

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Circle Ministry Session Plan
God

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)

In the third chapter of the Biblical Book of Exodus, we read that Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, when he came to Horeb, known as the “mountain of God.” An angel of the Lord appeared to him out of a bush that burned but wasn’t consumed. So Moses approached the bush to see why it wasn’t consumed. As he did so, “God called to him from within the bush, ‘Moses! Moses!’ And Moses said, ‘Here I am.’

‘Do not come any closer,’ God said. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’ Then God said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ Moses hid his face; he was afraid to look at God.

God then shared with Moses his intent to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, the land of their oppression; he made it clear that Moses was to be his agent of liberation; and he instructed Moses to go to Pharaoh and present his case, for God had heard the people’s cries for release.

“Who am I to do this?” Moses asked. If I say to my people, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me,’ and they ask what his name is, what do I say?” And God replied, “‘I AM WHO I AM...Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”(Adapted from Exodus 3:1-14)

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: God

Karen Armstrong, writer and commentator on religious issues, begins her book, *A History of God*, with some curious thoughts that contrast with our introductory reading from Exodus. Says Armstrong:

“As a child, I had a number of strong religious beliefs but little faith in God.”

She didn’t connect with God and in an all-out effort to do so, Armstrong entered the convent and for seven years lived as a nun. Yet she wasn’t satisfied and notes that “nothing had actually *happened* to me from a source beyond myself. I never glimpsed the God described by the prophets and mystics,” and she adds: “Despite my years as a nun, I do not believe that my experience of God is unusual. My ideas about God were formed in childhood and did not keep abreast of my growing knowledge in other disciplines. I had revised simplistic childhood views of Father Christmas; I had come to a more mature understanding of the complexities of the human predicament than had been possible in kindergarten. Yet my early, confused ideas about

God had not been modified or developed. People without my peculiarly religious background may also find that their notion of God was formed in infancy. Since those days, we have put away childish things and have discarded the God of our first years.”

Moses found God in the burning bush, yet he did not see God and received a puzzling answer about God’s name. Armstrong’s search for God turned up remoteness and led her into an intensive study that became her book, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Moses’ experience was intimate and immediate; Armstrong’s was distant and academic, but intense and open.

Give yourselves a few moments of silence to think about two questions that provide a beginning for exploring the notion of God?

1. What was your earliest notion of God, and how, when and where did you learn it?
2. How has your view of God changed or evolved over the span of your life? If there were any major shifts in how you came to view God, what experiences prompted them and what notion of God came into being because of them?

[You may want to read both questions and then proceed in phases, question by question.]

For our concluding thoughts: How would you complete a sentence that begins, “God is....?”

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 consider the topic “Service.”

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

Closing (1 minute)

Rev. William Sinkford, President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, offers some help in responding to the question of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

"The Unitarian side of our family tree tells us that there is only one God, one Spirit of Life, one Power of Love."

"The Universalist side tells us that God is a loving God, condemning none of us, and valuing the spark of divinity that is in every human being. So, Unitarian Universalism stands for: one God, no one left behind."

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!