

"The Ties that Bind": Covenant Group Kick-Off

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Unitarian Church in Summit
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Details of Covenant Groups:

Covenant Groups are six to 10 people, meeting twice a month. Each will have a trained facilitator. Groups will meet for 1½ hours, unless they unanimously decide to extend the discussion time (groups will never meet for more than two hours). Each group is bound by a covenant, which is an agreement on how the members will operate as a group. Each group is expected to choose one or two service projects to the church or larger community, so the group's strength isn't only self-focused, but always spills out into the larger world. On occasion, groups will be asked to split to create two new groups, but only after a year together.

Those interested in participating should fill out the registration form on the back of the lavender Covenant Group brochure.

Covenant Group Gathering:

A Covenant Group meeting always begins with opening words and an opening ritual (like a chalice lighting), a reminder of the group's covenant, and a time to check in. A sample covenant might be the following:

- * We will speak from "I" -- our own experience.
- * What we hear of a personal nature within the group stays within the group as much as possible.
- * Check-in will be limited to three minutes per person -- exceptions if someone is in serious distress.
- * A person may pass (that is, opt not to participate) in a discussion or exercise.
- * Everyone has a chance to speak on a topic once before anyone speaks a second time.
- * We will do our utmost not to interrupt each other.
- * We commit to try to understand those with different opinions.
- * The members will share the privilege and responsibility of helping the group to function.
- * Childcare needs will be honored and accommodated, including a child being present in the building if childcare arrangements at home fail, or the group meeting is in the house where childcare is needed.
- * Cell phones will be kept on only as needed for the safety of family members.
- * We will start and end on time.

Check-in is a time when everyone has a few minutes to say what has been going on in their life since the group was last together or what they need to leave behind from their day to be fully present to the group:

- * Someone might share that she just left her oldest child at college and how that feels.
- * Someone else might share about the uncertainty in his place of employment and how he is coping with it.
- * Someone else might mention that she has fallen in love or he is having trouble at home
- * or found a lump in her breast
- * or is feeling depressed
- * or is reading a wonderful book
- * or had a revelation over breakfast
- * or is counting down the days to vacation.

Check-in is not therapy, but it is a chance to share more than formalities. To offer up a snapshot of our lives, beyond the "How-are-you?"-"I-am-fine" response we give so often.

Discussion Portion of the Gathering:

The main portion of every Covenant Group gathering (45 minutes to an hour) is the discussion time. Generally it is opened up by a reading or a few pointed questions to get the discussion going. Today we'll open up with a reading from Roy Phillips' *Transforming Liberal Congregations for the New Millennium*:

The cartoon titled "New Member's Worst Nightmare" shows an elderly man, with a long, flowing beard, speaking to a young couple new to the church. The couple looks at a huge bulletin board listing all the congregation's committees. At the top is emblazoned: "Our Committees Need You!"

The old man says, "Most people are on nine or ten committees, but since you're new I'm sure people will understand if you only join six or seven to start." The best part of the cartoon is the list of committees themselves: Finance Committee, Investment Committee, Board of Trustees -- yes. But it goes on ... Thermostat Control Committee, Committee for More Comfortable Pews, Committee for the Promotion of Committees, Plant Watering Committee, Pigeon Control Committee. The cartoon is a good one. It makes me wince. And it makes us laugh -- or not -- because it's so close to the truth.

Those thinking and writing about congregational administration over the years have given us the theoretical underpinnings for committee involvement ... a step-by-step breakdown of what any and every congregation should be prepared to do for newcomers. First invite people. When they arrive, welcome them. Next orient them to what's available for them in the congregation. Then, help them to join. Finally, give them some work to do so that the congregation can assimilate and thus retain them ...

I have a problem with this ...

In his book *Effective Church Leadership*, Kenneth Callahan speaks about the church [today] as disturbingly, as powerfully, as in anything I have ever read. [He writes]:

People come to church longing for, yearning for, hoping for ... [a] sense of roots, place, belonging, sharing and caring. People come to a church in our time with a search for community, not committee.

We make the mistake of assuming that, by putting people on a committee, they will develop ownership for the objectives of the church. People are not looking for ownership of objectives or for functional, organizational, institutional goals.

Their search is far more profound and desperate than that. They are looking for home, for relationships. They are looking for the profound depths of community ... They almost put up with the silliness of our brochures, the institutionalized new member orientations, the self-serving nature of our membership hustling. Their search is that desperate ...

People don't climb the mountain to the guru's hut because they want to be on a committee or because they can provide sound advice on balancing budgets. The seekers go there, as they come here, to find help with the life of the spirit -- to deepen and live it.

Sermon:

Were this a Covenant Group gathering, I would now ask you all to respond to this reading. What do you think of what Phillips and Callahan have to say? You can almost hear the heartbreak and anger in Callahan's critique of how he thinks religious communities have strayed from meeting people's needs. Does this resonate with any of you -- some, any of this resonate with what you experience in this community and what yearnings you bring to it?

However, this is not a Covenant Group meeting, so instead I'll tell you what I think about what the two men have to say, and how it relates to Covenant Groups.

I think that the two men in the reading are both right and wrong in their critique of where religious communities have gone wrong. For instance, I happen to think that Callahan's snide dismissal of the welcoming of new members is over the top. I don't think that having information available for people who come to visit our communities, offering regular opportunities for them to come with their questions and find out more about us, and ways to honor their desire to join the community is a "hustle," but a central act of care and welcoming. It is part of that virtue of hospitality that should be at the center of every religious community, especially ours. I hardly feel we hustle the folks who walk through our doors. I hope we make them feel welcome.

And of course, we do encourage people to serve on committees or task forces. That's not just to keep them busy. It's in part because that's where the important work of the church gets decided and carried out in this congregationally governed congregation, and we want new folks to feel part of that. It is also that many of our committees *do* offer a place for people to find community, to connect, to care for each other and to serve. There isn't, I don't think, a lot of busyness, pure busyness, in this place. At least I hope there isn't.

However, their point is also well taken in that many of us do come here, and always will, looking for more than a committee to serve on. You might say we come to religious communities like this one looking for two things: for intimacy -- that connection, that sense of home that Phillips and Callahan talk about, finding a place where, as the theme

song from "Cheers" says, "everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came" -- and for ultimacy -- a place to ask the big questions, to make sure the lives we live are ones that will be worth dying for, to touch what is greater than us all but present in us each. If all we wanted was intimacy, we could join a bridge club or a book group. If all we wanted was ultimacy, we could hire a spiritual director. But we want both, and whether we articulate it to ourselves or not, we came here, I think, hoping deep down that we would find both in this place.

Moreover, I think we can and do find both things here if we are engaged in this place. Caring relationships spring up all over this place. There is something about a religious community that says it is okay to let down your guard a bit here, to be yourself. Here no one cares about the car you drive or the title on your business card or who does your hair, but the condition of your life. Are you okay? How are your kids? How is work? Are you sure everything is all right? Can I help?

And we also are prodded here to consider the things of ultimate concern. Sunday services try to prod and search these issues. Social action roundtables raise the challenges of the day. In a given year, we are bound to be asked or ask ourselves as a result of what we hear: What is goodness? What is justice? What is mercy? What do these times demand of me? How do I treat those near me -- my family, my neighbor, my foe? What legacy would I like to leave behind? What will they say at my funeral? Will there be enough evidence to convict me of my beliefs?

We build intimacy and we take up the ultimate here. However, the question is whether we do it enough. Callahan and Phillips' criticism asks us to consider whether we make it *central* to our business here to carve out enough time for these activities. It is a fair question to ask. Just as a strong marriage, life partnership or friendship needs time carved out of the week's routine for its care -- be it a date night or a quiet dinner out -- the nurture of one's personal and spiritual development needs the same. What covenant groups offer is one place, one means, one opportunity carved out to make room for these things to take place.

When we started planning the Covenant Groups, we debated about how often they should meet. Once a month seemed enough to some, while others had their doubts. Our planning group, which ran itself according to a Covenant Group format, met only once a month early on to lay the broadest groundwork for the program. As the deadline for launch became closer and the details built up, we met twice a month to deal with all that faced us. What we found, quite by accident, is that our friendships grew much stronger when we saw each other more frequently. That folks took more risks, laughed more, looked forward to seeing each other and that our conversations were richer. Though in the abstract the time commitment seemed too great, this meeting twice a month, once it was part of our practice, there was not a single one of us who doubted that it was worth it or who would have given it up.

I know that one of the biggest hesitations folks have about joining such a group is the time commitment. There are lots of arguments for making the time for Covenant Groups.

I could give you Robert Putnam's argument from *Bowling Alone* about the importance of social capital. How it supports us, creates a web of resources for us to fall back on, and strengthens society also. How just being together works magic and how we Americans are increasingly, to our detriment, going it alone, bowling alone.

I could give you the practical argument for making time to be in a Covenant Group: that it's the most *efficient* way to meet people and have some of the conversations you came to church wanting to have.

I could tell you it is good for you. That it will ease your stress, nurture your inner springs, deepen your sense of place in the world. But I think the best argument is the one Phillips and Callahan give -- that Covenant Groups will answer the yearning that I and, I bet, you brought to this place -- a yearning for home, for a place of welcome, and for a place to examine our lives, to ask and begin to answer the big questions with which all of us ultimately must grapple in our quest for lives of purpose and meaning.

In the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, sports writer Mitch Albom reconnects with his college professor and mentor Morrie Schwartz while the latter is in the last few months of his life. Morrie is sick with Lou Gehrig's disease, a brutal attack on the neurological system. Albom spends hours with his wise and caring mentor, then recounts these conversations in his book. Albom compares these Tuesday mornings with a graduate class in The Meaning of Life. Only this one has no papers and ends not with a final exam but with a funeral.

At one point in this series of Tuesday morning conversations, Morrie says to his former student: "The truth is, Mitch, once you learn how to die you learn how to live."

"I was like everyone else" [he said]. "I once told a friend of mine, in a moment of exuberance, 'I'm gonna be the healthiest old man you ever met!' ... [Most] of us walk around as if we're sleepwalking. We really don't experience the world fully, because we're half-asleep, doing things we automatically think we have to do. ...

"Mitch. Can I tell you something?"

Of course, I said.

"You might not like it."

Why not?

"Well, the truth is, if you really listen to that bird on your shoulder, *if you accept that you can die at any time* -- then you might not be as ambitious as you are."

I forced a small grin.

"The things you spend so much time on -- all this work you do -- might not seem as important. You might have to make room for some more spiritual things."

I don't think any of us standing on this other side of September 11th, with only two years between us and a wash of terror and loss, can ever forget for long our own mortality. The shadow of death and the importance of living life awake, purposefully, joyfully are both the blessing and the curse that are one of the legacies that these events have left behind

for us. However, we all know how easy it is to slip into routines, how easy it is to get caught up in busyness, and ignore our innate desires and spiritual needs, like those for intimacy and ultimacy. Think of Covenant Groups as an insurance policy against such forgetfulness. Three hours a month that guarantee you progress in growing a soul and extending your web of friendships. Three hours a month to ensure you don't leave the business of learning *how to live* for the last few months when you are faced most squarely by death.

And here's the escape clause: If you hate it, you can drop out. We just ask you to attend as faithfully as you can for as long as you are committed to a group. The preparation is simple: Each week, you need only bring yourself. I'd invite you to give it a try. It may be just the thing (and those of us who have been planning it for a year are pretty sure it is the thing) you came here seeking!

The End of a Gathering:

The last few minutes of every meeting is just a chance to take care of any housekeeping details, like the shared cost for a dinner, if the group decided to have dinner beforehand, any information about the next meeting, and so on. And then a quick check-out, in which members are asked to say a few words about how the meeting went, how people are feeling.

The checkout can be simple, with people saying things like "Great," or "Not enough time for such a topic," or "Good to see everyone." Or it can be more complicated, with someone pointing out the need for broader inclusion of the group in the discussion, that some folks dominated more than is ideal, or mentioning that the tone of the conversation seemed sharper than necessary, perhaps reminding folks that a difference of opinion doesn't mean a challenge to a person. My experience is that such comments, the tough ones, are what keep the group honest, growing, and make it stronger. We didn't have many tough comments at check-out in our year together, but the ones we had were good for the group and were offered in a spirit of love, and then forgotten as we altered how we worked together to honor the feedback.

Finally, each group closes with a reading. This one from Emily Dickinson:

I dwell in Possibility --
A fairer House than Prose --
More numerous of Windows --
Superior -- for Doors --

Of Chambers as the Cedars --
Impregnable of Eye --
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky --

Of Visitors -- the fairest --
For Occupation -- This --
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise --

Go in peace with love and strength until we meet again. Amen.