

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
Circle Ministry Session Plan

*Parenting*

Rev. Jan Carlsson-Bull for Circle Ministry at First Parish UU Cohasset, MA  
Adapted from the session plan developed by Holly Zeeb and Bob Zeeb  
and the session plan developed by Bobbie Sproat and Judy Zacek,  
both used by the First Unitarian Society in Newton, MA

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

**Gathering, Welcoming (2 minutes)**

**Chalice lighting (1 minute)**

**Opening words (1 minute)**

Listen.

Listen to the words not spoken.

Listen to the sentences not completed.

Listen to the sighs not explained.

Watch.

Watch faces that mirror the words.

Watch faces that let the unintended escape.

Watch eyes that brighten with joy and eyes that glaze with sadness,  
eyes that make contact with yours and eyes that look away.

Anticipate.

Anticipate stories told for the first time.

Anticipate stories crinkling at the edges from telling and retelling.

Anticipate stories that reveal and stories that protect,  
stories complete, stories half-told, and stories barely begun.

Be present.

Be present as we listen and watch and anticipate and wonder  
at what a gift each of us is for all of us,  
at this time that is sacred.

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

**Discussion of congregational and community service plans (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: Parenting**

What is the nature of being a parent? Ursula Hegi has this to say:

“Because that is the nature of being a parent...you love your children far more than you ever loved your parents, and—in that love, and in the recognition that your own children cannot fathom the depth of your love—you come to understand the tragic, unrequited love of your own parents.”

(Ursula Hegi, “Freitod” – from *Hotel of the Saints*)

And Fred Rogers—remember Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood—had this to say:

“It is one of the paradoxes of parenting, and often a painful paradox, that even as our children need us for love and trust, they also need us for honest differing. It’s not only over limits and rules. . . [but also] about what we represent in the way of culture, traditions, and values. We owe it to them to be honest adversaries, for it is through this honest confrontation that children can grow into adults who have a firm sense of their place in the sequence of the generations.”

And Oscar Wilde, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, claimed that:

“Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.”

[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

Cross-conversation

Concluding statements

We have all had parents and, in one way or another, we all are parents. If you have not had or adopted your own children, focus on children you have come to know well, children who have become part of your life. Let this invitation sift in a few moments of silence, as you consider your response:

1. Talk about your experience as a parent (or non-parent but nurturing adult) focusing on one incident or one period of time.
2. Parenting is a difficult, often puzzling, and usually trying experience. Generally the relationships we create with our children change us as much as they change them. What has been the most rewarding aspect of your parenting? The most difficult? The most unexpected? What advice would have helped you?

What concluding thoughts would you like to share?

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

Thank the group. Ask what they liked in this session and what variations they would hope for.

Explain that for the next session, we’ll consider the topic, “Living and Dying.”

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

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

I offer you John Rosenthal’s thoughts on parenting.

“For better or worse, having a child changes you forever. The risk is everything and the stakes are too high for lies.... The child forces you to take your measure—the chaff flies away and you arrive at a purer notion of who you are and what you should be. The presence of the child carves you into your proper shape, sad or silly or full of juice.”

Go in peace, unless you’re a parent and you can settle for wonder.

## 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!**