

What is a Group Covenant?

Rooted in the examples of how God related to His people and how He established guidelines for how that relationship would function, a Group Covenant spells out—sometimes simply verbally, but often in written form—how members of a group will relate to one another and the “rules” they will follow as they participate together in a group.

Neal McBride defines the covenant as “a written compact or agreement that sets forth specific details, principles, and practices the group members commit themselves to uphold for the specific period of time they meet together as a group.” (McBride, *How to Build a Small Groups Ministry*, 91.) Stated another way, covenants are “expressions of group values, expectations, or behaviors for which we hold ourselves mutually accountable.” (Bill Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 85.)

Why a Group Covenant?

Group Covenants are important because they clarify expectations for current members and potential new members, they set norms, and they give a standard for evaluating groups. More than once, a crisis has arisen in a group I have been a part of that was solved simply by being able to remind group members of the covenant they had made to one another. Unfortunately, I have also experienced situations when a covenant was not in place and there were no stated expectations for the (in this case, inappropriate) behaviors of group members. The simple process of defining behavior and expectations helps individuals feel more comfortable about how they go about being a part of a group, which in turn allows them to be a better participant within that group, aiding in the overall success of a group.

How do you form a Group Covenant?

A Group Covenant is derived by the entire group. You cannot simply give the group what you think the covenant should be. A covenant also takes more than one meeting to create. You need to introduce the idea, give the group some time to think about their expectations, collect these expectations, and then form a consensus from them.

Some groups establish a covenant from scratch. Some groups find it easiest to begin with some general questions or prompts and then edit/alter them as they answer the questions together as a group.

The general process goes something like this:

Tell your group that you will be forming a Group Covenant, and group members should be thinking about the expectations they have for the group. What behaviors or actions are they hoping to see be a part of group life? This is usually done the first week a group meets.

The following week, have your group members share the expectations they thought of during the previous week. This may include writing everything down together on a white board, or it may simply be having members write their expectations on a piece of paper you collect. One other way to go about doing this is to have a list of questions that give a sort of outline for your discussion. Many groups have general expectations for their group, but they also spell out some specifics, like when we meet, how long a meeting goes, etc.

Compile the thoughts you have collected. You will find that these ideas usually can be grouped together under common headings. Do this during the week and if you are able, hand out (email) these to group members prior to the next meeting so they can be thinking about them for the next meeting.

How do you form... (cont.)

At the next meeting, take a few minutes (Do not make this be the entire focus on any meeting, but rather, something that is done for a few minutes at the beginning or end of your time together.) to discuss the list as you have compiled it. Ask group members to agree or disagree that the items listed should be included as listed. If they disagree, find out what needs to be changed. Be sure to ask if there is anything that needs to be added.

Pray that the guidelines you have set forth in the Group Covenant will be a blessing to your life as a group.

At this point, some groups will type up a more “formal” document so that every member of the group can have a copy. Some groups ask for a signature—on a document that only the signee keeps—to help emphasize the importance of the covenant. Personally, I think simply having a typed document typically serves the purpose well.

Regularly, revisit the Group Covenant to remind the group of the expectations it has set forth for members.

Possible Group Covenant Questions

Here are some possible questions or topics that you may want to address as you create your Group Covenant. While many of these may be addressed in the ideas given by group members, if they are not, you might want to ask: Do we have any expectations for ... agenda, format, etc. Use these questions to help shape your thinking as you define and identify expectations.

1. In addition to the general goals guiding all groups sponsored by South Plains, are there any unique goals our group has adopted?
2. Will our group function as a 1 Group?
3. How will we ensure we are focusing on the 7 areas of the 1 Vision?
4. When (day, time) and where will/does our group meet?
5. What is our basic agenda, format, curriculum, etc? (What will we do?)
6. What are attendance expectations?
7. What are participation “norms” or expectations?
8. How will the group communicate information between one another?
9. How will we handle a crisis or disagreement that arises in the group?
10. How will we handle confidential things that have been shared in the group?
11. How will we deal with visitors and/or new group members?
12. If appropriate, how will refreshments/hospitality be handled?
13. If applicable, what do we plan to do with our children during group meetings?
14. What roles will or do individuals need to fulfill in order for our group to be successful?
15. What are other issues we as a group want to include?

The next three pages include a copy of an email with a list of covenant ideas that we collected and then presented to our group last year. We then spent some time discussing these items. Also included are two sample covenants prepared by other churches (just for your reference to show how some groups do this).

Group:

Below is the information I wrote down when we talked about a covenant a couple of weeks ago (except for the part about no karate.) [NOTE: Our children, on their own, developed a covenant amongst themselves which included "No karate." And no, I have no idea where it came from!]

I need each of you to spend a few minutes looking over this and then decide:

Is this accurate? Is this what you meant to communicate? (In other words, did I write it down right?)

What changes do you see needs to be made to this?

What needs to be added?

Anything you cannot live with?

Either this week or next, we will spend a few minutes reviewing this, making any edits we need to, then I will make a "final" list for us to use to guide how we "do" group together.

By the way, please be honest about this. If you would like to see something changed, but do not say it, in the long run, you will make yourself miserable, not the rest of us. Nobody wants that!

Thanks for your thoughts and prayers on this!

Rob

Thoughts on Covenant:

- We like the food themes and put out a general call to fill our possible themes list.
- We will meet 1 night per month somewhere besides the Roberson's. (Anderson/Richardson volunteered.)
- We expressed interest in having a "getaway" to a hotel or something similar.
- We want studies that help us love Jesus more.
- We also want studies that help us show our children what that means.
- We especially like ways to communicate this that may be "outside the box" and not a typical sit down and talk type lesson. Activities with our children are good. (Trent and Rob agreed to begin looking at topics and activities to use for upcoming lessons.)
- We recognize that each one of us is less effective at helping our children learn what it means to love like Jesus than all of us together are and so expect that all groups members will love, encourage, and mentor our children together.
- We also recognize the importance of older members mentoring younger members and will not only structure our gatherings to encourage this to happen, but also our membership.
- We will be committed to studying/reading/examining any material we have chosen to study together, knowing that without all of our participation, we will not be as effective as we could be.
- We want to invite others to be a part of the group.
- We like the idea of a family movie night or some other fun get-together.
- We are fine with the current structure and schedule of the group.
- We think that conflicts should be addressed with the person with whom the conflict originated or needs to be responsible for handling the conflict.
- If we need to deal with issues beyond that person, we will do them face-to-face, with the entire group, asking for a few minutes at the next meeting to address the conflict together.
- We will use email to communicate to one another about schedule and food themes.
- We will respond as quickly as possible to group meeting "invitation" emails so that people who are planning/preparing food will be able to do so effectively and not rushing at the last minute.
- We will try to avoid things that conflict with group meeting times, including last-minute things.
- If we do have to change our plan, we will let someone at group know to alleviate concern.

An Example of a "Relational" Group Covenant

Our small group gives us the opportunity to develop the relationships and fellowship necessary within the Body of Christ. Genuine biblical fellowship *is possible*, with God's help, through our individual and mutual commitment. To assist us as group members in achieving the goals of identification, love, caring, and accountability to God, and to guide us in our mutual commitment to one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, we agree to abide by the following covenants:

1. ***THE COVENANT OF AFFIRMATION AND ACCEPTANCE:*** I pledge to accept you. I may not agree with your every attitude or action, but I will attempt to love you as God's child and do all I can to express God's affirming love. I need you; we need each other.
2. ***THE COVENANT OF AVAILABILITY:*** My resources—time, energy, insight, possessions—are at your disposal if you need them. As part of this availability, I pledge to meet with you in this group on a regular basis.
3. ***THE COVENANT OF PRAYER:*** I promise to pray for you regularly.
4. ***THE COVENANT OF HONESTY:*** I agree to strive to become a more open and honest person, to share my true opinions, feelings, struggles, joys, and hurts as well as I am able. I trust you with my dreams and problems.
5. ***THE COVENANT OF FEEDBACK:*** I pledge to mirror back to you what I am hearing you say and what you are feeling. If this means risking pain for either of us, I trust our relationship enough to take the risk, realizing it is in "speaking the truth in love, we are all able to grow up in all aspects unto Him, who is the head" (Ephesians 4:15). I will try to express this feedback in a sensitive and controlled manner, in keeping with the circumstances.
6. ***THE COVENANT OF SENSITIVITY:*** Even as I desire for you to know and understand me, I pledge my sensitivity to you and your needs to the best of my ability. I want to hear you, see your point of view, and understand your feelings.
7. ***THE COVENANT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:*** I promise never to divulge anything shared within this group in confidence outside this group. I vow not to push you to share things about yourself that you would prefer to keep undisclosed.

In full acceptance of these covenants, I affix my name to this document in recognition of my commitment to God and the members of this group. I shall keep this document as a reminder of this voluntary covenant I've entered into on this date.

Signature

Date

(Your signature is for your own commitment; you retain this document.)

Connection Group Covenant

Because Connection Groups are based on three biblical patterns, CONNECTING to one another, CHANGING into the likeness of Jesus, and CULTIVATING a missional life of service, I will agree to strive for the following:

Connect

I will make attending the group a priority and will call the host if I cannot attend or know I will be late.

- I will keep any shared information within the group and I will not gossip.
- I will allow each group member to share without interruption.
- I will value other group members by communicating with them during the week through phone calls, notes or email.

Change

I will come prepared to participate.

- I agree that each member should be encouraged to share what they think without judgment and I will show Christian love without condition.
- I will encourage other group members in their Christian walk.

Cultivate

I will look for ways to serve other group members and for ways to reach out and serve the community around us.

GROUP LOGISTICS:

- The meetings will begin at (time) _____ and end at _____.
- We will meet at the home of _____
address _____
phone _____
- Refreshments – Our plan for sharing food and refreshments is...

