

How to Increase Deep Sharing and Listening in Covenant Groups **Part I – Elements that Enable Deep Sharing**

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At a recent Facilitators Meeting, a covenant group leader asked how to increase the deep sharing and listening in thriving small groups. To find the answers, we sent a set of questions to members of the UU Small Group Ministry Network. Many thanks for your responses! We received a multitude of great suggestions--enough for three articles--from covenant group programs across the U.S. We are inspired by their deep spiritual awareness and deeply indebted to the outpouring of wisdom. We truly are a “network,” supporting each other in small group ministry. See the complete list of contributing congregations on page seven. Please send additional ideas to quarterlyeditor@smallgroupministry.net.

Part II in the Spring Quarterly will explore group development and learning to listen and share deeply. Part III (Summer) will cover topic design, training, and the spectrum of deepness. Look for your comments in this issue or in parts to come. We hope you enjoy and learn as much as we have in creating the series.

By “deep” we mean authentic: sharing from a place of honesty, transparency, and vulnerability; telling stories from our own life experiences, and expressing our hopes and dreams as well as our fears and shortcomings. **We do not intend sharing of a nature that is appropriate for the therapeutic, counseling, or support group setting.**

The purpose of covenant groups is two-fold: to bond with one another and to explore one’s spiritual/life journey. As our sharing deepens, bonding and inner journeying may also deepen. As Grace Hirsh of Bradenton, FL, says, "Going deeper depends on a shift from left brain to right brain; less thinking and more feeling."

Before you read any further, think back to a particularly deep moment you experienced in a covenant group. What was the tone of the group, the facilitator, the topic? What do you think needed to be in place to facilitate that deep moment? Our respondents spoke of elements they felt were important in enabling a group to “go deep.” You may resonate with some of these, disagree with some, and others may surprise you. We invite you browse through all the ideas, then draw your own conclusions.

We have found that there is no agreed-upon order for elements that enable a covenant group to grow in deepness. Wendy Sapp of Chattanooga, TN, makes a soup analogy: “What makes a soup delicious to one person makes it dreadful to another. In the same way, what one group needs to move deeper may not be what another group needs. Some members grow restless with sessions on listening and covenant; they want to move on to the ‘real SGM stuff.’ Others appreciate starting slowly, learning to trust their fellow participants and the SGM model before moving into deeper, riskier sharing.” Sally Hattig and Cathy Olson of Ann Arbor, MI, observe that the level of deep moments varies with groups, their personalities, and the facilitator’s leadership style.

Clear Program Guidelines

Prepare members for the covenant group experience with a comprehensive program description and participant guidelines. This description may be shared in brochures, forums, Sunday services, the church website, and the newsletter. Member guides are often presented at sign-up or in an initial letter to group members. As Dorothy Burns of Pittsburgh, PA, says, “Set an expectation for confidentiality,

deep listening, shared speaking time, and not interrupting. Explaining early on that we are not support groups enables members to just listen without feeling pressure to solve the problems expressed. Likewise, explaining that we are not intellectual discussion groups encourages members to share their own experiences rather than current events or media subjects.” Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund of Marietta, GA, reiterate the expectation for experiential conversations: “Going deeper doesn’t occur when topics are discussed on a theoretical level, or the conversation is about someone else’s experience.”

A facilitator in the Southwest District discovered that a sample presentation for the congregation shed much light on the general nature and tone of a group. Some long-time congregants and church leaders expressed surprise to find they were actually drawn to small group ministry now that they knew what it was about and saw the “safe” aspect of sharing. Shirley Williams of Albuquerque, NM, notes that once people understand what covenant groups are about, they come. “Our people are spiritually hungry and there is a real need to communicate at that level.” Members immediately understood the recommendations for communication in the group, says Rev. Ellen Livingston of Montclair, CA, and went deeper than in ordinary situations.

A Safe Space

The physical and emotional meeting space needs to feel secure for each member. It should be comfortable, calm, and free from interruptions. (Joe Schenk, Titusville, NJ, and Dez Papendorp, Chattanooga, TN) Joe adds: “Creating a safe ‘container’ includes a quiet space, adherence to a covenant, consistency in attendance, and a common understanding among members to share of themselves in the group.” Alan Backler of Bloomington, IN, adds that trained facilitators can play a large role in creating a sense of safety in groups.

The meeting format and the process itself—centering ritual, sitting in silence, a directed check-in, reflection on what was said—help to create a safe space in which to listen and share deeply. (Alan Hollister, Durham, NC) Facilitators in Devon, PA, suggest beginning each meeting with a spiritual practice such as a moment of meditation or silence, holding hands in a circle, music, or sounding a chime or singing bowl, to help move the group from secular time into a sacred space.

“The common ground in deep sharing experiences”, says Rev. Margret O’Neill of Buffalo, NY, “is open-hearted listening without commentary, critique or piggy-backing. The facilitator needs to model this as well as speaking about it and teaching it.”

“Participants need to feel at ease, as if they matter; they need to feel that they will be listened to and heard.” (Elizabeth Asnes, Houston, TX) If a small group is a safe, loving, gentle, accepting place, people who have trouble “going deeper” may be able to gain confidence and share at a deeper level. (Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA) “For those who are shy or introverted, the logistics of the group allow for carving out a space that is just for them. They can pause without interruption to think further about what their view or feeling is, and continue without the party-type of discussion where extroverts and people with strong views may take the stage.” (Facilitator, Southwest District)

The Facilitator Sets the Tone

First and foremost in creating a “deep group” is the tone and example set by the facilitator. (Shirley Williams, Albuquerque, NM) Facilitators in Pittsburgh add, “When facilitators share a deep experience, it can help others understand the type of discussion we are hoping to have.” Mia Scofield of Albuquerque agrees: “The facilitator can set the tone here by how much and how deep they share, and it opens possibilities to other members by seeing someone else do it.”

Alicia gives this example of setting the tone. “At a recent conference I asked the audience to pair up, share an unresolved life issue, and listen deeply to the other person. I gave an example of my struggle in deciding to get a hearing aid, facing my judgments about aging, and memories of communicating with my Dad who was severely hearing impaired. Since I was in the middle of this turmoil, my angst showed in my brief sharing. I didn’t share it with the calm wisdom that comes with time and resolution of the issue. It really impacted the audience and the sharing experience that followed. There was such depth of sharing in the room amongst these strangers that one person said it felt like sacred time.”

Group members may also set the tone. Facilitators in Pittsburgh shared, “Some of our deep moments have been achieved when one person in the group has chosen to share a more meaningful experience and others have followed suit.” Rev. Heather Janules of Bethesda, MD, adds, “Once a member has taken a risk by sharing openly with candor and vulnerability, other members of the group receive an implicit invitation to join them on this level.”

A Well-crafted and Agreed-upon Covenant

Covenants are a starting point for creating safety in a group. Going deeper doesn’t occur without the safety of clear boundaries. “It is the job of the facilitator to remind the group of the covenants made with each other.” (Susan Jordan & Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA) “Individuals are most likely to share in a personal way if they trust the rest of the group to respect their comments. That trust is achieved by consistent adherence to the covenant agreed to, and by carefully following the format planned, giving plenty of space between comments and being comfortable with silence.” (Janet Woodward, Seattle, WA)

Occasionally there is resistance to "rules" set forth in covenants, but group leaders have come to value the security that these agreements provide to participants. (Dorothy Burns, Pittsburgh, PA) There needs to be “a covenant developed and agreed to by the members that sets up the expectation for safety in several dimensions, followed by some experience with folks holding to the covenant, and the practice of listening people into speech with love. The presence and guidance of a trained and skilled facilitator also helps.” (Rev. Margret O’Neill, Buffalo, NY)

“People need to know that what they say will stay in the group, by use of the covenant.” (Ingrid Deckman, Devon, PA) Other ground rules include speaking one at a time, passing anytime on any topic, commitment to deep listening, and being nonjudgmental. (MaryBeth Brizzolara, Lutherville, MD) Following the ground rule of no cross-talk may meet with resistance, but makes a difference in the degree of deep sharing. (Kathryn Warrior, Hillsboro, OR)

Groups may use a generic covenant or one prepared by a steering team: “In our first session we have a careful review of the Small Group Ministry Covenant of Right Relationship, which supports respectful sharing and listening and includes an agreement about confidentiality. Following this covenant helps create an atmosphere of trust, safety and bonding, which increases the likelihood of more open sharing. All members are encouraged to remind the group about the covenant as needed.” (Richard Loescher, Eugene, OR)

Groups often write their own covenant: “At the first meeting, the facilitator explains the structure of a Connection Circle. Together the group creates a covenant that creates a sense of safety and makes deep connection possible. The facilitator drafts the covenant and sends it to the members for approval. The covenant can be referred to as a reminder if the group begins to veer off-course, and it can be changed if the group sees the need to do so.” (Carol Schwyzer, Santa Barbara, CA)

An Atmosphere of Trust and Openness

Consistent format, trust, bonding, and developing connections all help to provide a secure construct. (Sally Hattig and Cathy Olsen, Ann Arbor, MI) Patience is important; it takes time to develop the trust that allows for deep sharing. (Kathryn Warrior, Hillsboro, WA) Group members become more open with each other as they discuss life and death issues. And when sensitive subjects are covered, trust builds when members find that the group embraces, rather than rejects them. (Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund, Marietta, GA)

As a facilitator in the Southwest District says, trust leading to deeper sharing is further developed when it's clear that members care about the group, and support one another in times of need. There may be times when group members are affected by startling events or crises, a worrisome diagnosis, or a risky procedure. "These things suddenly put life into perspective and allow caring instincts to be put into effect."

Compelling Topics

"Good topics are important and often come from 'where-the-rubber-meets-the-road' places along each person's spiritual journey. For a Christian, what does it mean in my life to actually 'love my enemy;' for a UU, how can I really promote inherent worth and dignity toward persons who are dishonest or hurtful to others?" (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)

"It seems that any level of sharing depends on how the chosen topic hits the particular group at that moment in their lives." (Ellie Anderla, Phoenix, AZ) Dez Papendorp of Chattanooga, TN, adds that sharing deepens when the topic has meaning to the participants.

Eliot Chapel facilitators recall that some topics have lent themselves to deep sharing better than others. For a recent session on ancestry, members were invited to bring photos and mementos to share with the group. It opened up a powerful and deeply personal discussion about families and relationships. (Rev. Terry Davis, Kirkwood, MO)

Session topics can have a strong and long-lasting impact on group members. During a session on forgiveness, "one person's story resonated with the group. It is the session I remember most clearly out of all the covenant group meetings I have attended." (MaryBeth Brizzolara, Lutherville, MD)

"The topics that have taken folks deep are those that center around emotions: hate, fear, regret, love, anger, pride, disappointment. Other topics are mentors and childhood experiences that bring up memories of people and events. Sessions focused on parents, siblings, and other family members also bring up deep feelings." (Ann Davis, Easton, MD) Alan Hollister of Durham, NC, agrees: "Deep sharing is elicited by topics that dive into one's spiritual core and those that elicit an emotional response. For example, 'What is your greatest fear right now?'" Facilitators in Devon, PA, suggest these topics for depth: evil, death, what to say when there's nothing to say, patriotism, treasured objects, anger, risk-taking, a two-part session on planning and making life changes, a favorite piece of music.

Good topics can also come from examining universally recognized conditions of this life (gratitude, loneliness, forgiveness, prayer/spiritual practice) as viewed through our own lives. This often leads to better understanding of ourselves, what we have come to believe, and want to stand for. "Hearing others share their thoughts and stories on a topic that I've found interesting or have been wrestling with has been powerfully moving and illuminating for me and for others in our group. In its sheerest form, a

good session can result from nothing more than two or three good questions if the questions are interesting enough to provoke self-reflection on a particular topic and inspire sharing a personal story.” (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)

In Part II we’ll continue our quest for deepness by learning to listen and to share our stories. To be heard deeply by another is truly an amazing experience. To quote Thich Nhat Hahn, “The greatest gift we can give another is our presence.”

Small Group Ministries are transforming the religious landscape of Unitarian Universalism in the United States. (Thandeka) They are an effective way of building relationships within our church family along with exploring our spiritual journey; they provide the personal touch we need to feel connected in our lives. Covenant groups connect us in close communities of shared thoughts and experiences and enable us to practice listening and speaking from the heart. “What we’ve learned is that Small Group Ministry is the single most effective way to provide people with a sense of roots, place, belonging, sharing, and caring.” *Effective Church Leadership*, by Kennon Callahan

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CONTRIBUTING CONGREGATIONS

UU Church of Bloomington, IN
UU Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, NY
UU Congregation of Frederick, MD
First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor, MI
Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC
UU Community Church, Augusta, ME
Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA
UU Church at Washington Crossing, Titusville, NJ
UU Church in Eugene, OR
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Monte Vista, CA
UU Church of Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL
First Universalist Church of Minneapolis, MN
Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Kirkwood, MO
The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, CA
Manatee UU Fellowship, Bradenton, FL
Emerson UU Congregation, Marietta, GA

Cedar Lane UU Church, Bethesda, MD
UU Church of Greater Lansing, East Lansing, MI
UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR
UU Church of the South Hills, Pittsburgh, PA
First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM
UU Fellowship at Easton, MD
UU Congregation of Phoenix, Paradise Valley, AZ
University Unitarian Church, Seattle, WA
Towson UU Church, Lutherville, MD
First Parish Church UU, Duxbury, MA
UU Church of Chattanooga, TN
UU Congregation of Green Valley, Amado, AZ
UU Community Church, Park Forest, IL
UU Church of Buffalo, NY
UU Fellowship at Stony Brook, NY
San Gabriel UU Fellowship, Georgetown, TX
First UU Church, Houston, TX

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