



All Souls Church, Unitarian
Covenant Group Ministry

Covenant Group Manual

Small group ministry or covenant groups create a sacred time where the stories of our lives are shared. In order for this sharing to occur on a deeper, sacred level, the covenant group meeting must feel safe enough for the members to “let their souls speak” (Parker Palmer).

What is the Covenant Group Ministry?

The Covenant Group Ministry (CGM) is one of the most important programs of All Souls Church. Its purpose is to create, foster, and support small communities that will deepen our ties to the church and to each other. CGM provides a safe and supportive space in which members can explore and share their spiritual journeys.

What is a “covenant group”?

A covenant group is a gathering of 8-12 members who agree to:

- Meet on a regular basis, monthly or twice a month, for a defined period of time
- Make attending covenant group meetings a priority, and attend meeting whenever possible
- Treat each other with love and compassion by listening to each other carefully
- Engage in an exploration of the church’s monthly spiritual themes
- Identify and carry out an annual church service project
- Establish how it will maintain right relations among its members
- Respect the confidence of the group by not sharing personal information
- Welcome new members as vacancies occur

Most groups share by talking into the circle of members about a spiritual theme/focus reading, but book discussion, meditation, reflection or prayer, journaling, poetry, and other means to enhance spiritual development.. In addition, some minister to a specific group. For example, there are groups for men, women, members who live in a certain area, and groups for specific age cohorts.

Facilitators

Most groups have an identified facilitator/co-facilitators. Facilitator responsibilities are:

- Leading meetings
- Arranging and notifying members of upcoming meetings and locations
- Keeping All Souls informed about basic administrative information (number of members, intention to continue, etc.)
- Participating in All Souls support network for facilitators

Welcoming New Members

Covenant groups welcome new members as vacancies arise. The All Souls Covenant Group program maintains a database of people interested in joining a covenant group. Groups can find new members through personal contacts, as well.

Deciding Whether to Close or Leave a Group

A group covenants to meet for a specified period and revisits when that period ends. At that point the group can:

- Decide to close and have a closing ceremony, after which members can join new groups
- Choose to meet for a longer period of time (For example, continuing through the summer), retaining all or some members

Sometimes circumstances change, Work or family obligations make regular attendance difficult; the group no longer meets the member's needs; or the member would like to join another group. Leaving the group in an intentional and respectful manner is very important. If possible, the member should attend a final meeting that permits everyone to say goodbye.

When the Group Needs Help

Sometimes the group may face a challenge that requires assistance. In that case, the facilitator, or any other group member, may contact the Covenant Group Ministry coordinator (currently the Chief Program Officer). He/she can give advice, seek advice from other group facilitators, or, in very difficult cases, refer the matter to the Committee on Right Relations.

Covenant Group Meeting Format

A standard meeting format with shared guidelines and expectations helps create a shared and sacred space for all participants.

Standard Meeting Format (excerpted from *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry*)

- A chalice/candle is lit and a “sacred object” or “talking stick” is reachable in the center of the circle.
- An opening reading (from the Monthly Guide, our hymnal, or any other source consistent

- A check-in period during which each person is asked to briefly state his or her answer to a question such as: What's on your mind today? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here? What brought you here today?
- A time for the focus or purpose of the meeting. The church's monthly spiritual theme guide is provided as a suggested guide with theme-related poetry, readings, and stories. Sometimes the group may decide to discuss something else at their 2nd meeting of the month which is fine as long as it aligns with the 7 Principles of the church. The focus should be more on sharing than on debating.
- The closing check-out. The facilitator asks each person for a word or phrase that says something about how she or he is feeling as the meeting draws to an end.
- A closing reading. Again, it can be from the Living Traditions Hymnbook, another Unitarian Universalist source, or readings from your own resources.

Except for facilitation, the member sharing and talking will hold the sacred object. It is returned to the center when sharing is finished.

Covenant group leaders are encouraged to adopt the standard meeting format above to their own group, and keep this framework in place throughout the meeting cycle of the group. See below for an example of how one covenant group has adopted the standard meeting format for themselves:

Sample Meeting Format (from an existing covenant group)

7:00 –7:30	★ Informal Socializing	Arrive early to socialize and catch up on each others' daily lives. Beverages and snacks can be available if persons agree to bring them.
7:30	★ Opening <i>“May we enter our sacred space and sit quietly for a moment... feeling love flow around us and through us, knowing that as we give love away, there is always more within.”</i>	Facilitator rings bell/chime and we gather in a circle. Facilitator lights the candle and reads the opening. (choose from guide sheet)
	★ Check In ★ 2 minutes/person	Facilitators ask and individuals to answer a question. "What's most on your mind today?" or "What do you need to let go of to be fully present?"
7:50	★ Reading(s) ★ Select 2 – 3 from Monthly Guide	Readings may be selected from the suggested guide sheet provided by the church on the monthly spiritual theme. Another option is to use resources provided by the facilitators or suggested by group members.
(5 minutes)	★ Silent Meditation/Reflection or ★ Meditation with Music	The end will be signaled by the sound of the bell.
	★ Re-read the readings	After meditation, our minds are often better able to focus on the readings. Different members might do the re-readings in order to hear the words in literally a different voice.
	★ Sharing with the group: <i>“You may take the bowl (or another appropriate object) and respond to the reading or to something the reading suggests to you. When you have finished, re-place the bowl in the center of the circle.”</i>	The bowl serves in the tradition of the “talking stick”; when you have it, you may talk and others will listen. (no cross talking) Each member receives one turn with the bowl. Note: You always have the option of remaining silent. Please indicate this by saying “I pass” so the group knows not to wait for you.
	★ Responding to others' sharing	At this time you are welcome to respond freely to what others have said. The bowl (“talking stick”) is no longer used during this portion.
8:55	★ Benediction: <i>“Keep alert. Stand firm in your faith. Be courageous. Be strong. Let all you do be done in love.”</i>	The group gathers together, standing in a tight circle, and recites the benediction together.
Finish by 9:00	★ Closing	The group blows out the candle to signal the end of the covenant group session.

Active Listening

Covenant group facilitators are encouraged to teach and reinforce the practice of active listening during covenant group meetings. For many covenant group members, what makes the CG experience so powerful is the simple fact of being listened to without being given advice. Groups may find the use of a “talking stick” a helpful practice to encourage this special type of listening. A talking stick is an object placed in the middle of the group. When one member picks up the stick, only that member may speak. All others will listen with open ears, mind, and heart, and with closed mouths. No advice will be offered, no suggestions will be made. When the member is finished speaking and replaces the talking stick to the center, all will observe a moment of silence to just sit with what has been spoken before the next member takes their turn with the stick.

When people speak in the sacred space of the covenant group, they speak of their own lives and experiences. What others have spoken should not be critiqued or commented upon beyond, “When Susan mentioned XYZ, it brought to mind for me a time when I felt . . .” Covenant group members listen actively to all who speak, but when speaking, reflect only upon their own lives and feelings.

Parker Palmer offers an image to consider when learning to listen actively and hold a person in a sacred space. The sacred space he is discussing is a particular Quaker practice called a clearness committee, but this image can be quite useful for UU covenant groups as well. Palmer suggests “hold[ing] the soul of the person as if we were holding a small bird in the palms of our two hands.

As we do so, we are likely to experience three temptations, and it is important that we resist all of them:

- After a while, our hand may start to close around the bird, wanting to take this creature apart and find out what makes it tick. Resist this temptation: our job is not to analyze but simply to hold in open trust.
- As the time goes by, our arms may begin to tire, and we may find ourselves tempted to lay the bird down: attention flags, the mind wanders, and we are no longer holding the person at the center of our awareness. We must resist this temptation too. A bird is light, and a soul is even lighter. If we understand that we are under no obligation to fix, save, or advise, or set this person straight, our burden will disappear, and we can hold this soul for two hours without tiring.
- Toward the end of the process—having held the bird openly with the best of intentions—we may find our cupped hands making a subtle but persistent upward motion, encouraging the bird to fly: ‘Don’t you see what you have learned here? Aren’t you ready to take off, to act on what you now know?’ Resist this temptation too. This bird will fly when it is ready, and we cannot possibly know when that will be.”

Parker’s book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, is an excellent resource for covenant group leaders with further discussion and explanation of creating sacred space where each individual’s soul can be heard.

Other Tips / Suggestions

Chalice lighting - Think of the table in the center as an altar (a focus point to remembering the spirit of the meeting - so don't put food and drinks on it.) The ringing of a bell can also help remind members that now the special, sacred time of the meeting has begun. Listening to or singing a sacred song together can also help bring everyone together into the sacred space. "Spirit of Life" from the *Music from All Souls* CD is available as an MP3 download, for example: <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/allsouls>

Check-in – Some groups prefer to use this time each meeting to fill in the other members about anything significant which has happened in their lives since the last meeting. Other groups prefer using different suggestions of people sharing about themselves, so it is not the same question each time. Also, if a general check-in starts getting too long and detailed, using a specific question at check-in can help people focus their thoughts and sharing.