

Circle Ministry Session Plan

*Brand new/Age old!*

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 (1 minute)**

**Opening reading (1 minute)**

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,  
For those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Such are the first few stanzas of the New Year's offering of 19<sup>th</sup> century British poet, Alfred Tennyson. Such is the oft-rung sound of the new year. Hear also these words from the first chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes:

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done;  
and there is nothing new under the sun.  
Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"?  
It has been already, in the ages before us.  
There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance  
of later things yet to happen among those who come after.

Ecclesiastes 1:9-11 (Revised Standard Version)

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

**Discussion (60 minutes)**

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

First response  
Cross-conversation  
Concluding statements

**Topic: Brand new/Age old!**

We greet a new year on our relatively recent calendar that is one of many measures of time since we humans have recorded time. We greet a new year and for a brief while sense a fresh start, not quite a blank slate, but a fresh start. "New" is the word of the day, modifying the year ahead. "Old" is the word of yesterday. The notion of new bids us to believe that we are born again into a season of promise. The notion of old bids us to let go, to turn our backs on what has been, shedding it like a skin no longer needed. In contrast, the author of Ecclesiastes claimed that "new" is an illusion: "There is nothing new under the sun." S/he further claimed that there is no

remembrance and there will be no remembrance. If there is no remembrance of things past, then surely there is no reflection to inform our present.

When you greet someone with “Happy New Year!” where does the old year, the past, reside? How do you like to celebrate or not on the threshold of a new year?

What notion or feeling first comes to you when hear the word “new?” To what extent do you value what is new? Is time ever new? What notion or feeling first comes to you when you hear the word “old?” How do you value what is old? How do you learn from what is old?

How about things—new things, old things? What is the appeal for you of the “brand new?” What is your aversion to the “old?” What aversion might you have to the “brand new?” What appeal does the “age old” have for you? How do these notions infuse what we buy or buy into and what we discard?

How do these notions infuse our regard for human age, our own age and the age of others? How might we cultivate a regard for the age old in human life even as we greet the new born?

[You may want to begin your discussion with the questions posed in the paragraph that begins, “When you greet someone...,” follow the suggested sequence, and then move through the balance of questions, adding some of your own.]

For our concluding thoughts: What do you anticipate as the nature of the year ahead? What do you cherish from the year past?

### **Feedback (15 minutes)**

Thank the group.... Ask what they liked and what variations they would hope for.

Explain that for the next session, we’ll approach the topic “Letting go.”

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

### **Closing (1 minute)**

In his poem, “Stranger,” Thomas Merton teaches us that:

When no one listens  
To the quiet trees  
When no one notices  
The sun in the pool  
  
Where no one feels  
The first drop of rain  
Or sees the last star  
  
Or hails the first morning  
Of a giant world  
Where peace begins  
And rages end:

One bird sits still  
Watching the work of God:  
One turning leaf,  
Two falling blossoms,  
Ten circles upon the pond.  
  
One cloud upon the hillside,  
Two shadows in the valley,  
And the light strikes home.

## Circle Ministry Session Sequence for Facilitators

### First Parish Unitarian Universalist – Cohasset

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!**