

Leader's Notes for Sharing Our Histories

Before the Session

- Personalize for your group the letter in Covenant materials on the church Web site. It includes prep work for the first meeting. E-mail it to group members at least a week before the first meeting.
- If your 1st/3rd or 2nd/4th week meeting times conflict with a holiday, discuss schedule changes during Business time. It's okay if there's a month or two when the group meets only once. Your room is booked October–May; there will be time to cover all 14 topics.
- Put out name tags and markers and a list of members with phone numbers and e-mails.
- As people arrive, ask them to check that their phone numbers and e-mails are correct.

Chalice Lighting (2 min.)

We come together in an attitude of openness—not knowing quite what will happen, yet daring to receive a new idea, a new experience, sustenance for our minds and our hearts.

We come with an attitude of humility, knowing how much we need one another, how alone we can be in the world, how vulnerable if we face life solely by ourselves.

We come in the spirit of love, seeking human warmth and fellowship in the hands and faces of those around us.—*adapted from Peter Lee Scott*

Brief Introductions (about 2 min. per person)

Go around the circle, with each person telling one thing they hope for in this covenant group.

Silence (3 min.)

Business (5–8 min.)

- Tell everyone how glad you are they are in the group and how much you're looking forward to getting to know them.
- Explain each meeting will last 1-1/2 to 2 hours and will be centered on a particular topic.
- Discuss possible schedule changes if necessary.
- Tell them where the bathroom is.
- Usually any business is handled at the beginning of the meeting, and is quite brief. Today it will be longer since we're just beginning.
- Look at the covenant on the back of our meeting paper. Ask one person to read the first covenant. Are there any comments or problems? Can everyone agree to this? Continue in this way through all the covenants.
- Although covenant groups use the same materials and format, each group evolves in different ways. We honor these differences and encourage each of you to help create a space that is comfortable. We'll check in on the group's comfort level during our third meeting. [Leaders: Be aware that some may not be comfortable with physical contact—holding hands for a closing ritual, for example. A member may have hearing issues and need to develop a hand signal to indicate she could not hear what someone said.]
- Shortly after a meeting, the leader will e-mail the preparation for the next meeting.

Shared Readings

Invite members to read aloud.

Introduce Deep Sharing/Deep Listening (5 min.)

Explain that deep sharing and deep listening is the core of a covenant group. It is a unique way of sharing and listening, so the group will spend a few minutes getting acquainted with this process. Going around the circle, have each person read one paragraph at a time from the bulletin:

During the sharing, one person speaks at a time, into an appreciative silence. The only responses are nonverbal, although the facilitator may express thanks. A brief moment of silence between speakers lets the sharing “sink in.” Going in any order, the next person will share. This may seem awkward at first, but most groups find it very satisfying once they get used to it.

The one who is sharing has the job of speaking deeply from their heart about the topic. Listeners have the task of keeping an open heart to what is shared. The facilitator is responsible for helping speakers stay in their allotted time. It is assumed that everyone in the group will speak, but if someone does not want to speak, they may pass.

Round 1 The facilitator will pose a question related to the topic, and everyone has an opportunity to respond briefly (about 2 min. per person).

Round 2 Everyone can speak about how you felt about the topic, a way you grew, something that touched you, a story you want to share. (about 5 min. per person)

Round 3 In the final round, the facilitator may introduce another question or the group may continue sharing as they have been. (about 2 min. per person)

Practice Deep Sharing and Listening

Round 1 Tell them: “There will be only one round of sharing at this first meeting since we’ve spent extra time going over the covenant and the deep sharing process. We’ll share our histories with one another, taking about 5–6 minutes each. So that everyone will have a chance, I’ll wave at you when you have about a minute left. You may not have time to explain everything you had planned. Don’t worry; there will be lots of time to share more fully. Tonight is just the start.”

Read this aloud and then go first to share as a model for the group:

Santayana said that those who don’t know their history are doomed to repeat it. We look to our individual pasts to understand where we’ve come from, where we are now, and where we are going. Let us now enter this time of sharing to center ourselves here and now, in this moment, on the forming edge of our lives.

Closing Words

All read the following aloud:

Each of us brings a separate truth here,

We bring the truth of our own life, our own story.

We don’t come as empty vessels.

But rather we come as full people—people who have our own story and our own truth.

This room is rich with truth, rich with experience.

We gather together. Together we have truths.

Together we have a story. Together we are a community—*Penny Hackett-Evans, adapted*

Song

Bulletin for Sharing Our Histories

Business

Chalice Lighting

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Brief Introductions

Silence

Shared Readings

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self.

To place our ideas before the crowd is to risk certainty.

To dream aloud is to risk accountability.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk failure.

To reach out is to risk rejection.

To live is to risk dying.

To fear risk is to never live.

—*Leo Buscaglia*

When I see you with worry on your brow and shadows in your eyes, and I say to you, “What’s up?” remind me gently that I was not there when you made that journey to the center of your soul. Tell me as kindly as you can that I am sleeping when night clutches at you and you are driven to a place in your heart which is ever night. Do not let me say, “Don’t worry,” when worry is all you know and it feels as if worry is all you’ll ever know.

For none of us ever really walks in another’s shoes or knows the innermost rooms of a person’s heart. None of us truly knows the lonely places of another’s journey or the causes of the lines around another’s eyes. Therefore, let us be gentle with one another. Let us listen more than we speak and accept more than we judge. Let our open, outstretched hands reach and touch that we may walk along together for a little while in friendship and in trust.—*Elizabeth Tarbox*

It is by speaking and listening to each other that out of the darkness of our separate mysteries is brought to light the truth of who we are.—*Frederick Buechner*

Introduce Deep Sharing/Deep Listening

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Round 2

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Round 3

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Deep Sharing/Listening Round

Round 1 We'll share our histories with one another.

Closing Words

Song

The Covenant

I commit myself:

- to come to meetings when I possibly can, knowing that my presence is important to the group.
- to let the leader know if I will be absent or need to quit.
- to share with the leader the responsibility for good group process by watching how much time I take to speak and noticing what is going on for others.
- to do the reading and thinking about the topic ahead of time.
- to not gossip about what is shared in the group, and tell only my own story to others.
- to honor the safety of the group by listening to what others share with an open heart.
- to refrain from cross-talk, judging, or giving advice.
- to share as deeply as I can when it is my turn.

Welcome to a Covenant Group!

Dear covenant group member,

We are so happy you have agreed to be in this covenant group. We want to give you information about our first meeting, and we also want to know that you have received this information.

So please respond to this e-mail, which will let us know that we got your e-mail right and that you have the information for the first meeting. Simply reply and let us know that you got this information. Thanks.

There is a waiting list for covenant groups. So please let us know if you are unable to be in this group. We understand that schedules and circumstances change. Just let us know so your spot can be given to another person.

Our first meeting will begin at (time) _____ on (date) _____ at _____ (put room at the church or off-site address) _____. The sessions usually last for about an hour and a half to two hours. We will be meeting on ___ (the 1st and 3rd OR 2nd and 4th _____ [day]).

Facilitators for the group are _____ (your names and phone and email)
Please bring \$5.00 to the first meeting for the materials/administrative fee.

Preparation for the First Session: Sharing Our Histories

Please prepare some sort of pictorial representation of your life up until now: a collage, a timeline, a map, or whatever else appeals to you. Focus especially on your religious and/or spiritual background and major life transitions or crises. We will be using this pictorial representation as a way of introducing ourselves and getting to know each other.

These quotes may help you get started:

Everyone's story matters. The wisdom in the story of the most educated and powerful person is often not greater than the wisdom in the story of a child, and the life of a child can teach us as much as the life of a sage. Hidden in all stories is the One story. The more we listen, the clearer that story becomes. Our true identity, who we are, why we are here, what sustains us, is in this story. In telling stories, we are telling each other the human story. Stories that touch us in this place of common humanness awaken us and weave us together as a family once again.—*Rachel Remen, adapted*

One of the problems in the modern world is that everything is discontinuous. It used to be that we believed in an essence, a soul, a story, a myth that we lived by; we came from small communities with shared guiding principles based on a shared point of view. Now we live in what people increasingly call a postmodern environment. What postmodernism means at its best or worst is that we don't have links of continuity in our lives. . . . instead, we are filled with information that comes to us from the outside. We are the first generation bombarded with so many stories from so many "authorities," none

of which are our own. The parable of the postmodern mind is the person surrounded by a media center: three television screens in front of them giving three sets of stories, fax machines bringing in other stories; newspapers providing still more stories. In a sense, we are saturated with stories; we're saturated with points of view. But the effect of being bombarded with all of these points of view is that we don't have a point of view and we don't have a story. We lose the continuity of our experiences; we become people who are written from the outside.—*Sam Keen*

Imagine the choices you have in saying things about yourself and about other people . . . You can do the same with versions of your life history. For instance, most people can tell a version that emphasizes the continuities in their lives, to make a single story that goes in a clear direction. But the same people can also tell their life stories as if they were following on this statement: "After lots of surprises and choices, or interruptions and disappointment, I have arrived some place I could never have anticipated." . . . Both of these are true stories. But they are very different stories.—*Mary Catherine Bateson*