

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
Circle Ministry Session Plan  
*Letting Go*

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)**

I offer you the reflections of the late Philip Simmons:

...we deal most fruitfully with loss by accepting the fact that we will one day lose everything. When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them....

As I see it, we know we're truly grown up when we stop trying to fix people. About all we can really do for people is love them and treat them with kindness. That goes for ourselves, too. That goes for ourselves *especially*. I've given up on self-improvement. (I've also decided I no longer have to floss.) Fact is, my character is pretty much set, and even if I were in perfect health, I would have to accept the following truths: my desk will always be messy; I will never stop being bothered by other people's errors of grammar; I don't find badly done children's school concerts "cute"; I pick my nose; I notice beautiful women; I can't stand laziness, whether physical, moral, or intellectual; I cry during sappy father-and-son moments in movies; I will drop almost anything to watch my daughter comb her hair. For better or worse, these things are beyond fixing. Accepting ourselves means accepting the whole package, the whole sour and sweet, lovely and larcenous mess that we are.

**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: Letting Go**

*Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, holds the written reflections of Phillip Simmons, father and husband and professor of literature and stubborn climber and reckless sledder and fellow Unitarian Universalist. When Simmons discovered at the age of 35 that he had ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, he gathered up his young family, left his post in Illinois as a college professor of English Literature, and returned to his beloved New Hampshire, where he had grown up. He was determined to let go as gracefully as he could, cradled in the support of his family and extended family and breathing in the fullness of life with every precious breath,

knowing that sooner rather than later, he would breathe his last. During the ten-year span of his illness, he refined the art of letting go, learning to fall.

“In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them... “ echo his words from our opening words in this circle of ministry. “Is not falling, as much as climbing, our birthright?” he asked knowingly, and continued:

“We have all suffered, and will suffer, our own falls. The fall from youthful ideals, the waning of physical strength, the failure of a cherished hope, the loss of our near and dear, the fall into injury or sickness, and late or soon, the fall to our certain ends. We have no choice but to fall, and little say as to the time or the means.”

So I ask that we ponder these questions and let them sift in silence before we speak:

To what are you holding on for dear life?  
 What does the prospect of letting go feel like?  
 What will you lose?  
 What will you gain?  
 What for you are the spiritual dimensions of letting go?

[You may want to proceed in three phases, beginning with the first question, continuing with the next three, and concluding with the question on spiritual dimensions. If you don't get to the final question, that's just fine. Let go of it!]

For our concluding thoughts: What can you let go of this morning (or this afternoon or tonight)?

### **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 "Family."

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 Provincetown poet, Mary Oliver, from "In Backwater Woods."

To live in this world

you must be able  
 to do three things:  
 to love what is mortal;  
 to hold it

against your bones knowing  
 your own life depends on it;  
 and, when the time comes to let it go,  
 to let it go.

## 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!**