

## **The Covenant Group Experience By Loren Gomez**

As Marta suggested during a recent service, I asked someone after church one Sunday what his thoughts and feelings were about God. He had a lot to say about where his beliefs fit into the survey results about worship at First Parish, and how he views nature and humans in this world. While he was talking, I noticed myself beginning to form my own response to the question about God. I wanted to jump in and give some feedback, but I stopped myself. Instead, I listened to him express his thoughts and feelings. I let go of the idea that I needed to offer a counter point, or agree, or say something witty to continue the conversation.

Covenant group conversations are like that. There are opportunities to express oneself in depth, without interruption. There are equivalent opportunities to listen deeply, without needing to fix someone, or needing to maintain the conversation. As it turns out, listening deeply is very freeing. Gone is the anxiety of not being able to say the appropriate thing to make someone feel better. What is left is the space to witness. Being listened to in this way brings the soul to a place of acceptance, and where healing can take place.

Covenant groups (also called Small Group Ministry) meet once a month and the meetings last two hours. One member of the group is the facilitator, called the convener. A chalice is lit and an initial reading is shared. There is a short check-in. The covenant, or set of guidelines, is read together. The name covenant means agreement in this context; each group member agrees to come to the meetings and to share and listen without interruption. The groups are topic oriented. Themes might include Asking for Help, Change, Loss, Longing, Aging, Learning from Failure, Gratitude, Creativity, or Faith, to name a few. The convener sends out the topics to the group members about a week ahead of time. There is a reading and related questions that are read aloud. After that is the sharing of our thoughts and feelings on the topic, which is the central part of each covenant group meeting.

Although each group has its own particular variation, most groups keep track of time, and each person takes a turn talking, for about 3 or 4 minutes at a time. There is usually time for each person to share twice. Depending on time, some groups have a period of open conversation at the end of the sharing time. The group ends with a quick sharing for closure about what we liked or wished about the meeting, and a short final reading.

Common to all who choose to be a part of a covenant group is the desire for meaningful connections with others. Covenant groups are opportunities for us to engage in deep sharing as we speak from the heart, and are heard by others. We may speak about what is “weighing” on the mind. We are unburdened in the company of others who are open and listening to us in a deep way, without interruptions, or attempts to fix or outdo us. When people are sharing and listening in this way, we are a part of a whole.

I believe that in the process of following the group’s covenant, we tap into a universal unconscious that is the spirit of all. What’s more, I realize that as a result of being in a covenant group, I found a new comfort level in my everyday conversations. I imagine what the world could become if everyone were always as present and attentive to one another. Hopefully on that day while I was listening to someone share his thoughts at coffee hour, I was making a start.

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