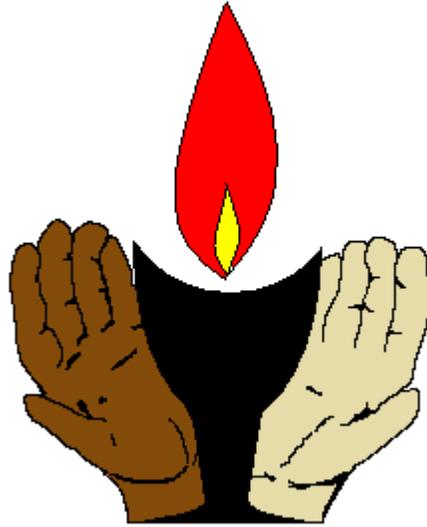


**Unitarian Universalist Association  
Young Adult and Campus Ministry  
Covenant Group Series**



**Young Adult & Campus Ministry  
Covenant Group Manual**

**by Rob Cavanaugh  
and Michael Tino**

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## INTRODUCTION

### About the Young Adult and Campus Ministry Covenant Group Series

*Michael Tino*

Welcome to the manual for the new Young Adult and Campus Ministry Covenant Group series. I hope that these resources will be valuable to your group, and can provide you with program ideas and community building exercises to form deep relations among the members of your group.

The series will continue with a number of covenant group curricula. Each curriculum will present a series of group sessions that fit with the covenant group format in this manual. We hope that these curricula will center on topics of interest to young adults—life decisions, identity issues, social justice, anti-oppression, and relationships, to name a few. There is no intended order to these curricula—we hope that your group will review the available choices and decide which ones interest you the most.

Let me know if there are specific covenant group curricula you'd like to see developed or if there are sessions or series that you've developed that you'd like to share. This series is intended to be ongoing, and not limited to one or two initial group curricula. While print copies of the manual and curricula will always be available from the Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministry for a small fee, we intend to make these resources available for free on our web site; we trust that you will print and copy them for your group's use only and that you will not sell them. Check the site from time to time for new curricula.

Lastly, it's important to note that the development of this manual and the entire Young Adult and Campus Ministry covenant group series has been made possible by the Campaign for Unitarian Universalism.

### About this Manual

*Rob Cavanaugh*

This manual is based on my small amount of experience leading a men's covenant group at my congregation, All Soul's Church, Unitarian, in Washington, DC; what I've learned from years of leading small groups in YRUU and the UU young adult movement; and information from on-line resources (primarily Bob Hill's covenant groups resources page, available through [www.swuuc.org](http://www.swuuc.org)). I don't purport to be an expert, just a guy with some ideas and experiences that I'm willing to share. Plus, I've got kind of an obsession with creating manuals.

Throughout this resource I cite the practices of my own covenant group. These are not intended to be prescriptions of How It Should Be, but merely suggestions of what seems to be working in my experience. There is no universal model for organizing or running covenant groups. When possible I have tried to articulate options so that users of this manual can choose what will work best for them.

I believe that the covenant group model holds great promise for use in young adult and campus groups. While your group's covenant will certainly work and read differently than those of other groups, the processes of developing a covenant and running a covenant group have great promise for use in young adult groups.

There are five main characteristics or goals that good covenant groups have that are beneficial in your ministry with young adults:

- Good covenant groups are based on caring, listening and respect. Group rules allow everyone to talk and ask everyone to listen. A trained facilitator should help keep things at an appropriate level of sharing, allowing all to feel comfortable opening up in the group. Members get to know one another and form a deep community, allowing them to care for each other even outside of the group.
- Small groups are flexible and responsive to the needs of their members. Not only is the covenant the entire group's product, but it is also designed to meet the needs of the group members. If it's not doing that, it can always be changed. Curricula for covenant groups are written with this flexibility in mind, and with the hope that your group will take them and mold them to meet your needs best.
- Covenant groups foster real closeness that is unavailable or uncomfortable in larger groups. Working in a large congregation and taking worship courses in seminary, I learned a lot about how some people react to attempts at intimacy in a large, public worship service. Even shaking hands with the stranger beside you is uncomfortable to some people. The sharing of personal joys and concerns in our services, as meaningful as it might get, does not generally allow for a real community response to the emotions presented. Covenant groups offer a way to build community bonds with people with whom you might not have a lot else in common. They allow their members to share at progressively deeper levels, creating real intimacy based in mutual ties to the group.
- Well-structured covenant groups offer the opportunity to explore meaningful topics in depth for measured periods of time. I know some groups in our congregations that formed 20 years ago and are still discussing the same topics. I don't think that young adults are particularly drawn to such groups. Covenant groups can use topic-based curricula for a while, be non-topical for a while, and come back to another, completely different, curriculum. They also allow for groups to open themselves up to newcomers on a regular basis, helping to alleviate the formation of closed cliques.
- Covenant groups are more than social groups. Their most important goal is the spiritual growth of their members, and the covenant is written to provide a safe space for that growth. That space is sacred space—space that is designated as special and unique.
- Small group experiences are familiar in some ways to other experiences common in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Many people who have been a part of a Unitarian Universalist youth group know the importance of “touch groups” at youth conferences. Touch groups allow people to touch base with one another amidst the hustle and bustle and mega-community-building that goes on at those cons. Covenant groups do a similar thing—consider them touch groups on life. At each meeting, covenant group participants have the opportunity to check in and let others who care about them know what's going on in their lives. They allow us to admit when we're going through a rough patch, and to support our friends when they are.

I hope that you, too, will find this model well suited for forming and leading groups in your congregation or on your campus. We are truly blessed to have as our manual this wonderful resource created by Rob Cavanaugh, to which I've added a few sections from my own experience. I trust that it will become your companion in introducing covenant groups to your community.

# COVENANT GROUPS: WHAT, WHY, AND HOW

Rob Cavanaugh

## What's a Covenant Group?

Covenant groups, also known as small ministry groups, comprise 8-12 people who covenant to meet regularly over several months in order to build relationships, grow spiritually, and provide service to the congregation and community. The covenant provides a framework for the organization of the group: how members will interact with one another, what the commitment means, and the basic logistics of meetings.

## Why a Covenant?

A covenant group should provide a safe space for listening and sharing. Having a written, agreed-upon covenant—meaning general guidelines for how the group will work—is a great way to ensure that your group time is spent having healthy, meaningful experiences and not arguing over process.

The scope and specificity of the covenant will vary from group. Below is a set of questions that I think any covenant should answer. For most of them, I've also included the reason for the questions, and what my own group came up with. I offer my experience as a model, but it's important for each group to come to its own decisions.

## Theme

Some covenant groups have specific themes or membership characteristics; such as poetry, women, young feminists, young adults, men, or diversity. Others are simply about building relationships, and have no separate theme. Even if you have a very broad mission, having everyone agree to it will probably help your group to coalesce and not constantly revisit its purpose.

In my men's covenant group, we originally thought we would spend a significant amount of time developing a mission statement. However, after a few meetings and covenanting on other issues, we decided that the purpose of our group was simply to talk about issues particular to us as men and learn from each other. That has proven sufficient.

## Questions the Covenant Should Answer

1. How will we be together?
2. Where will we meet?
3. How often will we meet?
4. For how many months will we meet?
5. When will we stop accepting new members?
6. How many meeting can one miss and still be a member?
7. When is too late to come to a meeting?
8. What level of privacy/confidentiality should we have?
9. How will our group be led?

### I. How will we be together?

In order to create and maintain positive relationships in the group, it is important to have a common understanding of what is appropriate for sharing and how members react to what others have said. For example, discussing church politics or other members of the church is not appropriate. In my group we felt that there was sufficient understanding of what topics were not appropriate, so our covenant focused on how we would interact.

We decided on the following:

#### **Sample Covenant MEETING NORMS**

1. Listen to whomever is speaking. Do not interrupt.
2. Name and share feelings. Conflict is OK; stay with it; don't avoid it.
3. Be honest. Say what you feel without excuses.
4. Silence is OK.
5. Bring problems with the group to the group. Please don't talk about members or group dynamics except during meetings.
6. Don't give advice unless someone specifically asks for it. Instead, consider questions or ways to help the person find his own answers.

## 2. Where will we meet?

Some groups meet at the congregation; some meet in member's homes. Do whatever works for your group. The church is nice neutral ground, and everyone knows where it is, but other activities taking place there may be disruptive. If you meet at someone's home, make sure it's geographically accessible and welcoming for all. If someone or their place would be an inappropriate host (i.e., someone who is high maintenance or a problematic person in the group), be prepared with alternate plans when they offer.

## 3. How often will we meet?

Most groups meet either once or twice per month. In designing your schedule, try to find a balance between the needs of people not to over-schedule and over-commit themselves and the needs of the group to have members who have made a serious commitment and to meet regularly enough to build on previous meetings' work.

## 4. For how many months will we meet?

It's important that folks know what they're getting in to. Again, it's good to find a balance in the group: members need to be able to make a commitment to the group, but no one should feel as if they're stuck in a group forever.

My group, which started meeting in May, decided on the following:

### **Sample Covenant** **DURATION**

*The group will re-evaluate itself in December. Questions to address then: Will it become an ongoing men's group? Will it take new members? Will it split into two or more new covenant groups?*

## 5. When will we stop accepting new members?

New members, as the *5 Steps To Community Building* (see the last section of this manual) suggests, require that the group essentially start over, or at least move back a step or two so as to make the new person feel fully included.

The longer you do this, the more your risk frustrating the older members and preventing the group for really gelling. Set up a reasonable timetable for closing the group.

My group decided on the following at its third meeting:

### **Sample Covenant** **MEMBERSHIP**

*The group is now closed to new members. Those who previously showed interest must start attending regularly within the next two meetings.*

## 6. How many meeting can one miss and still be a member?

For the same reason it's important to stop accepting new members, you may also want to decide how many meetings someone can miss.

My group decided on the following:

### **Sample Covenant** **ATTENDANCE**

*All members are expected to attend and be engaged. If you're going to miss a significant number of meetings (such as 3 or more), please evaluate your commitment to the group. You are encouraged to share your thoughts on this with the group. Planned absences should be communicated in advance, and members are encouraged to explain unplanned absences. If you need to quit the group, you are encouraged to let us know why.*

## 7. When is too late to come to a meeting?

My group wanted to set a guideline for this to avoid being disrupted by latecomers. Once discussion gets going, it's often hard on both the group and the latecomer for someone to join mid-stream.

We agreed on the following:

### **Sample Covenant** **PUNCTUALITY**

*If you're going to be more than 15 minutes late, please consider whether or not you NEED to come. If you need the community of the group, by all means come. Otherwise, please do not disrupt the group.*

## 8. What level of privacy/confidentiality should we have?

As you can imagine, the covenant group will bring up very personal and sensitive topics, some of which shouldn't be shared outside the group. However, the experience is also intended to deepen individual's relationship with each other outside the group, so it's natural to want to continue certain conversations. Also, group members may want to continue discussing interesting topics—including sharing things others had said—with partners or friends. My group decided that it was fine to continue discussing topics and sharing things others had said so long as the sources were not revealed (by either name or context details). We made an effort to strike a balance between total confidentiality and relationship building between members outside of group

My group adopted the following:

**Sample Covenant**  
**RESPECT PRIVACY**

*Bring things up with members at non-group times at your own discretion. Feel free to say "not a good time" if someone brings something up that is too personal or private. If you bring something up in the group that is particularly personal, please identify it as such.*

## 9. How will our group be led?

Some covenant groups have designated leaders responsible for programming at every session; others rotate some or all of the responsibility. The degree to which session leaders need to be specially chosen and trained (see the next section of this manual) depends in large part on the topic you've chosen and the stage of community building your group is at (see the last section of this manual). At minimum, I would suggest having members participate by doing opening and closings, and/or lighting the chalice. My own group rotates completely: 1-2 members agree to provide all of the programming. Ideally, the permanent group leaders would touch base with the meeting leaders to confirm that the programming was appropriate and that they would respect the structure and opening/closing rituals.

Beyond providing the focus reading, leaders are responsible for the overall dynamic of the group. In groups where the members have a good sense of appropriate topics and how to respectfully express themselves, the facilitation role will be minimal. However, if your group has members with poor judgment or social skills, the job will be much harder. Use the covenant to remind individuals of how they agreed to be. The covenant should make it easier to find the balance between the good of the group and being welcome to individuals who may not have many other options.

# SELECTING AND TRAINING COVENANT GROUP LEADERS

Michael Tino

## Selecting leaders from the group or congregation

Covenant groups should not begin without leaders. In selecting leaders for your groups, it is good to invite people to leadership who have the skills and gifts to be good facilitators. What does this mean? In a covenant group, the leader's role is to guide the formation of a covenant and to help keep people to that covenant. While the role of meeting facilitator may rotate, the leader needs to be able to direct a group conversation without taking it over. It's a tricky balance that not everyone can manage.

When I selected covenant group leaders, I started with people who had demonstrated leadership ability already. In my congregation, I began with the past presidents of the congregation (a large group of people going back throughout the history of the Fellowship). Each past president was invited to use the knowledge and skills they had gained being a leader of the congregation to serve the spiritual needs of the members. The letter I sent them read, in part:

*In being asked to serve as president of our congregation, you were recognized as someone with important leadership skills in our community. Because of those skills, you were given enormous responsibilities—for helping to manage the business of our congregation, for articulating a vision for our community, and, often times, for pushing the congregation to make difficult decisions that shaped its future. I'm writing to you today because those same skills are needed to help us live out today's vision of our Fellowship as a vital center for spiritual growth and development.*

The past leadership of any group or congregation is a good place to start looking for these leaders, but it is not the only place to look. Search for people you'd like to invite into larger roles in your group. Look for caring people with good listening skills. Look for tactful people who don't dominate discussions. Being a covenant group leader is a wonderful opportunity for someone to learn leadership skills that will serve them well in future roles in your ministry.

Above all, be honest about the responsibility they're committing themselves to, and the amount of time that will take. We estimated that leading a covenant group would take 2-3 hours per week given the out-of-group responsibilities of the leaders. The list we gave the people considering answering our call to group leadership consisted of the following, some of which may be rotated to group members who volunteer to facilitate meetings:

### Covenant Group Leader Responsibilities

- Set first meeting date/time/place
- Find an apprentice leader
- Call people who miss a group meeting (make sure everything is OK)
- Refer anyone in need of special help to minister(s)—they will inform Caring Committee if necessary
- Organize the group's response to aid members in need (cards, visits, food, etc)
- Make sure each group does one service project each year
- Attend monthly group leader meetings

### In group meetings:

- Work with the group to establish group norms and policies/procedures (covenant)
- Keep discussion moving and on-topic: do not let one person dominate discussion
- Allow everyone to speak once before someone responds
- Choose opening and closing words

## Training your leaders

Leader training can be done as a large group in a few hours of time—we ran our training as a sample covenant group, with check-in and reflection on group leader issues. Important parts of it include a reflection on what it means to be a facilitator, training on how to refer group members in need of pastoral care, and a discussion of how to perpetuate the leadership of a group.

In our model, one of the responsibilities of each leader was to identify and train an apprentice leader in their group. This person served as a back up (in case the leader could not attend the group meeting),

and was chosen as someone who could one day lead a group himself or herself. In this way, leadership was perpetuated without the same group of people always having to do it. Following a rotating covenant group model, in each round of covenant groups, the available leadership doubles (and that doesn't count new people you recruit from outside of the groups).

### **Pastoral care: referrals and follow-up**

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Covenant groups are not group therapy sessions, but sometimes someone tries to use them as such. "High-need" people will sometimes gravitate towards these groups for the validation they need in their lives. Group leaders are responsible for balancing the needs of the group with the needs of each individual. No person should be allowed to monopolize the check-in or reflection time, and a reasonable effort should be made to keep the discussion on-topic.

Given this, sometimes things happen in our lives that we need support to deal with. Over the course of several months, any covenant group will have members who are in need of pastoral care. It is wonderful when a group can support and care for one of its members having a difficult time—I've seen groups bring food to the homes of sick group members, and provide each other transportation to appointments and such.

Sometimes, great need manifests itself in withdrawal from a group. Thus, group leaders must be prepared to contact everyone who does not show up for a group meeting. Sometimes, an absence is easily explained; at other times, an absence is a signal for help.

Group leaders must also feel comfortable discerning whether someone's needs are too great for the group to handle. If that is the case, it is appropriate for the leader to share information with the minister (or, if there is not one, a mutually agreed-upon professional therapist or counselor).

Thus, it is necessary to do some training around pastoral care, follow-up and referrals. In some cases, covenant group leaders will develop a covenant for themselves about these issues.

### **Leaders' groups**

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It is important that your covenant group leaders not be asked to do their jobs in a vacuum. Even if there are only a few groups, start having the leaders of those groups meet on a regular basis (I suggest monthly) with the covenant group coordinator and, if possible, your congregation's minister.

Leader group meetings are often run just like covenant group meetings, the only exception being that the reflection question or focus reading is always about how the groups are going. Sometimes, topics will emerge from check-in about such topics as group facilitation, dealing with difficult people or finding appropriate readings. The leaders' leader can use her or his discretion on whether those are appropriate topics for the entire group to consider.

Leader groups also allow you to care for your leaders. People who take on important positions in our congregations need care themselves, and it is appropriate for us to provide this care through a covenant group setting.

In an ideal covenant group program, the leaders group leaders would eventually need their own group. When I helped begin a covenant group program at the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Durham, we had 15 group leaders; we split those folks into two monthly meetings—I facilitated one and Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube facilitated the other. Rev. Straube and I met regularly as the leaders' leaders to check in on how things were going. A program like this can go on indefinitely, with each group leader being responsible for no more than 10-12 people.

# A TYPICAL COVENANT GROUP MEETING

Rob Cavanaugh

## Group needs for each session

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- 1 ½ - 2 hours
- Comfortable meeting space where the group can sit in a circle and see each other
- Opening words
- Chalice or candle and matches/lighter
- Focus reading/questions for reflection
- Closing words

## A typical covenant group agenda includes:

### 1. Opening words; Chalice Lighting

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Opening words and chalice lighting provide a ritual to acknowledge that we gather as members of a religious community. Opening words should be brief and meaningful; the lighting of a chalice or candle helps create a worshipful atmosphere conducive to open sharing and deep listening.

### 2. Check-In

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Give people time to say what they need to say to be present in the room: stresses of work or life; news that they need to get off their chest. This should not be a lengthy process, nor should people share everything that went on in their week, nor should everyone feel the need to share. It is the minimum folks need to say to be present.

Many groups incorporate into their covenant that each person has one pass at uninterrupted check-in before group members are allowed to follow-up. If your group intends to have this rule, put it in your covenant—introverted people often appreciate having time to check in about where they are without fear of being interrupted by others in the group.

### 3. Focus Reading/Questions for Reflection

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This is the cornerstone of the serious reflection in which the group will engage. Sometimes, a focus reading is followed by one or more questions about it on which people might wish to reflect. Give a few

minutes for reflection or meditation on the reading after it's read before inviting folks to share.

### 4. First Reflection

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Each person shares, either popcorn-style or in order, their thoughts/responses to the reading. It's also OK if they share something unrelated; the process isn't meant to be that rigid. Popcorn-style, meaning persons share whenever they feel so moved, is neat because it often results in significant periods of silence between reflections. Silence is good; most of us don't have enough of it in our lives.

When someone is speaking, others in the group should be intently listening. The purpose of this exercise is to be fully focused on the person speaking. This first reflection should take a great deal of time.

### 5. Second Reflection/ Response

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After everyone has had the opportunity to speak, do another round of reflection. Invite folks to share things they've thought of while listening to other people's reflections. If you want to make the group more interactive, allow people to ask questions about other's reflections. Ensure that these are indeed questions (Tell me more about x. How are you handling y?) and not challenges (How can you believe that? Why did you do that?).

A covenant group is not a place for arguments. Some feel that covenant groups should not be discussion groups, either, but more structured. That's up to you.

### 6. Closing Words; Chalice Extinguishing

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Something to close the sacred space created in the covenant group. You may want to do a check out, allowing folks to share a word or two about their experience. Using the same closing each week may help to create a sense of ritual.

## FOCUS READINGS, EARLY MEETINGS, AND SPECIAL EVENTS

Rob Cavanaugh

### Focus Readings

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The focus reading can be an excerpt from a book, a meditation, poem, prayer, sermon excerpt, or anything else that raises questions related to the theme of your group or particular meeting. It can be as short as a few lines or as long as a few paragraphs, but keep in mind that it's hard to follow anything that closely for more than a minute or two. Read slowly.

### First meeting

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Include some getting to know you exercises; checks about families, lives, jobs, etc but be sure to also do a focus reading and reflection. Potential members will want to know more about the other members of the group, but they should also have at least part of a typical experience so they know what they're getting in to. Have nametags. Review the agenda for the meeting and suggest some guidelines (the group will eventually determine it's own, but for the first meeting you may want to simply dictate them). Let the members know what decisions they will make about the group at future meetings.

### Subsequent early meetings

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Continue having some getting to know you time. Be intentional about including new attendees in the group—make sure they know the process, etc. See the *5 Steps to Community Building* for more information about the stages a group goes through. Start working on your covenant and structure,

addressing the questions (and any others you've identified) listed earlier in this guide.

### Special Events

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Our group thought it was important to gather occasionally in settings where we weren't bound by the covenant group format, for the reasons listed below. Our regular meeting schedule is 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesdays, so in months with a 5<sup>th</sup> Tuesday we decided to use it (and other dates as agreed upon by the group) for special events. Special events can include activities such as:

**Fun:** Since the structure of the covenant group doesn't always allow for lots of high-energy discussion and laughter, you may want to get together socially in an informal setting. My group has met at a fun restaurant with family-style dining and had a great time. After dinner, some went on their way while others got coffee and talked for hours.

**Service:** Service to the church and community is an integral part of the covenant group experience. My group has discussed volunteering in the community and putting on a worship service, among other things. Many congregations expect covenant groups to do annual service projects as part of their relationship to the rest of the church.

**Theme-related Spiritual Deepening:** One or more of your activities might want to be something experiential that relates to the theme of your group. My group, a men's group, has discussed volunteering at a women's shelter, or initiating a sharing session with one of the women's covenant groups.

## STARTING COVENANT GROUPS IN YOUR CONGREGATION

*Rob Cavanaugh and Michael Tino*

Some congregations start covenant groups as a church-wide effort with many or even most members participating. Doing this requires a significant amount of buy-in from the church leadership, and months of planning and selling the idea to the congregation. Other congregations offer just a few covenant groups as a smaller part of a larger adult education or small group program. Either model can be successful; both require advance planning before beginning a program.

If your congregation has a professional religious leader such as a minister or professional religious educator, the first step is to be sure she or he is enthusiastic about covenant groups. The support of professional staff is fundamental to the success of these programs—they are a shared ministry. For this reason, it is necessary that the religious professionals in your congregation have a role in choosing (or at least approving) group leaders. Covenant groups are designed to bring up sensitive personal issues, and it is important that facilitators be the kind of people who your minister(s) and staff can trust to handle such emotions appropriately.

Once you have the go-ahead for a group or covenant group program, pick a theme and recruit members by inviting specific people. Recruit other leaders to create groups on topics of interest. If the program is to be church-wide, it will be necessary to educate the membership about these groups.

At the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Michael worked with the Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube to create a covenant group program. After identifying and training leaders with Rev. Straube, Michael prepared a series of newsletter articles and Sunday service inserts on covenant groups. These materials introduced the concept of covenant groups to the congregation and educated them about the philosophy that Eno River's groups would use. They also helped warm up the congregation to hear these messages from their minister.

Meanwhile, Rev. Straube began weaving the need for small group interactions into his presentations to

membership classes. Eventually, in a service on spiritual community, he outlined a vision for small group ministry in the congregation. This vision involved the philosophy that small groups help people care for each other, and help get pastoral needs brought to the attention of the ministerial and lay leadership. At the service, members were asked to sign up for non-themed groups and some 150 people responded immediately. Within six months, covenant groups were a thriving part of the culture at Eno River.

At All Souls Church, Rob knew a few covenant groups were happening but not much more. Then one day he was asked by the minister, the Rev. Rob Hardies, to lead a men's group in what would be the second round of groups at the church.

Together, they discussed potential co-leaders, and soon found an older African-American gay man with whom Rob (a 26-year old straight white man) could work. They were asked to join a group leader's covenant group—led by Rev. Hardies—which met several times before the groups “went public” so all of us had some experience with the model (see the section on recruiting and training leaders).

After a few months, the Sunday service featured testimonies from participants in the first round of covenant groups, and Rev. Hardies preached about them. An insert in the order of service featured descriptions of all the new groups, and at coffee hour, all of the groups had tables set up so folks could learn more and sign up. Rob's group had about 16 guys sign up, 14 at the initial meeting, and eventually 10 who committed to the group.

The leader's covenant groups at All Souls and Eno River continue to meet monthly. The first half of their meetings is a focus reading and reflection (as in the covenant groups); the second half is spent discussing how the groups are going and helping each other out. While some groups rotate meeting facilitators, the same person represents that group at the leader's group meeting every month.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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