

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Small Group Ministry Plan for Facilitators

The Importance of Covenants

Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA, Rev. Dr. Stephan Papa, September 2005

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:

“Mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge, of love and compassion ever exceeding our practice, reverently we covenant together, beginning with ourselves as we are, to share the strength of integrity and the heritage of the spirit, in humanity’s unending quest for reality and love.” From Walter Royal Jones

Reflection/Personal Sharing/Prayer (approximately 30 minutes)

(The facilitator should briefly remind the group of confidentiality/anonymity, that this is not the time for cross conversation, etc.)

Focus Readings:

From *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* by M. Scott Peck

“The problem—indeed the total failure—of the ‘ethic’ of rugged individualism is that it runs with only one side of the paradox, incorporates only one half of our humanity. It recognizes that we are called to individuation, power, and wholeness. But it denies entirely the other part of the human story: that we can never fully get there and that we are, of necessity in our uniqueness, weak and imperfect creatures who need each other.” (p. 56)

“In our culture of rugged individualism—in which we generally feel that we dare not be honest about ourselves, even with the person in the pew next to us—we bandy around the word ‘community.’ We apply it to almost any collection of individuals—a town, a church, a synagogue, a fraternal organization, an apartment complex, a professional association—regardless of how poorly those individuals communicate with each other. It is a false use of the word.

“If we are going to use the word meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some serious commitment....” (p. 59)

“A covenant is an agreement, a promise, an understanding about a relationship. Marriage is a covenant. Parenting is a covenant; friendship is a covenant; families have covenants; church membership is a covenant, a promise of partnership with parameters for the relationship. In a marriage it is understood that one is not to have extra-marital affairs; but covenants are not always explicit. Unfortunately, they are most clearly understood when they have been violated. For example, it is expected that a young child will listen to the warnings of their parent, and their parent is to never harm them. Covenants are not contracts; the latter are legal agreements and can be enforced; if one partner doesn’t fulfill their agreement it is null and void. A covenant cannot be legally enforced; it is based on trust, good will, common vision, commitment, respect, relationship; when a covenant is broken the relationship does not end (though it may change radically as with a divorce.)” From Stephan Papa

Focus Questions:

How have your covenanted relationships (for example, marriage, parenting, being a son, daughter, or sibling) been of value? What have you liked best about them? What have you disliked?

What do you look for in a relationship before you will be really honest?

What do you look for in relationships of “intimacy and ultimacy?”

What do you bring (personal qualities, attributes) to your covenantal relationships?

What is and what is not being fulfilled in your current covenantal relationships?

Checkout/Likes and Wishes

(This is the time for facilitators to ask participants what they liked about this meeting and what they might wish for future meetings. This is also the time for any discussion of logistics.)

Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:

“In our hearts may there be the love which seeketh not its own, suffereth long, hopeth, believeth, endureth all things. By the power of that love may the dissensions of the earth be reconciled, and the children of earth be drawn together into unity of purpose. May we live as members of one family, with one heart and mind to serve the commonwealth of [humanity and the world].” From Robert French Leavens

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Small Group Ministry Plan for Facilitators

Our Covenant

Main Line Unitarian Church, Rev. Dr. Stephan Papa, September 2005

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:

“As we light this Flaming Chalice, symbol of our way in religion, we promise to support this congregation by generously giving of our personal resources. We promise to reach out to others; to ask for help when needed; to speak well of others; to share our thoughts with honesty and humility; to listen; and to act with integrity. We make these promises to sustain and extend the spirit of trust and goodness in our community and throughout the world.”

Reflection/Personal Sharing/Prayer (approximately 30 minutes)

(The facilitator should briefly remind the group of confidentiality/anonymity, that this is not the time for cross conversation, etc.)

Focus Readings:

“One of the deepest convictions that unites us as Unitarian Universalists is a belief in the possibility of a beloved community among people, whether members of a family or the most diverse representatives of humanity. We affirm that such communities are in part a natural outgrowth of human life, but that they must also be deliberately formed and reformed, nurtured and renewed.” From *Interdependence* by The Commission on Appraisal of the UUA

“The most fulfilling relationships in life ask the most of us.” From Stephan Papa

“Covenant is a way of working and being together in the context of human interaction including the natural energy of conflict. A covenant is an open and unequivocal statement about how we intend to live and a claim of the importance of that choice. When we make a promise we stretch out to say, ‘I will be there no matter what turns up.’ As free selves we know we become genuine selves by making commitments to others. This is holy and sacred lifelong work.” From Karen Lindley of the Wilmington, Delaware Unitarian Church

(It is suggested the facilitator hand out the attached *Guidelines* and have the statement of purpose printed here read out loud by all in unison.)

“The Small Group Ministry program encourages people in their spiritual growth and helps them develop relationships of substance and depth. These groups serve to enrich our community with the sort of personal sharing that doesn’t happen much in our busy lives. SGM provides a way to meet members’ needs for worship, community, service, to grow spiritually and in understanding.” From the *Guidelines* of the Small Group Ministry program of the Main Line Unitarian Church

Focus Questions:

The Guidelines state the purpose of our Small Group Ministry program is “to meet members’ needs for worship, community, service, to grow spiritually and in

understanding.” How is this happening and/or not happening for you? What have you experienced so far?

What have you found valuable in covenanted relationships that you would like to see in this group?

What group agreements would make your experience more valuable?

What changes in the program would you like to see?

What agreements will you commit to?

What agreements, promises, values should we include in our group covenant?

Activity: (Have newsprint available.)

Have the group read through the current *Guidelines*, and notes of group answers to the focus questions, and write their own covenant.

Checkout/Likes and Wishes

(This is the time for facilitators to ask participants what they liked about this meeting and what they might wish for future meetings. This is also the time for any discussion of logistics.)

Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:

“Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the source of life knowing that we are not our own, earth made us. Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the community of resistance never to forget that life can be saved from that which threatens it by even small bands of people choosing to put into practice an alternative way of life. And, let us covenant with one another to seek for an ever deeper awareness of that which springs up inwardly in us. Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure or the failure of others cutting into our lives, Even when we have done all we can and life is still broken, there is a Universal Love that has never broken faith with us and never will. This is the ground of our hope, and the reason we can be bold in seeking to fulfill the promise.”

From *What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do* by Rebecca Parker

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Creating a Covenant

Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA (*Adapted from SGM Network materials*)

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:

We come to this time and this place

To rediscover the wondrous gift of free religious community;

To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life;

To reaffirm the way of the open mind and full heart;

To rekindle the flame of memory and hope;

And to reclaim the vision of an earth made fair, with all her people one.

~ *David Pohl*

Check-in: What is on your mind today?

Focusing Thoughts:

A group covenant is a set of promises or agreements to live by at group meetings. While covenants can and should be unique to each group, they usually include committing to the group, being on time, listening without interrupting, and not giving advice. These promises are often called “ground rules,” and they need to be very clear. If they’re not clear, the group may feel unfriendly and unsafe to some members, particularly less vocal ones. Often, most problems in small groups can be traced to no covenant or failure to follow the covenant. Your covenant helps to keep the group healthy. When the ground rules are clear, they can prevent disruptive or disrespectful behaviors that diminish the feeling of safety within the group. Also, they’re what you refer back to when problems arise, as in, “This is what we all agreed to”.

Focus Activity: Creating a Covenant

As a group, discuss what you are looking for from SGM and how those needs may be met. Then write your ideas on a flip chart or piece of paper. Read them aloud and make sure everyone is in agreement. The covenant doesn’t have to be long or detailed. (If more direction is required, see attached pages on creating a covenant.)

1. Do we agree to arrive at our stated time? How will we handle latecomers?
2. How will we create a safe, respectful space for everyone to participate?
3. How will we ensure each other confidentiality about our conversations?
4. Is it okay to stay and talk with each other after the meeting? For how long?
5. What do we do if we cannot be here?
6. What is our understanding of the Check-in? How long should each person take?
Do we agree to refrain from commenting on Check-Ins?
7. To what extent are we expected to share? What if some do not?
8. Is it acceptable to share personal stories, emotionally charged events, beliefs, or values?
9. To what extent shall we discuss church, local and world issues?
10. Can participants ask for feedback? If so, how can we respond?

Check-out/Likes & Wishes: How did this session go for you?

Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice: As we leave this place and this company, may the fellowship of this circle carry us forward, remind us of that which we hold to be most sacred and encourage us in every hour, until such time as we meet again. ~*Calvin Dame*

Creating a Covenant for Your Group

The Big Picture

- Your goal is to create a statement that reflects how your group members desire to interact with each other during your meetings or other activities.
- You may write your covenant in a single gathering, or over several. Please view your initial statement as a draft that you will review again, especially if you write your covenant in one session. Living covenants are works-in-progress!

Three Strategies for Drafting an Initial Covenant

#1 Quick & Easy

- Talk about what covenants are (and aren't!). For example, they are guides to how we want to be together. They are not rules with penalties.
- Give each person a piece of paper and pen. Ask participants to write down three statements that they'd like to have as part of the groups' covenant. Give them a few minutes to do this.
- Go around the room, each person reading one statement that hasn't yet been spoken, until you run out. Write these on an easel where everyone can see them. Combine statements that are similar, but make sure that those who proposed the statements agree.
- Ask if anyone has questions or concerns about anything that's been written. If so, discuss them. If not, ask if everyone is comfortable with what's been written and ask them to sign the covenant as a sign of their willingness to abide by it.

#2 Building on existing covenants

- Distribute copies of the handouts we've provided to give your group members a sense of what a covenant looks like. See if one of the covenants feels like a good starting place. Remember that no two groups are alike, and different covenants will serve different needs (e.g. the Board covenant is going to look different than the Numinous Circle covenant!)
- If you choose to start with an existing covenant, first take a few minutes to speak about the items that resonate with you. Then ask if there are items that don't seem relevant and need to be deleted or revised. Then ask if there are omissions, items that you'd like to add that weren't part of the original covenant.
- Alternately, you might start with a blank sheet of paper and select statements from a number of covenants in order to craft your own.

#3 Reflective & Thoughtful

- Begin by talking about the values you hope to live by in your relationships with each other. Generate a list by brain-storming or brain-writing (brain-storming individually on paper).
- Take some time to listen to each other as you talk about what these values mean to you. Focus on what excites you, rather than criticizing or dwelling on what does not work for you. It may help to encourage people to tell a short story of a time when they experienced the value in action.
- Hone down the list. Are some values similar enough to combine? Then ask people to pick their top three or five. You can use dot voting, putting a check mark on a list, or any other clear way for people to indicate their choices. It is important to limit people's choices to three or five so that you can end up with a manageable list.
- Sit with the list. Have a silent time among you to just take it in.
- Ask people to write down behaviors that exhibit each of these values. Ask for behaviors that are in context to what your group does. Make a list of those behaviors.
- Ask people to talk about why the behaviors are important to them. Encourage talking in the positive.
- Again, see if any can be combined. Then, hone down the list in a way similar to what you did

before. This is the basis of your covenant statement.

- Avoid the temptation to word-smith your statement as a group. Ask if statements don't ring true for people. If so, ask for general principles for how they could be improved. Then give your draft to one to three people at most to word smith and bring back to the group.

Using Your Covenant: Ways to Keep it Alive and Vibrant

Covenants will not do their job if you write one and then file it away. They need to be kept alive. Here are some strategies that we've found helpful. You may choose to do one or more of these, at different times:

- Give everyone in your group a copy of the covenant
- Read your covenant aloud at the beginning of every meeting. Rather than asking one person to read, go around the circle and ask each person to read a line.
- Post your covenant on a chart where everyone can see it. Do this at every meeting.
- Take a few minutes at the end of your meeting to reflect on whether or not you personally have upheld the covenant. Then think about whether the group has upheld the covenant. Don't accuse. Speak your truth with love. Remember that a covenant is an ideal. We, being human, will make mistakes. Our goal is to work together to live our covenant as best we can.
- On a regular basis, make some time on your agenda to reflect on whether your covenant still reflects your desires and concerns. If it doesn't, revise it.
- When a new member joins the group, give them copies of the covenant and invite them to ask questions and propose changes. Be open to changes – people are much more likely to honor a covenant if they've played some role in creating it. This is also an opportunity for you to reflect on your covenant to see whether it still matches your beliefs and practices.

If you are interested in reading more about the concepts and history of covenants, check out the Minns Lectures at: www.uucb.org/about/minnslectures/

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Small Group Ministry
Listening & Covenanting
MAIN LINE UNITARIAN CHURCH, Devon, PA, *Adapted from Heart to Heart*

Opening Words and Chalice-Lighting:

We come together in an attitude of openness - not knowing quite what will happen, yet daring to receive a new idea, a new experience, sustenance for our minds and our hearts. We come with an attitude of praise, expressing our thankfulness for the good that has come into our lives.

We come with an attitude of humility, knowing how much we need one another, how alone we can be in the world, how vulnerable if we face life solely by ourselves.

We come in the spirit of love, seeking human warmth and fellowship in the hands and faces of those around us.

We come in the spirit of joy, seeking reconfirmation and renewal of life, of love, and of hope.
Adapted from Peter Lee Scott

Check-in: Why are you here today?

Focus Readings:

Each of us brings a separate truth here,

We bring the truth of our own life, our own story.

We don't come as empty vessels...

But rather we come as full people -- people who have our own story and our own truth.

We seek to add to our truths and add to our stories.

This room is rich with truth, rich with experience.

All manner of people are here: needy...joyful...frightened...anxious...bored...

We all bring our truth with us.

May we all recognize the truth and the story in everyone's life.

And may we hear and honor the truths that we all bring as we gather together..

Together we have truths.

Together we have a story.

Together we are a community.

~Penny Hackett-Evans

We have begun to learn about a method of deep listening. As we already know, we have to practice before we can listen deeply. Sometimes we can also translate "deep listening" as compassionate listening, that is, to listen with compassion, or to listen with love. We hear with one aim only; we don't listen in order to criticize, to blame, to correct the person who is speaking or to condemn the person. We only listen with one aim, and that is to relieve the suffering of the one we are listening to. *~ Thich Nhat Hanh*

Creating and Sharing Our Covenant

Within each Small Group Ministry at Main Line Unitarian church, members abide by a group covenant -- a statement of the relationship of the members to each other. A covenant is a solemn promise shared among people which often relates to personal actions. As our lives become increasingly disconnected from each other, creating a covenant is an important practice which calls the group to form intentionally.

Focus Questions:

1. What makes a covenant different from a contract?
2. How can you bring your spirituality into this covenant-making?

3. What additional promises would you like to add to this covenant for your time together as a Small Group Ministry?

SGM Covenant:

Today I commit myself:

- To share deeply when it is my turn;
- To share with the facilitator the responsibility for good group process by watching how much time I take to speak and noticing what is going on for others;
- To honor the safety of the group by listening to what others share with an open heart;
- To refrain from cross-talk, judging, or giving advice;
- To speak only once before everyone in the group has spoken;
- To respect the confidentiality of what is shared;
- To be as fully present to this gathering of people as I can be;
- To attend our regular gatherings, arriving on time and committing to the length of the session;
- ...
- ...
- ...

Check-out/Likes & Wishes: What is the most important aspect of the covenant to you?

Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:

As we part now one from another, let these be our thoughts:

If that which is most holy lies within the human person, and if the greatest power in the world shines flickering and uncertain from each individual heart, then it is easy to see the value of human associations dedicated to nurturing that light: the couple, the family, the religious community.

For the power of good in any one of us must at times waver. But when a group together is dedicated to nurturing the power of good, it is rare for the light to grow dim in all individuals at the same moment.

So we borrow courage and wisdom from one another, to warm us and keep us until we're together again.

~Eileen B. Karpeles