

The covenants in small groups, or **Covenant Groups**

Many Unitarian Universalist churches in the United States have small groups, often called “covenant groups.” These groups help members feel connected, even when there may be so many people in a congregation that we can’t know everyone. Even in small congregations, covenant groups can be useful for creating deeper connections with one another and helping groups connect to the larger world outside the church. A “small group” for purposes of this discussion refers to a group that has 6-10 people in it.

Key to these small groups is the concept of “covenant.” Covenants are agreements we make with one another about our practices in the group. These agreements are important so that everyone knows the social landscape. This is especially important in a culturally diverse setting. For example, in many cultures, when we say a meeting starts at 4:00pm, members of that culture understand that it really means the people will begin to arrive at 4:15 or 4:30, and that the meeting will not actually start until 4:45 or so. In other cultures, a starting time of 4:00pm means that everyone will have arrived before the hour and the meeting will begin promptly at 4:00. If we wish to welcome people to our churches who are culturally different than we are, the covenants become especially important. That way, a newcomer knows which kind of social culture the group has. Both ways of starting a group are perfectly fine, and the covenant simply states which way it will be. Some sample covenants for starting time of the small groups follow:

Our meeting time is 4:00pm on Tuesdays. We will begin to gather at that hour, and will not begin until all the members of the group are gathered or accounted for. We will start the meeting no later than 5:00pm on Tuesdays.

Our meeting time is 4:00pm on Tuesdays. We will begin promptly at 4:00 and anyone who arrives after the hour is invited to enter quietly and join the group already in progress.

Our meeting time is 4:00pm on Tuesdays. We will try to begin promptly, but will wait until 4:10 if members of the group are not yet gathered or accounted for. However, by 4:10 we will begin whether or not everyone has arrived. Members who arrive after 4:10 are asked to enter the group quietly.

An important aspect of these covenants is that the members of the group decide what the covenants will be. The leader of a group, or facilitator, may have some suggestions to offer, or sample covenants to begin with, but it is critical to the health of the group that all the members talk about their covenants, craft them, and agree to abide by them to the best of their ability.

In addition to covenants about how the members of the group will interact with one another, there is always a covenant to do a service project together outside of the regular meetings. I’ll provide you with more information about the service projects, meeting agendas, and ways to keep the groups welcoming to newcomers in future weeks.