

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
of Vero Beach

**Covenant Groups Program  
Facilitator's Guide**



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**Facilitator's Guide  
2022**

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

Contains our Facilitator's Guide, Participant's Guide, monthly newsletters, and other documents and links of interest to Facilitators (No password needed):

[http://uufvb.org/learning-development/covenant\\_groups/](http://uufvb.org/learning-development/covenant_groups/)

Link to the Unitarian Universalist Association's Small Group Ministry Network:

[www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)

## 2. Introduction

Thank you for agreeing 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 2022, we have nearly 150 enrollees in 13 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), the national UU program including 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**

A “**covenant**” is a set of relational ground rules that creates a safe environment and enables a small group to build friendships and share spiritual exploration. Ground rules typically include time management, commitment, respectful listening, confidentiality, and speaking from one’s own experience (“I” statements).

Covenant Groups ideally contain 8-10 members and are led by trained lay-people. In many groups, two people share the Facilitator role. UUFVB offers two types of groups. Year-round groups meet once a month from January to December. Seasonal groups meet twice a month for four to six months. The number of meetings per month is at the discretion of the individual group. Part-year group facilitators work with group members to determine what topics will be discussed when. Meetings generally last one and one half to two hours.

Covenant Groups have historically met either at the Fellowship or in group members’ homes. In 2020, after the start of the pandemic, most groups switched to using ZOOM in place of in-person meetings. Both in-person and ZOOM meetings have proven to be successful ways to stay connected. Facilitators and participants decide what format to use each month.

Three important agreements or covenants between Covenant Groups and the Fellowship are:

- To abide by a set of relationship ground rule 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 groups or programs within the UU. In Covenant Groups, members abide by a group covenant, which outlines the nature of the relationship of members to one another. 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 Covenant Groups 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.

## **Characteristics of a Covenant Group**

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Our Covenant Groups program follows basic elements of Small Group Ministry, called the “**Model**.” Our Model is defined by:

- Lay-led groups of about 11 people
- Meeting 1x or 2x per month
- Meetings lasting 90-120 minutes
- Trained Facilitators
- Meeting Format
- Session Plan
- Group Covenant
- Sharing of personal experiences
- Respectful listening
- Service Projects
- Commitment to Program Growth
- Commitment to one full year
- Facilitators Circles

### 3. The Facilitator’s Role and Responsibilities

The word “**facilitation**” comes from the French meaning “making easy.” The Facilitator’s role, then, is to create and maintain an environment where sharing for all members is made “easy.” This complex role can be very rewarding and challenging at the same time. It is complex because the Facilitator must balance group leadership skills with personal sharing skills. Many Facilitators thus see their role as a contradiction. On the one hand, they must lead their group, while at the same time, they must be human and willing to share their own private lives. Some believe they must approach their group as if they were a block of wood, strictly interpreting their tasks and disclosing little of their private attitudes and beliefs. Others choose the opposite approach, allowing nearly free reign in sharing while adopting a transparent approach to group management. Successful Facilitators are able to balance both skill sets; they create a warm, accepting atmosphere where members feel free to share at a deep level and take an active part in going deeper in their own spiritual journey. They know when to assume both roles at the suitable time. As such, becoming an effective Facilitator takes time and practice.

Facilitators serve in these roles:

- Role model
- Group convener
- Covenant manager
- Covenant Group model manager (described below)
- Facilitator of group sharing
- Co-Facilitator
- Service project leader
- Facilitator's Circle member (see below)

The Facilitator's responsibilities are to:

- 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.
- Guide the group in the adoption of a covenant.
- 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.
- Communicate with your Co-Facilitator between meetings about the progress and health of the group.
- 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.
- Implement the Model described in this Guide.
- Attend Facilitators' Circle meetings as scheduled.
- 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.

The Co-Facilitator's responsibilities are to:

- Facilitate as determined: begins session if the Facilitator is late.
- Attend Facilitator's Circles in the absence of the Facilitator or as desired.
- Assist with coordination of service projects and social events.
- Consult with Facilitator between meetings on group concerns.
- Make note of and follows up with absent members.

- Assist with time management during group sessions: starting and ending on time: summarizes and moves group along as necessary.
- Assist in enforcement of the covenant, redirecting as necessary.
- Model active listening, concern and empathy.
- Provide positive reinforcement.
- Make efforts to engage members who are not actively participating.
- Act as scribe during covenant creation and as necessary.
- Make 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 Preparing Meetings

### Format of a Covenant Group Meeting:

1. **Chalice Lighting:** a symbol of UU gathering, lighting the Chalice signifies the time for all participants to focus on the sanctity of the meeting.
2. **Check-in:** Taking turns around the circle, each person shares, uninterrupted, something of a recent spiritual or personal experience 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 OK to pass.
3. **Opening Reading:** The Opening Reading is designed to focus people's attention, to start them thinking about the topic, and to elicit an initial reaction to it.
4. **Topic Exploration:** A deeper dive into the topic, this section is designed to elicit one's own attitudes, feelings, values, and reflections about the topic. The emphasis is on sharing personal experiences rather than debating or relating something read in a publication.
5. **Questions/Sharing:** Questions focus the participant's attention on how their attitudes, feelings, and values affect how they choose to act on their beliefs.
6. **Closing Reading:** The purpose of this section is to leave the member with a thought to carry with them about the topic for further consideration.
7. **Check-out and reflections on today's session:** Near the end of the meeting, each person is asked to briefly state 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.
8. **Extinguishing the Chalice:** This act signifies the end of the meeting.
9. **Housekeeping** – Group decisions about the logistics of the next meeting.

### Planning for a New Group:

If you are starting a new group that has not met before, you will need to:

1. Get the most recent Membership List for your group from the Covenant Groups Membership Chair in December.
2. Contact each member before your first meeting. Welcome them and ask about their previous experiences as a UU and with Covenant Groups.
3. Orient them as needed to our program and your group. Orientations should include:
  - a. What a Covenant Group is
  - b. How it works
  - c. How it is different from other groups (like a Book Club)
  - d. Day/Time/Location of your group
  - e. Structure: ZOOM/In-person/Hybrid
  - f. Answering any questions they might have
4. Make a plan to attend with them.
  - a. How will they receive a link if ZOOMing
  - b. How will they get a paper copy (from you) if in-person
  - c. Confirm their ability to attend
  - d. Identify/Resolve barriers (like how to ZOOM)
5. Connect with our UUFVB Administrator; that your desired meeting day, time and location are available. Provide:
  - a. Your name
  - b. Your group name, day, time of meeting
  - c. Structure: ZOOM, In-person, or hybrid
  - d. Need for a link to be set up
  - e. Need for space in the building

### **Planning for an Existing Group:**

If you are continuing with a group that has met before, you will need to:

1. Get the most recent Membership List for your group from the Membership Chair in December.
2. Contact each member before your first meeting to confirm their attendance. (Some may have changed groups or left.)
3. Contact any new members to your group and orient them as described above.
4. Reconnect with our Administrator to assure ongoing ZOOM linking or room booking as needed.

### **Preparing for Meetings:**

1. Get the link if needed from our Administrator.
2. Get the Session Plan for the month from the webpage. Go to the UUFVB homepage; click on "Connect"; "Covenant Groups," (no password needed), and then scroll down to the appropriate month.
3. Forward the link and the Plan to your whole group or make copies for your in-person group.
4. Just before the meeting, prepare the room. Set up ZOOM if used. Get out a Chalice and matches.
5. Decide your own procedure for reading the Session Plan.

## **5. Leading Meetings**

### **Convening the Meeting:**

1. Welcome all and introduce any new members.
2. Confirm ZOOM connections as needed. Turn on Captioning if needed.
3. Confirm who has copies of the Plan.

### **Facilitating the Meeting:**

4. Introduce (Read) the name of the Session **Topic**.
5. Read the Chalice Lighting together as a group as you light the Chalice.
6. **Opening Reading:**
  - a. Briefly describe (in 1 sentence) your preference for who reads this section. Preferences might include:
    - 1) You read the entire section.
    - 2) You go around the circle with each member reading one part.
    - 3) You ask for volunteers to read parts or the whole.
  - b. Read the section
  - c. You may ask for reflections at this point or go on to the Topic Exploration.
7. **Topic Exploration:** use the same procedure for the **Opening Reading**.
8. **Questions/Sharing:** Using the same procedure, the Facilitator allows for individual sharing of personal experiences to the Questions. Facilitators choose how they want to do this. Some possibilities follow.
  - a. The Facilitator reads one question at a time in order, stopping for reflections after each Question.

- b. Members trade off reading each Question, stopping for reflections before changing to a new reader. When there is no given order, this is called “popcorn style.”
- c. The Facilitator or various members read a Question that is particularly meaningful to them regardless of numbered order in the Plan.
- d. The Facilitator or member reads the entire list of all Questions before pausing for reflections.
- e. After Questions/reflections have been offered, it’s a good idea to ask one final time for any further thoughts before Closing.

9. **Closing Reading:** The Facilitator or a member reads it, thus bringing closure to sharing time. The remaining time should be spent on offering impressions of the session itself and Housekeeping.

10. **Check-out/Reflections:** Here, the Facilitator asks members to express their thoughts and feelings about how today’s meeting went.

11. **Extinguishing the Chalice:** Usually the Facilitator does this, but may ask for a volunteer.

12. **Housekeeping:** This is the time for announcements, group changes, meeting changes, discussion of a Service Project, or other logistics issue.

## 6. Suggestions for Facilitators (listed in alphabetical order)

1. **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.
2. **Boundary Setting:** 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 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.

3. **Commitment:** UUFVB Covenant Groups run from January 1<sup>st</sup> until December 31<sup>st</sup>. We ask that members commit to their 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 period 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.

4. **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 a 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.
5. **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.

6. **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.
7. **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. Revisit it every 4-6 months with your group.
8. **Developing Future Facilitators:** 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.

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
9. **Extra-Care Needed Members:** Our Covenant Group program is open to all UUFVB members who are in agreement with our purpose, format, and covenant. Most group difficulties can be prevented or solved by abiding by a covenant that has been created by your group. However, a Covenant Group may be a challenge to some people and may not be appropriate for everyone. Some people need extra grace from the Facilitator and fellow group members.

There are generally three situations where "extra-care" is needed:

- a. People for whom listening and sharing in a group is difficult.
- b. People who continually challenge the Model itself, suggesting a change, for example, to a book discussion or a movie review group.
- c. People who challenge the boundaries with sexualized, racist, or homophobic comments.

Placement of the member with extra-care needs requires discernment and a skilled Facilitator, one who can carry out the ministry objectives, implement our Model and the group covenant, and one who is willing to welcome this new member to the group.

It is wise to remember that Covenant Groups are not collections of socially adept, perfectly compatible people. Keep in mind our purposes: spiritual growth, meaningful relationships, and sharing of personal experiences. An “extra-care needed” member benefits the group by challenging us to become our best selves: respectful listeners, patient and understanding, and appreciative of diversity.

Dismissal of a group member is rarely necessary unless the group’s health and well-being are threatened. When the Facilitator concludes that the problem cannot be solved within the group, consulting with the chair(s) of the Covenant Groups Steering Committee is the next step. Alternative activities should be suggested so that the person does not feel abandoned. There may be other groups and activities for which the member with extra-care needs may be suited. Concern may also be confidentially shared with the fellowship's minister for additional insight and support.

**10. Facilitators Circles:** Facilitators meet as a group four times a year either via ZOOM or at the building when it is safe. Attendance at these meetings is vital to the health of the program. Meeting content is guided by input from Facilitators. Meetings give Facilitators the chance to share what is going on in their groups and to receive feedback from their peers. It is crucial that at least one of the group’s Facilitators or a designated group member attend. You will receive a reminder, the agenda and, if needed, a ZOOM link before each meeting.

**11. Flexibility:** 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.

**12. 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?"

13. **Group Responsibility:** In the beginning, the Facilitator is totally responsible for seeing that the group gets a good, healthy start. 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 meeting's success.

14. **"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.

15. **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.

16. **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.

17. **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.
18. **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.
19. **Members Who Have Died:** Losing a group member to death is often unexpected. At the same time that 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 our Pastoral Care team 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.
20. **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.

21. **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 Circle 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.
22. **Role:** 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!
23. **Service Projects:** 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.

Here are a few suggestions:

Greet at Sunday Services  
 Be responsible for Coffee Hour  
 Help Kristie clean up after a Fellowship event  
 Weed, mulch, or tend the garden  
 Copy, fold, and add insets to an Order of Service  
 Provide a worship service  
 Donate a service to the Auction  
 Greet/Pass out pamphlets at an Emerson event  
 Sponsor a movie for Social Justice  
 Help put on a New Member reception or memorial service  
 Put on a fundraiser or food drive for the Fellowship, Social Justice, or local Not-for-profits like the Food Pantry or United Against Poverty  
 Help provide meals through our Transitional Meals Program  
 Collect children's and young adult books for the Little Free Library  
 Volunteer at the Fair Trade Corner  
 Work with committees to reestablish social events like Circle Dinners  
 Volunteer at a homeless shelter or senior center  
 Call blood-drive donors for Red Cross  
 Register voters or be poll-watchers  
 Volunteer with a literacy program

**24. Share the Session:** Some Facilitators may wish to delegate the responsibility for leading the sharing during a specific session to other group members we call Session Leaders. A Session Leader assumes temporary responsibility for sharing during that meeting, while the Facilitator retains their normal Facilitator responsibilities. This practice encourages members to step out of the roles they usually take and learn to expand in other ways. It allows us to share investment and ownership in the group equally. Meanwhile, the Facilitator continues to monitor the group as usual. A Session Leader assumes these responsibilities:

- Light and extinguish the Chalice
- Assure that every member has either checked in or passed
- Request members to read parts of the Session Plan
- May ask questions to others to go deeper in their sharing
- Lead a discussion about service projects
- Attend to housekeeping details

**25. Social Meetings:** Groups may occasionally wish to meet for a purely social gathering outside of the normal Covenant Group meeting. Facilitators should remain aware of when their group may be ready for this discussion, such as after repeated overly long Check-Ins.

**26. 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. 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. Here are a few 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.

## 7. The Process of Covenanting

A Covenant will be created by each new group during the first meeting. For the second 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. The process the Facilitator uses to create this important document follows these steps:

1. Prior to the covenanting meeting, the Facilitator should review and make a few copies of the “Sample Covenants” in Section 8 of this Guide. Bring these copies to your meeting.
2. At the meeting, introduce (or review) what a covenant is and remind members that the purpose of a covenant is to create a safe environment for sharing by group consensus about how you would all like to be treated.
3. Asking direct questions will often elicit discussion that leads to the formation of a covenant, such as: What do you want this group to look like? Feel like? Respected? Heard? Valued? “I want it to be a place where....” This part of the meeting should be a brainstorming or discussion where members share and evaluate what type of relationship they want for your group. The Facilitator may wish to offer suggestions (see below) to help the members get the idea.
4. The Facilitator should ask for someone to scribe, writing suggestions and notes as you go along. In the library, you can use a dry erase board.
5. Frequently used topics include:

Listen respectfully & deeply  
 Start & end on time  
 RSVP (regrets only)  
 Tolerance & understanding  
 Trust

Attendance & Commitment  
 Non-judgmental reminders  
 No interruption  
 No advice or “fixing”  
 No attacking or criticism

Acceptance  
 One person speaks at a time  
 Group time shared equitably  
 Honesty

Humor without sarcasm  
 Stay on topic, follow format  
 Don’t monopolize  
 Share session leadership

Transparency  
 Respect  
 Confidentiality  
 Silence is OK

No side conversations  
 Speak from personal experience  
 Use "I" statements  
 Passing is OK

6. After ideas have been generated, the effective Facilitator goes through the list with the group, requesting consensus on items to be included.
7. The Facilitator then takes the list, types it up, and sends it out to all members for their review before the next meeting.
8. At the second meeting, the Facilitator makes sure everyone received the covenant and responds to questions about it.
9. The covenant should be looked at again every few months or whenever a new member joins the group, when they should be given a copy.

## **8. 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 respect diversity and value our differences.  
 We will remain quiet until all have finished their reflections.  
 We will value all questions.  
 We will start and end on time.

or

We will listen from the heart.  
 We will speak personally, using "I" statements.  
 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.

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.

## 9. Do's and Don'ts

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. **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 Facilitators Circle a personal priority and come prepared to talk about your group's successes and concerns. **Do not** forget safety at evening meetings. Leave no one alone in the building or the parking lot.
8. **Do not** feel guilty about reporting pastoral concerns to the minister. The minister will help you determine the proper role for your group and assist with follow-up when needed.
9. **Do** assist your group to plan a service project. Bonding increases when groups work together.

## **10. Building Community: The Spiral in Small Group Ministry**

(This article is taken from the UU Small Group Ministry Network's **Facilitator Training and Development Manual**, 2008.)

Building community has been described as taking steps, often pictured as going up stairs. But building community with other people by taking steps together along a spiral path from an outer point toward a deeper center seems more applicable for our Covenant Group program.

**Step One: Bonding:** The first step in building community is to break down the cliques and barriers that exist, and to establish a relationship among the individuals in the group. As each person is accepted and welcomed by others, they begin to identify as part of the group. The things to consider are:

- How do we establish trust in the group?
- How do we welcome and accept each other?
- How can members develop a sense of connection and commitment to this group while still having friends in other parts of the congregation?

**Step Two: Opening Up:** When an individual can share non-threatening areas of life, and perceives that another is genuinely interested, trust will develop. The more emphatically a group listens, the more secure an individual feels as a member of the group. People can share to whatever degree they feel comfortable.

- What will it take for each of us to feel comfortable enough to share non-threatening areas of our lives?
- How will each of us know that the members of the group are genuinely interested in our story?
- What will happen when we feel trust?
- What will happen if any one of us does not feel respect, interest, or trust?

**Step Three: Affirming:** Participants in affirming interactions leave feeling warm about the group and themselves. This is crucial at this stage of the community-building process. After Opening Up, people need positive feedback before they will consider sharing further.

- How would each of us like to be affirmed in the group?
- How can we affirm each other?
- Why is affirming important to the group?

**Step Four: Stretching:** Difficult situations are opportunities for stretching. When people move beyond their normal comfort level, they experience the greatest potential for growth. Individuals cannot merely say they care for each other in a stretching exercise;

they must actively show it. They must create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable enough to expose their imperfections to the group. Individuals also realize they can achieve much more as a group than they could as a collection of individuals. They realize the importance of each member to the entire group. Facing and overcoming difficulties give people the confidence that they can cope with everyday problems.

- Have we-individually or as a group- had situations that caused us to move beyond our normal comfort level?
- How have we shown our support for each other?
- How can we, the group, create an atmosphere where any of us might feel comfortable enough to expose imperfections to the group?

**Step Five: Deeper Sharing and Goal Setting:** At this stage, individuals share deeply with one another. The group becomes a setting where people can express their visions of the future and present struggles. The group can help the individual while holding the individual accountable for his or her decisions, remaining supportive throughout the process.

- How can we each become comfortable enough to hold each other accountable for our decisions and our interactions, and still remain supportive?
- Members of a group can change. How do we welcome new people into the group while still keeping our established closeness?
- How do we say good-bye when people leave? Are their rituals that we might want to have to mark these changes?

There are several adages for building community in Covenant Groups:

- *Groups are dynamic* rather than static. There is a general progression toward deeper levels, but the rate and even how far the group goes will depend on the group itself.
- *Changes in the group* will require changes in progression through the steps. For example, when a new person enters a group, bonding will include being aware that the new person is informed of the group culture and of the specific identifying details that the rest of the group knows about each other, such as the names of spouses, partners, children, or significant events.
- *Topics may work differently* depending on the levels of community development. Introducing Session Plans that ask deeper questions may be intimidating to a group that is at a beginning level. Likewise, a group that functions at deeper levels may take a topic beyond the questions that are asked.
- *The Session Plan itself* includes some of the steps of building community. The greetings as the group comes together and the opening ritual are bonding. The Check-in and Sharing are warming up. The response of the group to each participant

is affirming. The stretching and going deeper relate to the topic itself, the way the Questions are asked, and the amount of sharing that occurs.

## 11. 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 needs 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 sometimes 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?"

## 12. The Facilitators' Covenant

Facilitators in our program agree to support each other in these ways:

**Commitment to participate**

We agree to participate in Facilitators' Circles.

We agree to negotiate with our Co-Facilitator if we must be away from our small group.

**Respect for one another's time**

We agree to arrive at our small group meetings and the Facilitators Circles on time.

We agree to start our small group meetings at the announced starting time.

We agree to conclude our small group meetings by the announced ending time.

**Mutual Support**

We agree to be supportive of our Co-Facilitators, especially when group conflicts arise.

We agree to support one another as Facilitators.

We agree that if we are upset by a situation in our group, we will share the concern at Facilitators Circle as a topic for general discussion without naming the individuals involved.

The Committee Chair and Training Team will remain available between meetings to confidentially discuss your concerns.

**General Respect**

We agree to encourage participation in a way that everyone will be heard.

We agree to model for our groups active listening.

We agree to honor all within our groups, one person speaking at a time.

We agree to call anyone in our groups who doesn't show up without letting us know beforehand.

We agree to encourage our group members to speak from their own experiences. We agree to discourage advice giving in our groups.

We agree to keep the content of our Facilitators Circles confidential.

**Challenging Situations**

We agree that our groups are not therapy groups and that we will refrain from addressing anyone's psychological issues.

We agree to share with the Committee Chair, or a member of the Training Team, any situation calling for direct pastoral care and/or intervention.

**Service to others**

We will ensure that our group will undertake at least one yearly service venture to either the congregation or the greater community.