

Engagement Groups – in a Nutshell

Intention:

- To deepen the spiritual life of participants
- To create community among the participants
- To learn and relearn the principles of “right relationship”
- To deepen connection to one’s church or chapel



Structure:

This is a suggested structure. It has been found to be helpful. But it is not the “only way” and groups are always empowered to do what works best for them.

Opening:

- Welcome and reminder of the purpose and process of the group
- Spiritual activity which centres the group and each person
- Brief check-in by each participant (*“How are you this evening?”*)

Content:

- The activities which constitute the bulk of the meeting.
- This can be learning, a shared project, discussion, reflecting, etc.
- In its simplest form it is people sharing their insights and spiritual journeys with one another.

Closing:

- Check-out by each person:
“What has this evening meant to you?”
or “How are you feeling as we close tonight?”
- Closing spiritual activity or moment

Engagement Sharing Principles:

There are many ways to express the following points, and each group is encouraged to create their own covenant of how they want to share and be with one another.

- Confidentiality
- Different spiritual viewpoints are accepted and encouraged
- Everyone who wants to share gets a chance to speak
- No person or persons dominate the sharing
- People always have the right to pass (*i.e. choose to be quiet or silent*)
- People do not judge or criticise one another
- No cross-talking (*i.e. one person speaks at a time*)
- Listen to what people say with respect
- Speak your truth in the spirit of loving kindness
- No debating or arguing or ‘being right’ or ‘scoring points’
- Sharing is done in a contemplative atmosphere
- Periods of silence are appreciated (not feared)
- We do not try to ‘break past’ anyone’s defences

Facilitation:

- Groups need to clearly know who is facilitating the session
- Facilitator makes sure the engagement principles for sharing are followed
- Facilitator keeps the structure flowing and within time limits
- Facilitator has the authority of the group agreement (its covenant for sharing)
- Facilitation can be by one person, co-facilitators, or rotating facilitation
– it just needs to be clear which one it is and when, so the facilitation can be effective.

The Diversity of Engagement Groups and Small Group Ministry

‘Engagement Groups’ and ‘Small Group Ministry’ are small groups whose intention it is to further the ministry of your congregation.

There are principles which make small groups healthy. These principles are the values we cherish as Unitarians: human dignity, reverence for life, the democratic process, compassion, the free search for truth, loving kindness, justice and equality. We live these values in our small groups. A small group ministry is a spiritual experience. The ‘Light’ or ‘God’ or ‘highest goodness’ within each person is encouraged to come out and be shared with the group.

There are practical skills which help small groups to be successful. These include: non-judgmental sharing, clear leadership, everyone getting a chance to participate, an openness to diversity, a minimum of cross-talking or arguing, speaking one’s truth with respect and listening to another with respect, acceptance of silence as valuable, clarity about the Unitarian values we cherish and agree to abide by (see above), a safe meeting space, clear time guidelines.

The variety of Engagement Groups and Small Group Ministries is remarkable. Small groups can gather for many different activities, whilst making use of key Engagement Group principles and facilitation skills, for example:

Prayer Circle	Social Justice Work	Book Discussion	Making Music
Sharing Spiritual Journeys	Creative Writing	Art and Craft	Studying the Life of Jesus
Sacred Dance	Storytelling	Intergenerational Activities	Chanting and Singing
Poetry	Adult RE Courses	Dreams Workshop	Film Study
Interfaith Encounters	Theological Reflection	Cooking and Eating	Meditation Practice
Earth Spirit Circle	Science and Faith	Healing	Environmental Action
Unitarian History	Hiking	Study of World Religions	Support Groups
Knitting for Good Causes	Theatre and Culture	Gardening	Spirituality in Daily Life

The list of activities is as expansive as our imaginations and intentions – choose a focus that you are interested in.

Small Group Ministry skills and principles can also be applied to ‘administrative groups’: management committees, building or finance committees, organising committees for specific events, can all benefit from this approach to group facilitation.

Whatever the activity or focus for the group might be, the deeper purpose of Engagement Groups and Small Group Ministry is to come together in right relationship with ourselves, each other, and God.