

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Circle Ministry 2009-2010
Animal Friend

Rev. Jan Carlsson-Bull for Circle Ministry at First Parish UU Cohasset, MA

Note: See the Circle Ministry Session Sequence for process guidelines.

Gathering, Welcoming (2 minutes)

Chalice lighting & Opening words (1 minute)

Religious mutts

we might call ourselves—
we who are faith-born of
women and men who believed
this and that and something else altogether,
who wittingly or unwittingly taught us
to question certainty.

Religious mutts we are,
bearing the burden and alive with the freedom
of humility that comes from not knowing for sure.
Perfection eludes us.
Certainty makes us squirm.
Relentless we are in searching for truths and meanings.

Our choice is community that proclaims,
in the words of the late Stephen Huneck
at the entrance to his Dog Chapel:
“WELCOME!
ALL CREEDS. ALL BREEDS.
NO DOGMAS ALLOWED.”

Blessed be the animals.
They teach us well.

Check-in/Sharing (3-4 minutes@ - 30-40 minutes)

Service ventures (10 minutes)

If you haven't already done so, confirm your group's focus and date for service ventures yet to be completed.

Topical Discussion (60 minutes)

[See Circle Ministry Session Sequence as a reminder of the structure of this segment.]

First response

Cross-conversation

Topic: Animal Friend

Rev. Gary Kowalski is minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, Vermont. He has long been a friend and advocate of animals. And from what he has to say about his dog, we can understand why.

Everyone needs a spiritual guide: a minister, rabbi, priest, therapist, or wise friend. My wise friend is my dog. He has deep insights to impart. He makes friends easily and doesn't hold a grudge. He enjoys simple pleasures and takes each day as it comes. Like a true Zen master, he eats when he's hungry and sleeps when he's tired. He's not hung up about sex. Best of all, he befriends me with an unconditional love that humans would do well to imitate.

Of course my dog does have his failings. He's afraid of firecrackers and hides in the closet whenever we run the vacuum cleaner. But unlike me, he's not afraid of what other people think of him or anxious about his public image. He barks at the mail carrier and the newsboy, but, in contrast to some people, I know he never growls at the children or barks at his spouse.

So my dog is a sort of guru. When I become too serious and preoccupied, he reminds me to frolic and play. When I get too wrapped up in abstractions and ideas, he reminds me to exercise and care for my body. On his own canine level, he shows me that it might be possible to live without inner conflicts or neuroses: uncomplicated, genuine, and glad to be alive.

[Options for the conversation to follow:

- 1) Read and consider one question before going to the next; or
- 2) Choose and consider only one question; or
- 3) If you decide to consider both questions, you may not do a "go-around" for the second.]

1. Was she/is he four-legged, winged, finned? Was she/does he bark, howl, meow, sing, breathe bubbles? Who was or is the animal companion who has been your "wise friend," your "guru" even. What was she/is he like? Tell a story about your friendship.
2. What is most endearing about your favorite animal companion? What is most annoying? What do you or will you most miss about this animal friend when s/he's no longer with you?

What concluding thoughts would you like to share?

Feedback (10 minutes)

Thank the group. Ask what they liked in this session and what changes they would hope for. Explain that for the next session, we'll consider the topic, "Before and After (pivot point)."

Note that the session plan for this gathering is available for group members as we leave.

Closing (1 minute)

- Go in friendship.
- Go in tenderness.
- Go in gentle humor.
- Go in love.

Circle Ministry Session Sequence for Facilitators

First Parish Unitarian Universalist – Cohasset, MA

The suggested sequence and time allocations spelled out below will help you who facilitate our Circle Ministry sessions to ensure that every participant will have a voice over the two-hour timeframe that comprises a Circle Ministry session.

Gathering, Welcoming (5 minutes)

During the **first meeting** of your group, you might want to offer clarification on questions that people have raised:

How long do the groups meet? We're asking that each of the initial groups commit to meeting at least through May. At that time or before, you can each decide whether you want to continue in this group, move to another group, or not continue.

Why a designated facilitator and a co-facilitator? As similar groups have met in other congregations, facilitators provide assurance that each person has a voice, that we stay on topic, and that we sustain respectful dialogue. Even experiences at First Parish have taught us that groups without designated facilitators tend to fray. There are exceptions; but this is the general learning. The structure provided by facilitators is ultimately satisfying for everyone.

Introduce your co-facilitator. Clarify that this person will step in if you can't be there, and if additional congregants want to join groups and there aren't enough open spaces, s/he stands ready to be the lead facilitator for this new group.

Where will we meet regularly?

This first meeting is at [facilitator or co-facilitator]'s home. For our subsequent sessions, we're asking that one of you volunteer to be a home host. That's all you have to do! Don't clean your house for us. Don't prepare refreshments. Just open your door and welcome us in. By the end of this evening's session, I hope we'll have a home host.

How can we ensure respectful dialogue and the structure that was introduced about Circle Ministry? Our focus next week will be a behavioral covenant. I'll provide a basic covenant, and we'll go from there.

You'll continue to have questions. Toward the end of each session there will be a time to raise them.

Chalice lighting (1-2 minutes)

Check-in/Sharing (2-3 minutes@ - 20-30 minutes)

Ask each person to share **what's on their mind and heart**. You may wish to have a timekeeper to gently remind anyone who moves beyond the allotted check-in time that their sharing is valued and we need to ensure a voice for everyone. If the speaker persists, ask her/him firmly and respectfully to conclude. IF as the sessions unfold, someone arrives who has had a particularly rending experience, decide as a group your willingness to give this person extra time.

NO feedback, NO cross-talk during this segment. Simply be with each other in deep listening.

"Business" matters (up to 10 minutes)

At year's beginning, review Behavioral Covenants and session structures.

Later in the year, you'll want to discuss and plan your service projects.

Discussion (60 minutes)

Introduce the topic and the questions (2 minutes)

Ask folks to **pause and ponder** this in a period of silence. (2 minutes)

First response: Ask folks to register their initial thoughts—in random order, but with **no feedback** during this segment.

Then: Cross-conversation. IF one person dominates, gently remind that person that we need to allow time for every group member to speak.

Conclude discussion with request for **final statements/last thoughts on this topic**—in random order, but with **no feedback**.

Feedback (5-10 minutes)

Ask participants **what they liked** about this session. **What would they change? How?** Take note during succeeding sessions of **who isn't present**. Let the other members know that you'll follow up to determine if all is well or not. Remind members that if they absolutely can't make a session, to please let you know.

Closing (2 minutes)

Note: Have copies of the session available for participants at the conclusion of each session, but don't distribute them up front. If someone asks about having an outline in hand, explain that we all tend to connect more freely when we're not tied to a paper.

Thank you!

You are a valued leader in Circle Ministry as it unfolds within our faith community!