

Directed Check-In: Connecting Through Personal Sharing

*Susan Hollister, Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC
Christine Trigeiro, Chalice UU Congregation, Escondido, CA
UU SGM Quarterly Winter 2010 Facilitator's Toolbox*

Has this ever happened to you? Half of your Covenant Group members have checked in and the next speaker tells about eating at a new restaurant with good friends. The person next to her checks-in, saying he's eaten at that restaurant, and describes his meal. A member across the circle, who has already checked-in, asks where the restaurant is and suggests the whole group go there together. Yikes, check-in has been hijacked! What's a facilitator to do?

Check-in is the first opportunity in the session for members to start connecting with one another. While others listen deeply, each person shares from the heart and mind what meaningful thoughts, feelings, or insights have occurred since the last meeting. It is part of the process of developing trust and intimacy in covenant groups that grows and expands over time. Each person uses "I" statements to describe what they have been thinking about lately, the situations they have "left behind" to be there with the group, the joys they've had or anticipate, or the concerns or heavy feelings they are carrying. The above scenario expresses some pleasure, but not much that would be meaningful for the group to know about that person's feelings or thoughts. It was a restaurant review, but could just as easily have been a travelogue. How can we as facilitators explain deeper sharing to new groups or guide a group back to personal check-ins?

One way is to spell out expectations in your program's guidelines or in the session plan itself, as the Unitarian Society of New Haven, CT did at their program's launch. For example: *"This is a chance to speak from your heart and your life, without interruption or response. Give one another your thoughtful silence and undivided attention. What you share may come from the current state of your physical or spiritual health, joys or concerns about loved ones or concerns or excitement about what is happening in your life. The focus of the sharing is on how those activities or situations affect your feelings and thoughts."* The session plans at the Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon, PA, alternate among a few provocative phrases: *"What is most on your mind today?" "What significant experience have you had since we were last together?" "Share one high and one low from your life right now."*

Another way is to include a statement in your group covenant and to review it now and then, reminding the group of the purpose of check-in. For example, "Check-in is meant to be a brief, 1-2 minute sharing of something that is of significance to you and would be *meaningful* for the group to know about you."

A third, and highly effective, method is for the facilitator to model an impersonal versus a personal check-in. Prepare your example ahead of time. Give the less personal version first, then an example of "deeper" sharing of that same topic. as in, *"We went to our daughter's house for Christmas this year and had a great time. It was too cold to be outside, so we mostly watched movies and drank hot chocolate."* Your second example is vastly different: *"We celebrated Christmas this year at our daughter's house, along with her boyfriend, our son and his wife. It was one of our most memorable and heart-warming holidays ever. I loved watching the young people assume new roles in re-creating family traditions and making sure everyone was having a good time. It gave me a glimpse into the future, seeing how life transitions forward, carried by each new generation."*

A deep sharing example of less positive feelings could be, *"I feel so angry about needing another surgery; that my body is letting me down,"* Instead of a simple recitation of physical ailments, this example demonstrates how the speaker could connect more with others in the

group. A variation of this exercise would be to have group members take turns giving factual versus deep check-ins. The group may then need only an occasional reminder such as, “Check-in has more to do with thoughts and feelings than with things and events.”

A fourth approach is to ask group members to think about their check-in ahead of time. What might they want to share that would allow the group to know more about them? Some advance thought can help deepen the check-in experience. It may also decrease “passing” by group members. Passing during check-in is always acceptable and, at times, may be an opportunity to just relax without needing to share one’s feelings or situation. But it is difficult for deep connections to be made if a member passes often. Finally, let your group know it’s okay to gently bring each other back when check-in veers toward events and away from thoughts and feelings.

At your next Facilitators’ Meeting, you may want to describe the exercise you tried and its effect on your group. As always, you are also encouraged to share your experiences with the *SGM Quarterly* or *Covenant Group News*.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Winter 2010