

Circle Ministry 2007-2008

*Sin*

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 memorable circle of a campfire's glow,  
we dip into the pools of each other's eyes.  
In the revolving cycle of seasons,  
we watch for signs of turning.  
In the orbit that we ride every 24 hours,  
we lean into the rhythms of light and dark, sun and moon.  
Of the circles of Saturn,  
we spin tales of wonder and theories astrophysical.  
Through the circle of now,  
we gaze transfixed, we watch for signs,  
we choose resilience, we tell our tales,  
wondrous, hopeful, discerning, present.

**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: Sin**

When we mark in our worship the arrival of a child in our midst, we don't baptize, we dedicate. We don't use the ancient symbol of water to cleanse the stain of sin with which this child was presumably born, because the notion of original sin doesn't have a place in a Unitarian Universalist understanding of a loving God. We dedicate this child to a life of "right living both for herself and for humankind." Our minister remarks that original sin makes no sense at all, because there's nothing about sin that could possibly be original. We're not born sinful, but we do arrive with the possibility and the likelihood that soon enough we will trip over our capacity for love and compassion and mindfulness and commit sin, many sins most likely. What's one of the first words of most children? "Mine!" How recklessly do we observe this declaration played out in adulthood: "It's mine, all mine! I deserve it, and *they* don't."

The primary Hebrew term for sin means "to miss a target or to fail to reach it," and refers most frequently to a violation against the law of God. In the Gospels of the New or Second Testament, sin is generally understood as a form of debt, as in "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Leopold Sabourin in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*) Sin can thus be understood as not living up to our capacity for what, in the words of the prophet Micah, God requires of us: "To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

There's a strong tendency for Unitarian Universalists to keep the notion of sin under lock and key, most likely because Universalism doesn't hold a belief in hell, in eternal punishment. So we believe we're "home free" in this world and whatever follows. Yet we have no problem speaking of injustice, of wrongdoing, of violations against one another and the earth, and of consequences. Maybe there is something to this notion of sin, unoriginal as it is. What do you think? What does your life experience tell 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.]

Hold a moment of silence and ponder your response to these questions.

1. What does the word sin mean to you? What is the history of your relationship with the concept? Do you find the idea of sin useful in any way to connect you with parts of yourself? If so, how?
2. Tell a story that illustrates how you might have been a perpetrator of sin and/or downwind of sin perpetrated by another. Think of a story that illustrates your experience of sin either "one on one" or in a larger context, such as a social policy or war. How were you able to move through and beyond the experience you're describing?

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, "Mentors."

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

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

Unoriginal as we can be  
 with our violations of this miracle we know as life,  
 we can also be mindful, attentive, awake, and aware.  
 We can tell the painful truth to ourselves first of all,  
 so that when we say to another, even to God: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,"  
 it will resound with credible readiness for a fresh start.

Go in love. Go in peace.

## 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!**