

How to Increase Deep Sharing and Listening in Covenant Groups, Part III

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In Parts I and II we identified the elements that enable or inhibit deepness and explored silence, listening, and sharing deeply. This final article in the series will focus on the meeting structure and materials, preparing participants for the covenant group experience, training facilitators to lead sessions of depth and substance, and ongoing support through regular facilitators meetings.

Preparing Participants For a Deep Experience

First, be clear about what a small group ministry is and isn't. Groups have many purposes. There are teaching groups for learning something new, advocacy groups for acting on one's passion, and affinity groups for joining with others of a like interest. In contrast, covenant groups are relational groups that focus on sharing and being open to one another. Their purpose is to bond with one another in deep ways while looking at our spiritual/life journey.

Carol Schwyzer of Santa Barbara says, "When people indicate their interest in a Connection Circle, we communicate as much as we can about what the groups are; that the groups are not social in the ordinary sense, but they can expect to make deep connections with fellow group members."

Create a website, participant guidelines, and a brochure that outline the program in enough detail to give clarity to prospective members and convey the purpose of the program. Consider offering a mini-group after church to give congregants an idea of the process.

Alan Backler shares that before the Chalice Circle Kick-off at the UU Church of Bloomington, IN, both the minister's sermon and group members' testimonials focus on deep listening. Participants know what they are getting into and these expectations are reinforced by the group covenant.

Despite clear program guidelines, challenges may

arise early in the life of the group; perhaps a suggestion to scrap the topic or change the format. This is the "storming" stage of group development to use Bruce W. Tuckman's terminology, when a member either disagrees with the design or suggests a "better" way to run a meeting. Prepare facilitators to manage such challenges using non-judgmental language.

For example, Susan responded in this way when faced with a format question: "We have many opportunities to talk one-on-one, but not many group experiences. Here we learn to share our thoughts and experiences in a group of 10 people, and we learn to really listen to each other. So let's trust the process and see where it takes us." The outcome was greater understanding, a more cohesive group, and a willingness to engage with the group purpose and format design. Continuing with Tuckman's model of group development, the next stages of norming, then performing can happen when the group agrees on the goal of being a safe place to share and sees that the structure ensures this safety.

Training Facilitators to Foster Deep Listening and Sharing

"The initial training is important, but ongoing support for the facilitators is essential." (Alan Backler, Bloomington, IN) Although deepness may be introduced at an initial training, "thoughts on 'how to go deeper' need to be part of ongoing training." (Rev. Axel Gehrmann, Urbana-Champaign, IL)

Some respondents question the notion that deepening can be taught. "The tone and example set by the facilitator are subjective and hard to measure or train. However, it can be discussed in training and examples of 'good tone' and 'bad tone' can be modeled. Even more effective is to ask trainees to reflect upon their own experiences and ask what characteristics of the facilitator encouraged them to share deeply." (Shirley

Williams, Albuquerque, NM)

The impact and insights of a covenant group may extend past the meeting, Daniel DeVaney (East Lansing, MI) suggests. “Invariably in a quiet moment there will be additional insights—and usually more connections—as the entire covenant discussion has time to breathe like a fine wine.” In the same way, training for depth may be more productive after groups and facilitators have had some time to breathe and deepen.

Training Content

The basic points to cover in the initial facilitator training include the purpose and design of Small Group Ministry, the facilitator’s responsibilities, problem-solving strategies, and where to go for help when needed. Supplement facilitator trainings, handbooks, and meetings with a discussion of the elements that foster deep listening and sharing. Refer to Parts I and II for this information.

A list of recommended training manuals is included here:

- ⤴ *Small Group Ministry Facilitator Training Manual*, Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, OR, <http://www.uueugene.org/small-group-ministry-sgm>.
- ⤴ *Together in Exploration (TIE Groups) Handbook for Facilitators*, UU Congregation of Santa Rosa, CA. Contact: Carol Kraemer, CarolUU@zonedoc.net.
- ⤴ *Covenant Group Facilitator Manual*, First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, NM. Contact: Alicia Hawkins, ahawkabq@comcast.net.
- ⤴ *Facilitator Training and Development Manual*, UU Small Group Ministry Network: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/forsale.html>.

Many of you responded with specific suggestions of facilitator responsibilities.

We have grouped them here by content:

Explain Meeting Format

- ⤴ Make sure participants know the reasons

for listening without interruption or judging others, before we even begin sharing. (Chris Cleveland, East Lansing, MI)

- ⤴ An uninterrupted check-in is helpful. (Rev. Alex Gehrman, Urbana-Champaign, IL) It signifies that we’re listening with full attention.
- ⤴ The candle lighting and opening reading convey the message that this is different from simply another meeting. (Gehrman)
- ⤴ Think of members’ responses as “interlogue,” a term suggested by Alan Hollister (Durham, NC) in place of dialogue or discussion. “Interlogue links with the emotional content of the interaction: What is the ultimate meaning of what you say and what you are to each other?”

Develop and Follow a Covenant

- ⤴ Never underestimate the importance of “process.” That includes developing a covenantal consensus and having all group members commit to this way of treating each other. (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)
- ⤴ The leader helps create the “safe container” by reminding members of the pertinent covenant points. (Joe Schenk, Titusville, NJ)

Manage the Process

- ⤴ A caring leader lays out the structure, not trying to control, but rather letting the dynamics unfold. (Gehrman)
- ⤴ Adjust the structure to meet the needs of the group. For example, develop a technique for time-keeping when needed. (Gehrman)
- ⤴ Be sensitive to how much a person wants to share, allowing space, but not prodding. (Gehrman)
- ⤴ Part of the facilitator’s role is to be sensitive to and encourage members who risk sharing something deeply personal for the first time, and to manage any discomfort that becomes evident. (Kathy Kellison, Augusta, ME)
- ⤴ Acknowledge the courage of a group

member who shares deeply. Make going deeper a positive attribute for the group. This could be done during likes and wishes if the opportunity is missed earlier. "I liked when Joe shared at a deeper level. The whole group followed him." (Susan Jordan & Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA)

Model Behavior and Responses

- ⤴ Making newcomers feel welcome, comfortable, and accepted sets a standard for compassionate interaction. (Gehrmann)
- ⤴ Jumping into the regular format and assuming the new member will 'catch up' is not very inviting. The integration process for new members should include a review and discussion of the covenant, and perhaps a look at what current members value in the group. (Kellison)
- ⤴ Facilitators can explain the kind of sharing we are looking for, and model it when sharing begins. (Carol Schwyzer, Santa Barbara, CA)
- ⤴ Model a check-in that is more about thoughts and feelings and less about places and events. Also model a moment of silence and reflection between speakers, as well as between topic questions.

Redirect as Needed

- ⤴ Use gentle reminders and policing by leadership and the group at large to keep on topic and within the covenant. (Schenk)
- ⤴ When conflict arises in a group, facilitators need to know when to reach out for support and guidance from the minister and/or SGM program coordinator. (Kellison)

Plan Service Projects

- ⤴ Our "deepest" groups are those who have done service projects together: working on a church fundraiser or charity event, painting, or supporting a group member with meals and phone calls during a challenging time. (Kellison)
- ⤴ Service seems like a basic, simple concept

- we help someone or some group. But it is actually quite complex spiritually, emotionally, and culturally for both the server and those being served. (Carolyn Brown, Albuquerque, NM)

- ⤴ Working side by side towards a common goal creates strong bonds among group members. Spending time together outside the structured meeting format, seeing each other's gifts and talents in a different context, and reflecting on the completed project renews the group's energy and sense of purpose.

Share Leadership

- ⤴ Sharing leadership may help the group go deeper. (Gehrmann)
- ⤴ Take turns lighting the chalice, giving opening and closing words, and leading the topic discussion.
- ⤴ Have the group choose some of the session topics. (MaryBeth Brizzolara, Lutherville, MD)

Meeting Structure

The structure of the meeting may play a role in achieving deepness. Some groups present the topic at the meeting. Others present it at the end of the previous meeting and give quotes and questions to start the thinking process. Daniel DeVaney of East Lansing, MI, comments that when people are given questions prior to the meeting, they are able to ponder and let them gently marinate until the meeting. I (Alicia) find myself thinking about the topic at traffic lights and when I'm driving; this is helpful and deepening for me. Several congregations, including Albuquerque and San Jose, use the "ponder ahead of time" approach. See their websites at <http://uuabq.org/covenant.html> and http://sanjoseuu.org/FUSJC_SGM/index.html for examples.

Some congregations use several rounds of sharing. "The deepest sharing and insights occur after the surface level sharing is peeled away and there is so much more food for thought. When we didn't have or make time for that third round, I felt we missed an important opportunity to get the

most from the discussion.” (Shirley Williams, Albuquerque, NM) Here is a brief description of the three rounds of sharing:

Round I - A question is asked about the topic which can be answered briefly.

Round II – This sharing may include something you felt about this topic, a way you grew, something that touched you, a story you want to share. This longer sharing is more feeling-oriented, from-the-heart sharing.

Round III – This is a more general discussion, however there is still no cross-talk. This time may also be used for a ritual or may be a more conversational time. Those who are speaking should be aware of others wishing to speak.

Topic Design

Consider starting new groups with “getting to know you” topics—families, spiritual journeys, favorite things—and progress to topics that center around emotions, values, and universal life conditions. The UU Church in Eugene, OR, intentionally uses graduated topics. “Topics for the first few sessions are easier to share about as the group is getting acquainted. Topics that are emotionally charged or more difficult to share about are used in later sessions, when the group members have become more comfortable with each other.” (Richard Loescher)

Several congregations have a theme for the month or year as a way to “go deeper” in their covenant groups. “Discussion topics address that theme—something like chapters in a book—all of which lead to the build-up of the story.” (Meg Menks, Frederick, MD) Meg continues, “As we go through the months addressing the theme, group members draw on earlier discussions and make new connections and discoveries about the topic. Insights move from person to person as this happens. Deepening occurs when we witness others make leaps of insight or feeling.”

Each group meeting at The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, CA, has a theme with readings and discussion questions provided by the minister. These are the themes for the Sunday services as

well. Carol Schwyzer says, “They are like lenses for looking at our lives and experiences in different ways.”

Involve group members in topic choices, another way to share leadership. “One of my groups wanted a topic that wasn’t among our resources, so we created it. It was deeper for its intentional individual molding to us and responding to our wishes.” (Facilitator, SWD)

Crafting Questions

Educating leaders/facilitators to develop and use topics and curricula which allow for the sharing of life experience versus “what I think” discussions can promote deeper sharing. (Penny McDougal, Frederick, MD)

Several facilitators commented on the “art” of writing questions. Groups can get off track when people teach or theorize or stay “in their heads.” Write questions to encourage sharing from the heart: “In your experience, how ...?” or “Was there a time in your life when...?” (Carol Schwyzer, Santa Barbara, CA) “Going deeper depends on a shift from left to right brain; less thinking and more feeling. Phrase questions so that they elicit personal memories.” (Grace Hirsh, Bradenton, FL)

The basics of writing questions include open-ended questions which avoid a yes or no answer, and staying in the heart realm rather than the mind by asking for a recalled memory, experience or life event. “Tell a story about a time you experienced forgiveness,” rather than “What is needed for forgiveness to happen?”

Facilitators Meetings

Ongoing training can deepen the experience of the facilitators and their groups. “An effective way to train facilitators is to give them the experience during monthly facilitator meetings.” (Ann Davis of Easton, MD) “Use the model to teach the model,” says the Rev. Glenn Turner, one of the early Small Group Ministry leaders and writers. Facilitator sessions can follow the format of a covenant group meeting. As Rebeka Feeser of Boiling Springs, PA shares in Covenant Group

News (March 2012), the meeting includes check-in, current small group problem solving, and a training component.

In the early days of the Covenant Group program in Albuquerque, facilitators did the upcoming session as part of the facilitators meetings, explaining what was happening as it happened. Later, just portions of the session, such as a ritual or one round of sharing, were played out with the facilitators.

High Quality Facilitators Meetings

Although not always possible, clergy presence at meetings highlights the importance of the small group ministry program. Using small group ministry principles, the minister or program coordinators model the skills of listening, accepting and supporting. The facilitators, in turn, minister to their groups in the same way. Consider creating a covenant for facilitators similar to a group covenant as suggested by Rebekah Feeser, Boiling Springs, PA. See her example at <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/cgnews/index.php?n=133>.

There's more to being a good facilitator than learning skills. Focus on asking why we are facilitators and what is the purpose and value of covenant groups. Carol Schwyzer of Santa Barbara, CA, suggests asking facilitators to write down what covenant groups have meant to them.

Mini-Training Topics for Facilitators Meetings

1. Using silence to deepen the covenant group

- ▲ This input from Rita Weathersby, University of New Hampshire, may help introduce the power of silence in our inward journeying:
Busyness is probably inversely related to the depth of our spirituality. Silence as a spiritual practice, whether it is meditation, reflection or prayer, challenges the busyness of our lives in a fundamental way.
- ▲ Ask facilitators to share ways their groups experience silence: candle lighting, pauses

after a person's check-in, three minutes of quiet, pauses during and after sharing, extinguishing the candle.

- ▲ Ask facilitators to share ways that help their groups enter into silence: quotes to introduce the time of silence, walking in silence, prayer beads, walking a labyrinth, listening to music, visualizations, meditations, closing eyes or focusing on the flickering of the candle, creating a quiet sacred space with the candle lighting. Try a new way of moving into silence at each facilitators meeting.
- ▲ Share ways others have found helpful in deepening the experience of silence:
 - During facilitator meetings at Emerson UU, the minister asks us to pause for a moment of silence after each person checks in. In our small groups, when someone is distracted from going deeper, offer a moment of silence to quiet the group. (Susan Jordan & Vicki Ecklund, Marietta, GA)
 - Silence may be a sign that a person IS going deeper. (Susan and Vickie)

2. Sacred Time

- ▲ Introduce the concept of sacred time with this article from Thandeka in the January/February 2005 UU World Magazine:
Sacred time is not the opposite of profane time. Sacred time is the opposite of fleeting time. Fleeting time is the kind of time in which we are distracted, racing around and trying to catch up as we fall further behind; it's working at the computer while a friend talks to us on the phone. By contrast, sacred time is noticing a shift of tone in a person's voice and asking what's wrong; it's full presence, paying attention in the moment. It's what happens in a covenant group when we discover how to stay present to life again.
- ▲ Brainstorm on moving from secular time to sacred time in our covenant groups. The chalice lighting has this as its purpose. Find chalice lightings at Worship Web: http://www.uua.org/worship/by_topic.php

[?topic=Chalice%20Lightings.](#)

- ▲ Consider using a ritual such as this one at the start of the meeting:

The group sits around the chalice candle. Those on the east side read the first line, etc.

East: Brother Fire, we invoke warmth.

May our hearts be open to each other.

South: Father Air, we invoke inspiration.

May our words be wise and kind.

West: Sister Water, we invoke the flow of life. May we have courage.

North: Mother Earth, We invoke groundedness. May we all be here in spirit as well as in body.

Leader: Spirit within, we invoke depth.

May we remember all we value. (light chalice) - Rev. Christine Robinson

3. Listening

A. Role play this visual exercise, using cups and a teapot of water on a tray, while the leader narrates this story: *A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's overfull! No more will go in!" the professor blurted. "You are like this cup," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"* This lesson can be applied to listening: the cup of your mind must be empty in order to receive the words of others.

B. This 10 minute exercise focuses on listening to self as a precursor to listening to others. Read the following quotes or print them on a sheet of paper:

Before one can be asked to listen deeply to others, one must first get in touch with listening deeply to oneself.

-Daniel DeVaney of East Lansing, MI

The practice of deep listening should be directed towards oneself first. If you don't know how to listen to your own suffering,

it will be difficult to listen to the suffering of another person or another group of people.

-Thich Nhat Hanh

Put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard. - *Anne Sexton*

Hand out paper and pencils or markers, telling the group the papers will not be shared. Ask each person to draw a circle and divide it into sections with parts of his/her life: work, personal issues, family, spiritual life, relationships, etc. Have participants look at each segment and draw in a word or picture that represents the issues and questions that come up for them. Next, ask the group to close their eyes and listen to this first part of the Mindfulness Meditation: *May I be filled with loving kindness, May I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be whole.* Sit in silence for a few minutes, then ask group members to share any insights realized from the exercise of listening to one's self.

C. In this two-part exercise, facilitators sit in groups of three. Each person relates an issue they need advice about while the other two listen without responding. Next, each person shares what happened in their minds while they listened, and how it felt to be unable to give advice to the other two.

D. This 30 minute exercise focuses on deep listening and also strengthens bonds within the facilitator group. Each person will have one-on-one sharing with every other person using questions such as these:

Why are you drawn to the covenant group experience?

What led you to become a facilitator?

In what ways have you been changed by the covenant group experience?

What's going well in your group?

What do you think could be working better in your group?

In what area of facilitating do you feel the most and least competent?

Set up a double row of chairs, about a foot apart,

facing each other. Each participant faces another group member, sitting knee-to-knee. When the leader gives a question, one person speaks and the other listens. After 1-2 minutes, participants switch roles using the same question. With each new question, participants rotate to the next chair. The last chair in one line does not rotate.

Further details are available from ahawkabq@comcast.net.

We close with these words from Mark Nepo, poet and philosopher: *To listen is to continually give up all expectation and give our attention, completely and freshly, to what is before us, not really knowing what we will hear or what that will*

mean. In the practice, to listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness to be changed by what we hear.

The authors wish to thank all of you who shared information and ideas with us. We couldn't have written this series of three articles without your generous responses and interest. Our goal has been to gather and share the collective real-world experience of ministers, facilitators, group members and coordinators to write a practical and useful guide to deepening covenant groups. We have loved the process of collaborating and weaving all your comments together into a tapestry of wisdom.

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