

Moving through Covenant to Communion:

Evoking Ecclesiola in Ecclesia

CONVICTION:

The Purpose of gathering in Christ is

- to be *the church*,
more fully, more completely, more intensely.
- to be a vibrant, vital, renewing *church* within Church.

The Purpose of Covenant Groups, then, is

- to be a crucible that intensifies discipleship
- to be a crucible that develops leaders, that intensifies leadership
- to manifest the divine life that creates, sustains, and redeems.
- to be an icon of the body of Christ, the *church*, to the Church.

Common Problems with Covenant Groups:

- Covenant groups may be too formulaic, too routine, losing intensity
- Activities in covenant groups may be inauthentic to who you are down deep. They do not reflect who you really are, what spiritually jazzes you, what spiritually challenges you.
- Covenant groups may emphasize only 1 or 2 dimensions of spirituality: knowledge (head), emotion (heart), action (hand), or the negative of all that: mystical (apaphatic spirituality of the great mystics).
- Some Members are not interested in going deeper, of intensifying their faith and discipleship.

A Process of Evocative “Holy Conferencing” – to be *church* more fully

A Wesleyan practice of asking provocative, intimate questions about one’s spiritual health and discipleship: “how goes it with your soul?”

Purposes:

- To ask probing questions of self and one another
- To evoke greater spiritual engagement in self and in the group. To intensify, to catalyze, to provoke.
- To better organize your communities around vital spiritual/missional practices.
- Most of all: To be *church* more fully. To be ecclesiola in ecclesia.

Process:

- ask probing questions gently and wisely to each other;
- listen attentively and discerningly;
- help persons speak their truth and listen attentively to one another;
- form community around common interests/activities/insights,
- as means of living in the divine life more fully.
- Accept everything each person says with grace and love. Do not argue or try to teach other members of the group. You are not there to inform them; you are there to help them speak, to listen to them, to discern a better way with them, and thereby to transform your community into greater communion.
- Continue asking the questions, always striving to go deeper, live more intensely, be church more fully.

Note: When asking questions, start with relatively banal, easy, non-threatening ones, then move to more the explicit and probing.

4 Steps:

- One to One Conversations
- Convening your small group in holy conversations
- Help your group discern creatively and organize your covenant group given *your interests, experiences, and what is authentically true for you.*
- Bring this process of holy conferencing, of evocative leadership to communities/groups within the congregation.

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Step I: One to One Conversations

- a) Each member talk to other members (maybe 2 or 3) one to one. Ask the probing questions, listen deeply.
- b) Share a little about your self but the main purpose is to get to know the other person better, especially what engages them spiritually.
- c) Ask *some* of the questions below as ways to get into the conversation. Do not get too heavy at first. The questions move to greater intensity and intimacy.
- d) Ask evocative questions: tell me more about that...? How does that make you feel? Can you remember an experience, tell me a story about what you have just said...?

Theme of the one to one conversations: **Spiritual vitality.**

How are you spiritually engaged, challenged, energized?

Suggested Lectio passage: Ephesians 3:14-19

Questions:

1. When do you feel that God is near? What are you doing, where are you, who are you with?
2. When do you feel most spiritually engaged? What are you doing, where are you, who are you with?
3. When do you feel most spiritually energized, uplifted, filled up? What are you doing, where are you, who are you with?
4. When do you feel most spiritually challenged, convicted, when you are questioned, troubled about something in yourself or a situation, when you are being called to do something differently?
5. When do you find/experience the most spiritual vitality and energy in this covenant group? When are you most challenged in this group? What are we doing together that evokes those experiences?

Step II: Gathering covenant groups in 5 sessions of conversations

Theological Framework for the conversations: **WHAT IS CHURCH?**

- “Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”
- “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”
- By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
- Church (ecclesia) is a verb, a relation, a manifestation of the divine life among us.

4 Movements of Being CHURCH – the body of Christ – in any context

1. <u>Gathering</u>	Coming together to welcome, accept one another, belong to each other, to be transfigured. Gathering to offer and to share.
2. <u>Offering</u>	Offering our lives entirely to God as a living sacrifice (Rom 12) is our <i>true</i> worship. We offer in order to share our lives in Christ.

3. <u>Sharing</u>	Sharing all things in Christ, becoming the body of Christ in which the lowly are lifted up, the lost are found, the outcast are brought in. Around the Lord's table, we receive and give the bread and cup from each other, equally.
	a. Receiving: Receiving love, nurture, kindness, support, challenge, help for the journey. Accepting others' gifts as bread and wine, we receive Christ.
	b. Giving: Using our gifts and talents to help and nourish others. Giving what we have and who we are as bread and wine, we give Christ.
	Sharing fully: we take in Christ through others; others take in Christ through us. Thus, we share to become one body in Christ.
4. <u>Sending/Extending</u>	Extending what we have become, communion, to those beyond our community, especially the least, lost, and oppressed; We are sent out to gather the harvest, to bear fruit, and bring it all into greater communion with God.

ALL THIS IS FOLLOWING CHRIST; LIVING IN THE SPIRIT; BEING CHURCH

First Session theme: Gathering

Gathering to be transformed: Welcome, hospitality, incorporating everyone

Suggested Lectio: I Cor. 12: 7, 12-14, 21-27

General (any group, place, community):

- What group or community gives you the greatest sense of belonging? How are you welcomed in the group?
- How were you incorporated into the group, brought into its center? How did that happen?
- What expectations do you have when you join the group? For yourself? For the group as a whole?

Covenant Group:

- When have you felt best incorporated into (woven into the fabric of) the Covenant Group? Where was it? How did it happen? What did people do to help you feel that way?
- What expectations do you have when you join this group? For yourself? For the group?

Second session theme: offering oneself.

Themes: offering oneself, as much as possible, to God and to the group and to the common purpose. Putting oneself on the altar to be transformed by the Spirit. Offering all that one is and has.

Lectio: Rom. 12: 1, 2.

General Questions:

1. When have you poured yourself into an activity and 'lost' yourself in it? Where were you, who were you with, what were you doing?
2. In what situations have you heard a call, received a vocational calling, to dedicate yourself to a higher purpose?
3. What community, what cause, what person have you given yourself to, unreservedly?

Covenant Group:

1. When have you dedicated yourself most fully to God? To *church*? To ministry? What caused you to do so?
2. What can we do as a covenant group to empower us to offer ourselves to God more fully each time we gather?
3. What can we do as a covenant group to enact our offering of self and of our group to God and to each other as *church*? What can we do to help us offer ourselves more fully, to be transformed more completely?

Third Session theme: receiving.

Themes: Receiving love, nurture, kindness, support, challenge, help for the journey

Lectio: ?

General (any group, place, community):

1. How have you received help through the years that made a significant difference in your life?
2. When were you 'fed' when you were most spiritually hungry? Where were you? How were you 'fed'?
3. Where and how did you feel the most nurture and love? What was given to you that helped you to feel nurtured and loved?
4. Where are you and what are you doing when you 'recharge'?

Covenant Group:

1. How have individuals in this Covenant Group made a significant impact in your life?
2. How has this Covenant Group 'fed' your spiritual hunger? How does it feed you? Where are you and who is involved?
3. In what context do you feel most nurtured and loved in this Covenant Group? How does that nurture and love help you? What does it help you to do, to become?
4. Finish this sentence: in this Covenant Group, I receive most spiritually when_____.

Fourth session theme: giving.

Themes: my gifts and talents help others, nourish others; my offering is accepted, helps others.

Lectio suggestions: ?

General (any group, place, community):

1. What are some of the ways that you contribute to the lives of others?
2. What has been the most meaningful experience when you contributed to others, when you gave of yourself, and when what you gave made a difference for someone else?
3. What is most meaningful to you about giving, helping, contributing?

Covenant Group:

1. How has this Covenant Group involved you in giving to others?
2. What is most meaningful to you about those experiences?
3. In which group do you feel that you contribute the most, that you have something vital to give, that people benefit the most from you? How does that happen?
4. If you were to start a ministry that would help the congregants give more of themselves, what kind of ministry would that be, what would it do?
5. Finish the sentence: I give most, and get the most out of it, when _____.

Fifth session theme: sharing.

Themes: Sharing our lives, becoming a family with each other, giving as receiving, receiving as giving, generating a common life, becoming the body of Christ.

Lectio suggestions: ?

General (any group, place, community)

1. What do you do in your families that helps each member to feel most like family.
2. In what other contexts do you have relationships that feel most like family, in which you feel that you have a lot to contribute and that you receive most?
3. In what community/group do you feel that the members are most interdependent. In what community do you feel the participants, including yourself, are most authentic, most real?

Covenant Group:

1. When and where in the Covenant Group life have you felt most like – or better than – family. In which each person contributes and each person receives?

2. Following question #1: be as specific as possible about what happens in the group: what did you give to someone else, what did you receive from someone else, such that both of you felt that you belonged and that your contributions made a difference and nourished each other?
3. What do you need/want in the covenant group that will help you share your life in the group more fully? That will help you be more vulnerable and receive help or care? That will help you give to and care for others?

Sixth session theme: Extending.

Themes: Extending communion to those outside our community; bringing others into greater communion. Extending the communion within the Covenant Group into the other areas of your life; bringing all areas of your life into the communion.

Lectio: ?

General (any group, place, community)

1. What communities are you a member of that reaches out to others outside the community? Why do they do it? What do they hope to gain?
2. Think about a community in which you were/are active, that felt like family, that you were able to give and receive among others the most. Has anything happened in that community that was so wonderful that you told people outside that community about it?

Covenant Group:

1. How do you live your faith everyday outside the congregation or this covenant group such that others recognize it? How do you proclaim the good news such that people hear it, experience it? [Not how *should* you or how would you *like* to. Rather, how do you actually proclaim the good news?]
2. What does this mean to you: “we should take the church out into the world beyond the four walls of the covenant group.” How could we do that together?
3. Have you brought people into a church community who were significantly different from yourself and the community? If so, was your activity accepted by other church members? How might we do that in our group?
4. Besides bringing in other people, what else that is new and helpful could you bring into the covenant group to build it up? What do covenant groups need brought in, like fresh air and food for one’s body, to keep it vital and vibrant?

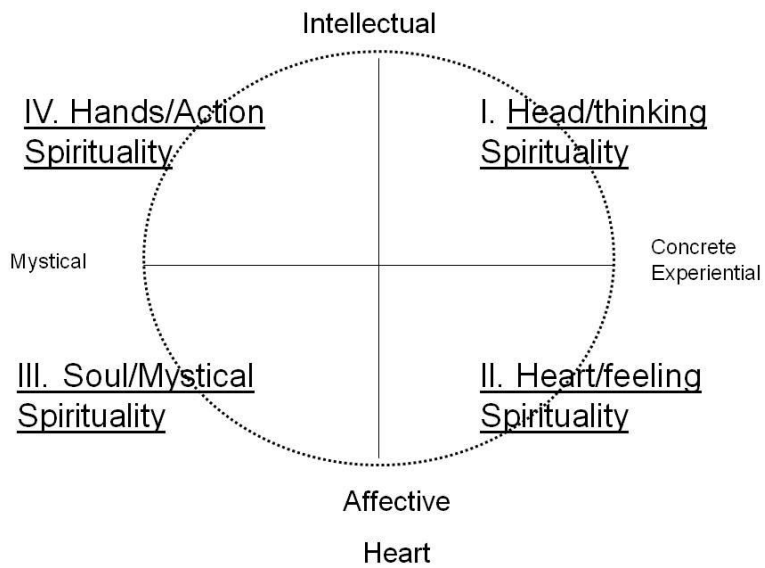
Gathering Again. The Cycle continues, goes deeper, gets wider, becomes more intense and more complete.

Step III: Help your group discern how to organize your covenant group to *be church more fully*, given your interests, experiences, and what is authentically true for you

Step IV: Help church communities form around common interests/activities

- a. You can be the evocateur in your congregation. If the congregational life is stale and static, find out what is spiritually enlivening for the people. Then build the congregational life around those relations/activities.
- b. Help others identify they ways they are authentically spiritual, to recognize their authentic spirituality.
- c. Encourage persons to form new communities around authentic spiritual engagement.
- d. Equip and support persons for leadership (help them understand how to lead evocatively in a community)
- e. Pour your positive energy into the communities without ever leading them. Do not let them founder due to your inattention.
- f. Celebrate publically in the congregation all the good that happens in and through these new communities.
- g. Be attentive to old and dying communities; help them pass on so that new communities can form.
- h. Think of yourself as a gardener. You cannot make the communities form or grow or be productive, but you can nurture them, and you can cultivate an environment in which communities of ministry can emerge.

Appendix:



How does your covenant group integrate all 4 quadrants of spirituality?

RESOURCES:

Covenant Discipleship

<http://www.gbod.org/smallgroup/cd/default.asp>

Lectio Divina:

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Catholic/2000/08/How-To-Practice-Lectio-Divina.aspx>

<http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html>