

A Resource Pack from the Engagement Support Panel

An Introduction to Engagement Groups and Small Group Ministry



Original documentation prepared by Dot Hewerdine, 2002 – Revised by Jane Blackall, 2007

An Introduction to Engagement Group Facilitation and Small Group Ministry

Original documentation prepared by Dot Hewardine, 2002 - Initial revision by Jane Blackall (new revised edition due summer 2007)

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Appendix A: "Our Unique Unitarian Gift"

Presentation by Rev. James Robinson at the LDPA/SUA Meeting in Portsmouth, Autumn 2006

Call for Contributions:

This is an interim release of our resource pack produced to coincide with the GA Annual Meetings. We are in the process of carrying out a full revision of this resource pack for re-launch in the summer of 2007. As part of this process, we are collecting stories and feedback from those who have facilitated engagement groups in the UK, to take stock of the experience we have collectively accumulated over the five years since Thandeka delivered the Essex Hall Lecture on Engagement Groups back in 2002.

Please email articles to Jane Blackall (rebelrebel@clara.co.uk) or post to 20 Manchester Grove, London E14 3BG.

1. Welcome to Engagement Groups!

The Engagement Support Panel would like to thank you for your interest in facilitating an Engagement Group in your local Unitarian Community, and to welcome you to the support network, for Engagement Groups and Small Group Ministry.

This pack is intended for use as a resource for you; to support and enhance your experience of Engagement Groups and Small Group Ministry. You may like to photocopy for your group members those pages which you feel will be helpful for them. We would welcome your comments on the usefulness of this pack – what is helpful, what could be more helpful, what is missing. These comments will be referred to the members of the Engagement Support Panel who are committed to responding to the needs of facilitators, and group members, as these become apparent through experience.

We would also welcome receiving the stories, and images, of your experiences. From these, we hope to build up a resource for future facilitators and group members which focuses on the UK experience of Engagement Groups and Small Group Ministry.

In addition to this pack, the Engagement Support Panel is also offering support and training to facilitators through meetings with local, experienced leaders. Initially this may be one to one, moving to small groups of facilitators meeting as the number of Engagement Groups grows. Please contact the Panel in the first instance and you will be put in contact with a local representative.

Once again, thank you for your interest in this innovative and exciting project. We look forward to hearing from you.

Rev. Margaret Kirk, Joyce Ashworth, Jane Blackall, Rev. Lindy Latham, Rev. Jim Robinson
Engagement Support Panel, April 2007

Contacting the Engagement Support Panel:

If you would like more information about Engagement Group facilitation, or would like to know about forthcoming training opportunities, please contact the convenor of the Engagement Support Panel:

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2. Background

In 2002, Rev. Thandeka was invited to give the Essex Hall lecture at the General Assembly Annual meetings in Sheffield. Her subject was “Engagement Groups: Bringing Forth the Future from the Past”. The Unitarian Development Committee organised a workshop following the lecture, which offered delegates an opportunity to explore issues and opportunities raised by the lecture on Engagement Groups (alternately known as Covenant Groups or Small Group Ministry in the USA).

The response to the lecture and the workshop was very enthusiastic and a small working group was formed, resourced by the Development Committee, to explore ways of looking at Engagement Groups in the UK context. An exploratory conference was held in July 2002 at Luther King House. Participation in this was subsidised by the Development Fund to reduce costs for individuals. A group for Engagement Support arose from this process and, having reflected on the discussions and feedback from the conference, the group set up a number of regional workshops to continue the exploration with people who had been unable to participate in the national events. Engagement Support has evolved over the last five years, encouraging the development of new Engagement Groups and responding to the needs of group facilitators, as new groups have emerged all over the country. The Engagement Support Group has now become a Panel under the umbrella of the Education and Training Commission.

Members of the Engagement Support Panel are available to provide one-to-one support for potential facilitators who are keen to set up an Engagement Group in their local Unitarian community. A number of local support meetings have been established to bring together Engagement Group facilitators, to share their experiences and develop good practice, in a setting which is facilitated by a member of the Engagement Support Panel. Progress reports, and accounts of different group activities, have been published in the *Inquirer* from time to time. A series of residential Engagement Groups have been offered at Hucklow Summer School in recent years with the backing of the Engagement Support Panel.

This pack forms part of the support being offered to Facilitators of Engagement Groups. It is intended for use as a resource rather than as a prescriptive “manual”. Responses to it and its use in practice will inform, shape and influence the training and support which is offered in the future. In the five years since Thandeka’s Essex Hall lecture, group facilitators have freely adapted the original Engagement Group model to suit the circumstances of their congregations, and we are in the process of collecting accounts of experience from facilitators in the UK for publication in the next edition of this pack.

The Engagement Support Panel members view this project as an opportunity for shared learning and look forward to your contributions to that learning.

3. Thandeka – A Report of the Essex Hall Lecture on Engagement Groups, 2002.

In the 2002 Essex Hall Lecture delivered at the GA in Sheffield, “Engagement Groups: Bringing Forth the Future from the Past”, Thandeka said that she had two reasons for being here:

a) When she spoke in Vermont in the spring of 2000, she invited people to be in covenant groups (with invited leaders). One pillar of the church volunteered that he didn't have any friends. And all the men in the church knew what he was talking about, he said. He joined a group.

b) Robert Hill's work on covenant groups is a second reason why she's here, as part of a group of ministers that has come together out of the belief that by 2003 there will be covenant groups in each UUA congregation. The Centre for Community Values is out to facilitate that process.

Why do covenant groups work? They're powerful, but why? Because they generate three spiritual strengths: compassion, stamina, and renewal. How do we generate these strengths? She uses the analogy of a physical workout: warm up, work out, cool down.

In her words, covenant group work is a spiritual practice with an attitude. Each of the three parts has its own procedure, and none can be neglected. She characterized covenant group work as starting with a downward movement of the mind towards the heart, as participants look for stories and the group relates these to their lives. It promotes a deep sharing and intent listening and creates an appreciative understanding of differences. Senses of identity are broadened in this exercise, and a sense of awe emerges among the people in the group, an awe sometimes characterized as the human reaction to a sacred encounter - the place between "I" and "thou" where the healing presence of God is met and felt. John Dewey called this the ethical content of religious experience, when the ethical comes to the fore to promote action.

The spiritual workout begins as the spiritual endorphins of compassion kick in. Such a collective experience creates an overflow of good will that is translated into actions outside the group, either expressed every fourth meeting, which allows a measured contribution without draining the group, and it builds stamina.

Returning to the group's home site, members share the experiences they've had, leading to the cool-down part of the spiritual workout. In respectful listening, the experiences of each participant are shared, acknowledged, and respected. Each hears and is heard, affirms and is affirmed. Participants discover the third spiritual strength of covenant groups: renewal.

It's a way to practice what we preach: right relationship.

4. Engagement Groups: The Process

Note: This is the engagement process as originally described in the literature from Thandeka's organisation.

Size: 6 - 12 members.

Growth Pattern: When a group grows beyond 10 members, the planned creation of a second group will begin.
(Note: this is not widely practiced in the UK as yet)

Meetings: At least once a month, perhaps twice a month or once a week.

Format:

- Opening:** Welcome and statement of group purpose.
Reading or ritual, which ties the group to its larger organisation and transcendent purpose.
Review of group covenants.
- Check-in:** What, briefly, is going on in your life today?
- Content:** Experiencing, learning, discussion, planning, action, reflection: it is the group's choice.
(Suggestion: choose something you already like doing! Examples might be craft, reading, personal sharing...)
- Check-out:** How is everyone feeling now?
- Closing:** Ritual which ties the group to its larger organisation and transcendent purpose

Facilitation: Facilitator and co-facilitator are chosen and trained to facilitate the group's process. Facilitators of groups meet together with the appropriate local Engagement Group facilitator support network for ongoing training and support.

Covenants: Ground rules for the group's relationship and interaction.
Service to local Unitarian community and larger world.
Commitment to generate new groups by growing and dividing.
(Note: This covenant is rarely adopted by engagement groups in the UK at present).

5. Facilitator's Role and Behaviours

The role of a facilitator in an Engagement Group context is to help the group stay focussed and in line with its covenants, so that the group can accomplish its task. The facilitator convenes and facilitates group meetings and sees to it that basic logistics of the group are attended to.

Characteristics of an effective group facilitator include a commitment to the Engagement Group model and to the larger organisation of which the group is a part. An effective facilitator is willing to learn, has good listening skills, is open to people with diverse viewpoints, is emotionally mature, and has the ability to be objective.

Facilitators learn Engagement Group facilitation by attending special training sessions, by using available resource materials (such as this pack), by consulting with appropriate local Engagement Support network members, and by ongoing participation in a facilitators' Engagement Group.

Key Aspects/Requirements of the Facilitator Role

The following describes the requirements of facilitators in order to fulfil their role:

Achieving the Task

- Clarify and maintain roles, responsibilities and boundaries with regard to the task, time, content and levels of participation.
- Help people take part in the Engagement Group in ways which are meaningful, relevant, in context and productive in achieving outcomes that are useful to them, to the Engagement group, and to the local Unitarian community and wider world.

Maintaining Relationships

- Encourage a respectful curiosity about all views by acknowledging them, by maintaining neutrality toward them and by asking questions, if appropriate, to release more information about them.

Managing Dialogue

- Help people develop new but related views by eliciting, inviting, and offering different perspectives.
- Question generalisations to elicit specific examples which support or contradict them

Shared Leadership

One of the keys for an effective Engagement group is shared leadership. This means that all members of the group have a sense of ownership of and responsibility for the group. Groups that operate on the basis of shared leadership are more stable and long lasting. They are less dependent upon the designated facilitator, and are more involved, active, take more initiative. Thus groups with shared leadership are more dynamic and vital than those based on a hierarchical model. Plus the facilitators of groups with shared leadership are less likely to burn out as they are not burdened by excessive responsibility for the group.

- Facilitators of groups with shared leadership have a responsibility for encouraging other group members to gain the skills needed for leadership and facilitation.
- It is a key aspect of the facilitator's role to ensure that the group has a clear purpose, format and ground rules to enable all members to share in the work of keeping the group focused.

Making Suggestions

When appropriate, pose questions which may challenge or suggest alternative behaviours, beliefs and relationships. Invite and make suggestions which respond to the meaning of situations as they are understood and described by individuals.

Personal Professional Development

Actively participate in the continuous improvement of their own effectiveness as a facilitator through available Engagement Support processes.

Maintain a genuine curiosity about their own effectiveness demonstrating openness to alternative ways of facilitating and readiness to assist the development of others within the group as facilitators and leaders.

*“Remember that your influence begins with you and ripples outward.
So be sure that your influence is both potent and wholesome.”*

The Tao of Leadership. John Heider

6. Preparing the Ground

Administrative Points

Present these as a way of helping people find their way around. Even if they have been told or given a written sheet of administration and information it is worthwhile pointing out some lighter topics: start times, refreshments breaks etc.

Manage the Environment

People will only comment on the physical surroundings if in some way they are made uncomfortable. If people are too hot or too cold, or the chairs are uncomfortable they do not relax and their readiness to participate is inhibited.

Handling the Check-ins

Tell people what you want them to cover in their check-ins and approximately how much time they have. Remember the pass option. Try to avoid mechanically sweeping round the group from left or right. Don't forget to check-in yourself.

Rapport Building

Get to know people's names and use them. Don't be tempted to be over familiar or very chummy at the outset – people need to take their own time to decide whether they like you or not. In-jokes or cliquy chats with one or two may build rapport with them but may make you look rather exclusive to others. Build rapport evenly in the group.

Invite the Group to Communicate Concern

It can be rather unproductive asking "is everybody happy?" An alternative is to ask "is anyone unclear of any of the details I've given?" Or "If anyone is uncomfortable with any of those points please let me know?" Give the group permission to express concern.

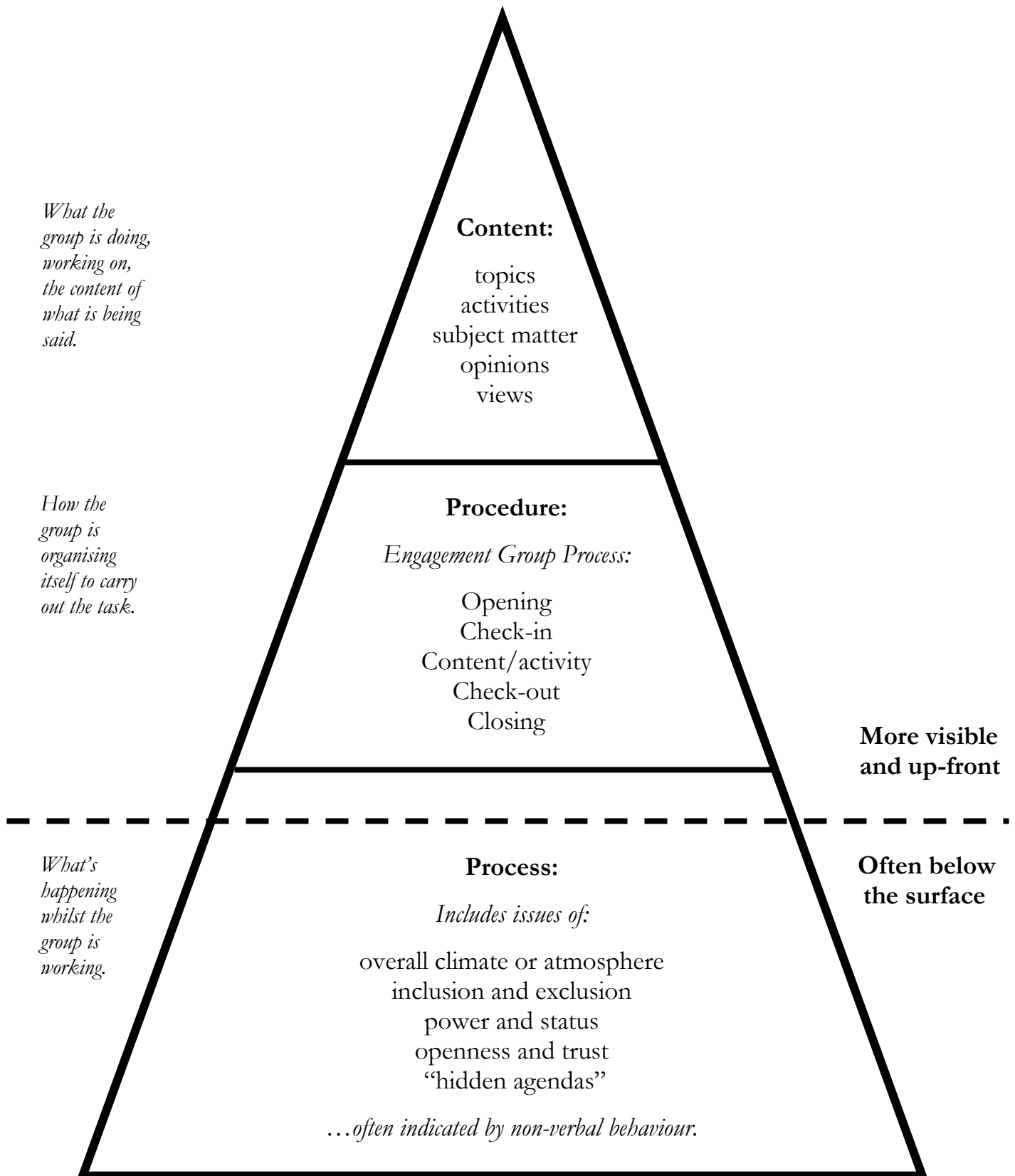
Establish Ground-Rules / Define Roles

This is about clarifying and managing expectations of you, of each other and of the Engagement Group process. It can be useful as the facilitator to briefly say something about your role; this is what I will be doing, this is what I will not be doing. In the same way, you may want the group to spend a little time sharing their views and feelings about how they want to work together e.g. hopes, fears, expectations.

Modelling Appropriate Behaviour

If the purpose of the Engagement Group is to get the group talking to each other openly, sharing experiences and activities, how you as the facilitator respond, particularly early on, can have a powerful effect on the group. How you respond to questions for direction, challenges, disagreements and confrontation within the group towards you, will convey messages of permission or not and will reinforce your role.

7. The Content/ Procedure / Process 'Iceberg'



8. Some Practical Hints and Tips

General Approach	Specific Things You Can Say Or Do
<i>Enforce process agreements</i>	<p>Once the group has agreed to a procedure, your credibility and neutrality may be at stake if you don't enforce their agreement.</p> <p><i>"Wait a second, you agreed to brainstorm. Don't evaluate ideas ..."</i> <i>"Harry, let John finish."</i> <i>"Sorry Beth, I'm afraid your time is up".</i></p>
<i>Encourage</i>	<p><i>"Could you say more about that?"</i> <i>"Why don't you try..."</i> <i>"Keep going. I think this is useful".</i></p>
<i>Accept/ legitimise/ deal with or defer</i>	<p>This is a general method of intervening that works well for dealing with problem people and emotional outbreaks of all kinds.</p> <p><i>"You're not convinced we're getting anywhere? That's OK, maybe you're right".</i> <i>"Are you willing to hang on for 10 minutes and see what happens?"</i></p>
<i>Don't be defensive</i>	<p>If you are challenged, don't argue or become defensive. Accept the criticism, thank the individual for the comment, and boomerang the issue back to the individual or group.</p> <p><i>"I cut you off? You weren't finished? I'm sorry. Please continue."</i> <i>"You think I'm pushing too hard? (lots of nods)</i> <i>thank you for telling me. How should we proceed here?"</i></p>
<i>Say what's going on</i>	<p>Sometimes, simply identifying and describing a destructive behaviour to the group is enough to change that behaviour. Be sure to check for agreement after your process observation. Don't assume they are with you.</p> <p><i>"You are not letting John finish his presentation".</i> <i>"I think you're trying to force a decision before you're ready".</i> (See "Don't Be Defensive")</p>
<i>Avoid process battles</i>	<p>Don't let the group become locked into arguments about which is the "right" way to proceed. Point out that you can try a number of things, deal with more than one issue. The issue is which one to try first.</p> <p><i>"We can try both approaches. Which one do you want to try first?"</i> <i>"Can we agree to cover both issues in the remaining time? ...</i> <i>OK, which do you want to start with?"</i></p>

<p><i>Boomerang</i></p>	<p>Don't get backed into answering questions the group should be answering for themselves. Boomerang the question back to the group.</p> <p>Group member. <i>"Facilitator: which problem should we deal with first?"</i> Facilitator: <i>"That's up to the group. Which do you think we should discuss first?"</i></p> <p>Group member, to facilitator: <i>"What was the inflation rate for last year?"</i> Facilitator: <i>"Who can answer that question?"</i></p> <p>Group member: <i>"I don't like the tack we're taking here".</i> Facilitator: <i>"What do you think we should do?"</i></p>
<p><i>Don't talk too much</i></p>	<p>The better facilitator you become, the fewer words you will have to use. When you have really done a good job, the group may leave thinking that the meeting went so well it can do without you next time.</p> <p>Use your hands, eye contact and partial sentences to communicate economically:</p> <p><i>"I'm sorry. You were saying that..."</i> <i>"Could you say that again?"</i> <i>"The point you were making was..."</i></p>
<p><i>Maintain/regain focus</i></p>	<p><i>"Wait a second. Let's keep a common focus here".</i> <i>"Just a moment, one person at a time. Joe, you were first and then Don".</i> <i>"I can't facilitate if we have two conversations going at once. Please try to stay focused".</i> <i>"Excuse me, Elizabeth. Are you addressing the issue of...?"</i> <i>"Let's work on one thing at a time".</i></p>
<p><i>Play dumb</i></p>	<p>When the group has gone off track or the meeting has broken down in some way, playing dumb is a way of getting the group to focus on its own process by having to explain it to you. It's a form of boomeranging, and is easy to do when you're really confused.</p> <p><i>"Can someone tell me what's going on?"</i> <i>"I'm confused. What are we doing now?"</i> <i>"Where are we?"</i> <i>"I'm lost. I thought we were"</i></p>
<p><i>Use your body language</i></p>	<p>Many of these interventions and preventions can be reinforced, and sometimes even made, by the movement of your body and hands. For example: regaining focus by standing up and moving into the middle of the group, enforcing a process agreement by holding up your hand to keep someone from interrupting, encouraging someone by gesturing with your hands.</p>

<p><i>Check for agreement</i></p>	<p>Almost any time you make a statement or propose a process, you give the group an opportunity to respond.</p> <p><i>“Do you agree?”</i> <i>“Alright?”</i> <i>“OK?”</i></p> <p>A powerful way of checking is to look for the negative. Make silence a sign of confirmation. Rather than saying, "Do you all agree", ask:</p> <p><i>“Are there any objections?”</i> <i>“If there are no objections (pause) ... we'll move on to ...”</i> <i>“Is there anyone who can't live with that decision?”</i></p>
<p><i>Use the group memory</i></p>	<p>The group memory can also be used to reinforce many of the interventions and preventions. For example: Regaining focus can be facilitated by walking up to the group memory and pointing at the agenda item the group should be dealing with. Getting agreement on content can be greatly supported by writing down or circling the subject to be discussed.</p> <p><i>“It seems to me that”</i> <i>“My sense is”</i></p>

*“The paradox is, of course, that the minute the question has been asked, the questioner becomes the listener!
So a good questioner has also to be a good listener. They are two sides of the same coin.”*

9. Facilitation – What It Is and What It Isn't.

Is	Isn't
Enabling	Teaching
Motivating	Prescriptive
Guiding	Individual problem solving
Clarifying	Judgmental
Being approachable	Taking over
Being a role model	Lecturing
Equal	Guru
Encouraging	Superior
Catalyst	Patronising
Listener	Scoring Points
Recognising others	Rigid
Aware of impact	Dogmatic
Flexible	Prejudiced
Organised	An ego trip
Support	Agony Aunts or magicians
Sensitive to group	
Source of energy	
Having a clear message	
Challenging	
Confronting	

“It (this book) is committed to the view that the facilitator is a midwife eliciting the emergence of self-directed and peer learning.”

10. Facilitation and Stages of Group Development

STAGE ONE: 'Forming'

Key Facilitator Behaviours:

- create safety and comfort.
- make objectives and tasks clear and explicit.
- help people feel included, welcome and involved.
- create opportunities for people to get to know one another.
- be prepared to allow a degree of dependency on the facilitator in the early stages.
- take initiatives.
- try and avoid being excessively anxious.
- value previous experience of group members.

Concerns and Feelings

- am I going to be liked/accepted?
- do I need to be liked/accepted?
- how anxious do I feel?

STAGE TWO: 'Storming'

Key Facilitator Behaviours

- allow conflict to surface.
- acknowledge the expression of different opinions and feelings.
- respond to challenges constructively.
- accept responsibility for and confirm own facilitation.
- encourage negotiation of responsibilities.
- avoid scapegoating and polarisation.
- try and take feedback seriously without collapsing under criticism.
- be clear about limits: what is and is not negotiable.
- distinguish between you and your role.

Concerns and Feelings

- is all this going to fall apart?
- do I really know what I am doing?
- how much should I stay in control?
- likely feelings of anger, frustration, resentment, apathy.

STAGE THREE: 'Norming'

Key Facilitator Behaviours

- help create norms rather than rules.
- be honest about own values and norms.
- create climate where feedback can be more openly given and received.
- build on and develop roles.
- don't allow group to get too rigid about ways of doing things.
- don't be reluctant to allow further autonomy and lose centrality of facilitator.

Concerns and Feelings

- likely feelings of relief, sense of progress and possible boredom.

STAGE FOUR: 'Performing'

Key Facilitator Behaviours

- develop creativity, allow room for mistakes and experimentation.
- allow others to lead and/or facilitate, let go as far as possible of control.
- create more sense of equality in team, partnership and interdependence.

Concerns and Feelings

- feeling good, involved, committed, that the whole of you is being used.
- more able to relax and enjoy.
- excitement of achievement.

“By facilitator style, I mean the unique way a person leads a certain a certain group, and more generally, the distinctive way that person leads any group.”

11. Further Printed and Electronic Resources

Websites:

UU Small Group Ministry Network is online at: www.smallgroupministry.net

Includes a vast quantity of interesting links to small group ministry within the UUA and beyond.

The Centre for Community Values (involving Thandeka) is online at: www.the-ccv.org

Includes a downloadable introduction to Covenant Groups: www.the-ccv.org/pdf/sourcebook.pdf

Books:

Unitarian/Unitarian Universalist Context:

“The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry” by Rev. Bob Hill (Skinner House)

ISBN-10: 1558964576 / ISBN-13: 978-1558964570

“Small Group Ministry Session Book” and “Small Group Ministry Resource Book” by Calvin Dame

and the UU Community Church of Augusta. Available from www.uua.org/bookstore

“Up Close and Personal: Experiential Exercises for Building a Spiritual Community” by Donna J. Moore

Now downloadable as shareware from: www.cedarsuuchurch.org/upclosebook.pdf

Other Church and Community Contexts:

A number of these books are written using mainstream Christian language and theology – others are set in a more secular context – but all of them contain some worthwhile resources if you are willing and able to see past these differences in presentation and “translate” them as appropriate for use in your own Unitarian community.

“Making Small Groups Work” by Henry Cloud and John Townsend

ISBN-10: 0310250285 / ISBN-13: 978-0310250289

“Walking the Small Group Tightrope: Meeting the Challenges Every Group Faces” by Bill Donahue

ISBN-10: 0310252296 / ISBN-13: 978-0310252290

“Building a Church of Small Groups” by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson

ISBN-10: 0310267102 / ISBN-13: 978-0310267102

“Creating Community: Five Keys to Creating a Small Group Culture” by Andy Stanley and Bill Willitts

ISBN-10: 1590523962 / ISBN-13: 978-1590523964

“The Tao of Leadership” by John Heider

ISBN-10: 0893340790 / ISBN-13: 978-0893340797

“The Zen of Groups” by Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey, Bill Taylor

ISBN-10: 1555611001 / ISBN-13: 978-1555611002

“Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture” by Christina Baldwin

ISBN-10: 0553379003 / ISBN-13: 978-0553379006

Appendix A:

“Our Unique Unitarian Gift”

Presented by Rev. James Robinson at the LDPA/SUA Meeting in Portsmouth, Autumn 2006

There is something we can do in Unitarian and Free Christian churches and chapels which no other group in Britain can do, as well as we can. We can gather people together in small groups and talk sensitively and safely about our diverse spiritual journeys.

Certainly, small groups gather (throughout Britain) to talk about spirituality: Christian groups, Islamic groups, Jewish groups, Sikh groups, and so on. All of these gatherings are very important and we, as Unitarians, respect them highly. But in these groups, you either agree with their theological view point or creed, or else you really don't belong.

Certainly, there are times in British life when people of different spiritual and religious views share their beliefs. It could be a radio programme, a television talk show, an interfaith event. All of these interactions are valuable, and we as Unitarians support them. But they are (almost always) one off events and are held in a public venue, making disclosure of deeper feelings or faith a risky business.

What we Unitarians do is unique. We gather theists, agnostics, atheists, Pagans, Christians, Buddhists, followers of all traditional religions, people who believe in angels, people who do not believe in angels, people who believe in after life, people who do not believe in after life, people who pray and people who never pray, people who meditate and people who never meditate, people who are humanistic and people who are spiritual mystics, and more differences than I could ever mention, and we gather them together in the same place at the same time and share our spiritual journeys. And we do it, not just once, but consistently, week after week. That is our uniqueness as Unitarians in modern Britain.

For example, we have a group at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel, in North London, which meets twice a month on a Friday evening. The group lights candles and then shares 20 minutes of quiet, during which participants meditate or pray in their own manner. Then we talk about a spiritual topic. In the past two years we have covered topics such as faith, love, suffering, ethical values, spiritual journeys, how to deepen the quality of human life, and many more. As you can see, we have talked about key spiritual questions. About 12 people attend the group regularly, with an average attendance of 8 on any given Friday. Participants have Buddhist, Hindu, theistic, scientific, Christian, Jewish, agnostic, etc. leanings or beliefs. What happens during our sharing is that we find both areas of common agreement and areas of difference. Each participant clarifies their spirituality and deepens their understanding of others. We experience an affirming and loving community, and our own spiritual journey is inevitably deepened.

In the past few years, such spiritual sharing groups within Unitarian settings have been called “engagement groups”. But the name does not matter – any sensible name will do. And there are many different examples of how Unitarian churches or chapels foster such groups. Here is a sampling:

+ Newington Green Unitarian Church holds a weekly Tuesday evening event including a simple meal, meditation, and an art project focusing on a spiritual theme. People share their spiritual journeys through art;

+ Sevenoaks Meeting House has a monthly evening group called Reflections which has covered a wide range of spiritual topics. People share their spiritual journeys through sharing their reflections;

+ Richmond Unitarian Church has had a knitting group which shares spiritual journeys while creating gifts for people with special needs. People share by telling the story of their spiritual journey;

+ Kensington Unitarian Church has a “Reading Engagement Group” which selects and discusses books of spiritual and ethical interest. People share their spiritual insights through discussion;

+ Croydon has had a monthly group which used the poetry of the Sufi mystic Rumi to evoke spiritual sharing between participants. People share their spiritual journey through the medium of poetry;

+ Golders Green Unitarian Church holds a monthly sacred dance group. People share their spiritual journeys through the medium of dance.

Some Unitarian Churches or Chapels are small and their Sunday worship service itself becomes the opportunity for a small group of people to share their diverse spiritual view points. If your regular worship attendance is under 15 people, then your worship service can be a ready made engagement or sharing group. At Rosslyn Hill Chapel, in addition to our morning service, we also hold a Sunday evening service. The average attendance is 12 people. I (or another worship leader) presents a theme and our ideas, and then open up the topic for sharing among the group. It has become a worship-engagement group. People share their diverse spiritual views and journeys in a safe and encouraging atmosphere. This is true for other smaller Unitarian worship settings as well. Being small can be beautiful. It can give everyone the opportunity to share.

Whether a small Sunday worship service or a mid-week programme, these groups have something in common: people sharing their diverse spiritual or religious view points within a safe and encouraging community. There are some key principles which make a Unitarian group safe and encouraging. Here are some of those principles:

+ Different spiritual view points are accepted, i.e., there is not just one way to believe. Humanists and theists are both valuable. People who pray and people who do not pray are both valuable. And so on;

+ Everyone gets a chance to share who wants to, and no one person dominates the conversation. Everyone gets an equal chance to share;

+ People do not judge or criticize each other;

+ People do not cross talk, that is, people do not try to speak over the voice of another, and people do not hold side conversations;

+ People share in a contemplative atmosphere. This means people actually listen to one another with care and respect, and there are often silences after a person shares so what they said can really be appreciated.

+ People do not debate and try to win an argument. Loving kindness replaces the desperate need to be right.

+ The group focuses on spiritual or ethical themes.

These principles of sharing create safe and genuine spiritual community. This helps people clarify their personal faith and most importantly, helps them to live it in daily life. Daily lives are made more sacred and ethical. The real point of spiritual sharing is to help us deeply live our spirituality in daily life. How we act is more important than what we say we believe. We often end our small groups at Rosslyn Hill Chapel with the question: “What is one thing you would like to do this week to put our topic into practice?”

One critical factor in healthy Unitarian sharing or engagement groups is the facilitator or facilitators. Someone needs to take responsibility for keeping the group safe and encouraging. Someone needs to remind everyone to follow the sharing principles. Some people can do this facilitation without any extra training. Others need some guidance.

Let me give you one small example of how a facilitator keeps a group safe and encouraging. In a recent engagement group at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, someone spoke about their experience of God’s presence. This triggered something in another person, who quickly challenged the person by saying: “But what about all the cruelty in the world. How can there be a God allowing that?” Now, this is certainly a legitimate question. But the questioner did not respectfully listen to the person sharing. They did not pause and let what the other person say sink in. Instead, they wanted to start a heated debate about how believing in God is naive. Arguing, debating, and judging are not appropriate in a safe and encouraging Unitarian engagement or sharing group. So as facilitator, I needed to step in quickly, and say: “Your question is a valid one, but we are not here to try to change one another or debate with on another. We are here to listen respectfully and appreciate our differences.” This intervention was enough to calm the situation and for the safety of the group to continue.

At first, it may seem daunting to consider being a facilitator. But really, it is not as difficult as it seems. Anyone who has good people skills can facilitate a group, although attending a workshop on Unitarian engagement or sharing groups can be helpful.

There is a tremendous need in Britain for the kinds of groups we Unitarians can offer. One way I experience this need in society is when I officiate at weddings. When I prepare weddings, for non chapel couples (which I do regularly), I often encounter something I call “spiritual illiteracy”. Here is how the conversation will often go:

I say: “In a Unitarian church or chapel, we welcome a wide diversity of spiritual view points. Each wedding or rite or passage will differ, according to the spiritual faith of the primary participants. So I will be helpful for me to know about your spiritual faith.”

The couple will say (each in their turn) something like: “I was raised in this or that tradition, but I left it, and I don’t go anywhere now. I am not religious but I am spiritual.”

I say: “That is fine. That is good. What is your spirituality?”

They say: “I don’t believe in a man with a beard on a throne.”

I say: “That’s good. What do you believe in?”

Then there is an awkward pause. They say: “I don’t know what to say.”

I would estimate that in three out of four couples which I meet with, the participants cannot sensitively describe their spiritual faith. This does not make them bad people. They are good people, just as good as I am. But this is, I think, unfortunate. One thing I have discovered, after nearly 30 years in the ministry, is when the tough times occur, you suddenly wish you had explored your spiritual faith more deeply. But more than that, someone who can sensitively understand and describe their faith, will probably be able to live it (apply it) more clearly in daily life. Large scale surveys show that people who can articulate a spiritual faith are less likely to be alcoholic or addicted, and are more likely to be engaged in life in a positive manner. Some studies indicate that people with a sensible spiritual faith actually live longer.

People sometimes say to us: “You Unitarians don’t believe in anything!” But really, we believe in a lot. We believe in human dignity; love; the free search for truth; service; environmental stewardship; justice; the democratic method; compassion; and similar values. We have deeply held spiritual values, which we have clarified over our 400 years of Unitarian history. With those values as a foundation, we can allow and celebrate a diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs. It is because we Unitarians are so deeply spiritual that we can be so deeply respectful of differences.

We Unitarians are in a unique position in British society. We can gather small groups of people together to share their diverse spiritual journeys in a safe and encouraging manner. This creates loving community and helps people clarify their own faith, allowing them to live it more fully in daily life. So, my friends, go from here today, and help your Unitarian church or chapel fulfil its unique and life affirming purpose. In this way, you can bring hope to a despairing world.