

Introduction and Right Relational (Facilitators/Participants)

Covenant Groups 2009–2010 First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

Written by Tracy Blanchard

Facilitator, this introductory section should take no more than 30 minutes. Please feel free to read straight from the sheet with group members following along on the 1-page if this helps keep you on track.

Introductions

Let us know your name, how long you've been coming to First Parish, and why you wanted to join a Covenant Group (very brief—2 minutes each) and perhaps what you want out of the CG.

Facilitator Check-in (2–5 minutes)

- Welcome
- Does anyone have travel/parking issues?
- Does anyone have special needs (childcare? special seating? Hearing?)
- Double check that the contact information you have for all the participants is correct
- Some of this info may be a repetition for anyone who was in a group last year but you know best how important it is to be elicited about our intentions up front. Please bear with us as we introduce covenant groups to the new folks.

What covenant groups are, and what they are not (9–12 minutes; hand out one-pager, feel free to simply read these instructions directly if it keeps you to the allotted time and ask folks to hold questions until the end)

- Covenant groups provide an open and supportive environment in which the inherent worth and dignity of each community member is respected, one that specifically promotes intimacy (making connections and developing friendships within our congregation) and ultimacy (spiritual growth and the search for truth and meaning). They draw us into mutual ministry, strengthen our congregation, develop lay leadership, and express our values and principles in the community. They achieve this by developing and committing to a covenant of behavior of their own making.
- **The group covenants to:**
 - **To engage in at least one service project to the congregation or larger world**
 - **To abide by a set of relationship ground rules the group develops for itself**
 - **To hold an “empty chair” so as to always welcome new members (both into the group as well as into the larger program)**
 - **To make meetings a high priority**
- Groups consist of 6–11 members. Groups will welcome new members until all 11 chairs are filled, at which time the group will be full and a new group will form. If a member should leave the group for any reason, their chair will become open to a new member.
- The group meets at least once a month for two hours. If the facilitator is available and the group unanimously agrees, the group can meet more often. We are asking you to put all the meeting dates for this group into your calendar when you get home and make a commitment to attend all of them, unless something unavoidable, or an emergency arises. If you cannot, please be in touch with the facilitator in advance of the meeting.

Each group will be lead by a trained facilitator, or co-facilitators. Each facilitator is supported and overseen by the Covenant Group Planning Committee, which in turn is supported and overseen by the church's ministers. Facilitators participate in monthly meetings led by the planning committee and the minister for ongoing support, skill building, and problem solving. The role of the facilitator is to

- Explain the rules/responsibilities of the group and ensure that the group's Covenant is respected by all.
 - Facilitate the group process, manage the addition of new members or new groups
 - Encourage mutual care-giving
 - Call group members when they miss a meeting and do not call in to say they are not attending
 - Contact the minister when the leader has knowledge of a situation requiring support beyond the scope of the covenant group, or when a member states the intention to harm another or him/herself
 - Keep the meeting on track and on time
 - Gently intervene if a member speaks beyond his/her time limit; gently discourage crosstalk, interruptions, or advice-giving; encourage quiet members to speak; look for and cultivate new potential leaders within the group and congregation.
- Groups will meet October through early June. Individual groups can choose to meet in July and August as well. Each group will disband at the end of the year. In the fall registration will open again and new groups will form. In this way, over the course of several years, participants will develop deeper relationships across the congregation and not just with the same 11 people.
 - Groups are not formed around specific interests such as young adults or BGLT, etc., but represent our diverse fabric of gender, age, theology, sexual orientation and identity, and race.
 - Each member of the group has equal responsibility for keeping the group to its covenant. This is part of the shared leadership commitment of the group.
 - **Covenant groups are NOT therapy. We are not here to give advice or feedback or to “fix” anyone but to be present, to listen deeply to each individual, to witness for them and honor their opinions, ideas, and feelings. Each participant will be given equal time to speak or, if they prefer, to be silent.**
 - **Covenant groups are NOT debate societies. All discussion should be based in “I” statements, each member should speak from personal experience.**

Ask if everyone feels clear on what CGs are and are not. Answer any questions.

Now we will have an abbreviated session on right relations and covenanting. This session will show you the standard format of our monthly meetings. From that we will develop our group's own covenant.

Right Relationship: Facilitators

Covenant Group Session #1, 2009–2010

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

Written by Tracy Blanchard

NOTE: This session is identical to that received by Participants, except for items marked in left margin. *Facilitators, please allow no more than 60 minutes for this session. You will need another 30 minutes afterwards to develop your group's covenant based on how the session goes and what is discussed.*

Because you haven't developed your covenant yet, there may be some advice-giving or interrupting or cross-talking. Let it happen for just a little bit, so people understand how it can be disruptive, but if it gets too out of hand, step in, saying something like, "Why don't we let X finish," or "Y hasn't had a chance to speak yet," or "How did that feel, being given advice? Would it have felt better simply to be listened to?"

Chalice Lighting and Opening Words (this generally sets the tone for the meeting)

"By spiritual, I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and much more trust-worthy than our egos—with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, and with the mystery of being alive.

—Parker Palmer

Check-in (usually 2-3 minutes for each person about what is going on in a person's life or what they've left behind to be with the group or how their spirit is doing in the moment)

We did a check in at the beginning of the session so for now we won't do another one.

Readings (on the topic of the discussion)

"... In reality, in the circle of right relationship, there is no above and no below, no in or out; all are together in the sacred circle . . ."

—Dhyani Ywahoo, *Voices of Our Ancestors: Cherokee Teaching from the Wisdom Fire*

Are we a community or a collection of individuals? What is it that defines the community of our church and pulls its individual members together? One way to think about a church is as a circle.

Mathematically speaking, a circle is defined as the collection of points that are a certain distance (radii) from a particular center point. The individuals in a church make up the circle—they are the points around that center point. The crucial part of this analogy is that this community is defined by its particular center point and the relationships of its members to that centering factor.

... A central difference between Unitarian Universalist churches and many other churches is that our center is not a particular religious creed but rather a covenant of shared values, a common commitment to live out those values in our lives and in the world, a common vision of how we define our relationships with each other.

Some thoughts for discussion

- What do we value in our personal relationships and how do we want to be treated?
- Share a time when you felt valued by someone's treatment of you. What about a time when you felt disrespected?
- Talk about a time you have fallen short of right relations and how that felt.
- What is the spiritual significance or practical significance of a covenant, to you?
- When thinking about the covenant of right relations this group will make with each other, what would you like to promise to others? What promises would you like made to you in return?

Before we begin our discussion, let's pause for a minute of silent reflection. Feel free to use pen and paper if you process more easily through writing.

Normally we will begin by going around the circle, giving each member 6-7 minutes to speak, or be silent, as they see fit. Because this first session is abbreviated, we will each have 3 minutes. After each person has their turn, we will open the discussion (about 25 minutes) to a slightly freer discussion format.

Developing a group covenant (30 minutes)

The group will develop a covenant of how we will treat each other in these discussions over the coming year together. Why do we do this? To make the "rules of behavior" by which the group abide overt. Covert rules tend to create an "in group" and an "out group." This leads to anxiety for the out group, an unwelcoming environment for newcomers, imbalances of power in the group, a lower level of comfort, participation and risk, lower shared leadership, and less likelihood of achieving our goals of intimacy and ultimacy. How vital our group stays is in direct correlation to how well we develop and stick to our covenant. So based on the experience we just had and the things we talked about, what are your suggestions for our covenant of behavior.

Here are some suggestions if folks aren't forthcoming, examples of what might be in a covenant.

Suggestions include: * Using only "I" statements/speaking from personal experience * No cross-talking/interrupting * No advice-giving * remembering our 1st principle and the inherent worth and dignity of each participant and their opinions/experiences * Deep listening * Entering quietly if late, no need for excuses or apologies, don't disrupt current conversation * Starting and ending on time * The right to pass or sit in silence during one's turn * Share time equally * 3 seconds of silence after person speaks before next person begins.

Check-out (usually about 1-2 minutes per person about what a person liked about the session and what the person wished for that might not have happened)

- This is a time for constructive feedback. An example might be, "I like how we approached the topic this evening and I wish we had moved through check-in a little more quickly/slowly."
- Please provide feedback about how the gathering was for you, not about the people present.
- Please keep it short and to the point—one or two sentences.
- It's ok to have likes without wishes, or to pass if you prefer.
- Please respect other people's likes and wishes and avoid "defending against" them.

Closing words and the extinguishing of the chalice

"Where nature makes natural allies of us all, we can demonstrate that beneficial relations are possible even with those with whom we most deeply disagree, and this must someday be the basis of world peace and world law"

—John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Introduction to Covenant Groups, 2009–2010 Participants

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
Adapted from the UUA Small Group Ministry Training by M'Ellen Kennedy

An Overview of Covenant Groups at First Parish in Cambridge

The Power & Purposes of Small Group Ministry:

Intimacy (community building and friendship)

Ultimacy (spiritual exploration and the search for truth and meaning)

First Parish Covenant Groups agree:

To engage in at least one service project to the congregation or larger world

To abide by a set of relationship ground rules

To hold an “empty chair” open for new members

To make meetings a high priority

Size: 6-11 members. When the group reaches 11 members, the group is full and a new group will form.

Meeting Frequency: At least once a month. Group meetings typically last about two hours. A group may choose to meet more frequently.

Leadership: New facilitators will be nominated by current facilitators and approved and trained by the minister(s). Facilitators participate in monthly meetings for ongoing support, skill building, and problem solving. These meetings are led by the minister(s) and/or lay leadership team.

Group Duration: Groups meet October through June (in during the summer if they so choose). Each September, each group dissolves and new groups form so that participants form an ever-widening circle of friends in the congregation.

Group Composition: Groups are not formed around specific interests such as young adults or BGLT but represent our diverse fabric of gender, age, theology, sexual orientation and identity, and race.

Meeting Format:

During the Check-In and Discussion, a stone, talking stick, or bowing practice is used to deepen speaking and listening. A meditation gong or chime may be used for transition between elements of the meeting.

Welcome & Opening: The chalice is lit and a short reading, poem, or song helps set a tone for the meeting.

Review Covenants & Ground Rules: Restating the behavioral commitments which the group members have created for themselves. (This is necessary in the first few months when a group is new and any time there is a new member.)

Check-In with each group member Suggested question: “How is it with your spirit?”

Discussion: A reading and series of questions are presented for contemplation. After the questions a moment for silent contemplation is recommended. Each person is then invited to speak without interruption up to a number of minutes (e.g. 5) determined by the facilitator. Then free-flowing discussion is invited. Discussion time is not for advice or problem-solving but for deep listening and reflection emphasizing I-statements.

Check-Out: Brief sharing from each person to bring the meeting to a close. “Positives and Deltas” or “Likes and Wishes”: what did you appreciate and what could be improved?

Closing: A reading or song helps bring the meeting to a close while the chalice is extinguished.

Right Relationship: Participants

Covenant Group Session #1, 2009–2010

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

Written by Tracy Blanchard,

Chalice Lighting and Opening Words (this generally sets the tone for the meeting)

“By spiritual, I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and much more trust-worthy than our egos—with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, and with the mystery of being alive. —Parker Palmer

Check-in (usually 2-3 minutes for each person about what is going on in a person’s life or what they’ve left behind to be with the group or how their spirit is doing in the moment)

We did a check in at the beginning of the session so for now we won’t do another one.

Readings (on the topic of the discussion)

“. . . In reality, in the circle of right relationship, there is no above and no below, no in or out; all are together in the sacred circle”

—Dhyani Ywahoo, *Voices of Our Ancestors: Cherokee Teaching from the Wisdom Fire*

Are we a community or a collection of individuals? What is it that defines the community of our church and pulls its individual members together? One way to think about a church is as a circle. Mathematically speaking, a circle is defined as the collection of points that are a certain distance (radii) from a particular center point. The individuals in a church make up the circle—they are the points around that center point. The crucial part of this analogy is that this community is defined by its particular center point and the relationships of its members to that centering factor.

A central difference between Unitarian Universalist churches and many other churches is that our center is not a particular religious creed but rather a covenant of shared values, a common commitment to live out those values in our lives and in the world, a common vision of how we define our relationships with each other.

Some thoughts for discussion

- What do we value in our personal relationships and how do we want to be treated?
- Share a time when you felt valued by someone’s treatment of you. What about a time when you felt disrespected?
- Talk about a time you have fallen short of right relations and how that felt.
- What is the spiritual significance or practical significance of a covenant, to you?
- When thinking about the covenant of right relations this group will make with each other, what would you like to promise to others? What promises would you like made to you in return?

Before we begin our discussion, let’s pause for a minute of silent reflection. Feel free to use pen and paper if you process more easily through writing.

Normally we will begin by going around the circle, giving each member 6-7 minutes to speak, or be silent, as they see fit. Because this first session is abbreviated, we will each have 3 minutes. After each person has their turn, we will open the discussion (about 25 minutes) to a slightly freer discussion format.

Developing the group’s covenant

Check-out (usually about 1-2 minutes per person about what a person liked about the session and what the person wished for that might not have happened)

- This is a time for constructive feedback. An example might be, “I like how we approached the topic this evening and I wish we had moved through check-in a little more quickly.”
- Please provide feedback about how the gathering was for you, not about the people present.
- Please keep it short and to the point—one or two sentences.
- It’s ok to have likes without wishes, or to pass if you prefer.
- Please respect other people’s likes and wishes and avoid “defending against” them.

Closing words and the extinguishing of the chalice

“Where nature makes natural allies of us all, we can demonstrate that beneficial relations are possible even with those with whom we most deeply disagree, and this must someday be the basis of world peace and world law”

—John Fitzgerald Kennedy