

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Circle Ministry Session Plan
Living and Dying

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 farmer/poet Wendell Berry:

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance,
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments

This time that we share is as precious and subtle and fragile and fleeting as a lifetime,
so let us listen and speak knowing that we have no time to lose, no time to waste.
Come into this circle [this morning/this afternoon/this evening],
cherishing our time together, our now.

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: Living and Dying

Our minister asks:

How long has it been,
our play in the sand?
How long has it been,
the building of these castles,
the weeping at their demise?
How long has it been that
we have wandered along the
shoreline, pretending our
footprints are there to stay?
How long has it been that
we have cast the nets of our souls
in fear and longing to that which neither asks
or considers how long it has been or will be?

As we ponder our living and dying, how do we compose our response? Forrest Church, Senior Minister for the past thirty years at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, has this to say: "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." It's almost a mantra for Forrest, and it now carries profound personal weight for him. Hear it again: "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die."

Take a moment of silence and:

1. Consider your response to this "dual reality of being alive and having to die." How do you live with this reality?

[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.]

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

First response to
Cross-conversation
Concluding statements

Forrest also has challenged us to "live lives worth dying for." Again, take a moment of silence and consider what it means to you to "live a life worth dying for." Then:

2. Share if you will a story from your living of how you are living a life worth dying for.

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, "Hope."

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

Closing (1 minute)

Years ago, Unitarian Universalist minister Kathleen Korb, wrote this for a young man who died of AIDS. She has used it often since then.

And do I die?

How should I die?

My atoms
are the same that existed
on the first day of the universe.

My elements
are identical with the make-up of
the stars.

I am one with all that is,
and my brief life a comet's trail
across the starry universal night.

I do not die.
My elements are scattered
New lights, new comets' trails will use them.
There is, because of me, a new note in the song
sung by the morning stars.

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!