

# Virtual Youth Groups HANDBOOK



## Facilitator's Guide

### **UUPCC Vision Statement**

We envision a worldwide Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist community that promotes peace, justice, and liberty for all, supported by partnerships that are integral to congregational life.

# Introduction to Virtual Youth Group Meetings

*No vision for the future of Partnerships, the future of Unitarian Universalists around the world, and the future of a global UU community can be complete without the active participation of our youth. Youth pilgrimages and connections made with Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists around the world are life-changing experiences.*

—UUPCC Board Charge to Youth Initiatives Task Force, 2014

UUPCC has created a model for Unitarian/Universalist youth groups from around the globe to be able to connect to one another. We aim to develop a program that allows for theological exploration and discussion of current issues through structured conversations. This could be used not only internationally, but between youth groups within a single country as well.

UUPCC is hoping that this program will have a life of its own. Feel free to use these materials and/or create additional materials that work for the groups you are connecting. While these are youth-focused, we are quite convinced that the model could also be adapted for adult use.

These sessions were developed specifically with US congregations and Transylvanian congregations. If your partner is in a different country, you will want to adapt the readings and some of the questions to reflect the different culture. We have however, developed these to be general enough that they were very effective in our beta tests between two US congregations.

There is no central scheduling office. In true network fashion, every congregation is welcome to connect with churches in the U.S. and anywhere else. We would love to hear your stories about these sessions and get feedback from groups. Please send comments to [office@uupcc.org](mailto:office@uupcc.org).

The materials here include a guide for facilitators, five pilot session outlines and a discussion of technology, including the hardware and software that we used for the beta testing.

It is our hope that these materials will assist your youth group in connecting with other Unitarian/Universalist youth either across the state, the nation or the globe.

# Facilitator's Guide

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# Introduction to the UUPCC Youth Initiative

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this program. Our hope is that this will become a model for Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist youth groups from around the globe to be able to connect to one another. Our aim is to develop a program that allows for theological exploration and discussion of current issues through structured conversation. This model can be used internationally and between youth groups in a single country as well.

These groups assist us in building international Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist relationships. It provides an opportunity to talk with others from your same country or a different country about the big questions of life. These relationships can assist us in breaking down walls of difference for when we know a person's story; we are less likely to be contentious or defensive. We are more likely to open our hearts and minds to allow the story and the experience of another to shape us and inform our own story.

## **Format of a Group Meeting**

1. Introduction of Facilitators
2. Check-in —Youth
3. Opening Reading
4. Exploration and Discovery
5. Closing Check Out
6. Closing Reading

## **General Group Policies**

*This is how we agree to be with one another:*

- We strive for respect, consideration, empathy and understanding.
- Have a strong commitment to be present at group times.
- Practice respectful listening and sharing of group time, with listening to each person's sharing without interruption or cross talk.
- Respect the right to pass. A person may choose to talk later, or to sit in silence.
- Speak from personal experience.
- Refrain from giving advice or trying to fix problems.
- Keep what is shared in the group, in the group.
- Remember we are all learners and teachers.

### **What these Groups Are *Not*:**

They are not a debate society or a study group. The point is not to convert other people to your opinion or to impress them with your intelligence and knowledge, but to speak your truth so that others can know you, and to listen to others speak their truth so that you can know them.

The topics are not ends in themselves; they are means to the end of getting to know each other. By watching and listening to each other grapple with topics, the members learn about each other in a different way than they would by serving on a committee or meeting at a purely social event.

The point of these groups is to get to know one another, not to solve each other's problems or give each other advice. People get to know each other by participating together in discussion and sharing. The topics are intended to focus the group's attention on the experiences we have in common just by being human.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

### **Facilitator Roles and Responsibilities**

*The role of the facilitator is to oversee the structure of their group:*

- Set the meeting time in conjunction with the facilitator of your partner group.
- Keep the discussion on track.
- Model good listening skills and inclusion of all in the discussion.
- Focus on process rather than outcome.
- Identify and handle awkward situations.
- Help the group maintain their covenant.

### **Group Members' Roles and Responsibilities**

*The role of group members is to care for the well being of the group by attending to its primary purposes: the building of community among and between youth groups.*

- Attending all meetings unless illness, family, or other situation prevents.
- Letting facilitator know if you are going to be absent.
- Offering support to others in the group is welcomed and appropriate.
- Keeping the group covenant.

# Planning and Leading Group Meetings

**Logistics**—Youth group leaders should connect in advance of the virtual youth group session to test technology, find good spaces for the virtual youth groups so that everyone can be seen and heard, and determine meeting times.

**Covenant**—A covenant is a set of promises or agreements to live by at group meetings. It is a statement describing the relationship of the group members to each other and of the group to their partner group. It keeps the guidelines out in the open, gives everyone a shared understanding of expectations, and helps prevent disruptive or disrespectful behaviors that diminish the feeling of safety in the group.

**Confidentiality**—The group strives for a mindfulness and sensitivity to information shared in one's group; an agreement to engage in "respectful sharing" which avoids taking heart-felt comments outside the group; an understanding that what is shared in these groups remain there so that a feeling of trust and intimacy can grow and develop over time.

**Meeting Place**—The room your group meets in should be comfortable, with chairs drawn into a semicircle and with the ability to have as many as possible seen by the camera you are using to communicate with your partner group.

**Meeting Format**—Review format and topic of the group before each meeting. Make sure to review the covenant with your group meetings at the beginning of the session. You could have it posted in your room as a reminder. Have nametags available, making sure to greet any new members you may be joining you, and discuss any housekeeping or logistics. Facilitators will want to communicate with each other in advance of the session to see if they would like to make any changes for the specific needs of their youth.

**Providing Continued Leadership**—The word facilitator means "to make easy." The Facilitator's role is to make it easy and comfortable for group members to express themselves and talk about their experiences, hopes, dreams and shortcomings with the expectation of being heard and without fear of judgment.

Your major responsibilities are to maintain a sound group, ensure equal participation, uphold the group covenant, pay attention to the group's interests and energy levels, and help the group explore interesting and sometimes, challenging topics.

**Keep the Group in Focus**—It may be necessary to remind the group from time to time of the purpose of this program. It is the Facilitator's responsibility to steer the focus toward discussions of personal significance. Theoretical, third person discussions can sabotage the meeting, taking it far from its intended purpose of personal sharing and ministry.

If your group has this problem, you could start the next meeting by reading the covenant, reviewing the purpose of connecting with another youth group, or using a directed check-in, such as “Please share one thing of personal significance that has happened to you since we last met.”

**Be Flexible**—Personal sharing is the objective of the topic discussion segment. There will be times, however, when a serious event in the community, the world, or a group member’s life will be on everyone’s mind. Part of your ministry as facilitator is to decide when to make a change in the usual meeting. At such a time the session can be reworked and the planned topic delayed. Make sure that the focus remains on personal sharing.

# Sample Covenants

*As mentioned above, creating a covenant is a crucial piece of the success of these group relationships. Below are a few samples to give you an idea of what these might look like. Your group can pick and choose from these samples or can write their own ideas.*

## **We agree to...**

- Trust, respect, and appreciate one another
- Respect confidentiality
- Let the facilitator know if you are going to miss a meeting
- Start and end on time
- Stay on topic
- Focus on personal sharing, not giving advice or fixing problems
- Share time and allow space for all to be included

## **Group Covenant**

- No interrupting
- Respectful listening
- Confidentiality
- Start and end on time
- Commitment to the group
- Explore personal experience... deeply
- Share the space
- Stay on topic
- Agree to follow format
- No unsolicited advice
- Silence is okay
- No side conversations
- Passing

## **Group Covenant**

- Be faithful to the purpose of this group
- Commit to belong for (period of time) and to have regular attendance
- Respect and follow the meeting format
- Create and abide by our covenant
- Welcome new members to the group
- Begin and end on time
- Respect confidentiality
- Speak one at a time
- Listen respectfully and deeply, without interruption
- Share the time
- Speak from personal experience
- Listen to understand, not give advice
- Refrain from side conversations
- Respect differing views



# Facilitator Tips

- A few days prior to each meeting, send out an email reminder or call to remind members of the date, time, and place of the meeting, the topic for the session, and, if desired, the questions.
- Arrive at least 10–15 minutes prior to each meeting to allow time for you to get settled, have handouts ready, review the agenda and topic and covenant, and to greet each member as they arrive. This also gives you a moment to work on getting the technology set up.
- Possible helpful strategies during the meeting, if needed:
  - Review parts of the covenant, process, and agenda to help the group get focused, especially if there have been challenges in the past.
  - If you have found that members take too much time for check-in or use it to explain some position vs. experience, take a moment before starting to review what the check-in is for and model it by being the first to check in.
  - Consider having each person read a portion of the opening words, readings, and questions so everyone has an opportunity to get involved and be heard.
  - Be aware of both verbal and nonverbal communication of members. Sometimes it is not what is said, but how it is said that is revealing. Also note what is happening during silence, observing body language and facial expressions.
- If you have a concern about a member, try to check in with that person privately as soon after the meeting as possible to check your perceptions.

## Optional Meeting Strategies

- Use a talking stick or object to indicate who is talking and when the person is finished.
- Indicate when one is done talking, such as with a gesture or a phrase, “I’m finished.”
- For time management, consider having a clock visible to the person speaking for self-monitoring ahead of time, or have a timekeeper to indicate when the allotted time for a person’s sharing is reached.
- Consider the option of having a period of silence, perhaps 30 seconds, after each person has shared to allow for reflection, and to allow people to think about comments or questions they may want to bring up during the open discussion after all have shared.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## ***How will the meetings feel?***

The technology may feel a bit awkward at first, but once the groups understand how the facilitation and communication will work, it should become comfortable. In the beginning, people may feel a little anxious about the group and they will be getting to know you and one another and their partner group. The first 2–3 meetings may be exciting and wonderful or they could be a bit stressful. As the group becomes accustomed to the format and to each other, and starts to benefit from the sharing and new relationships, they usually will become more relaxed and comfortable. This is a natural process in group development.

## ***What if no one speaks after a topic question is asked?***

Silence is okay; it means the group is taking the opportunity to reflect on their experiences related to the question. Learn to welcome and be comfortable with the silence; it is a gift to each other, a sacred space in time. The group will respond when they are ready. Also allow time between responses for everyone to reflect on what the last person said.

## ***What if someone stops attending the group?***

If a group member misses a group without explanation, call to ask if s/he is okay and still wants to be a part of the group. If a person tells you they want to leave the group, ask them if you can share with the group their reasons for leaving and if they would like to come and formally say goodbye to the partner group.

## ***What if check-in takes up the entire meeting time?***

Occasionally a group member has important and pressing things they need to share that may take longer than usual. In this case, the facilitator can decide how flexible to be with the meeting time. If this becomes the norm however, the other members may become uncomfortable with the unequal use of meeting time. One solution is to pass a talking stick or agree to a time for sharing and have a timekeeper keep track for each member.

## ***What can the facilitator do when the discussion becomes argumentative or abstract?***

In either case, the facilitator can remind the group of their purpose for meeting and refer to the covenant which everyone has agreed to abide by.

# Facilitator Training Agenda

## a. Welcome and Gathering

Thank everyone for participating and make sure all have what they need to participate in the training.

## b. Opening Words

*We come to this time and this place;*

*To rediscover the wondrous gift of free religious community;*

*To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life;*

*To reaffirm the way of the open mind and full heart;*

*To rekindle the flame of memory and hope;*

*And to reclaim the vision of an earth made fair, with all her people one.*

—David Pohl

## c. Introductions and Initial Sharing

Ask facilitators to share their name, congregation, a little information about their youth group and what excites them about being a part of this program.

## d. Review of Facilitator Guide

- Review purpose of this program.
- Review roles of facilitators, members.
- Discuss Group Meeting Format and Sample Session Ideas

## e. Creation of Facilitator Covenant

How do our facilitators want to be together in this program? Use this covenant creation as an example of how facilitators can do this exercise with their groups.

## f. Review Logistics

(Technology, pairings, meeting times, etc.)

## g. Facilitator Questions and Concerns

## h. Closing Words

*As we leave this company, may the fellowship of this circle carry us forward,  
remind us of that which we hold to be most sacred and encourage us in every hour,  
until such time as we meet again.*

—Calvin Dame