

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Circle Ministry 2008-2009

Listening

Rev. Jan Carlsson-Bull for Circle Ministry at First Parish UU Cohasset, MA
Adapted from the session plan initially adapted by Judy Friedman
and used by the First Unitarian Society in Newton, MA
and from the session plan created by Rev. Glenn H. Turner

Note: See the Circle Ministry Session Sequence for process guidelines.

Gathering, Welcoming (2 minutes)

Welcome all to the beginning of this third year of Circle Ministry through First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset. Affirm the presence of seasoned Circle Ministry participants. Extend a special welcome to folks who have never experienced Circle Ministry. Invite them to ask questions freely and to make suggestions during the feedback segment.

Chalice lighting & Opening words (1 minute)

In the words of a proverb,
“To listen well is as powerful a means of influence as to talk well,
and is as essential to all true conversation.”

When we listen with full heart and mind,
we let go of the inner chatter
that tempts us to listen elsewhere.

When we listen with full heart and mind,
we dispense with judgment.

When we listen with full heart and mind,
the arms of our hearts unclasp
and the fabric of our mind expands.

When we listen with full heart and mind,
we are present to each other
and are at risk of transformation.

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

Review of Behavioral Covenant and preview of session sequence (10 minutes)

See Sample Behavioral Covenant. Fill in blanks of meeting times and places. Add elements that your group feels will enhance the Circle Ministry experience for each of you and for any new folks who may join over the course of the year ahead.

Preview the session sequence if you feel that this will help new members especially in orienting to the Circle Ministry structure.

Topical Discussion (60 minutes)

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

First response

Cross-conversation

Topic: Listening

Ralph Emerson Roughton, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, has this to say about listening:

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice,
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem,
you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked was that you listen, not talk or do—just hear me.

....And I can do for myself. I'm not helpless.
Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can do for myself,
you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational,
then I can quit trying to convince you and can get about the business of understanding
what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I
don't need advice.

Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them.
Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes, for some people—
because God is mute and he/she doesn't give advice or try to fix things.
“They” just listen and let you work it out for yourself.

So please listen and just hear me.
And, if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn, and I'll listen to you.

[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 consider these questions.

1. Think of a time when you were really listened to about something that was close to your heart. Describe what happened, how it felt, and what it meant to you.
2. Think of a time when you didn't feel heard. Describe what happened, how it felt, what it meant to you, and how it could have happened differently.

What concluding thoughts would you like to share?

Feedback (10 minutes)

Thank the group. Ask what they liked in this session and what changes they would hope for. Explain that for the next session, we'll consider the topic, “Fear.” Note that the session plan for this gathering is available for group members as we leave.

Closing (1 minute)

In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh,
“The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence.”

Circle Ministry Session Sequence for Facilitators First Parish Unitarian Universalist – Cohasset, MA

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!