

## Covenant Group Facilitator Training

Goals of Small Group Ministry are to develop a growing network of small groups that:

1. Draw us into mutual ministry
2. Strengthen our congregation
3. Deepen our understanding of Unitarian-Universalist principles and values
4. Continuously develop lay leadership
5. Challenge us to action and spiritual growth
6. Express our principles and values in the community
7. Help members identify their own calling and expression of lay ministry

Covenant Groups, sometimes known as Small Group Ministry, are spaces for members and friends of the First Unitarian Church of Alton to explore deeper more intimate relationships with one another. Meeting between once and twice a month, participants are given space to actively listen to one another in response to particular topics of living, faith, philosophy, values, and beyond. Facilitators hold a unique role within these groups by providing the container within which these conversations to take place.

### *The Container*

Groups follow a particular process of formation that can be fostered toward helpful and meaningful experiences. The Facilitator and Co-Facilitator ensure that the group knows what to expect, follows commitments and covenants the group makes with itself, and helps the group stay on task in a timely fashion. In addition, they may provide pastoral resources ranging from special rituals for individuals experiencing significant life changes to referral to the Minister or Pastoral Care Associates.

The container is simply the boundaries that the group maintains. Some are determined ahead of time by the Covenant Group Coordinator, Jennifer Timpe, and Team. For example, the format for covenant groups will be consistent across the groups. Also, topics and rituals may be predetermined based on the church's monthly theme or in response to a particular experience the congregation is facing. Other boundaries may be determined by the group such as the group's covenant, time limitations for check-in and check-out, rituals, etc.

A good Facilitator will set clear boundaries and keep them while making space for the needs of the group. For example, if during check-in someone shares that their parent died and it is clear that they need a few more minutes for sharing, the Facilitator may ask the group for permission to give the person more time to speak or to have some time at the end for them to speak. This keeps within the boundaries of the group while also caring for the person in grief.

### Deep Listening vs. Therapy

Covenant Groups are a place for deeper connection and intimacy between participants. As such, the design of Covenant Groups is focused on deep listening. In deep listening, we are invited to listen to the voices of others without response. It can be a natural inclination to want to provide ideas, solutions, or other feedback when someone is sharing, but that is not keeping within the unique experience of Covenant Groups.

As a Facilitator, you will need to help the group stay in process and covenant. This means monitoring yourself and the group for cross-talk, response, and advice. If someone begins to do this, it is important to intervene with a kind reminder that this is not the time for responses. If one particular person continues to respond out of turn, then you may need to speak with them one-on-one to see what would help them to follow the process.

Covenant Groups are not for everyone. It may be that a member of the group really needs to go to an alternate form of programming such as discussion groups. If you are finding it difficult to help people stay within covenant, please speak with the Covenant Group Coordinator or Minister. We will help you work out creative solutions as we are able.

### General Format

Each session follows a standard format.

1. Preliminary- review covenant, explain process, anything need to prepare the group
2. Opening Words/Chalice Lighting
3. Check-in
4. Reading/Activity
5. Silence
6. Deep Sharing/Listening
7. Closing/Extinguish Chalice

### Group Process

Groups are as unique as every snowflake. Just like every snowflake, they are made up of the same core elements. Understanding the processes for group formation and maintenance is important. There are five core areas to group formation:

1. Bonding
2. Opening Up
3. Affirming
4. Stretching
5. Deeper Sharing

Bonding occurs in the first few sessions of your group. It includes everything from the initial communications about the program through to the moment when sharing begins. Bonding will include communications with the Facilitator and Co-Facilitator, covenant creation, and the initial experiences of the Covenant Groups themselves. At this point, the group is experienced as a “I could take it or leave it” place. Members are determining if this is something they wish to commit time and energy to.

Opening Up occurs when people begin to share deeper more personal stories of their lives. In this phase members test the waters and to see if they can trust the group and then responding accordingly. At this point, the group is beginning to commit to one another and imagine the possibilities of what being a part of this group means for themselves.

Affirming occurs when members feel supported in their sharing. Trust has been earned to some degree and members begin to form friendships (if they haven’t done so already). They will see the group as significant to their lives. At this point, members are committed to this group and are hopeful for the future.

Stretching occurs when a crisis event occurs either for one member or for the entire group. The group’s ability to be supportive and present is tested. In Covenant Groups, there are shorter sessions that can be attached to the beginning or end of a session to address personal crises such as loss of a person or pet, difficult child situations, marriage, divorce, adoption, illness, and more. The process of Covenant Groups should help with stretching that could occur because of conflicts within the group. If you are unsure of how to proceed, this is crucial time to request support from the Covenant Group Coordinator and/or the Minister. At this point, the group will either rise to the challenge or fall apart. In Covenant Groups, it is unlikely that a group will disband due to the specificity of process, but it can happen.

Deeper sharing occurs when the group has faced a crisis (big or small) and come through the other side. With the foundation of trust and experience, members begin to share more personal stories and ideas. At this point, the group has become cohesive. This will last until one of three things happens:

1. The group comes to a natural end (by calendar or decision).
2. The group has someone new join them or someone leave.
3. Another stretching experience occurs.

Having a sense of where your group is in the process will help you be aware of what they need most in terms of care and support. If a member is wanting folks to share very deep information at the bonding phase, they may need to be reminded that some folks need time to trust and share. If it seems like your group is anxious and on edge, perhaps they have reached the stretching phase of development.

### *Covenant Creation*

As the Small Group Ministry Network puts it, “A covenant provides relational ground rules. It is a promise that participants make to create a safe environment for spiritual exploration. A covenant typically includes time management, commitment to the group, respectful listening, confidentiality, and speaking from one’s own experience. It effects the comfort level within a session.”

At your first session, your group will determine the covenant. This is a living document that can be revisited and edited by the group at any time. It should be read at the beginning of every session.

When your group first meets, ask them what they would like included in the covenant. It may be helpful to have butcher paper or a dry erase board to write these down on. Be sure that the covenant is written down so that it can be read at each session. Once the covenant is written out, be sure to ask everyone if they can agree to this. If the group does not mention time management or confidentiality, be sure to ask them about it so that everyone is on the same page.

### *Service*

One important aspect of Covenant Groups is service. Covenant Groups engage in practices of going deeper in listening and communication about values. One aspect of these groups is to bring these values into action. The term here is intentionally broad. It will be up to each group to determine what form their service will take. They may decide simply to collect money to give to the church or to an outside organization. They may decide to do a service project for the church or the greater community. The goal is to take the deeper sharing and move it into deeper service.