



Creating Covenant: Spiritual Trust Groups for the Journey

Rev. Anne R. Atwell

anne@sunshinecathedral.net

954-462-2004 ext. 208

Most faith communities already have a number of groups.
Choir, Garden Team, Board of Directors, Study Groups, etc...
Why create another group?

Take a look at the groups you currently offer and determine what is missing. If you think nothing is missing, look again.
Frequently what is lacking in these groups is a depth of connection, an opportunity to share personal stories, and a **safe** place in which to talk about one's emotions and feelings.

A Covenant Group is a relational group in which participants focus on sharing their thoughts and perceptions on a specific topic, offer attentive listening to one another, and are open to other participants in their life experiences. What makes a Covenant Group different from other groups is that relationship building is the main objective.

If you want to develop an engaged congregation, you must focus on more than involvement. It is imperative that your church not only complete needed tasks in order to offer ministry to all people but that it can also meet the needs of individuals who need to share their powerful stories in a safe and nurturing environment.

But.....a reminder.....

Covenant Group is not meant to be a support or a therapy group but a group in which participants are able to connect with others, to share their deepest thoughts and feelings, and to understand that they are not alone in their journey.



Beginning

In order to begin a Covenant Group, an appropriate facilitator should be selected. It could be you or a friend/member of your congregation who understands and is able model good group processes. It is important that the facilitator be willing to share of themselves while gently directing people into a positive way of sharing their own thoughts and feelings.

It is also important when creating a Covenant Group that the participants understand what the Group will be. It is not therapy. It is not Bible Study. It is deep reflection. It is an opportunity to connect with others and to share and listen deeply to the stories of others in a safe place. It is a way to be really heard and to authenticate their own lives and the lives of others.

The group should be kept intentionally small so as not to overwhelm the participants and to give everyone ample time to share. I've had groups as small at 5 and as large as 12. It seemed to me that the most appropriate size was about 6 – 8 participants. This size would offer the participants sufficient time to express their own story while also experiencing the open sharing of others. You know your congregations best and after some time, you will be able to determine what group size will work best for your community.

When determining the frequency of meetings, you must also look at other commitments that your group will have. Will your group consist of parents with children? Then you should take into consideration the activities of the family. Will your group consist of people who cannot drive after dark? Then consider possibly meeting during the day. Are the majority of the participants still in the workforce? Then you will want to look at their work schedule, taking into account that the participants may need some time away from everything for rest and renewal.

Because the community I was trying to reach was people ages 30 – 60 who may still be in the workforce and who also may have other commitments, I scheduled the Covenant Group meetings on Tuesday evenings for approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours. We would meet for 12 weeks but I have also found that time frame may be too long. Beginning in September, we will meet for 8 weeks with 2 breaks during the Covenant Group journey. It is possible to create community in a brief time if the safety of the space is honored.

The point of the group is to create connection but not to overwhelm. Taking into consideration the other parts of the participant's lives while not adding "just one more thing" to their already overly busy schedule will make the journey more enjoyable for them and for you.



During

There are a few resources that have worked well for our Covenant Group gatherings. (Suggested resources are included in this paper.) But beginning with a discussion of what is expected from the group will give the participants an opportunity to determine if the group is right for them and will lay out the expectations of the group. I have created from several of the resources, a Covenant Group Agreement which presents the “rules” of the group. By creating and presenting the expectations to the group members, each participant can anticipate how the group will unfold. The facilitator will also want to model the expected behaviors by sharing as deeply as appropriate, being aware of any time issues, and making all participants feel welcome and included.

I have found it to be helpful, as well, to begin each session with a time of free sharing. Examples of this include a discussion of what has happened in the past week, for what or for whom should the group pray, any good or not so good events that have occurred, etc... If the group can start by sharing in this way, it will minimize the “talking” during the deep listening and reflection time.

In my experience, I have observed that a structured format seems to work best. If participants can anticipate how the group will begin and end each week, they can better prepare themselves as to what they will share with the others. A structured group also provides some stability in a society where many things seem out of control. And the structure of a Covenant Group will also keep participants accountable to the rest of the group. It is important to share your story but it is also important that others have the opportunity to share, as well, while staying with the boundaries created for the group.

In the groups I’ve facilitated, I’ve used the *Heart to Heart* and the *Soul to Soul* series created by the Unitarian Universalist Church. Their format works well and the topics do tend to generate deep reflection and sharing. But I’ve also changed their format a bit to make it more meaningful and suitable for our group and to allow the participants to more time to share what is important to them. I believe that is the beauty of these groups...you can create what will work best for you and your community.



Ending

Like all good things, a Covenant Group will eventually come to an end. In my experience, participants will often grieve the loss of the group and the time of deep reflection, community, and sharing. It becomes a place of safety and communion which many people lack in their lives. It is important as the group comes to an end that a ritual or a time of memory sharing is incorporated into the safe space. Simple questions about the impact of the group meetings, the depth of relationships that developed, and other “good-byes” that the participants have experienced are all great talking points.

You may notice that the participants will begin spending time together outside of the group. They may attend other functions together. They may sit together during the Sunday worship service. They may find joy in introducing family members and friends to one another. When you see this occurring, you will know that your Covenant Group has been a success. And it is important to acknowledge these relationships during the final group meetings.

We know that community is often built spontaneously. But with Covenant Groups, we can create environments that will facilitate that process. Not all Covenant Groups will work and, just like other small groups, Covenant Groups are not for everyone. It may be that there are those who are just not comfortable sharing their personal thoughts with others. And it is possible that there will be a participant or two who would love to be a part of the group but simply cannot abide the agreement or “rules.” But for those who are genuinely seeking community and are open to a process which will facilitate a safe gathering for all involved, a Covenant Group may work very well.

If you’ve heard from your congregants that they don’t feel connected to the church, if you would like to offer a safe environment for people to share their stories, and if you would like your church members and friends to feel a greater level of engagement, a Covenant Group may be exactly what is needed.

“Each of us brings a separate truth here. We bring the truth of our own life, our own story. We don’t come as empty vessels...but rather we come as full people – people who have our own story and our own truth. Together we have truths. Together we have a story. Together we are a community.” (Penny Hackett-Evans)



Collison, Brooke B. *Know and be Known: Small Groups That Nourish and Connect*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007.

Isay, Dave, ed. *Listening is an Act of Love; A Celebration of American Life from the Storycorps Project*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.

Myers, Joseph P. *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.

Robinson, Christine and Alicia Hawkins. *Heart to Heart: Fourteen Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2009.

_____. *Listening Hearts: Fourteen Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2016.

_____. *Soul to Soul: Fourteen Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2012.

Covenant Group Agreement

1. *Each person's story is unique.* While you may share some commonalities in your experiences, no two of you are exactly alike. Consequently, respect and accept both what you have in common with others and what is unique to each of you.
2. *Feel free to share your story.* However, if someone in the group decides to listen without sharing, please respect his or her decision.
3. *There is a difference between actively listening to what another person is saying and sharing your own story.* Please do not interrupt when someone else is speaking. Keep an open mind and heart to another's experience.
4. *Thoughts, feelings, and experiences shared in this group will stay in this group.* Respect others' right to confidentiality. Please do not discuss another person's story without their consent and refrain from gossip about what is shared in the group.
5. *Allow each person equal time to express himself or herself.* Please don't monopolize the time. We must allow sufficient time for all to share.
6. *Attend each group meeting and please be on time.* If you are unable to attend for any reason, please let one of the facilitators know. If you decide to leave the group, please discuss your decision with the group.
7. *Avoid "advice giving" unless it is specifically requested by a group member.* If your advice is not solicited, please don't give it. Remember this group is for community building, not therapy.
8. *Remember that your thoughts and feelings are neither right nor wrong.* Work to set aside any judgment while giving attention to the thoughts and feelings of others. Please do not try to change another's mind and offer the same respect to others as you would expect from them.

(These rules were taken from the book *Understanding Your Grief: Support Group Guide* by Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt and *Heart to Heart: Fourteen Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing* by Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins. They have been adapted for use at Sunshine Cathedral by Rev. Anne R. Atwell)