

Covenant Groups

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An increasing phenomenon in meetings and worship groups in recent years has been the establishment of covenant groups, as Friends have been seeking ways to offer and receive specific support within the body of their local faith community. These guidelines are offered for the use of meetings and worship groups that may be considering how they can better nurture their members and attenders.

Definition and Purpose:

A covenant group is a small intentional community within a meeting in which members and attenders may find support, encouragement, and mutual accountability in their growth toward fullness of life in the Spirit. Covenant groups provide a place where questions and doubts can be raised in an environment of acceptance and trust, and where experiences and insights can be shared in such a way that new aspects of faith, belief, and obedience to the Light within each person may be revealed. The presence of a covenant group within the larger meeting can contribute to the spiritual vigor of the entire meeting as well as to that of the participants. Care must be taken, however, that the group not become separated from the whole meeting community, or seem to others to be exclusive or judgmental.

Principal Features:

A group of four to ten people agree to meet together regularly for a stated period of time, usually three to four sessions, and then decide whether or not to continue meeting as a group. They then covenant together for a longer period of time, usually a number of months. At the conclusion of each covenant period, a new period of commitment may be negotiated and others may be welcomed into the group. Participants share life experiences and how their faith is developing. They agree to study together and discuss matters of faith, and to nurture and support each other. They pledge to help each other grow spiritually through honest, loving communication. Groups are characterized by openness and confidentiality, although no one would be urged to be more open than he or she wished to be.

Format:

Covenant groups often meet in participants' homes, but the meeting house could be used if it is available. Refreshments and fellowship may be shared at the opening, perhaps occasionally a full potluck meal, though care needs to be maintained that the provision of food not become burdensome or interfere with the primary purpose of the group. The group gathers for silent

waiting, long enough that centering can occur. The group may then move into a time of serious study, reflection, and sharing. Prayer for the group and for one another may conclude the time together.

Leadership:

Leadership should rotate. Always, the unseen director is God; the goal is to discover in one's self and in each other the Self that God has formed, and to learn to recognize and to let die that self that is separated from God.

Matter for Study:

Groups can use sections of the Bible or other literature that all agree would be helpful to study together.

Disciplines:

An important part of the covenant experience can be the undertaking of spiritual disciplines by all participants. Regular times for prayer, meditation, contemplation, or study are frequently used disciplines. Participants are accountable to the group for maintaining them. The group may decide to undertake other disciplines on a regular or experimental basis such as fasting or keeping a journal.

Special Service:

The covenant group may want to consider if it has a special service to offer which would be discovered through a process of discerning God's will for the group. These might include spiritual healing, prison visitation, work with the homeless, visiting members of the meeting who are unable to attend meeting, or any number of other possibilities.

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