

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Circle Ministry Session Plan

Family

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)

Mary Pipher, a Unitarian Universalist from Lincoln, Nebraska, and a clinical psychologist who has spent a lifetime treating, celebrating, raising, and writing about families, says that:

Families are about caring for people, about feeding and sheltering the young, the old and the needy. In addition to these roles, families have had two other major roles—to protect and to socialize. In today’s families those two roles are often at odds with each other. To protect is not to socialize and vice versa. Parents must figure out how to protect their children from values that are harmful to their well-being, and they must help their children connect with a meaningful world outside the family.

....Families, whether biological or chosen, are what give most people’s lives their shape. They produce enormous pain and joy and all the emotions in between for their members. Most of our happiest and most tragic experiences are somehow connected with family. Families are flawed, complex, intense organic units whose members often fail each other in important ways. But family affection is the glue that holds lives together.

....I would never argue that families are great, only that they are human. And I would argue that children do better in families, whether formed or biological, than they do anywhere else. Children grow best in a matrix of connected relationship.As institutions, families are far superior to their alternatives—the state or the corporate world. At least until something better comes along, I am for families.”

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: Family

“Families are about caring for people, about feeding and sheltering the young, the old and the needy. In addition to these roles, families have had two other major roles—to protect and to socialize.... Families, whether biological or chosen, are what give most people’s lives their shape.... I would never argue that families are great, only that they are human.”

These echoes of Mary Pipher's reflections, excerpted from her book, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*, carry the responsibility, the reality, and the humility that accrue to what we recognize as family. Notice the qualifier, "biological or chosen." Let's expand this to biological, chosen, nuclear, and extended as we consider family.

I invite you to ponder the following questions and to do so in silence before we speak:

Whether it is your biological family of birth, the family that you have formed and chosen, the family that you recognize as nuclear, your extended family, or perhaps some combination of these forms, how would you describe the family that has been most responsible, most caring, for you?

How has your family, whatever its form, shaped you into who you are right now?

How have you and are you now giving shape to the lives of those you deem members of your family?

Reminding ourselves that families are human, to what extent does this bevel the edges of some of the more painful experiences you have known in family? To what extent does this lend grace to experiences painful and joyous that you have known in family?

[You may want to proceed in three phases, beginning with the first question, continuing with the next two, and concluding with the questions on the humanity of families.]

For our concluding thoughts: What are your most memorable joy and your most haunting concern about your family, however you define your family?

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 "Friendship."

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

Closing (1 minute)

In our going, I offer you the words of Donald G. Smith:

"The family seems to have two predominant functions: to provide warmth and love in time of need and to drive each other insane."

and the postscript of our minister, Jan Carlsson-Bull:

"Most commonly this happens within the same family."

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!