

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Covenant Group Session
Food for the Journey
Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, IL

Preparation for Facilitators

This session can be done in several ways:

1. As an ordinary session (i.e. without food or environmental changes), simply talking through the pre-work questions in deep sharing and deep listening.
2. As a meal “experience,” inviting participants to bring a small amount of the food that speaks to them about a sacred or important meal experience. The environment would be dressed for the occasion. (This could also be a group celebration full dinner, at year-end for example.)
3. A combination of 1&2, no food but dressing the environment, for example.

The following session materials describe Option 2—the full experience. You can modify for the other two options as you see fit. Keep in mind, though, that “talking” about the sacredness of meals is less rich than sharing while experiencing at least some parts of it.

“Pre-thinking” and “Pre-work” for the Session

At the previous meeting, or within 2 weeks of this session, distribute the pre-work that is included at the end of this document. You will be inviting people to do some thinking on the topic, but also inviting them to bring with them a small, sharing amount of a food that has been important to them in building relationships, celebrating, etc. This is not intended to be a full meal. Characterize this as “tapas,” perhaps, where people share a bit of this and a bit of that. Nor does it need to be fancy. For example, when discussing this, a member of our Facilitator’s Circle remarked that popcorn was important to her because she rarely had it as a child and when her mother made it, it was a special occasion for the two of them. **Regardless, please make it clear that bringing food is not required. It is an invitation only.**

Environment You will want to do something a little different with the environment, as this is a “celebratory meal.” We recommend the following:

- A tablecloth or other covering on the center table.
- On the table, the chalice, plus two additional candles. (Candles required for the Jewish blessing to be used as the chalice lighting prayer.)
- On the table, a plate with a small, uncut loaf of bread and a goblet with wine. (These are not only Judeo-Christian symbols. Bread and wine are core to many faith traditions, as you will see from the blessings.)
- Another table outside the circle where people can place food, plates, cutlery, cups, napkins, wine, water, etc. You might want to make the plates, etc., your contribution to the meal, or ask for volunteers in advance. Also, please bring a garbage bag so that all garbage can be taken away from the room to be disposed of.

Ritual Preparation Twice—at the beginning and end of the session—each member of the group will be asked to read a meal blessing from various faith traditions. You can choose the readings from those in the document, “Food For the Journey: Readings for Participants” and give each person only their own. This might be important if you know someone has a sensitivity about

another faith tradition. Or, you can hand out all the blessings and just have people read them in order around the circle. So, either way, you'll need to make copies of the blessings you've chosen. If there are no sensitivities to be concerned about, you might consider the second alternative, because then participants have the entire collection of blessings to take with them and use at home if they wish.

Covenant Group Meeting Order

Preliminaries Try to keep "business" to a minimum at this session. With the addition of food, etc., there's enough going on without other distractions. For example, this is probably not the night to finalize your covenant or plan a service project! Try to keep a celebratory mood. Distribute meal blessings and say you'll explain what to do with them later.

Check-in

Because the lighting of Sabbath meal candles (the chalice lighting) should immediately precede the meal itself, do check in this night before the chalice lighting. It will also help settle the group down before the ritual/conversation begins.

Chalice Lighting (Female participant lights the chalice and the two candles after reading this prayer.)

Jewish Tradition--Lighting the Passover Candles

Praised are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe,
Who has sanctified us by your commandments and
commanded us to kindle the lights of the Passover holiday.
I pray that the brightness of these lights may inspire us
And bring spiritual joy and promise to all of us. Amen
All: Amen.

Meditation (shared by facilitator)

Tonight, we come together in kinship to seal our relationship in the same way peoples from around the world and in all times have done it—by sharing food.

And tonight, we're going to share our experiences of special meals in our lives, those meals that have made us "one" with family or friends, those meals which have brought us special joy, those meals which have brought us closer to the sacred, whatever that is for each of you. Through sharing the meal blessings of many religious traditions, we'll also remind ourselves that food comes from the web of Life and is "sacred" in the way you understand that word. The similarities and differences of those meal blessings may help broaden our own view of the sacredness of meal times. We'll do this twice. Once

before we eat and start our sharing, and again at the end. (*Describe how you want the readings by participants to work.*)

With that, let us move to a place of silence before the first blessing is read. (*Allow perhaps 30 seconds of silence before the first reading. Then continue around the circle until everyone has read a blessing.*)

Open Discussion

Invite participants to get food and return to their places. This discussion is more “open,” as it would be at a meal. Unless you’re doing a simpler version of this session, the Deep Sharing/Deep Listening format should not be followed. However, the facilitator will want to open the conversation with the questions from the prework, and help manage the conversation back to the experiences being shared as opposed to unrelated issues. Participants can go to the food table for “seconds” whenever they wish.

Questions for Facilitator—Open Discussion

1. What is significant about the food you brought tonight?
2. What experience would you like to share about a special meal in your life, a meal that made you “one” with family or friends?
3. What about a meal that brought you special joy?
4. What about a meal that brought you closer to the sacred?
5. How did you feel? What about the meal was sacred as you understand the word?

After-meal Blessings

Many faith traditions include a blessing after meals. To close the discussion, once again go around the circle with each participant reading an after meal blessing.

Check-out

Distribute “pre-thinking” work for the next session, if any.

Closing Reading/Extinguishing the Chalice and Candles

Nondenominational--From New Zealand Author Keri Hulme

Once the guest has eaten and drunk at your table, the guest becomes kin. . . .beggar or enemy, friend or chief, if they knock on your door, it will open; if they seek your shelter, it will be given and if they ask for hospitality, give them your bread and wine. . . .for who knows when you may need the help of another fellow human being?

So may we be.

Participant “Pre-Thinking” and Preparation for

Covenant Group Session: “Food for the Journey”

Sharing Food: Creating Covenant and Building Kinship

In America these days, meals have taken on “snatch and grab” characteristics. Often, we eat on the run, while “multi-tasking.” We eat in the car, at our desks at work, in movie theatres, on commuter trains. We bring home take-out, defrost TV dinners, “grab a bite,” open processed, pre-cooked packages, and of course, indulge in “fast food.” Families eat in shifts, depending on who has soccer when and what time Mom or Dad gets home from work.

Psychologists and sociologists are pleading with American families to take the time to eat dinner together at the table. Why? Because as far back as we know in human history, meals were “binding” rituals. Shared meals built relationship, established family unity, allowed for mutuality, provided a forum for family stories, and were cause for celebration. Meals were a time of thanksgiving, for the blessings of life and our connection to the divine and natural worlds. Anthropologists call this “table fellowship” and it’s as meaningful for us today as it was thousands of years ago.

Primitive Table Fellowship

In primitive cultures, the one necessity of life was food, or more broadly, nourishment. Everything else about their lives flowed from that one essential.

For hunter/gatherers, food wasn’t easy to come by. They worked for it 24/7 — finding, subduing, gathering, preparing, and preserving food. It was difficult and dangerous to find and, in a nomadic society, almost impossible to store. So, family groups, clans, and tribes worked together to find, prepare and protect it. They depended on one another for their very survival.

In the earliest primitive societies, sharing food with an outsider was rare. There wasn’t that much of it, and a wandering stranger had no vested interest in the survival of the group. He had done nothing to help acquire it and would often leave nothing behind to compensate for the loss. So, the voluntary sharing of food signified fellowship of the highest order. It indicated that the stranger was somehow necessary to the group’s survival, had or would provide a service of great value, and was accepted into the family.

Over time, as farming ensured a somewhat more reliable source of food, table fellowship became more ritualized. Hospitality traditions took root so that trade became possible. And meals became binding rites for completing treaties, agreements, and *covenants*. They also became ways of reconciling quarrels and celebrating rites of passage. Even today, most social interaction involves food in some way. Business lunches, contract signings, lunches with friends, celebrations of rites of passage—the

meal still signifies that we are necessary to one another and important to each others' lives.

Sacred Table Fellowship

Including the divine "Other" in table fellowship did not begin or end with the Christian rite of sacrificial bread and wine. Indeed, that rite was a natural evolution of how people viewed food and the sacred.

Peoples who lived close to the earth, depending on nature for survival, had a relationship with the Spirit of all Life that was not only acknowledged, but guided their daily lives. Native American traditions provide many examples of thanksgiving prayers and blessings to the soul of the deer or buffalo sacrificed so that the tribe might live, and the animal's sacrifice was celebrated and honored at the meal. And in a world where every berry and ear of corn and deer and rabbit were sacrificial gifts, it was much clearer that all living things are connected in the web of life to the Great Soul. So, every meal was an opportunity to celebrate kinship with the divine "Other," to declare a family relationship with God and all living things.

Sacred Table Fellowship Today

These basic concepts are found across most religious and sacred traditions around the world up through this day. In a secular context, shared meals are still opportunities to create and strengthen relationships and celebrate something important—in short, to build kinship. But shared meals can also be a reminder to us that, in a world of fast food, we are still connected to the sacred web of life. Food doesn't just "come." It requires work and the sacrifice of life and the husbandry of fields and animals. And we who have more food than we need can return to solidarity with those who have less than they need.

Food for Thought for the Covenant Group Session

In covenant group, we're going to share our experiences of special meals in our lives, those meals that have made us "one" with family or friends, those meals which have brought us special joy, those meals which have brought us closer to the sacred, whatever that is for each of you. So think about the meals of your life that have had special meaning. Maybe a holiday, the serving of a traditional family food, a rite of passage, or a simple cup of coffee to mend a friendship. Think about how you felt. What about the meal created kinship? What about the meal was "sacred" as you understand the word?

Food for Sharing

If you wish—and only if you wish—you're invited to bring to the meeting a small portion of a food that represents table fellowship for you. We'll share the fruits of our labors as we talk. We're not creating a full potluck meal. (For example, please don't bring a whole ham!!) But something you'd like others to share a bit or two of in order to have them participate in table fellowship—that's what we're after.

Meditation Readings Here are two meal blessings to help with your thinking.

Buddhist Tradition--From Thich Nhat Hanh

If we allow ourselves to touch our bread deeply, we become reborn, because our bread is life itself. Eating it deeply, we touch the sun, the clouds, the earth, and everything in the cosmos. We touch life and we touch the Kingdom of God.

From Kent Nerburn, "Small Gifts: The Quiet Gifts of Everyday Life"

Her day was long. She is tired. But she has chosen to prepare a meal. If not for my wife, Louise, we would each grab such food as we could find and go our separate ways. But she will not have it this way.

"It is important for us to eat together," she says simply, and places the food before us. Though she would not put it in these words, it is an act she reveres, a ceremony of the ordinary.

We say no prayer, though perhaps we should. But in a quiet way, the table itself is prayer enough. It draws us into a circle, the most mythic and powerful of all human shapes. We pass the food from hand to hand, the most sacramental of all common human acts. Though it remains unspoken, even unrealized, our shared meal creates a bond among us, and, for a moment, makes us one.

There is no mystery why Jesus chose a meal to reveal his death to those he loved, why he chose a meal to commemorate his truth. This is the moment when we are most human, when we most acknowledge the fallibility of our nature—that we must take the life of other species to sustain our own. And yet it is the time of common celebration when the taking of nourishment fills us with simple joy.

It is natural to want to hallow so elemental an event. The Dakota Sioux would often take the choicest piece of meat and cast it into the fire before beginning to eat. The Tibetans place the first food of a meal outside the door as an offering to the hungry spirits.

We have wandered so far from this sense of the meal as holy gift. Our food comes too easily. We care less about sustenance, more about choice. We judge the meal, we do not honor it. Only the one who lifts the hand in preparation senses even dimly the sacred significance residing in the act.

Louise sets the plates on the table. The rest of us come and take our places. Food is passed from hand to hand. The affairs of the day are discussed; grievances are aired. We laugh, argue, share stories of the day. We eat happily, filled with the elemental joy that comes with taking nourishment. It is a small moment, but it is ours.

“Food for the Journey” Covenant Group Reading Selections

Blessings Before Meals—Read by Group Participants

1. Unitarian Tradition--The Bread We Share (Adapted from Rudolph Nemser, UU Minister)

The bread we share this day is sacred.

The wine we share this day is sacred.

The friendship we share this day is sacred.

The laughter we share this day is sacred.

The stillness we share this day is sacred.

For bread, for friends, for joy and sorrow, for the comfort of quietness:

Let us ever be grateful and caring.

(Pass the plate with the bread, and everyone take a piece and eat. Then pass the cup with the wine or grape juice and everyone takes a sip.)

2. Christian Tradition--A Protestant Meal Blessing

For what we are about to receive,

May the Lord make us truly thankful.

Amen.

3. From a Native American Tradition--Preparing to Eat

Now that I am about to eat, O Great Spirit, give my thanks to the beasts and birds whom You have provided for my hunger; and pray deliver my sorrow that living things must make a sacrifice for my comfort and well-being.

Let the feather of corn spring up in its time and let it not wither but make full grains for the fires of our cooking pots, now that I am about to eat.

4. Hindu Tradition--A Hindu Meal Blessing

This ritual is One.

The food is One.

We who offer the food are One.

The fire of hunger is also One.

All action is One

We who understand this are One.

5. Christian Tradition--A Roman Catholic Grace

Bless us, O Lord,

And these, thy gifts which we are about to receive through thy Bounty.

Through Christ, our Lord

Amen

6. Jewish Tradition--Jewish Meal Prayer

Baruh atah adonai eloheinu meleh haolam borei pri haggafen.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine, who brings forth bread from the earth.

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7. Buddhist Tradition--From Thich Nhat Hanh

With the first mouthful, I promise to practice loving kindness.
With the second, I promise to help relieve the suffering of others.
With the third, I promise to see others' joy as my own.
With the fourth, I promise to learn the way of non-attachment and equanimity.

8. Islamic Tradition

As we sit at table and rejoice in the
mercy and goodness of the one God, may
the bonds of friendship be strengthened,
may our fellowship be a light in the darkness,
and—most importantly—may we
remember that in opening ourselves to each
other we open ourselves to God.”

9. Pagan Blessing (Source unknown)

From forest and stream, from mountain and fields, from the fertile Earth's nourishing yields, I
now partake of the Divine Energy; may it lend me health, strength, and love

10. Buddhist Tradition--From Thich Nhat Hanh

The plate is filled with food.
I am aware that each morsel is the fruit of much hard work
by those who produced it.

Blessings After Meals—Read by Group Participants

1) Christian Tradition--A Mennonite Grace

Thank you for the wind and rain
and sun and pleasant weather.
Thank you for this our food
And that we are together. Amen.

2) Jewish Tradition--Adapted from an Haggadah of Liberation

We dedicate this meal to our hopes and dreams for the future.
We dream of a world not threatened by destruction.
We dream of a world in which all people are free to be themselves.
We dream of a world at peace.

3) Prayer of the New Year Festival, the Gad of Ghana (Native Peoples of Ghana)

Hail, Hail, Hail.
May happiness come.
May meat come.
May corn come.
Just as the farmers work
And look forward to the reaping,
So may we sit again as we are sitting now.

4) Buddhist Tradition--From Thich Nhat Hanh

All living things are struggling for life.

May they all have enough food today.

5) From the Native American Iroquois Tradition

We return thanks to the corn, and to her sisters,
the beans and squashes, which give us life.
We return thanks to the bushes and trees,
which provide us with fruit.
We return thanks to the Great Spirit,
in who is embodied all goodness,
and who directs all things for the good of his children.

6. Islamic Tradition

Allah-hu Akhbar. God is great.

7) UU Tradition--A Unitarian Blessing

Blessed be the Earth for giving birth to this food
Blessed be the Sun for nourishing it
Blessed be the Wind for carrying its seed
Blessed be the Rain for quenching its thirst.

Blessed be the hands that helped to grow this food,
To bring it to our tables
To nourish our minds, bodies, and spirits.

Blessed be our friends, our families, and our loved ones.
Blessed Be.

9) Nondenominational--(Source unknown)

Today may we appreciate this food and remember those who are hungry.
May we appreciate our family and friends and remember those who are alone.
May we appreciate our health and remember those who are sick.
May we appreciate the freedoms we have and remember those who suffer injustice and tyranny.
Peace on earth. Amen.