Facilitators introduced discussion questions:

- Thinking back, why did you join a covenant group? What were your hopes and what were your fears at the time?
- What gifts (intangible gifts from the experience) have come to you from your participation in a covenant group? How have those gifts affected your daily living?

The Deep Listening model was not originally used in our earliest groups, then called Small Group Ministry, so each person had been provided a copy of two reflections on Deep Listening to review the process. Groups were asked to use Deep Listening to respond to the first question and then decide how they wanted to handle the second one.

The groups came together as a whole to respond to the third question:

- What do you hope for, for yourself and for our covenant groups, in the coming season?

This event was extremely successful. There was overwhelming consensus that belonging to a Covenant Group was an enriching, meaningful experience. Many comments were made on how well the process worked in the "new" small groups formed for that evening's session. Some of our groups have been together for a long time. I think this evening demonstrated that it could be possible for groups to divide and assimilate new members.

In reflecting on this celebration, longtime facilitator Chuck Battaglia, wrote: "I am always humbled and amazed at how quickly deep connections can be made between people through the process of intentional sharing within a safe, non-judgmental, and welcoming environment. I left the evening inspired with the renewed sense of purpose and hope for the possibilities that these groups have for the future in the growth and spiritual development within the UUCB."

At our facilitators' meeting following the celebration, plans were made for a similar event in the fall. This time each covenant group member will invite a guest to share the tasty repast and experience a small group session. We feel this may be a good tool to spread the word about the benefits of belonging to a Covenant Group.

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