

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
Circle Ministry Session Plan

*Hope*

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 & Opening words (1 minute)**

In the words of Jim Scott, Unitarian Universalist singer and songwriter:

Gather the spirit, harvest the power.  
Our separate lives will kindle one flame.  
Witness the mystery of this hour.  
Our trials in this light appear all the same.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.  
Gather in sympathy now and then.  
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.  
Gather to celebrate once again.

Let us gather together once again in this ministry of circles.

**Check-in/Sharing (3-4 minutes@ - 30-40 minutes)**

**Discussion of congregational and community service plans underway and ventures completed (10-20 minutes)**

**Topical Discussion (60 minutes)**

[See Circle Ministry Session Sequence as a reminder of the structure of this segment.]

First response  
Cross-conversation

**Topic: Hope**

We come together week after week as holders of hope. There is hope in our connections each with the other. In this circle, we are each, for the other, holders of hope. Whether we suffer or celebrate or are having a ho-hum time of it, we are holders of hope.

Consider the story of Václav Havel, playwright, essayist, statesman, and human rights activist. Havel led the resistance against the forces of cultural and political repression in his native Czechoslovakia. He was in and out of prison. He persevered and became President of the former Czechoslovakia and the first President of the newly created Czech Republic. Just over ten years ago, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He lives with what is. What does Havel have to say about hope?

Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world  
Either we have hope within us or we don't.  
Hope is not a prognostication—it's an orientation of the spirit.  
You can't delegate that to anyone else.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy when things are going well, or the willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed.

Hope is definitely NOT the same as optimism.

It's not the conviction that something will turn out well,  
but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things,  
even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.

In the face of this absurdity, life is too precious a thing  
to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily,  
without meaning, without love, and, finally, without hope.

[Options for the conversation to follow:

- 1) Read and consider one question before going to the next; or
- 2) Choose and consider only one question; or
- 3) If you decide to consider both questions, you may not do a “go-around” for the second.]

Take a moment of silence and think about your response to the following questions:

1. What does hope feel like for you? How do you experience it in your life? Describe a time in your life when you felt hopeless and worried that you couldn't work through a problem or issue or relationship.
2. Describe a time in your life when you dared to hope—not through naïve optimism, as discounted by Havel—but in a way that gave you strength to persevere through disappointments and discouragement to attain what you dared to hope for.

[See Circle Ministry Session Sequence for clarification of this next segment.]

First response to  
Cross-conversation  
Concluding statements

What concluding thoughts would you like to share?

### **Feedback (15 minutes)**

Thank the group. Explain that for the next session, we'll consider the topic, “Siblings.”

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

### **Closing (1 minute)**

Easter is about holding hope against hope. Easter is about our readiness to be astonished that the stones of our tombs, whatever form those tombs take, have been rolled away and there we are holding hope when we thought all was lost.

Easter is about not getting bogged down with the reality or otherwise of a physical resurrection, but about standing astonished in the here and now of the hopes that we share and live and hold. Life is with us. Death is a mystery. But hope is eternal. We hold it in our hands. We hold it for each other. And we pass it on

Go in hope. Go in peace.

## 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!**