



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network

CONFORMITY VS. NONCONFORMITY

Small Group Conversations, Anne Bailey coordinator
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Universalist Church of West Hartford, CT

(TOPIC READINGS start on p. 4)

OUR SMALL GROUP MISSION

These Small Group conversations are offered as a way to get to know each other better, as we explore the various topics selected by our Small Group Team, related to our life experiences, questions, joys, and challenges. We are free to share our thoughts and feelings, joys and struggles, as we choose, and are here to listen to and care about each other. (We are NOT here to be a therapy group ~ or to tackle “church politics”!)

We look forward to building closer connections with each other, as we spend this time together, and form new or deeper friendships and build our sense of community.

OUR SMALL GROUP COVENANT

As members of this Small Group of the Universalist Church, we covenant with each other to help make this experience both personally and spiritually rewarding, to nourish our sense of community, and to learn and practice right relationship.

We will try to arrive before the beginning of each session so that it can start on time. We will try to attend all of the meetings of our group unless we are ill or away, and will let the group know in advance when that will occur or by contacting the facilitator:

Facilitator Contact information:

We use these guidelines for sharing, as a pathway to a caring community:

- We will deeply listen and ask honest and open questions.
- We will respect confidentiality. What is said here stays here, unless we agree to share something outside of our group.
- We will allow others to speak without interruption.
- We will not try to fix, save, advise or correct.
- We will honor time for reflection and quietness and respect a member’s right to remain silent, as they choose.
- We will treat others with respect and without judgment.
- We will honor the diversity of thought and feeling and values among us.

CHECK IN

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Connection is the energy created between people when they feel seen, heard, valued and understood. One of the goals of small group is to move out of our heads and into our hearts in order to deepen our connections with one other.

Authentic sharing from a place of honesty and vulnerability allows us to build a community of trust, caring, and belonging. The connections we build with one another become contagious. They grow and spread and infuse our larger church community with life and vitality.

1. WELCOME / INTRODUCTIONS :

Let's remember to **Silence cell phones! Speak up clearly, so all can hear.**

Remind folks to let us know and to remind us if they have a hearing issue or if we aren't speaking up enough, so we can be aware.

• At FIRST SESSION of the series: Let's introduce ourselves:

"Tell us a bit about yourself, for example:"

- Your name, where you live and how long you've been in this area
- How long have you been a UU, coming to our church
- Your family, what you do (or did) for work, any special passions or hobbies
(Model this by starting with yourself.)

Distribute MISSION/COVENANT/CHECK IN handout.

- Read the MISSION statement orally - volunteers read COVENANT
- Remind folks to contact the facilitator if you are unable to come to a session (if not included, give them your contact info. to add to their copy)
- Read the CHECK-IN orally, in turn.
- "Since time has been spent on introductions today (tonight), we'll keep our check-in short"; ex. "Might you have a joy or feeling of gratitude you can share with us?"

2. CHECK IN: (at 2nd and later sessions: repeat names again, if needed, and read the following aloud, as you choose):

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Some CHECK-IN PROMPTS:

- *How have these past couple of weeks gone for you?*
- *Can you share some of your "highs" and/or "lows"?*
- *Has anything brought you a sense of gratitude or accomplishment? - of joy - or sorrow?*

3. OPENING: Use "chime" or bell to quiet folks; LIGHT CANDLE:

(3 reading choices below, you might vary this from session to session)

- *May "our separate fires kindle one flame" as we gather in this circle—bringing our stories, our reflections, our hopes and our struggles.
May our candle flame lend light and promise for our time together.*
~~~~~
- *May we know once again that we are not isolated beings, but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.*  
~~~~~
- *May our time together bring learning, understanding, compassion, encouragement, and hope as we share about our life journeys and passions.*

4. CENTERING: *In preparation for our conversation, let's take a few moments to center ourselves and be thankful for this time we have together in community.*

Please get comfortable, place both feet solidly on the floor, rest your hands on your thighs and let your shoulders drop. Gently close your eyes or focus on a spot a few feet in front of you on the floor. Bring your attention to the flow of your breath.

*Breathing in I calm my body.
Breathing out I smile.*

*Dwelling in this present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.*

Our life's path is not one we travel alone. We are in it together, and the company of spiritual friends helps us feel our interconnectedness.

Ring the chime: *"Slowly open your eyes."*

5. DISTRIBUTE READING:

Ask for **volunteers** to **read the paragraphs aloud, in turn.** You might include a **pause after the reading,** to allow time to reflect before responding.

6. POSE QUESTIONS to prompt sharing, invite folks to respond if and as they choose; If you choose, you can **split readings into sections,** with questions/conversation as you go along (some readings are already done this way).

Encourage silent spaces between reflections; be comfortable with silence.

You might prompt: **"Take some time to think about that."** - or the like.

FEEL FREE TO ADJUST or ADAPT THE QUESTIONS PROVIDED

You may not get to all of them, or you may want to modify them slightly or skip around a bit, even make up a new question, depending on what comes up in the conversation, to keep it moving along.

KEEPING YOUR GROUP ON TRACK: If a group member should go on and on, or responds inappropriately so that **conversation needs redirection,** gently ask that they give others an opportunity to share or say something like:

- **"Let's reconsider the question"**
- **"Let's stop now and take a moment to reflect."**
- **"Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Now let's move on"**.

You can also make reference to the covenant.

(If you are co-facilitating, work out a collaboration system with your partner, such as: when the other is facilitating, feel free to help guide the conversation, step in if you see a need to redirect.)

If the conversation has slowed down, you as facilitator can model responses to help the conversation along. **Some prompts could be:**

- **What are your thoughts about that?**
- **How does it make you feel?**
- **Can you say more about that?**
- **What does it make you think of?**

If the topic is really not going well, turn it back to the group:

- **"What do you want to do with this topic?"**

TOPIC READINGS start on next page:

CONFORMITY VS. NONCONFORMITY

“Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind.” (Dr. Seuss)

“The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no Price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.” (Friedrich Nietzsche)

“Read, every day, something no one else is reading. Think, every day, something no one else is thinking. Do, every day, something no one else would be silly enough to do. It is bad for the mind to continually be part of unanimity.” (Christopher Morley)

“Nature made us individuals, as she did the flowers and the pebbles; but we are afraid to be peculiar, and so our society resembles a bag of marbles, or a string of mold candles. Why should we all dress after the same fashion? The frost never paints my windows twice alike.” (Lydia Maria Child)

“Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.” (Apple, "Think Different" campaign)

“Conformity is the jailer of freedom and the enemy of growth.” (John F. Kennedy)

“It's weird not to be weird.” (John Lennon)

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

“The opposite for courage is not cowardice, it is conformity. Even a dead fish can go with the flow.” (Jim Hightower)

“If you are always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.” (Maya Angelou)

“A ‘normal’ person is the sort of person that might be designed by a committee. You know, each person puts in a pretty color and it comes out gray.” (Alan Sherman)

QUESTIONS:

- Which of these quotes stand out for you?
- Where do you find your own individuality? Are there times when you delight in being different?
- When are you uncomfortable if you don't conform?
- What is your concept of being “normal”?

Don't be normal.



You have a reputation
to uphold.

READING #2:

I grew up in Chelsea, New York, a mixed working class neighborhood in NYC. My appearance led to all kinds of commentary from the peanut gallery. People questioned the way I looked and who I hung out with. Those kinds of judgments used to bother me a lot because I didn't understand why my preferences in people and style should be questioned; and the critics were actually people I liked, so the pressure to conform was strong.

I remember one night I was getting ready to go to the movies with a friend from my neighborhood and I was dressed in torn overalls, a tied dyed shirt and I had a big old Afro. My friend looked, well.....normal. My friend took one look at me and said "I don't want to go anywhere with you looking like that. You should change your clothes." So I said, "You change." Then she said, "If you're going to go looking like that, then you're not going with me." "OK", I said. And she split.

My mother happened to be standing there when the discussion began. She said, "Well, you can change your clothes and go ahead and be like everybody else. But if it's not what you want and you're strong enough to take other people's ridicule, then stand by your convictions. You need to know, however, that criticism is what's coming. It's not ever going to be easy because being different never is."

That was a shock to me. I understood then that people were not necessarily going to encourage or even support me as I explored other ways of being. But I didn't want to be limited by other people's ideas. When my friend told me to change, the dilemma became, if I change for you this time, how many times am I going to have to change in the future? And I guess what my mom realized was, in saying "no," I might be opening myself up to a lot more of these kinds of conversations in the future. People would always make judgments about what people are on the outside--what they're wearing, or how they look--instead of trying to understand the person inside. If you wanted to be an individual, you had to be tough enough to take the criticism. My mother's words assured me that I wouldn't be making a mistake by refusing to change, but she was also warning me of the tough road ahead if I refused to conform. Expecting difficulties made them easier to take.

When I became famous, nobody looked like me. People would say, "Why doesn't she wear high heels to these formal functions instead of yellow-and-red Reebok sneakers." In the end, the very thing that brought people to me was that I wasn't like everybody else. You have to believe in yourself in spite of what other people believe. That self-confidence is what brought me through everything in my life, and that wisdom came from my mom. ~ Whoopi Goldberg, in *The Right Words at the Right Time*, Marlo Thomas

QUESTIONS ON NEXT PAGE:

QUESTIONS:

- What was your overall impression of this reading?
- When did you first become aware of pressure from your peers to conform to the "norm" ? How do you handle this pressure - especially when it just doesn't feel right.
- Can you describe a time when you felt it was more important to LOOK good, than to FEEL good?
- If you were confronted by a "friend" as Whoopi was, would you just go ahead & change into something more "conventional"?
- Have you been able to find support for just being who you are and not changing?
- Who do you look to for support to be who you are, your authentic self? Did you find it within your biological family or from a "family" of your own creation? or from close friends? or teachers?
- How has believing in yourself been important in your life? What has been the source of your self-confidence?

As CONVERSATION comes to an end, you might ask for **last thoughts on the topic**:

“Do you have a thought from this conversation that you will carry home with you?”

CLOSING READING

“Here's to the kids who are different, the kids who don't always get A's
The kids who have ears twice the size of their peers, and noses that go on for
days ...
Here's to the kids who are different, the kids they call crazy or dumb,
The kids who don't fit, with the guts and the grit, who dance to a different drum ...
Here's to the kids who are different, the kids with the mischievous streak,
For when they have grown, as history's shown, it's their difference that makes
them unique. (*Digby Wolfe, "Kids Who Are Different"*)

RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE (Choose one of these or one of your
choice)

*As our time together comes to a close, we give thanks for one another, for the
chance to share our lives, and to renew our spirits in the company of friends. May
we go forth enriched by our gathering, committed to living life fully, to loving life with
more passion, and to supporting one another.*

ANNOUNCE NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC: (unless last session)

**Ask for a volunteer to bring in a CLOSING reading (if needed) for this next
session** (It can be something they particularly like, doesn't necessarily have to re-
late to the topic.

if providing SNACKS, ask for a volunteer