

Covenant Groups at First Parish Frequently Asked Questions

What are Covenant Groups? What is Their Purpose?

Covenant groups are groups of six to 11 people who meet for two hours each month to share their views on a range of spiritual issues. In a large congregation like First Parish (FP), it can be difficult to develop and maintain friendships and a feeling of community. The purpose of Covenant Groups is to provide the opportunity to develop friendships, a greater sense of community, and the opportunity to explore spiritual meaning with others in a small group setting. You do not need to be a member of First Parish to join a Covenant Group. In fact, joining a group is a good way to meet people and learn more about First Parish.

What are the Covenant Group Member Expectations?

Each individual is expected to make the following covenant with everyone in the group to ensure that Covenant Groups offer a safe space to share and learn:

- Make Covenant Group meetings a high priority. While it may not be possible to attend every meeting, members are expected to make their best efforts to attend.
- To engage in a small service project for the congregation and/or the larger community.
- To abide by a set of relationship ground rules that each group develops regarding how members will treat one another.
- To welcome new members (either in an existing group or in the program overall). Groups have a maximum size of 11 to maintain intimacy.

What Happens at a Covenant Group Meeting?

* Statement of Purpose: Brief greeting and clarifying why the group is gathered. (This is important when a group is new and any time a new member joins.)

* Welcome and Opening: A short reading, poem, or song that helps set a tone for the meeting and the discussion topic.

* Review Covenants & Ground Rules: Restating the commitments, which the group members have agreed to abide by. (This is necessary in the first few months when a group is new and any time a new member joins.)

* Brief Check-In: Short sharing by each person on a question such as "What do you need to share to be here completely?" or "How is it with your spirit?" It helps everyone become present and gives everyone a chance to speak once before the main body of the meeting starts.

* The Topic: The main activity of the meeting. It may be a discussion, an experience, or an activity. It usually follows a pre-planned "session" on a particular topic such as fear, hope, guilt, anger, spiritual experiences, etc.... The topic usually includes several succinct, provocative questions to help the discussion get rolling in a focused way. Each member will have an allotted period of time to share his/her views on the topic before an open discussion begins. We practice compassionate listening—listening without judgment, listening without interruption, listening without trying to fix or advise.

* Check Out: Brief sharing from each person to bring the meeting to a close. It may take the form of answering the question, what did you like about the session and what would you wish for in the future?

* Closing: A reading or song to help bring the meeting to a close.

Where Do Groups Meet, How Often, and for How Long?

Groups meet monthly at the church for two hours. Groups will meet January through June in 2011. At the end of each year, groups will be dissolved so that new groups can be formed the following fall. In this way, participants will, over time, expand their networks of people in the congregation with whom they have formed close relationships, binding us together as a whole.

Who Is In Charge of Covenant Groups?

The ministers, aided by the Covenant Group Facilitators, have developed the guidelines and procedures for the program. They develop the session topics. The Associate Minister meets monthly with the facilitators for discussion, guidance, skill development, and to help maintain the connection between individual groups and the larger church. The minister has overall responsibility for assigning members to groups.

What Do the Facilitators Do?

The facilitators facilitate the life of the group. They send out reminders before meetings. They make sure meetings begin and end on time. They contact members who miss a meeting. During the meetings, they read from the session topics and guide the discussion, ensuring the time is divided evenly and that the group's covenant is followed. They are also full participants in the group.

How Are Facilitators Selected?

Potential facilitators, who have either already participated in and/or facilitated a Covenant Group, are asked to meet with the Associate Minister to discuss their interest. All facilitators must complete a small group ministry facilitators training and meet monthly with the minister and the other facilitators for training, support, and guidance.

Aren't Covenant Groups Like Other Church Groups?

Yes and No. Other affinity groups may be similar. However, to be a Covenant Group, the purpose, structure, format, and group covenants above must be adhered to. Other church groups may benefit from using some of the same structure and format. In addition, Covenant Groups are not therapy groups, discussion groups, nor a place to give advice or feedback. It is a process that offers connection, reflection, community, and spiritual growth. While others are talking, participants are asked to be present and focused and to listen non-judgmentally. After everyone has shared, there is a period of open discussion where it is permissible to ask clarifying questions and to reflect on how or what someone has said helps you to consider a point of view for the first time. It is, however, not an opportunity to debate, provide feedback, or try to "fix" another person.

How Do Covenant Groups Grow?

Until groups reach a maximum number of 11, an "open chair" is reserved for new members. If a group reaches more than 11, a new group will be formed if there is a facilitator available.

How Does the Idea of Service Fit In?

Every group takes on some kind of service project for the church and/or the larger community. This may take on the form of assuming an existing opportunity for service or creating a new one. Program Council provides a list of possible projects. Service beyond the group meetings is important because it joins us as individuals and as a group to the larger community, and because service is a necessary aspect of a growing spiritual life.

Do I Need to Attend All Sessions?

We ask all participants to commit to all sessions so as to create bonds of trust and safety amongst the members, realizing that illness, family emergencies, and things beyond our control do happen. Covenant Groups are not drop-in groups.

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What Will I Gain From Participating in a Covenant Group?

Covenant Groups are a unique experience that differs from Adults Religious Education, study groups, social networks, support groups, or anything else you do at church or in the community. It will give you the opportunity to:

- Discover what you really value, and express those values in your actions.
- Participate in an open, supportive, nurturing environment that promotes and facilitates spiritual growth and mutual, interactive care for one another.
- Search and grow at your own pace and in your own way through telling your story, learning, loving others, and contributing yourself and your resources.
- Feel affirmed and accepted.
- Experience a high level of caring and intimacy.
- Identify and use your spiritual gifts.

We hope it will soon become an important part of your life.