

AFFINITY GROUPS

Making connections through shared interests



Association of Membership Professionals

What is an affinity group?

Affinity Groups are small gatherings of people that agree to come together for a common purpose.

Affinity groups are everywhere. So, what is so special about the groups at my congregation?

Affinity groups can receive support and resources from the congregation, such as: staff time, building usage and Fellowship communications. Some congregations support their small groups financially. With the privilege of congregational support also comes the expectation that these groups will conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the values, practices, and mission of the congregation.

Why do we have affinity groups?

This congregation supports and encourages affinity groups because they are a great way to: make new friends, deepen connections, learn & grow, and progress on a spiritual path. Affinity groups keep the congregation feeling intimate... no matter what size we are!

What are good ground rules?

Basic ground rules are below. Your group may have others you want to add.

- Following your congregation's covenant/mission/vision. [One sample.](#)
- Confidentiality
- Right to pass
- "Converse, don't convert"

How do you greet newcomers?

Everyone who comes to a group should be welcomed. Introductions are appropriate whenever a newcomer is in attendance, as well as a quick orientation of what will happen during the meeting. Following up with newcomers during breaks and/or after meetings is always a good idea.

How do affinity groups interact with the larger congregational community?

Affinity groups exist to serve those who attend. Each group is foremost accountable to the people within the specific group. However, affinity groups also play a role in our wider congregational community. Here are some examples of how affinity groups serve their wider community, while also increasing their own reach and visibility:

- Volunteer to help at a congregational event
- At their meetings, light a chalice and give thanks to/for the congregation
- Occasionally, read the 7 Principles, Principles for a Healthy Congregation or the mission statement as an opening reading

Sample Operating Policies

Affinity Group –Affinity groups are related to the organized programming of the church where First Unitarian members and friends enjoy a variety of social, artistic and/or service activities. The exchange of new ideas, interests and opinions stimulates minds and builds friendships. As programs of the church, accountable to the Ends statements and church policies, affinity groups have access to the church facility when scheduled with the office assistant, and are advertised in the Intercom Weekly per the guidelines for our publications. The DCL is the staff liaison to affinity groups.

Affiliated Group – A request to form an “affiliated group” is usually brought forward by a church member with an interest in forming a group around a specific topic/practice not directly related to the organized programming offered by the church. Any request to form an affiliated group would be discussed with the Director of Congregational Life (DCL) and evaluated against UU Principles and the church’s current Ends Statements. An affiliated group must have a church member as an active participant in the group. This member would have the final responsibility for the group using the church facility as well as for the access card to the church. An affiliated group can use the church space after scheduling the use of the space with the office assistant; however, first preference on space is given to church programs. An affiliated group can also have announcements in the Intercom Weekly per the guidelines for our publications. The DCL is the staff liaison to affiliated groups.

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines

Affinity Groups as a Ministry

- Knowing others and being known
- Making connections with others
- Engaging with the larger community
- Growing spiritually, mentally, socially, physically
- Flexible based on individual's interests, needs and abilities



Starting a New Affinity Group

Before the First Meeting:

- Meet with appropriate staff member or lay leaders to discuss idea and get permission.
- Find others who are interested in joining the group.
 - Plan an introductory meeting.
 - Book a room and get a building key.
 - Consider providing childcare.
 - Consider accessibility issues.
 - Advertise your meeting.

At the First Meeting:

- Come early to set up the room as you want it and to welcome everyone who comes.
- Encourage everyone to wear their nametags. Have sticker nametags available.
- At the beginning of the meeting, have everyone introduce themselves.
- Discuss the purpose of group.
- Discuss the goals for group.
- Set regular meeting dates and times (monthly usually works best).
- Set ritual: Most groups do an opening reading and chalice lighting, check in and closing reading.
- Gather people's contact information.

After the First Meeting:

- Become an official affinity group. This will give you the right to have priority for building space, be featured on the website and listed in the Affinity Group Directory. To do this, fill out the attached Affinity Group Proposal Form and sign the Affinity Group Leader Guidelines form.
- Create a group covenant, have an agenda or plan for each group session to keep the group on task.
- Continue to be welcoming of newcomers.
- Don't be discouraged if you have a small turnout initially. Many groups build over time.
- Reassess the goals and purpose of the group at least and how they relate to the congregational mission.

Sample Guidelines

GUIDELINES FOR LEADERS OF AFFINITY GROUPS

Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Appleton, WI

The leaders of affinity groups have both a sacred trust and a special responsibility. In all groups there is an inherent power differential, recognized or unrecognized, between the leader and members of the group. Leaders hold greater power; therefore it is critically important that affinity group leaders understand and use their power with care and with strict adherence to guidelines that will ensure the safety of every person in the group. In this spirit, the following guidelines have been adopted by the Governing Board of the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

All leaders of affinity groups at the Fellowship (affiliated with the Fellowship or not) are required to agree to the following guidelines and confirm their intention to abide by these guidelines by signing as indicated:

First and foremost, respect the inherent dignity and worth of all the people in their group.

- Not discriminate against anyone in the group on the basis of age, race, religion, color, gender, national origin, ancestry, physical or mental challenge, sexual orientation, marital status or any other protected category (except to the extent required by the identity and purpose of the group, eg. Parents of Toddlers Covenant Group).
- Make the congregation aware in advance of any criteria for attendance, and ensure that those criteria are publicized.
- Never make use of trust, information, or influence gained in their leadership capacity for personal gain.
- Maintain appropriate behavior, relate to all group members with respect, and will not initiate, engage in or respond to any behavior which is illegal, abusive, or violent, or which is suggestive or overtly sexual in any way.
- Be mindful of the limits of his/her role and training. In particular, affinity group leaders must avoid taking on the role of therapist with group members.

Departure from these guidelines may be cause for dismissal from leadership, the dissolution of the group, and/or the withdrawal of the privilege to meet at the congregation.

I, _____, am the/a leader of
_____ affinity group. I agree to abide by these guidelines.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Challenges and Concerns

- ⦿ Practical matters: not cleaning up, closing down building properly
- ⦿ People treating group as a counseling session
- ⦿ Cross talk vs. open conversation
- ⦿ Healthy group endings
- ⦿ Leadership transition
- ⦿ **How do you engage people who don't talk? Or those who talk too much?**

Introverts are welcome, too! We want to make sure everyone has a chance to share what they are thinking about, not just those who are naturally outspoken. At least once during each meeting try to structure a time for everyone in the group to share (e.g, check-in, going around the circle). People may still choose to pass... but at least everyone will have been given the opportunity to share.

Those who tend to dominate groups may need to be asked to step back to allow for the leadership of others to arise. The role of facilitator is important at meetings when strong personalities tend to dominate meeting time. Often, a few words spoken in private can help to "reign in" those who tend to monopolize group time. A good facilitator uses the authority of the group to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

Affinity Group Proposal

Name of Group: _____



- ⦿ Background
- ⦿ General mission of the group
- ⦿ Proposed meeting dates, times and anticipated size
- ⦿ Will group be open to children/youth with or without parent guardian in attendance?
- ⦿ Will childcare be needed?
- ⦿ Are there financial needs or limitations to participation?
- ⦿ Are there any other limitations of participation, example for parents only? Physical abilities required?
- ⦿ What staff support do you anticipate needing?
- ⦿ Who are the contact people for the group?

Training for Affinity Group Leaders

- ⦿ Open to all members of affinity groups, though facilitators are the main focus
- ⦿ Opening and circle question to invite conversation
- ⦿ Share the guidelines that facilitators sign with everyone
- ⦿ Talk about shared leadership
- ⦿ Leadership transitions
- ⦿ Invite strong facilitator to share his or her experiences
- ⦿ Include people who handle conflict within the congregation

Sample Training Outline

5:45: Food and Fellowship

6:15: Opening Reading and Chalice Lighting:

There is a quality of listening that is possible among a circle of human beings, who by their attentiveness to one another create a space in which each person is able to give voice to the truth of his or her life. There is the miracle of authentic narrative, made possible by listening that holds still long enough to let the truth be told. Where there is this kind of listening and speaking, a new kind of community is born - a community of life.

- Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Theologian

6:18: Welcome

6:20: Affirm and validate affinity group leaders

6:25: Circle Question/Introductions: Name, The affinity group you are involved in, share a brief powerful experience you have had in your affinity group

6:40: Burning questions you bring to this training

6:45: Intro to Principles for a Healthy Congregation

7:00: The ministry and meaning of affinity groups by an Affinity Group Facilitator

7:15: Group dynamics

7:30: Logistics and communication resources

7:45: Staying connected in good times and challenging times

8:00: Questions

8:20: Ritual Closing with small gift of a candle to share the light

Principles for a Healthy Congregation

In these ways we, the members of the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, will walk together as a diverse community bonded by love:

We value trust, respect and acceptance of diversity in our relationships with each other, so we strive to...

- Challenge ourselves and each other to grow and be faithful to the truth we find within;
- Listen carefully to each other, seeking both to understand and to be understood;
- Keep our individual needs in balance with the health and vitality of the community as a whole;
- Welcome dialogue and cultivate an open and safe environment in which to hear all points of view.

We hold honest and respectful communication as the basis of healthy relationships in community, so we strive to...

- Be open, courteous and forgiving with each other, suspend judgment of those with whom we disagree, and offer each other kindness and encouragement;
- Provide our paid and volunteer leaders with clear expectations, clear lines of communication, and our steadfast love and support.

We acknowledge that change and conflict are normal parts of life in community, so we strive to...

- Respect tradition and also embrace change as the needs of our community change;
- Be firm in our commitment to seeking a mutual solution to our differences;
- Accept skilled help when we cannot reach agreement or reconciliation;
- Be straightforward in addressing divisive or damaging behavior within our community.

We are generous with our gifts in support of our mission, so we strive to...

- Give of our time, talent and resources as we are able to keep our community vital and strong;
- Provide our leadership with the resources to be effective in their roles;
- Work for justice and engage in acts of service and compassion to others.

Characteristics of a Leader

- ◉ Committed to the Unitarian Universalist Principles, the congregation, and the faith development components of this program
- ◉ Willing and able to thoroughly prepare for each workshop
- ◉ Effective at speaking and guiding the group process
- ◉ Flexible and willing to modify the workshop plans to support the full inclusion of all participants
- ◉ Able to listen deeply and encourage each individual to participate
- ◉ Able to exhibit respect for individuals, regardless of age, race, social class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and level of ability
- ◉ Able to honor the life experiences each participant will bring to the program



Policy on Responsible Behavior Sample:

<http://www.uuamp.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Policy-Regarding-Responsible-Behavior.pdf>

Possible Communication Outlets

Newsletter

Order of service announcements

Verbal announcements

Website

Facebook

Bulletin board space

Congregational Life Table/Welcome Table in lobby



General Information

- ⦿ Make sure leaders know that everyone who comes to the congregation can get a nametag, whether they attend services or not. Have a clipboard in each of the rooms where affinity groups meet to sign up to get a nametag and to receive the newsletter.
- ⦿ On a regular basis, share group covenant and do an evaluation of group process, structure and topics.
- ⦿ Building use
- ⦿ Key to building
- ⦿ Service Project: Request all affinity groups perform an act of service for the Fellowship in thanks for providing the space and support.
- ⦿ Support and reporting structure
- ⦿ Keep track of group membership and report information to staff on a yearly basis

Strategies for Effective Group Facilitation

Group Covenant

It is invaluable for any group—whatever its primary focuses—to agree on expectations for behavior in their work together. Whether you call those written expectations covenants, agreements, or guidelines, they include a range of issues such as arriving on time, keeping confidentiality, the right to pass, “no put-downs,” etc. Ongoing groups like standing committees can review and renew their agreements annually, or whenever new members are added.

Begin on Time, End on Time

Take this responsibility very seriously. Promptness sends two important messages:

“We are a group that means what we say. We said we would start at 7, and we started at 7.” This gives leaders credibility and builds group trust. “This is a group that respects my time and my needs. The leaders said we would be done at 9, and we are done at 9. (And can go home to our families!)” Modeling respect for the group fosters other expressions of respect within the group.

Model Brevity

Leadership is not license to ramble. Make sure your thoughts are organized and succinctly presented. In check-ins and other sharing, be sure you share for less than the allotted time for each person.

Use a Talking Stick

This practice discourages people from spontaneously (and repeatedly) sharing their thoughts out of turn. It clearly gives the floor to one person at a time, and encourages shared responsibility for participation, since the speaker, not the leader, must decide who to hand it to next. (If it is placed in the center of the circle after each speaker, participants, not leaders, must still take responsibility for who will speak next.)

Pass a Watch

Check-ins can consume much more time than planned. If the group has agreed to a number of minutes for each person’s sharing (such as 2 or 5 minutes), pass a watch with a second hand around the circle. Each person times the person next to them, and gently signals them when their time is almost up. As facilitator, you go first. This device is only appropriate if the group has agreed to limit their sharing to a certain time period. And, of course, common sense should prevail if someone is sharing a particularly painful or otherwise sensitive experience. In groups with a history of saying they want a short check-in and doing a long check-in, this is a consciousness-raiser that often does not have to be repeated.

Leveling the Playing Field

Some people are quick to speak up; others need time for reflection. Some are comfortable competing for the floor; others are not and will not. The result is that a few people consistently speak first, more often and at greater length. But only if the discussion mode is “survival of the fittest,” (that is, most verbally aggressive). Below are some techniques to equalize opportunities to speak:

Moment of Reflection. Tell the group you are about to put a question or topic before them for discussion, but you would like everyone to reflect silently for a minute (or two) after they hear the question. After you ask the question, do not allow anyone to break this silence except to ask a clarifying question. Then break the silence by calling on someone who has not spoken at length or by using one of the options below. This technique gives people the time they need to collect their thoughts.

Around the Circle. Suggest that the group go around the circle with each person speaking briefly to the topic who wishes to do so. Start with someone who does not dominate.

Raising Hands. Ask the group to agree that they will raise their hands when they wish to speak, and that everyone will refrain from interrupting when someone else has the floor. The facilitator makes a note of the order in which people raise their hands and periodically indicates who will have the floor next. For example, “Mary, John, Bill, then Cathy.” If this system seems “juvenile” or controlling, try it. It is actually very fair, inclusive, efficient, and relaxing because people can turn their attention to speaking and listening with respect rather than competing for the floor and trying to hold it against the threat of interruptions. A word of caution: it is important that the facilitator facilitate, and not take advantage of the process. If the facilitator wishes to participate in the discussion, he/she must symbolically raise a hand and add him/herself to the list.

Ask that people who have not yet spoken go next. Remember, this is an invitation; it should not feel coercive or put anyone on the spot

Body language. Watch for body language indicating that someone wants to speak, but is hesitant to compete for the floor. Call on her/him in an encouraging way.

Wisdom from Leaders

- ⦿ Always have an opening ritual to create a sacred/safe space.
- ⦿ Shared leadership can be a valuable tool. Some suggestions:
 - People want to help, they just need to be asked!
 - Have a very specific request for people or outline if it is something in depth.
 - The more we ask people to help, the more ownership they feel and the less burnout the leader feels.
- ⦿ Check in with regular attenders you haven't seen in a while.
- ⦿ Encourage leaders to pay attention to joys and concerns from the weekend (some congregations have an email list to which all joys and concerns are sent each week) and to follow up personally with members who are uplifted.
- ⦿ Have a part of your time together to give thanks to the congregation for allowing your group to meet.

Affinity Group Task Force

- ⦿ Check in with leaders 1-2 times per year for updates and feedback.
- ⦿ Send out email reminders as needed, and include staff contact information for questions and support.
- ⦿ Meet with groups at one of their regular meeting times as needed.
- ⦿ Develop and implement a bi-annual training for small group leaders, involving the Healthy Congregation Team.
- ⦿ Encourage and support leadership transitions.