

Reflections
Bill Allen

We have all heard it spoken in this space many times before: We are an inclusive church, where everyone is supported on his or her spiritual journey. We celebrate together, accepting our diversity of lifestyles and religious beliefs. And we have all heard and read the 7 Principles that as UUs we have agreed to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

For me, the open pronouncement of these ideals has always been a sign that here I have found a community that shares many of my own values, and that here I can feel comfortable knowing that I will encounter people willing to affirm my right to express myself freely and openly. The challenge has always been to find forums where these encounters can take place.

Now I'm not putting down the opportunities afforded by Social Hour for introductions or weekly check-ins, or committee meetings for working out the nitty-gritty details of who will bring the salad for the next sponsored event, but somehow those occasions just don't qualify in my book as "encouragement to spiritual growth". Don't get me wrong; those occasions are extremely valuable for first encounters and creating a sense of trust that can lead to deeper levels of openness.

The problem is where do you go to find the quiet occasions where the atmosphere is relaxed and protected enough to allow people to reveal their insecurity, their daily struggles or triumphs, their inner debates, their inner certainties, all seeking the affirmation, compassion, acceptance and encouragement promised by the words of the opening statement and the 7 Principles? I have found those occasions most often in the dependable third Thursday of the month covenant group meetings I have attended throughout the 10 years I have been a member of this church.

When I arrived here in 2001, I was fortunate in that the congregation had recently voted to become a Welcoming Congregation, and the message I took from this was that here was a place where I could nurture my emerging self-acceptance and pride as an openly gay man.

My participation in a covenant group gave me the opportunity to contribute my perspective, not only as a gay man, but also as a closet humanist, on a variety of issues and topics. I admit that it was my need to finally express my opinions honestly and without censure that I placed first on my list of reasons for attending the meetings. But running a close second was my desire to finally establish a more extensive network of human contacts, beyond store clerks and the job-related interactions of the workplace.

The discussions and personal sharing that take place in a covenant group meeting have been a great source of fulfillment to me. They have helped to satisfy my need for intelligent adult conversation, for lessons in dealing with other people, especially people that I disagree with, and for hearing and respecting another person's opinion and the trail of their reasoning.

These benefits and the comfort of knowing that somewhere there exists at least a small group of people who recognize me for who I am, and are still willing to sit and listen to what I have to say, can be yours too if you take advantage of what covenant groups have to offer.