

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
of Vero Beach FL
Covenant Group Program**

**Facilitator's Guide and Policy Manual
2019**

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Link to program sessions from 2012-present and Leadership Section:

Contains complete membership roster, Facilitator's Guide, Participant's Guide, monthly newsletters, and other documents and links of interest to facilitators

<http://uufvb.org/learning-development/covenant-groups/>

Password: cgleaders2

Link to UUA Small Group Ministry Network www.smallgroupministry.net

2. Introduction to the Covenant Group Program at UUFVB

You have agreed to be a Covenant Group Facilitator. This is a valuable service to the congregation and to your fellow Covenant Group members. Our Covenant Group program began at UUFVB in January 2012. In 2019, we have nearly 160 enrollees in 16 groups. Covenant Groups, while important to congregational life, exist to serve as an extension of, not a replacement for, Sunday services.

Purpose of the Program

A Covenant Group is part of the church's ministry—it provides a structure within which mutual ministry can thrive. It encourages people in their spiritual growth and helps them develop relationships of substance and depth. It is a place to share members' life experiences. Group members listen to each other, but do not attempt to solve each other's problems. Covenant Groups are said to be the place where members truly learn to practice "right relationship."

Power and Promise of Covenant Groups

Small Group Ministry (SGM), which includes Covenant Groups, meets our needs for belonging (intimacy) and meaning (ultimacy). It builds relationships and provides opportunities to talk with others about the big questions of life. Covenant Groups are designed to enrich our community with the sort of conversation and attentiveness that can be difficult in the busy life of a growing congregation. The Covenant Group experience also develops leaders, as group members go on to become Facilitators. SGM has the potential to grow congregations, not just in numbers, but in feelings of generosity, cooperation, and well-being. When we know a person's story, we are less likely to be contentious or defensive. When congregation members are having their needs for connection and spiritual deepening met, they are likely to want to give back to their faith community. Likewise, when listening becomes more important than getting your point across, committee work becomes easier and controversies are managed with fewer hurt feelings. It is reported that when participation in covenant groups exceeds 50% of membership, these benefits spread rapidly through the congregation as a whole.

Description of a Covenant Group

Covenant Groups ideally contain 8-10 members and are led by trained lay- people. In many groups, two people share the Facilitator role. Groups usually meet once a month at a regularly-designated time either at the Fellowship or in group members' homes. Seasonal groups meet twice a month in order to address a year's worth of topics. Still, the number of meetings per month is at the discretion of the individual group; meetings generally last one and one half to two hours. Two important agreements or covenants between Covenant Groups and the Fellowship are:

- To abide by a set of relationship ground rules based on UU values.
- To welcome new members to the group.

- To participate in a yearly service project to the Fellowship or to the greater community.

These agreements set Covenant Groups apart from any other kind of group or program within the UU.

Within each Covenant Group, members abide by a group covenant, which outlines the nature of the relationship of members to one other. The covenant generally includes listening without interrupting, regular attendance, and confidentiality, but is structured to meet the needs of the individual group.

Covenant Group members are supportive of each other, but they are not support groups or therapy groups. When a member is in need, the other group members may provide assistance as a way of connecting with each other. The Pastoral Care Committee or minister can fill in as needed. Covenant Groups are part of a religious community—the Fellowship.

Format of a Covenant Group Meeting

1. Opening Reading & Chalice Lighting
2. Check-in - members share something of personal significance.
3. Opening Readings and Topic Exploration
4. Sharing and Deep Listening relative to substantive discussion topics
5. Closing Reading & Ritual – extinguish chalice.
6. Housekeeping – logistics of the next meeting

3. The Facilitator's Role and Responsibilities

- Convene the group at least once a month, making sure all members know the date, time, place, and discussion topic for the meeting. Communicate via phone or email.
- Implement the model described in this Facilitator's Guide.
- Ensure that the group is a safe place for everyone, setting boundaries as necessary.
- Encourage participants to share their lives with each other during meetings.
- Guide the group in the adoption of a covenant.
- Communicate with your co-facilitator between meetings about the progress and health of the group.
- Attend Facilitators' Circle meetings as scheduled.
- Remain open to welcoming new members into your group
- Address issues and problems within the group as appropriate. Bring unresolved issues to the attention of your Facilitator's Circle.
- Communicate with the minister or pastoral care directly about issues involving the health or safety of group members

Responsibilities of Co-Facilitator

- Facilitates as determined: begins session if Facilitator is late.
- Attends Facilitator's Circles in the absence of the facilitator or as desired.
- Assists with coordination of service projects and social events.
- Consults with Facilitator between meetings on group concerns.
- Makes note of and follows up with absent members.
- Assists with time management during group sessions: starting and ending on time: summarizes and moves group along as necessary
- Assists in enforcement of the covenant, redirecting as necessary.
- Models active listening, concern and empathy
- Provides positive reinforcement
- Makes efforts to engage members who are not actively participating.
- Acts as scribe during covenant creation and as necessary.
- Makes note of process issues to be discussed with Facilitator between meetings: over or under participation, conflicts, tone of meeting and general health of group.

4. Planning and Leading the Meetings

Logistics - You and your group are ultimately in charge of your meeting schedule and location. Rooms will be scheduled for the calendar year, however it is the group leader's responsibility to contact Katrina in the church office regarding any changes. *If you are a seasonal group meeting at the fellowship, please let the office know when you will cease meeting in the spring and when you will resume meeting in the fall. Meetings usually last between one and one half and two hours.

Meeting Conflicts- It is UU Covenant Group Program Policy not to schedule meetings at times that conflict with Fellowship-wide events such as choir rehearsal or Emerson Center/Humanities events. Covenant group members should never have to choose between serving the Fellowship and attending their covenant group. When conflicts occur, meetings should be rescheduled rather than cancelled. Please contact the office whenever you need to reschedule a meeting. A current UU Calendar is available on the website.

Content - Session plans for the year are distributed by email to each Facilitator before January 1st. Back-up copies are available on the website and in the covenant group box in the office. Print copies are available by request.

Covenant –A covenant is a set of promises or agreements to live by at meetings and is a core element of covenant groups. It is a statement describing the relationship of the group members to each other and of the group to the fellowship. It keeps the guidelines out in the open, gives everyone equal footing, and helps prevent disruptive or disrespectful behaviors that diminish the feeling of safety within the group.

Covenanting Process – A Covenant will be created by each new group during the first meeting. For the next meeting, type the covenant and make copies for everyone. Established groups review, revise and renew their covenant each January. All members should receive typed copies by February. Review the covenant as least every 6 months and whenever a new member joins the group.

Confidentiality – Confidentiality comprises mindfulness and sensitivity to information shared in one’s small group and an agreement to engage in “respectful sharing” which avoids repeating heart-felt comments outside the group. The level of confidentiality is decided in the process of creating the covenant, but members should be advised that when in doubt, consider the sharing to be confidential.

Communication – You will be given a list of all the members of your group in early December. Before the first of the year and well before the first meeting, call each member, welcoming him or her to the Group. Provide the new member with copy of the Participant’s Guide and your contact information by email. Advise each person of the meeting day, time, and place and make sure they have directions if you are meeting outside the Fellowship. After requesting permission from group members copy and share the complete membership list for your group. Please provide a monthly reminder to all members approximately a week before meetings.

Meeting Place – The room should be comfortable, with chairs drawn into a circle if possible. Some groups enjoy sitting around a table while to others a table can seem like a barrier. Your group can decide whether to meet in members’ homes or at the Fellowship. Some feel that sharing homes deepens the intimacy among members. The smaller Olympia Brown Room is often desired for its more intimate setting than the Library.

Meeting Format – Each meeting includes time for both relationship building (check-in & check-out) and spiritual deepening (centering and topic discussion); each part serves a particular purpose.

- **Opening:** Welcome and reading from the session plan or from the hymnal or other UU source including the ritual of lighting the chalice. The opening serves as a transition from the busy world into sacred space.
- **Check-in:** Taking turns around the circle, each person shares, uninterrupted, something of recent spiritual or personal significance from

- their life. This may be a joy or concern, a spiritual experience, a milestone, or a life transition. Check-in serves to connect members to each other. It's all right to pass.
- **Opening Readings, Topic Exploration, and Questions/Sharing:** Our sessions are designed to elicit reflection and help focus dialogue. The emphasis is on sharing personal experiences rather than debating or relating something read in a publication.
 - **Check-out and Reflections:** Near the end of each meeting, each person briefly states their impression of the session, what they will take home from the meeting, and/or what they are feeling as the meeting draws to a close. This is also a good time to express the positive emotions that another member's sharing evoked in you as well as your thoughts about how to improve our sessions.
 - **Closing:** We employ both a closing reading and the ritual of extinguishing the chalice to bring the meeting to an end.

Modeling the format – At the first and second meetings, model the desired response by being the first person to speak. At check-in, speak for 2 or 3 minutes and share a significant experience. When you have finished speaking, turn to the person beside you and say their name, indicating that it's their turn to speak. Helpful lead-ins to the group are: "What is most on your mind today?" "What do you need to share to be fully present to the group?" "Share something that has happened to you since we last met that is significant to you," or "How is your spirit today." Your group is free to decide on the prompt that works best for them.

Model deep listening for the group; that is, listening without interrupting and without the intent to respond. For at least the first meeting, be the first to answer after asking the first discussion question. Use "I" statements and relate personal experience and feelings. After sharing, be silent and wait for another person to speak.

After the second meeting, maintain silence after asking each question. Allow the group time to process and reflect on how the questions relate to their lives. Model speaking to the entire group and making eye contact with each person.

Encourage group members to do the same, rather than look at and speak only to the Facilitator.

Service- A group service project enhances group cohesion and is a central tenant of the Covenant Group program. It is highly recommended that all groups plan at least one Fellowship or community-based service project during the year. Please begin discussing possibilities by your second meeting. Previous service projects have included cleaning up fellowship grounds, planning a potluck, and participating in a community-wide soup kitchen. Several groups have also volunteered to make coffee for a month.

5. Providing Continued Leadership

The word Facilitator means “to make easy.” The Facilitator’s role is to make it easy and comfortable for group members to express themselves and talk about their experiences, hopes, dreams, and shortcomings with the expectation of being heard and without fear of judgment. Your major responsibilities are to maintain a sound group, ensure equal participation, uphold the group covenant, manage the group’s energy with the hope of achieving synergy, and help the group explore spiritual dimensions.

The Facilitator often must straddle 3 roles: group leader, process observer, and group member. As it is not always easy to keep the 3 roles in balance, co-facilitators are often asked to step into the role of process observer in an effort to keep the group moving and on track. As much as possible, try to maintain your identity as a group member—it’s your Covenant Group too!

Keep the Group in Focus – It may be necessary to remind the group from time to time that the purpose of covenant groups is spiritual growth and that the group is part of the overall ministry of the Fellowship rather than an independent entity. It is the Facilitator’s responsibility to remind members to try and speak from personal experience. Theoretical, third person discussions can sabotage the meeting, taking it far from its intended purpose of spiritual growth and shared ministry. If your group has this problem, you might start the next meeting by reading the covenant or reviewing the purpose of Covenant Groups or you could use a directed check-in, such as “Please share one thing of personal significance that has happened to you since we last met.” Most Facilitators recognize the importance of steering the group back on topic, but it is actually just as important to steer it back to purpose, consider using phrases like, “that’s really interesting, but how does it relate to your personal experience?”

Be Flexible – Personal sharing is the objective of the topic discussion segment. There will be times, however, when a serious event is on everyone’s mind. Part of your ministry as Facilitator is to decide when to make a change in the usual format. At such a time the session can be devoted to the news story and the planned topic delayed until the next meeting. Make sure that participants are sharing their own feelings and not lapsing into political speeches or criticism. Alternatively, offer a moment of silence or meditation to acknowledge the event and/or give the group an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings before continuing with the planned topic.

Set Healthy Boundaries – Occasionally there may be discussions of topics or sharing of events that feel unhealthy, unsafe, or just make you feel uncomfortable. You are authorized, as the Facilitator, to set boundaries within the group, and to set norms for a safe space. Even though they may meet in members’ homes, Covenant Groups are a fellowship program.

For example, the Facilitator would limit (take time out; interrupt politely) a comment or joke that “sexualizes” the atmosphere. Descriptive accounts of sexual behavior are inappropriate discussions in a Covenant Groups just as they would be in the workplace.

Consider another example: Though difficult for the group members and the Leaders, a person revealing that she/he was sexually abused in the past is within the scope of the Small Group Ministry model. Revelation of abuse that is currently ongoing can be acknowledged and handled outside the group session through discussion with the minister.

Remember that “boundary-crossing” can occur when a participant tries to use the meeting as a therapy session or desperately needs professional psychological counseling. The most general advice is to use your judgment and listen to your instincts. **You are a Leader, not just a meeting Facilitator.** If you need to discuss healthy boundaries, a sensitive issue, or a particularly troubled participant who needs professional help, contact the minister, the Covenant Group Chair, or share the issue at a Facilitators Meeting, as appropriate.

Communication Between Meetings – Contact all group members several days before each meeting. This message should include the day, time, and place of the meeting, as well as an electronic copy of the session topic. Email works fine for those who have it; otherwise make a phone call. Also, one of the facilitators needs to follow up on members who are ill as well as members who did not give notice of their absence.

Group Responsibility – In the beginning, the Leader(s) are totally responsible for seeing that the group gets a good, healthy start. They serve as Facilitators during check-in and discussion. While one member checks in, all other members should listen respectfully, though clarifying questions may **occasionally** be in order. The Leaders should make sure that everyone is participating, following the ground rules and covenant, and that members are sharing only from personal experience rather than intellectualizing the topic.

If the group is functioning as intended, it tends to take responsibility for itself by the 6th meeting with more people helping to get full participation, keeping the group on track, etc. Facilitation becomes more relaxed when the group itself helps to ensure the meetings’ success.

After the first few sessions, your group members may wish to share facilitation duties. The Facilitator for the next meeting can be chosen when the meeting logistics are discussed. Group members should take turns doing the readings and lighting the chalice. This is known as “shared leadership” and it creates a feeling of ownership and belonging within the group.

Shared Responsibility – In some of our Covenant Groups the Co-Facilitators alternate responsibility for facilitating sessions. Each Leader will have a different style, even though they use the standard format, and this difference adds an element of vitality to meetings. The Co-facilitator who is not leading can help to remember details (like meeting logistics) and provide feedback and support during and after the meeting. Co-facilitators often meet or speak by telephone between meetings to discuss issues that arose at the last meeting or a need to follow up with a group member.

Mentoring – Expansion and growth through welcoming new members is one of the covenants of our program. It is important for each Facilitator to identify a group member to be an apprentice who will eventually leave and “birth” a new group. The current Facilitator mentors the apprentice, giving him/her opportunities to be the facilitator of the group. The Apprentice will receive additional training from the program leaders before starting a new group.

Meeting Frequency – After the first meeting, Covenant Groups meet monthly on their own schedule. Groups may choose to meet more frequently. Most of our seasonal groups meet twice monthly. Knowing in advance allows group members to anticipate meetings; they can enter “CG” on their calendars and schedule other meetings, appointments and activities around it, not visa versa. It is important to stress with your groups that Covenant Groups are not social engagements that can be skipped when inconvenient, but rather commitments that deserve priority.

Length of Commitment – Our groups are either one year in duration or an abbreviated year for partial-year residents. Commitments run from January 1 of one year until January 1st of the next. Year round groups meet at least once a month. Seasonal groups meet once or twice a month for various time periods, perhaps January through April then again in October through December. The time period is agreed upon by participants. No matter what the duration, we ask that members commit to the assigned group for the calendar year. It is important to stress with group members that Covenant Groups are not like social engagements that can be skipped when inconvenient, but rather commitments that deserve priority. Make members aware that, in the fall of every year there is an open enrollment for the Covenant Group Program where members may choose to recommit to their current group, move to a new group, or leave the program entirely. Seasonal groups are usually asked to register in late spring for next year’s groups.

Informal Meetings – Groups may occasionally wish to meet for a purely social gathering, which is determined by the participants.

Group Changes – Work with the membership and Recruitment Chair when membership changes occur or are needed within your group. Also, please inform

the Team and the church office if there is a change in your meeting time or place so that room reservations can be assured.

Adding Members – Welcoming new members is an essential element of the Covenant Groups program. Our symbol of openness is the empty chair, inviting others who have not yet had the small group ministry experience to join us. People can register throughout the year to be in a group and sign-up forms are always available in the Covenant Group message box in the office. It is UU Covenant Group Policy to work with Facilitators on determining at the best time to add new members to an ongoing group. Please keep the Membership Team informed about any openings that occur in your group during the year. A side benefit to adding new members is often a positive change in the group dynamic, a current of energy and vitality with the mix of new personalities.

Welcoming New Members - For successful integration of new members, prepare both the group and the new members. Discuss with the Chair an optimal date for the new member to join the group. Before that meeting, email or call your current members to tell them about the new member and explain the welcoming ritual you will use (included in this packet). Next, call or meet with the new members to discuss the nature of a Covenant Group, the meeting format, commitment to the group, and the group covenant. Please also provide them with a copy of the current Participant's Guide and group covenant. You will review the covenant jointly during the new member's first session.

It is crucial to the new members' sense of belonging to know what to expect and to understand all the "rules," both explicit and implicit. Your group may have been together for many months; the new person will invariably feel like an outsider for a while. You can alleviate or shorten this awkward period by taking the time to let the group and the new member get to know each other and bond in a meaningful way. (See #13 New Member Welcoming Rituals).

Losing Members – Some people drop out of a Covenant Group because they become less involved with the fellowship. Others discover they just don't enjoy the small group experience. Please try not to feel discouraged when someone decides to leave your group: It almost never has anything to do with the Facilitator. If an individual misses several meetings without explanation, ask (in person, if possible, but at least by phone) if she/he still wants to be part of the group. Suggest that the best way for a member to leave is to come to a meeting and explain in person why they are leaving. The next best method is for the member to send an explanation in writing to the Facilitator to be read at the group's next meeting.

When a Member Dies -- Losing a group member to death is often unexpected. At the same time, they are mourning a loss, Facilitators and members face questions such as: How do we help? How will we manage our meeting when all anyone can think about is our loss? The experiences of various covenant groups

over the past years have allowed a tradition to emerge which can now be offered as a guide. When a member dies, please contact Reverend Alexander Pastoral Care to find out how you can help. In the past, covenant groups have taken charge of refreshments for the memorial service and it is recommended that this tradition continue. As to meetings, there are several choices. A group may, of course, continue with the scheduled topic after an expanded check-in which includes time for each member to share thoughts about the member who has died. There are also specific sessions designed for dealing with the death of a member, several of which are available on the Leadership Page of the website. Of course, the group is free to choose its own way to memorialize the lost member.

Problems – Problems with members or special situations can be discussed with the Program Chair, who will help to resolve the problem along with other members of the Membership Team. A general statement of the problem can be brought to the Facilitators Meeting for discussion. It is occasionally necessary to seek the Minister’s counsel for a particularly difficult situation. You will be guided by your Membership Team in deciding when to go to the minister.

6. Covenant Groups Are Part of the UU Fellowship

Facilitators’ Meetings – Facilitators meet as a group six times yearly. Attendance at these meetings is vital to the health of the program. Meetings give Facilitators the chance to share what is going on in their groups and to receive feedback from their peers. It is important that at least one of the group’s Facilitators (or representative) attend. The meeting uses a format similar to that of Covenant Groups. The agenda includes personal and group check-in, announcements, group status and issues, problem-solving and a discussion of a topic relevant to covenant groups. You will receive a reminder before each meeting. Facilitator’s circles are scheduled for February 5th, March 5th, April 2nd, June 4th, October 1st, and December 3rd of 2019. Note this year we have changed our schedule slightly to allow seasonal members more opportunity to attend.

Share Information about pastoral care issues with the Minister, Pastoral Care Director or Program Chair. This allows us to observe such issues as a community and to send cards or visitors to the sick.

Change of Leadership – Among the many benefits of the Covenant Groups program is the opportunity for group members to grow and evolve into leaders. Look for emerging leadership among your group members and consult with the Program Chair about a member advancing to the Facilitator position. The new Facilitator will attend Covenant Group Facilitator Training before becoming a Leader. Facilitator Training sessions are scheduled for early January or as needed.

Criteria for Covenant Group Facilitators – When considering a group member for the Facilitator’s role, look for the following characteristics:

- 1) A good listener
- 2) Willingness and ability to implement the Covenant Group model
- 3) Emotional and physical health
- 4) A non-anxious presence
- 5) A positive regard for others
- 6) A commitment to the Fellowship as evidenced by regular attendance at Sunday services and active participation in church life
- 7) Willingness to learn and accept direction
- 8) Interpersonal and communication skills
- 9) A sense of humor

7. Frequently Asked Questions

What if a member of my Covenant Group needs special help?

Fellow group members may provide assistance as a way to connect with each other. In a healthy group the members will want to help if they can and will organize the help. When everyone pitches in, helping can feel like a joy, not a burden. Referral to the minister or Pastoral Care committee may be necessary when the individual’s need specialized care or the nature and level of care are more than the group can provide. Covenant Groups are not therapy groups and are unqualified to deal with serious mental health or emotional issues.

What if a Covenant Group member needs help with personal, work, or relationship problems?

In most cases, these should be brought to the minister’s attention.

How will the meetings feel?

In the beginning people will be a little anxious about the group - whether they will like it, whether it will work - and they will be getting to know you and each other. The first few meetings may be a bit stressful for you. However, as the group becomes accustomed to the format and to each other and starts to benefit from the sharing and new relationships, they will become more relaxed and comfortable. This is a natural process in the group’s development.

What if no one speaks after a topic question is asked?

Many groups purposely allow one minute or more of silence after each question is read. Silence is OK; it means the group is taking the opportunity to reflect on their experiences related to the question. Learn to welcome and be comfortable with the silence; it is a gift to each other, a sacred space in time. The group will respond when they are ready. Observe when people start looking up, a cue that they’re ready to move on. Also allow time between responses for everyone to reflect on what the last person said.

Why is listening so important?

Respectful listening—listening to understand, not to respond or to judge—will be a new concept for some group members and may take some practice. Having others just listen rarely happens in our busy world. The experience is affirming and builds trust among group members. It creates the safe space in which members can tell their stories.

What if a member doesn't like the idea of a relational group?

When this happens, it means that the individual is not a good fit for the Covenant Group Program. This is okay and does not reflect on either the program or the facilitator. Suggest other group settings that may be a better match.

What about social events outside of group meetings?

Some groups meet socially in addition to Covenant Group meetings. Such get-togethers are not necessary or essential to the groups' mission, but can provide an enjoyable and different way of being together if everyone is in agreement with the event. There is the risk, however, that some participants may feel that the original agreement of one meeting per month has not been honored by the group.

What if check-in takes up the entire time allotted for the meeting?

Occasionally a group member has important and pressing things to share and it takes longer than usual. In this case the facilitator should be sensitive to the member's need to speak and flexible enough to let his/her sharing time run its course. If this becomes the norm rather than the exception, however, the other members will become uncomfortable with the unequal use of meeting time.

One solution is to agree to an approximate time limit, such as 2 or 3 minutes for each person to check in, and to make it part of your covenant. Some groups choose to use an egg timer, or to pass a stone or talking stick to the next speaker after 2-3 minutes. (A talking stick is a tool used in many Native American Traditions during council meetings so that all can be heard. It is passed from one speaker to the next; only the person holding the stick is allowed to talk at that time.

What are some non-verbal signs I can give to show 1) that I'm listening? 2) That it's time to move on? 3) That we'd like to hear from those who haven't spoken yet?

- 1) Lean slightly forward with light eye contact.
- 2) Lean back and look at the session plan.
- 3) Turn towards the person and ask gently if there is anything they'd like to share. Passing is an option.

What are some body language signs to be aware of?

Tight fists may suggest anger. Lack of eye-contact and non-participation may

suggest preoccupation. A bored look or arms across one's chest may indicate non-engagement or defensiveness. You can check in with the person, asking gently if there is anything they need to share or let go of to be fully present in the group.

What if a member of the group looks at his watch? Checks her cell phone?

Again, it could be a sign of pre-occupation with an outside event or lack of engagement with the topic. Checking in with the person or asking how a particular question relates to his/her life may allow the person to re-connect with the group. We highly recommend that cell phones be turned off for the meeting. You might want to include this in your group covenant.

What should the Facilitator do after a participant shares a particularly sad or emotional part of their lives at check-in?

The Facilitator can ask for a moment of silence before the next person checks in.

What should the Facilitator do when the discussion becomes argumentative or abstract?

In either case the Facilitator can remind the group of their purpose for meeting and refer to the covenant to which everyone has agreed. Also, UU's have been known to over intellectualize. A Facilitator might ask, "how does that relate to your life and your feelings?" or say, "Let's bring the discussion back to the personal."

What if my group wants to change the format? For example, what if some group members want to substitute social activities or another common interest for the discussion of a topic related to participants' lives?

When the Covenant Group model is challenged, the Facilitator needs to go back to basics. He or she may review the covenant and reiterate the purpose of Covenant Groups and the function of the topic discussion format. The Facilitator may further suggest that the group explore the social activity or common interest outside the meeting time as an additional bonding experience.

What if a member of my group criticizes the minister or a staff member or makes a derogatory comment about how things are being done at the fellowship?

While expressing concern for the fellowship can be okay if it is done within a context of love and respect for our church family, any discussion that disparages either individuals or the Fellowship as a whole needs to be shut down by the Facilitator. The Facilitator can say that this is not the appropriate place for any discussion that disparages the fellowship or its members. If this becomes a problem, review the group covenant and purpose for meeting.

What if a group member gossips about a fellow church member and other group members join in?

The Facilitator can say, “Let’s bring our focus back to the session plan/ we’re on the second question.”

What if one person monopolizes the discussion?

The Facilitator can remind members of the promise to honor everyone in the group by hearing what each person has to say. Another strategy is to gently break in, thank the speaker, and ask what others have to say about the discussion question. If your group was thoughtful enough to include a mention in the covenant about time sharing, it would be especially important to review your covenant at the next meeting. A co-facilitator acting in the role of process observer can be of great help during these instances.

What if a member of my group talks about what they’ve heard or read?

What if a participant talks about an experience of someone they know?

The Facilitator can ask, “How does that relate to you?” or “How is this situation affecting you?” Or, “How does that relate to the ideas that others have shared?”

8. Verbal Cues for Creating a Group Covenant

A list of verbal cues can be used as a tool in the development of an initial covenant. Such a list can also be used for a group to see if there is anything they wish to add to their existing covenant. All covenants should include a promise to complete one service project during the year.

Asking direct questions will often elicit discussion that leads to the formation of a covenant. What do you want this group to look like? Feel like? I want it to be a place where.....

You may also use the list below to provoke suggestions.

Listen respectfully & deeply	Attendance & Commitment
Start & end on time	Non-judgmental reminders
RSVP (regrets only)	No interruption
Tolerance & understanding	No advice or “fixing”
Trust	No attacking or criticism
Acceptance	Humor without sarcasm
One person speaks at a time	Stay on topic, follow format
Group time shared equitably	Don’t monopolize
Honesty	Share leadership
Transparency	No side conversations
Respect	Speak from personal experience
Confidentiality	Use “I” statements
Silence is OK	Passing is OK

9. Sample Covenants

We agree to provide a safe place for expressing spirituality, considering religious questions, and growing spiritually. We offer support, encouragement, concern, respect, acceptance and a sense of humor.

We commit to the group for one year and will give attendance a very high priority in our lives. If a member needs to leave the group, he or she should say goodbye to the group at a regular meeting, in person, if possible.

One person speaks at a time. We will share check-in and discussion time. No one speaks a second time until everyone has had a chance to speak.

We will listen attentively to each other, putting our own thoughts aside. During check-in, we will allow each person to speak without “cross talk” with the possible exception of a simple factual question. During check-in, we will share something of personal significance.

Members will respect confidentiality within the group.

We will assume good intentions of other group members. Sharing and group interactions will be in accord with the Unitarian Universalist Principles.

We will not attack people or groups in our meetings. It is OK to say how the person or group makes us feel.

We will work together with the Pastoral Care Committee and the minister, still providing whatever direct assistance we can to group members in need.

We will use non-judgmental reminders to assist with group process such as, “Are we wandering?” and “Let’s move on?”

We will plan at least one group service project per year to either the fellowship or to the community.

or

We each have the right to pass

What is shared here, stays here

We will share time equally

We will be attentive listeners and not interrupt each other

We will not use this group as a therapy session

We will respect diversity and value our differences

We will remain quiet until all have finished their reflection guides

We will value all questions

We will start and end on time
 Anyone is free to take a time out from any of the exercises

or

We will listen from the heart.
 We will speak personally, using "I" statements.
 We will speak honestly from the heart.
 We will not engage in cross talk.
 We will try not to judge others by what they say.
 We will allow space for everyone who wishes to speak.
 We will be brief.
 We will respect the confidentiality of what is shared here
 We will listen from the heart.

or

I will listen with my heart
 I will try to speak from my heart.
 I have the right to pass.
 What is shared here, stays here. I will respect confidentiality.
 I will not treat this as group therapy, although our time here may well be therapeutic.
 I will not interrupt. I will not give unasked-for advice.
 I will share our time together. I will allow space for everyone who wishes to speak.
 I will not treat others people's problems lightly.
 I will honor the diversity of thought and feeling among us.
 I will honor the times for reflection with quietness together
 I will speak from my heart.
 I have the right to pass.
 I will listen with my heart.

or

We will listen from the heart.
 We will speak honestly from the heart.
 We will respect the confidentiality of what is shared here.
 We will not interrupt.
 We will not give unasked-for advice.
 We will not judge others by what they say.
 We will not treat others people's problems lightly.
 We will honor the diversity of thoughts and feelings.

We will honor the times for reflection with quietness.
 We will honor and respect our time together.

10. Welcoming Covenant Group Members

To a new group

Before the first meeting:

- Contact and welcome each member in person or by phone
- Briefly explain the meeting format
- Give meeting day & time
- Answer questions
- Provide copy of Participant's Guide

At the first meeting:

- Create a comfortable meeting space; have a chalice/candle & matches
- Review guidelines; introduce covenant concept
- Explain format as you go along; model desired responses
- Be first to check-in; share significant experience in 2-3 minutes as example
- Model "I" statements, deep listening, and sharing the time
- Decide on a meeting time & place that works for all - if in the UU building be sure to reserve the space through the office
- Provide members list

Follow-up to ascertain how the first meeting went for everyone

To an existing group

Before the first meeting:

- Send an email reminder to existing group
- Give meeting day & time
- Call to welcome new member(s), explain meeting format and covenant
- Prepare the current group for new members; plan a welcoming ritual (list attached)
- Answer questions
- Provide all with Participant's Guide, copy of Group Covenant, and updated member list
- Invite new member(s) to arrive early; make introductions

At the first meeting:

- Review covenant; make changes/additions at next meeting as desired
- Explain format as you go along; be first to speak; model desired responses and time use
- Allow new members to speak longer during check-in
- Include new members in shared leadership: invite them to do a reading, extinguish chalice, etc.

Follow-up with a phone call to ask how meeting went for new members.

11. New Member Welcoming Rituals

Any of these may be used in lieu of check-in

A. Exchange Mini-bios – From Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, Pennsylvania
Before the new member's first group meeting, ask each member, both current and new, to send you a short bio via email or mail. Include your own bio as an example of length and content. Prepare a compilation of all the bios and email or mail it to each person before the next meeting.

B. Bring a Treasured Object – Adapted from San Jose UU Church, California-
Before the new member's first group meeting, ask each member, both current and new, to bring one object that is precious to them to the next meeting. It may be an object they treasure, find meaning in, or would like to have people know about. It might be symbolic of some part of their life journey or give others some special insight about them. All the objects are placed on a table. During check-in, each person shares the story of their special object.

C. Share Religious Journeys -- During check-in of the new member's first group meeting, ask each person to share briefly their journey to Unitarian Universalism and to the UUFVB. They may also wish to include something about their family, work, hobbies, and church involvement. Model the content and length by being the first to speak. Allow the new members to take a little more time telling their stories.

D. Start with an Ice Breaker – Adapted from Willow Creek Community Church.
Before the session begins, ask a single question that each person will answer, going around the circle. Introduce your new members, then say "Tonight we'll begin a little differently. Let's have everyone answer this question."

Examples: *When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up; what did your parents want you to be? What was your first job; what do you remember most about it? What has been one of the greatest adventures you've ever been on?*

The advantages of ice breaker questions are: they break down barriers at the outset, give everyone the experience of speaking aloud in the group, let us know something unique about each person, and develop intimacy between group members. After the ice breaker, begin the session with the chalice lighting and opening reading as usual.

12. Do's and Don'ts for Covenant Group Facilitators

1. **Do** model commitment by letting your members know in advance when you will be unable to attend a meeting and arranging appropriate coverage for your absence.
2. **Do** let new members feel welcome by talking with them by phone or in person prior to their first meeting.
3. **Do** give all enrollees a copy of "Participant's Guide to Covenant Groups," and copy of your group's covenant or a sample covenant. **Do** work on developing a covenant the first two meetings if yours is a new group and remember to review and update the covenant for an existing group in January of each year. Covenants are living documents and call for renewal whenever a new member joins the group or problems develop.
4. **Do** send a reminder by e-mail of meeting date and time as well as a copy of the discussion guide approximately one week before your meeting. Please call those who prefer not to use e-mail.
4. **Do** follow-up when members are absent from group.
5. **Do** follow the meeting format and address the topic designated for each month but give flexibility to the group relative to the focus of their discussion and be willing to change the focus when needed.
6. **Do not** feel you have to answer every question (or even read every reading) in a session plan to have a successful meeting. Covenant group meetings are process rather than task oriented. **Don't** ask yourself what was accomplished, but rather what was shared and experienced.
7. **Do** make attendance at Facilitator's Circle a personal priority and come prepared to talk about your group's successes and concerns.
8. **Do not** forget safety at evening meetings. Leave no one alone in the building or the parking lot.
9. **Do not** feel guilty about reporting pastoral concerns to the minister. Scott will help you determine the proper role for your group and assist with follow-up when needed.
10. **Do** assist your group to plan a service project. Bonding increases when groups work together.

13. Suggested Guidelines for Covenant Groups

Focus on Spiritual Development - A covenant group is a small group that meets monthly to participate in *small group ministry*. The intent is to grow and appreciate the spiritual journey that is fundamental to our lives. The vision is that members would share philosophic and spiritual topics, respect each other's' views, share life experiences, have fun, and serve the Fellowship.

Making "I" Statements - One person at a time speaks while the group listens. It is best to speak from the "I". There should be no interruptions and little feedback. The speaker stands alone with the truth of his/her own experience and we learn to look inside rather than outside ourselves for direction. Trust yourself enough to allow what is there to just emerge. It is all right to pass. Sometimes there is nothing to say or nothing to say yet. Be careful not to talk to please others.

Listening Without an Agenda - This sounds easy, but it isn't. It requires that we suspend our own inner dialogue and refrain from assessing what the other person is saying. It doesn't require agreement, disagreement, interpretations or solutions. We practice empathy and truly experience what the speaker's world is like when they are speaking and the rest of the group is *actively and attentively listening*. It means focusing on the present moment, without thinking about what you will say when it is your turn, or how you can "help" the speaker.

Rotating Leadership - This practice allows each member to take the group in their own direction when their turn comes. It encourages members to step out of the roles we usually take and learn to expand in other ways. The shy can stretch to reveal themselves. The talkative can learn patience. It allows us to share investment and ownership in the group equally. Decisions are usually made by consensus rather than by a vote.

Confidentiality - The degree of individual growth that occurs in a group is dependent upon how much intimacy develops. That intimacy, in turn, depends on trust. People must know that what they say in the group will not be repeated outside the group. We can create a safe space where we feel comfortable sharing sensitive and fragile parts of ourselves.

Responsibility for One's Own Needs - Many of us are trained to be co-dependent. To get away from this, it is important that each member ask for what they need rather than expecting the group to know and respond appropriately in all situations. It is acceptable to decline to participate in an exercise or topic; the group does not have to change its plans to keep everyone happy at all times.

Commitment - The group sustains itself because each member comes every time. The group cannot sustain itself without this commitment: agreeing to be together and to make the group a priority. There is accountability to each other and to oneself to show up. You are essential to the group's existence!

NOTES