

Participant's Guide to Covenant Groups at UUFVB 2022

Welcome to our Covenant Group Program!

Purpose: The Covenant Groups program is an integral part of the Fellowship's ministry. The purpose of Covenant Groups is to encourage people in their spiritual growth and help them develop relationships of substance and depth. The subject matter of Covenant Groups does not attempt to solve each other's problems. Unlike a book club, knitting circle, or a therapy group, the focus here is on respectful listening, reflection, and thoughtful interchange among group members.

Description: Covenant Groups use monthly Session Plans offering a different topic each month for sharing personal experiences. Some topics are spiritual in nature (joy, trust, faith, prayer); others reflect universally human themes (mentors, loss, forgiveness, humor). Members respond to the topic questions by sharing their own life experiences.

Ideally each group has 8 to 10 members who meet once (year-round) or twice (seasonal) a month. Led by trained Facilitators, our groups have historically met at the UUFVB or in a member's home. Currently, they may meet at the UUFVB, by ZOOM, at a member's home, or as a hybrid where, if meeting in the library at UUFVB, some gather in person while others join by Zoom. Sessions last 90-120 minutes and follow a format (see below). At the first meeting, all members agree to a list of behaviors describing how members will treat each other. This covenant may be reviewed periodically and revised if the need arises.

Format of a Covenant Group Meeting:

1. **Chalice Lighting:** a symbol of UU gatherings, 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.

Expectations for All Participants:

1. To attend covenant group meetings regularly and to notify the group leader if you are unable to attend. Covenant groups cannot function unless members make this specific commitment.
2. To commit to listening without judgment or interruption to other group members.
3. To help write a covenant for the group or to participate in a review of any existing covenant.
4. To give regular attendance at weekly worship and service to the Fellowship high priority.
5. To commit to coming to the group for a year.

A Sample Covenant:

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.
We will speak personally, using "I" statements.
We will not engage in cross talk.
We will respect the confidentiality of what is shared here.

Your Facilitator is available to answer any questions you may have.