

Extra Grace or Care Required

By Diana Dorroh, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA

From a talk at the Mountain SGM Institute in 2009, in *CGN January 2010*

Situations where Extra Grace is needed will all be easier to handle if your program has:

- (1) Strong ministry objectives, mission and model for small group ministry.
- (2) A process to make sure that everyone who joins a group understands the program and what is expected of them. This can be done with an orientation session or by the group leader.
- (3) A process for choosing strong leaders who can carry out the objectives and mission and implement the small group ministry program your church has designed (sometimes called your model.)

Extra Care Required (ECR) people. What's that?

- (a) people who are not able to be in right relationship and cannot seem to listen or share time fairly.
- (b) people who continually challenge the model.
- (c) people who challenge the boundaries, with sharing that would be more appropriate for a therapy group or that contains over-sexualized, racist or homophobic comments, etc.
- (d) all of us who have ever had a bad day or been through a life crisis.

If you encounter any of the first three situations, you should seek advice from the minister, program director, or your coach. You need this support. Give one of them a call.

The fourth type, all of us who have ever had a bad day or are going through a life crisis, highlights the truth that all of us need extra care at some point. When a member temporarily needs extra care, your group should be flexible enough to provide it, but intentional enough not to focus on the ECR member. Everyone else needs ministry too.

Type (a) ECR people, those who are not able to be in right relationship and cannot seem to listen or share time fairly, can often function in a group. To welcome them into the group is the ultimate expression of radical hospitality. There they should be held to the covenant and expected to be in "right relationship" with other group members. And under no circumstances should the ECR member become the focus of the group or absorb an unequal amount of what is supposed to be mutual ministry. Sometimes it will work and the ECR person learns new skills of listening and sharing time. Obviously, the group should feel very proud when this happens. In other cases, holding the person to the group covenant will cause them to resign from the group, as they discover it's "not for them."

Sometimes a church may have a situation where one person is very difficult to integrate into the group and there is no group that can handle them. In this case, it can be the job of the minister or the lay leader of the SGM program to tell the applicant that small group ministry is not the best option for them. As a facilitator, you may need to refer the situation to your minister or program coordinator.

The type (b) challenges to the model can be very subtle and unexpected. The person may be very socially skilled and share time and listen well. But they just can't follow an established program without trying to improve it or break some of its rules. We are UU's after all. But, in a covenant group, this can be very destructive. I think of the model as a bowl, within which we can have a wonderful and safe experience, but only if the bowl is left intact. One example of challenging the model: "Instead of our next meeting, why don't we all go to this program I've found out about. Nobody should miss it." Another might be: "I've just read a fascinating book on economics and politics. Why don't we all read the book and discuss it." or "Let's exchange information about our lives via email, so we can get to know each other faster." The leader or facilitator must handle these challenges. One way is to say "I'm authorized to implement the church's small group ministry model, but not to change it." You can then explain why it would not support your church's model.

The type (c) challenge of the boundaries occurs as "over-sharing," or talking about inappropriate or unacceptable topics. "Over-sharing" refers to sharing that sounds like it belongs

in a therapy session. If it sounds to you, as the leader, like it's too much sharing, then it probably is. A description of sexual experience would probably be inappropriate; a statement that "sounds racist" to the group would be unacceptable. As a leader, you need to be prepared to handle all three categories of boundary challenges.

In an over-sharing situation, the leader would likely speak to the minister or program director first and then speak to the person outside the group. If the participant can't stop over-sharing, they might not be able to participate in a covenant group at this point in their lives. Again, get help with this.

The other boundary violations are rare, but more dangerous to the group. An over-sexualized or racist comment can be disturbing and make the group feel unsafe. Boundary challenges may never happen in your group, but if they do, as leader, you are authorized to pay attention to your own reactions and address the situation. My advice is to declare a few minutes of silence and then pray or prepare what you can say that starts with "I felt" and addresses the situation in a non-threatening way. Probably the lighter the touch, the better. And sometimes it could be covered in the Check Out or at the next meeting by reading the covenant... or by a personal conversation outside the group. But I recommend that you not avoid dealing with boundary challenges altogether.

Extra Grace or Care Required
with an Idea from Rhye Gray, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA
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Last month I wrote about four types of extra care required members of covenant groups:

- (a) people who are not able to be in right relationship and cannot seem to listen or share time fairly.
- (b) people who continually challenge the model.
- (c) people who challenge the boundaries, with sharing that would be more appropriate for a therapy group or that contains over-sexualized, racist or homophobic comments, etc.
- (d) all of us who have ever had a bad day or been through a life crisis.

One of the facilitators in our program in Baton Rouge, Rhye Gray, pointed out that there is at least one more type: participants who don't talk in a session.

What if Ellen passes during the check-in? I'd let it go, but come back to Ellen after the last person checks in. The only difficult part of that is remembering after the check-in is complete, to ask Ellen if she wants to speak. Often your group members will help you remember. If Ellen passes repeatedly during check-in, I'd speak to her outside the meeting to find out how she's experiencing the group. Some people take a little more time to feel comfortable sharing than others.

What do you do if a person does not participate in the discussion part of the meeting? Everyone else has contributed, but Howard has not said anything. One of the most basic roles of the facilitator is to make sure everyone has a chance to talk. The first step in fulfilling this responsibility is to notice that Howard hasn't spoken. Then, making it easier for Howard to participate can be as simple as asking: "Howard, we haven't heard from you. Would you like to say something?" You may notice that some members have a harder time "getting into" the conversation than others. If this is happening in your group, you might want to use a talking stick or have a moment (15 seconds) of silence between sharings. Sometimes body language can signal that somebody is ready to talk, but needs encouragement. I'd say hand movements, sitting up straight or any movements from a person who is not talking are probably a signal that he/she would like to get into the conversation. You can simply say: "Howard, you look like you want to say something" or "Howard, would you like to say something?" You have to find your own voice, of course. So, practice.

And finally, what if John has shared in every previous meeting, but is silent for one session. Rhye said he would ask this John after the meeting if anything was wrong. Rhye is a Pastoral

Care Associate at our church and he would use some of those skills to find out if there was something John needed to talk about, perhaps at a later date.

What are your techniques for getting everyone to participate? Send them to me at Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com.