



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network
FINDING COMMUNITY - Why Do We Come to Church?

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(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 CHALICE (or CANDLE):**

*We light our chalice as a beacon,
a candle in a window,
a bonfire on a hill,
a lighthouse on the shore:
this flame reminds us of the community
that holds us when we go*

*into the world for a week or
for as long as we are away
and then welcomes us back
when we come home again
from wherever our journeys take us.*

4. CENTERING: Before we begin our conversation, let's take a moment to center ourselves:

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.

Spirit of life and love that lives in us all, be present with us now. Help us be grateful for all that we have, grateful for this time of connection and sharing, grateful for each other and all who enrich our lives. May we cherish this time of sharing and grow together in spirit and sense of community.

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

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

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

~~~~~ TOPIC READINGS start on next page ~~~~~

## FINDING COMMUNITY - WHY DO WE COME TO CHURCH?

**Hand out FOCUS READING: *Lets take turns reading the following paragraphs:***

Humans weren't meant to be alone all the time. For millennia we lived in small communities, knowing intimately the ins and outs of one another's lives. But in the last one hundred years or so, we have become increasingly socially isolated. Nuclear families have gotten smaller and smaller, and because of dual careers, our neighborhoods are empty from early morning until late at night, when we crawl into bed.

A woman at a retreat once wailed, "Where's my tribe? I've spent my whole life searching for people I can feel connected to". We all need a group to be part of, a place in the social world where we feel we belong . . .

It doesn't matter where the group is - in cyberspace, in your hometown, or scattered around the globe. It doesn't matter what the focus of getting together is - a love of dogs, or books, or changing the world. What matters is that you find a clan, a tribe, where you can share your joys and sorrows, your gifts and challenges, and be likewise supported in return. It is about creating a culture of connection in which people feel cared for.

Many have left traditional religion, which used to provide this sort of social connection, as well as spiritual sustenance. Research has shown that high on the list of those who *do* affiliate with churches is their need for **relationship**.

In the words of one UU minister, the Rev. Bill Nelson, "People need to feel they are **understood** - that they can speak their minds freely, in the comfort zone of a 'spiritual open space', and know that they'll be heard." But there is more than this: ". . . folks come to church not just to be understood but to understand, to integrate the mystery of the universe into the concrete reality of being a living, thinking, walking, talking human being".

From *Rev. Peter Morales, former UUA President*: "I am a UU because I am convinced I need other people who love what I love. I am a UU because I want to join hands with others to create a community where we grow spiritually, where we support one another, and where we work together to create a world in which everyone matters, everyone is free, everyone is respected, and everyone lives in peace. I am a UU because I have seen what love, understanding, and commitment can do. And finally, I am a UU because I am convinced that if we let the love in our hearts guide our ways, the possibilities before us are breathtaking."

### **QUESTIONS:**

- What popped out for you in these readings?
- How have you found communities you have been part of - has it been easy or difficult to do?
- Was there one particular thing that first brought you to this church?
- Think for a few minutes about why you have affiliated with this church (or why you are attending this Small Group). Do any of the comments above reflect your reasons for being here?

- Do you feel you are part of a community here?  
What has helped you feel at home here? Have you found additional reasons for wanting to be here and become more involved?
- Look back over your life and tell us of a time or two in the past when you felt like an integral part of a community. This community could have been an extended family, a neighborhood, local organizations, a work setting, or any group where you felt connected in a satisfying way. What was satisfying about belonging to this group?
- In what other ways do you currently meet your need for community? Are they all 'face-to-face' or are there other ways you find to create a sense of connection?

**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:**

***Let’s read these closing words together:***

*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.*

**RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE**

*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.*

**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 relate to the topic.)

**if providing SNACKS, ask for a volunteer**

