

## **Covenant Groups - A Gym For the Soul**

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From the foreward to Listening Hearts, Fourteen Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing  
by Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins (Skinner House, 2015)

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I felt as lifeless as one of those Middle Eastern deserts you see in *National Geographic*, just hill after hill of hot sand, without a tree or a bit of vegetation to break up the view. My baby daughter had just completed six months of chemotherapy for kidney cancer. She was returning to health; my spirit was not. I had lost all faith and sense of meaning. As far as I was concerned, not only was there no God, there was no purpose. I had no answers to any of the important questions of life.

Feeling so deeply alone, I began attending a covenant group at my home church. The gentle atmosphere, the support of the other members as they listened without correcting or debating, and their willingness to be vulnerable and share their stories allowed me to find my own answers—ones that fit my “new normal.”

Slowly but surely, my parched spirit healed. The shallow, facile theology that had made up my previous worldview began to fade away. Held in this compassionate group, I was able, one by one, to put together the beliefs that I found to be true and life-giving. In that covenanted group, I could test new ideas by voicing them aloud, while being afforded the privilege of hearing the other group members voice their own tender beliefs.

When rough times came again, as they inevitably do, I had developed by then a solid foundation to help me weather the storm. I owned a tested system of belief and an internal strength that was fed by a group, committed to creating sacred space in our time together.

Some say that covenant groups (also called chalice circles or small group ministries) are a conversion experience. Both through my personal experience and my experience as a minister witnessing others in their first covenant group, I have found this to be true. In addition to my story, I can tell you about countless others and how covenant groups have transformed their lives. But when you experience it firsthand, it makes you want to shout from the mountaintops about the power of the small group.

A covenant group is like a gym for the soul. As a participant, you get to exercise “what it means to be human,” to use a phrase from Unitarian luminary James Luther Adams. Your minicommunity models mutual respect, as members practice deeply listening to one another. Your spirit becomes stronger as you stretch to accommodate new ideas, as you wrestle with your own conclusions, and as you learn how to compassionately hold the space for another member to process their own experiences.

Join or form a covenant group. Your life will be better. You will be better.

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