

“Gathering in Intimacy, Discovering Ultimacy”

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I promise, I vow, I will, I do, I covenant... Covenant is the root of this faith that we share. Promise brings covenant to life—what we promise to each other and to ourselves, the guiding light of our time together, that to which we return again and again, the tie that binds us in growing trust. Covenant transcends creed. Creed is static; covenant is dynamic. Creed is unbending; covenant yields. Creed is certain; covenant wonders. Creed demands; covenant calls.

What lies at the heart of the ministry of small groups? Covenant. Covenant as a bond of mutuality in the form of words offered, words edited, and words of which we're reminded again and again as we build trust over time in the setting of a small group. Covenant is the golden thread that winds through every gathering of a process designed for intimacy and ultimacy.

Intimacy creeps up on you. After the chalice is kindled, like we did this morning, one of the facilitators offers a brief opening reading, touching on the topic of conversation that will follow. It's rather like the opening words of this morning's service. Group members are then invited to “check in”, to share what's in their hearts that morning, to share what's on their minds that evening. It's easier to do this when you're sitting in a circle, which folks generally are, eight or ten of them including the one or two facilitators. They have already agreed to a covenant that says “check-in will proceed without feedback and that anyone has the right to pass.” They have already agreed to “speak from their own experiences” and to withhold any urge to give advice. However hurting a speaker might be, however jubilant a speaker might feel, they have also agreed to listen, simply listen, to each other.

While this experience can be healing, folks covenant not to turn it into “a therapy group and not to delve into any participants' psychological issues.” It's a delicate balance, because therapy means healing, but Small Group Ministry doesn't presume to heal. Being together, simply and profoundly being together, surpasses attempts to heal another, to solve one another's problems, or to fix one another's malfunctions or save another from some imminent fate. How much easier it is to trust when you're not filled with the dread that someone, anyone, in your circle is anteing up to be a mechanic for your soul and psyche.

I recall reading in Henry David Thoreau's account of his time at Walden:

“If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life...for fear that I should get some of his good done to me.”

For that person to simply listen is an altogether different story.

Being who you are, where you are, how you are, being your honest-to-goodness or honest-to-badness self in the company of listeners and sharers is a great gift and one of the core gifts of this ministry of Small Groups.

On the heels of check-in the facilitators introduce the topic—perhaps with a piece of poetry, perhaps with some fragments of an essay or a text deemed sacred by one of the world’s religions. Your interest is piqued...and remember the topic was indirectly introduced at the outset. Time now to ponder a couple of questions—always open questions—or tell a story on the matter at hand.

Consider a session on trust—and each session hones in on a different topic to which almost everyone can connect. The facilitator invites folks to:

- 1) Tell a story of how a key figure in your life earned your trust.
and
- 2) What has it meant for your sense of basic well-being when a person whom you had trusted betrayed your trust? Did the fracture heal? If so, what did this healing require from you?

Then silence, time to let these invitations sink in. What will you share? What is too private or even painful to say out loud? What experience have you bottled up, but in the intimacy of this group, might feel liberated in telling? The very nature of what is required to heal from a betrayal of trust isn’t something we think about every day. It’s a matter that we might call “below sea-level”. The extent to which it surfaces and is simply heard—not reacted to—can be transformative. Small Group Ministry thus moves from intimacy into ultimacy. What ultimately matters?

Again, no advice, no rejoinders. But after one round of responses, folks dialogue about these stories, these questions, and their responses. Always, the facilitators ensure that they honor their covenant, usually through a gentle reference to the pertinent behavior to which you have agreed.

When a reflection or sermon is offered from this pulpit, it’s an invitation of sorts, a narrative intended to touch a dimension of our living that opens us to possibilities perhaps not yet considered. Sometimes it’s provocative, perhaps an issue around the realities of racism or what it is to be a refugee or what it can mean to more deeply engage in this faith or, heaven forbid, the stewardship of time and money. Our hearts and minds stir—hopefully at least. Sometimes they curdle. Almost always messages conclude with hope, possibility, options.

While we usually don’t sing in a Small Group Ministry session, there’s nothing to prevent it. While we generally don’t pray in a Small Group Ministry session, we commonly enter a state close to meditative. We reflect. We convene in community that deepens over time. We’re prepared for re-entry into a world, a community, a neighborhood, possibly a family that doesn’t feel as safe as this Small Group circle. We’re ready for one among us to extinguish the chalice and provide closing words, as we offer a benediction, literally a “saying well”, that fuels our spirits as we go our separate ways.

We go our separate ways and count on the next time when the extraordinary group in which we find ourselves reconvenes, offering yet another opportunity to be wholly ourselves and to consider in an ambience of growing trust, what matters most in our living. What matters most is at the heart of Small Group Ministry when it works as it can. What matters most and what is worth our whole-hearted attention is at the heart of worship—worth-ship—when it flows as it can.

Twice a year each group commits to two service ventures—service adventures I call them. One is geared to the well-being of this congregation. The other is planned and performed for the well-being of our larger community—ideally, in a partnership of solidarity, not charity. What folks often strain at in the suggested baseline of the behavioral covenant is this matter of two service ventures. No time! Too busy! Ah yes, shall we engage in the *ministry* of small groups? Ministry is about service. Service is about moving beyond our own needs, our own noses, our own precious to-do lists, into being with and doing with and, in the process, finding ourselves making a positive difference inside and outside these walls.

We light our chalice. We listen and speak and sing and ponder and wonder and stretch. We extinguish our chalice. Small Group Ministry and this service of worship travel on parallel tracks, if not completely kindred tracks. With the chalice extinguished, we go forth, and we pass on the light that continues to burn brightly inside us.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry avid Thoreau*, Edited, with an introduction, by Brooks Atkinson, Foreword by Townsend Scudder, Random House/The Modern Library, New York, 1937, 1950.

“Trust,” A Small Group Ministry Session Plan, Jan Carlsson-Bull.