

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.

Parker Palmer

Whatever you do, don't make the journey alone.

Rob Hardies

The bottom line is, when we are listened to, we feel connected. When we're not listened to, we feel separate. The more we understand, the less we fear—the less we fear, the more we trust and the more we trust, the more love can flow.

Tara Brach

All Souls' Covenant Group Ministry is one of our most important programs. Covenant groups create, foster, and support small communities that deepen ties to each other and to the church. They provide a safe and supportive space in which members can explore and share their spiritual journeys.

All Souls organizes its church year around monthly spiritual themes, such as compassion, courage, and hope. Members covenant to meet in small groups once or twice a month to reflect on what those themes mean to us in our daily lives. Some groups also share thoughts about other topics central to our spiritual lives. Monthly theme guides distributed to facilitators and posted on the church's website offer readings and questions that can be used explicitly or as background to think about the theme.

Here's a way to think of the guide (or other agreed-on readings or questions): Best of all, participants have read and thought about the readings and questions in advance. Next best, they've read and thought about the questions, but all that's truly essential is that they've thought about-- or agree to think about-- the theme.

Covenant Group Defined

A covenant group is a gathering of 6 to 12 members who agree to:

- meet on a regular basis (monthly or twice a month) for a defined period in members' homes or, if logistics demand, at All Souls (in a reserved room).
- make attending covenant group meetings a priority, and attend meetings whenever possible.
- treat each other with love and compassion by listening deeply, avoiding cross-talk and advice.
- engage in an exploration of the church's monthly spiritual themes and/or other topics, chosen in advance, in line with the Seven Principles.
- 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.

Some groups may choose to sign a formal covenant (see Appendix A for a sample covenant).

Each covenant group should have a name and a facilitator or co-facilitators. This is important for matching up new members with existing groups.

Joining or Forming a Covenant Group

The first step in joining a covenant group is to fill out the online Covenant Group Interest Form (www.all-souls.org/covenant-group-form). The Covenant Group Ministry may add you to an existing group (vacancies are determined at certain times of the year) or invite you to join a new group. Groups are organized by geography, availability, and/or special interest (for example: poetry, a taste for fine dining, or women of a certain age).

The Covenant Group Ministry maintains a database of people interested in joining. Would-be members can find new members through personal contacts, as well.

The Role of the Facilitators

Covenant groups have a facilitator or co-facilitators. Some groups rotate the role of meeting facilitator, but an administrative facilitator must be identified to communicate with the Ministry committee.

Facilitators are responsible for:

- leading meetings, including time management and gentle reminders, as needed,
- arranging and notifying members of upcoming meetings and locations.
- keeping All Souls informed about basic administrative information (number of members, vacancies, intention to continue, etc.)
- participating in All Souls' support network for facilitators.
- serving as a conduit for All Souls staff to reach out to members, when needed.

Covenant group facilitators are encouraged to model and reinforce the practice of deep listening. Appendix B is included as a teaching tool. The facilitator or co-facilitators may need to issue gentle reminders if groups drift far off-topic, or if the session shifts into everyday discussion with cross-talk and debate.

Time in covenant is short and precious. Members are always free to engage in other discussions on their own time.

Covenant Group Meeting Format

Covenant group meetings are generally two hours long. The beginning and end of this sacred time are marked by some combination of prayers, chalice lighting, and the sounding of a chime or bell. Below, we offer suggestions for a timeline and format, but facilitators should adapt these as they see fit and then stick with a predictable meeting format. Likewise, meetings should stick to a schedule; for example, the first Wednesday of the month at 7:00 pm.

Chalice lighting prayer (5 minutes). The facilitator or a group member lights a candle or sounds a bell and says a brief prayer or meditation. The prayer/meditation, which can remain the same or change every month, may be taken from existing literature or may be written by the reciter. Here is a sample prayer:

We light the flame in the chalice to remind ourselves that we are part of a beloved community where we are encouraged to bring our authentic selves to join each other in sharing from our hearts and listening with our hearts. May it be so.

Check-in (15 minutes). Each person briefly (2–3 minutes) shares significant happenings or issues in his or her life. The facilitator might ask, “What’s been going on for you?”, “What’s most on your mind today?”, or “What do you need to let go of to be fully present?”.

Focus on monthly theme (or other topic, see below) (90 minutes).

Sharing and listening. There are different ways to handle the heart of the meeting—sharing on the topic of the monthly theme as it relates to our personal spiritual lives (see below for more on the use of the theme guide). Longstanding groups have evolved their own variations. Sharing typically occurs in rounds with each member taking a turn. Each speaker might finish with “Thank you for listening.” The listening is an

important aspect of the sharing. We listen from the heart with full attention, and we offer no analysis or advice. Appendix B offers additional guidance on active listening.

A group with six persons attending might share in three rounds of 5 minutes each (3–4 mins sharing plus 1–2 minutes response), focusing in each round on some reaction to the theme, one of the questions for reflection (or some other question), or a reading or question chosen by the facilitator. (More detail on structuring the rounds is covered below in the discussion on using the theme guide.)

Responding to sharing. Responses to each sharing are brief; the idea is to let the speaker know that they have been heard and are supported. Keep in mind that, for many covenant group members, what makes the experience so powerful is the simple fact of being listened to without analysis, without judgment, without advice. What others have spoken should not be critiqued or commented upon beyond, “What came up for me as I listened was . . .” Covenant group members listen actively to all who speak, but when speaking, reflect only on their own lives and feelings.

Closing the meeting (10 minutes).

Closing question/sharing. The facilitator asks a closing question with a short answer; for instance, “What will you be taking away from this session?” In addition, if a member is facing a challenging circumstance, the question to that member might be, “How can we support you?”

Next meeting. The date, time and topic of the next meeting should be announced or agreed on.

Closing prayer. A sample closing prayer might be “We extinguish the flame in the chalice, but not its warmth or light in our lives. We will carry the love of this group with us and remember that we are supported and held in love until we meet again.”

The chalice is then extinguished or the bell rung to mark the closing of sacred time.

Using the Monthly Theme Guide

To get members thinking about the theme before the meeting, facilitators should share the theme guide with members as it becomes available. Consider cutting and pasting the questions for reflection and discussion into a group email that also includes the guide as an attachment or a link to the theme guide online. (Theme guides are posted at www.all-souls.org/covenant-groups.) Discussing topics like “courage” or “compassion” needs no actual preparation, but the shared readings and focused questions can make sharing deeper and richer. Not all members will read the guide in advance, and that’s fine. The facilitator can only encourage, but never require, members to contemplate the theme before the meeting.

During the meeting, the group may focus, or not, on any or all the readings and questions. The facilitator keeps the group focused and present to each other. The goal is a deep and meaningful sharing—the best possible use of the group’s limited time together. Each group will evolve its own best ways to get there.

An experienced group may be counted on to have read the guide in advance, but then let it sit in the background, choosing not to reference any of the readings during the meeting. Members of the Poetry and Journaling Covenant Group, for example, often share writings inspired by the guide’s readings and questions.

New or less experienced groups should rely on the guide more explicitly. The facilitator might suggest one of the questions to focus on, or ask members to lift up a favorite reading to react to.

Meetings on Topics Other Than the Spiritual Theme of the Month

Covenant groups that meet twice a month may choose to focus their second meeting on a spiritual topic of their choosing. Groups have chosen, for instance, to discuss a book or a TED talk, to delve into social justice issues, to explore aging or relationship issues.

These meetings should still follow the general outline of the covenant group meeting, with its attention to sacred time and deep listening. Habits are strong and talk can revert to discussions featuring cross-talk and extended dialogues. There's nothing wrong with these conversations, but they don't offer the special opportunity to hear and be heard that characterize covenant groups.

The UUA offers topic outlines (and other resources) at www.smallgroupministry.net/index.html.

Deciding Whether to Close or Leave a Group

A group covenants to meet for a specified period. At the end of that period, the group can:

- decide to close and have a closing ceremony, after which members can join new groups; or
- choose to continue for another specified period (for example, through the summer), retaining all or some members.

Circumstances change. Work or family obligations make regular attendance difficult; the group no longer meets all members' needs; or a member would like to join another group. Leaving the group in an intentional and respectful manner is important. If possible, all members 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 (ascu.covenantgroups@gmail.com) for advice. In very difficult cases, the matter may be referred to the Committee on Right Relations.

Appendix A. Sample Group Covenant

The mission of our [Name] Covenant Group is to support and nurture each other on our spiritual journeys.

I shall attend all meetings of the Group, unless family illness or business prevents me.

I shall care for the well-being of the group by paying attention to its primary purpose, which is to deepen the spiritual living of its members.

I shall review this covenant in six months' time, and in the light of changing circumstances, renew, revise, or abandon it.

Signed _____

Appendix B. Active Listening: Resisting the Three Temptations

Parker Palmer offers an image to consider when learning to listen actively and hold a person in a sacred space. 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. I like to think of them as the the "three A's—analysis, attention, and aggravation." Here's how Parker suggests we understand and resist the energy of each temptation.

After a while, our hand may start to close around the bird, trying to feel what makes it tick. Resist this temptation: our job is not to analyze but simply to hold in open trust. We're curious and open-hearted, not analytical, self-referential, or judgmental. We listen from the heart.

As the time goes by, our arms may begin to tire, and we may find ourselves tempted to lay the bird down. Our 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, 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. (Leave time management to the facilitator.)