

Stories from the Covenant Group Leaders

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People who facilitate covenant groups for the Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of Atlanta (UUCA) play active and critical roles within the congregation. I am always amazed and delighted to witness the strength, power, and skill our facilitators bring to their covenant groups, and to the entire congregation. They use intuition and explicit knowledge. They communicate the essence of small group ministry and create and maintain cohesive groups that develop intimacy and explore spiritual growth. They do this with exciting enthusiasm. I'd like to illustrate their commitment and experiences through their own words.

"We meet monthly to discuss mutually agreed upon topics," says Tony Stringer. "Our sessions begin with sharing food, a check-in, a musical selection related to the topic, a 1-hour discussion, and a closing reading. Our meetings are full of laughter and hugs. We discuss topics both serious and fun, and get to know each other. In our last session, we shared our beliefs about death. We've discussed the "micro-oppressions" we've witnessed or experienced. We've brought a musical selection that spoke to us as individuals. The selections included classical and contemporary jazz, Latin music, gospel music, and "house rock," which had us dancing and head banging. As we've grown closer, we've found time to share holiday festivities and care for one another during pastoral emergencies. By any definition, the first 'Cultural Mosaic' covenant group has been a success."

Jill Pohl, a long-time member of one of our more established groups, says, "Initially, our group had an identified facilitator, but it became a chore none of us wanted. We decided to work as a group. Now, before we depart at the end of each meeting, we choose who will host the following month. During the next few weeks that person contacts us all with a topic and some provoking thoughts to get us going. They then prepare readings and chalice lighting words. This has worked fine for the past few years!"

UUCA has instituted groups that pursue spiritual growth from different perspectives. "This is the third 'Artist Way' covenant group I have facilitated at UUCA," says Helen Goldberg. What I love is that each group is so very different and diverse, and yet so very much the same. There is a common thread woven through all human beings in their search for deeper meaning and understanding of our authentic self. Most of us are still trying to figure out what we want to be when we grow up, and are frightened by the thought that it's too late. It isn't. As facilitator, I have the privilege of giving people permission to put themselves first, to try new things, and unearth their inherent creativity. We laugh, we cry and we go out on a limb. You have to go out on a limb if you want to harvest the fruit. For it is only when we actually do that, can we truly be of service to others." "Our 'Good Life' Covenant Group has evolved and been going strong for well over two years, with very consistent attendance," says Charlene Hurt. "There are times I suspect they'd be happy just having a social group, but our discussions related to spiritual growth are always lively and thoughtful. Just thinking about our covenant group makes me happy -- we are a caring community. I think our commitment to the covenants is the key to our success, and how good we are to each other."

Recently, UUCA launched a covenant group co-facilitated by Jean Harsch and Ortrude White for people facing memory loss and their care givers. Jean says, "We hope this covenant group will offer each couple loving support and enhance the spiritual and psychological growth in this journey of living with dementia." "We named our group 'Journeying Friends' because we seek to

support each other in what is a very difficult life transition on a perilous road with few guideposts. In this covenant group we each seek spiritual sustenance as well as community support," says Ortrude.

Julie Witt and Michael Halpern agreed to start a new covenant group about three years ago. "Michael and I were surprised by the invitation to facilitate a covenant group because neither of us had ever participated in one; in fact, we were not familiar with the entire concept. We decided that it was up to us as guides, together with our members, to create a fulfilling experience while maintaining a flexible adherence to typical covenant group protocol. By focusing on philosophical, psychological and personal growth, our discussions flow naturally and go where the members take them. This flexibility has helped us to create a comfortable and open spirit, rewarding on many levels," says Julie.

Laurina Florio facilitates one of UUCA's LGBTQ covenant groups, QUUest. Laurina says, "We just celebrated our 5 year anniversary this fall. The group's strength is rooted in the members' commitment to the group, supporting one another on our individual spiritual journeys, and in its diversity. One member of the group is responsible for coming up with the topic each month and then leads the discussion. This role rotates among the group members. The members of the group range widely in age, sex, and spiritual backgrounds, among other things, which seems to bring a healthy energy to the shared experience and our discussions."

Within and between the lines of these statements by a few of our UUCA facilitators you get a glimpse of the care, commitment and skill required to lead a covenant group. Their talents are many, and include how they listen, accept silences, maintain contact, and demonstrate their willingness to focus on what the individual says rather than what they are going to say next. They honor their members and create a safe environment within which all can thrive. As covenant group leaders, they focus less on management and more on affirmation. Silently, they say, "Listening, to be successful, is an active process."