

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Circle Ministry Session Plan

*Prayer*

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)**

“There is nothing so wise as a circle,” wrote Rilke. “Nothing So Wise” was Jeanne Lohmann’s choice of title for her poem, which reads:

The arc of an egg  
bends hands  
to shape prayer,

the shell  
unbroken,  
the heavy yolk  
floating.

Our fingers  
curving always  
inward, become a cup,  
an open bowl.

Prayer is  
circumference  
we may not  
reach around,

space for all we cannot hold,  
the rim of Love toward which we lean.

**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: Prayer**

Prayer as communication with God, with a higher power, with the Spirit of Life? Prayer as a psalm of praise? Prayer as a song of thanksgiving? A plea for relief? A petition for forgiveness? A proposed trade-off—If you will do such, then I will do such and such? Prayer as a meditation of silence?

Prayer may hold joy and sorrow and generosity and selfishness and compassion and hypocrisy and hope and humor and despair and all that abides in the spaces between these demeanors of heart and mind. It may be experienced in solitude or community. If prayer is the language of the inmost heart, it may not always be a spoken language. We may curve our fingers inward as if holding a cup or upwards as if forming a bowl, or a chalice even, but prayer itself we cannot wrap our fingers around. We cannot contain it.

So take a few moments of silence to reach into yourselves as you shape your responses to these questions:

1. How do you understand prayer or meditation, and what experiences have contributed to this understanding?
2. In the face of conflict, crisis, grief, and perhaps even despair, has prayer or meditation found a place in your coping and recovery? If so, how?
3. In the wake of great relief or celebration, has prayer or meditation found a place in your affirmation of what has happened?

[You may want to read all three questions and then proceed in phases, question by question.]

What concluding thoughts would you like to share?

### **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 do something different and consider the topic "Technology as Tyranny."

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

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

Go in the trust that your prayers are heard, even if they are never uttered. Go in the trust that your prayers are answered, even if all you receive is an echo. Go in the trust that prayer can both empty you and fill you. Go empty. Go full.

## 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!**