

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Circle Ministry 2008-2009

Spiritual Practice

Adapted from a session plan created by the Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco
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)

“Deep listening is miraculous for both listener and speaker,” writes author and psychotherapist Sue Patton Thoele. “When someone receives us with open-hearted, non-judging, intensely interested listening, our spirits expand.”

Ours is a circle in which we make it possible for our spirits to expand. It is no ordinary circle; it is Circle *Ministry*. In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister, Frances Reece Day,

“Into this place may we come
to share, to learn, to speak, to listen
and to grow together in the spirit of peace and harmony and love.”

Let us listen and speak and grow together.

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

Discussion of congregational and community service plans (10 minutes tops). Note that some of our groups have already completed these plans or clarified what they will do.

Topical Discussion (60 minutes)

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

First response

Cross-conversation

Topic: Spiritual Practice

Spiritual can refer to a state solitary or communal. It can refer to an inward quality or a quality of connection. It can refer to both. Usually it indicates a quality of experience beyond the materialistic, time-bound habits that detract us from what our Buddhist friends call simply “mindfulness.”

Meditation is regarded by many as a spiritual practice. It is not the only form. Connecting with our larger world through a desire for the common good is yet another way in which we, as individuals and in community, realize “spiritual practice.”

The prophet Micah, writing in the latter part of the 8th century BCE, proclaimed that what is good is “to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” There are many ways to interpret God. There are many ways to “be good.” Justice, mercy, and humility help; but there are multiple paths to mindfulness and countless means of transcending the narrow confines of ourselves that also permit us “to find ourselves.” Spiritual practice does carry an

understanding that the spiritual life—however we define it—takes practice. What form that practice assumes is a matter of choice driven by conscience and caring community.

In the words of the late novelist and Unitarian Universalist, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: “The primary benefit of practicing any art, whether well or badly, is that it enables one’s soul to grow.”

Let’s practice, for a moment, the art of silence, before we think and speak about how we grow our souls.

[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.]

NOTE: As discussion begins, encourage participants to pause after each speaker registers their initial thoughts, so that we can all digest the words of each.

1. Each of us holds our own understanding of “spiritual,” “spiritual life,” and “spiritual practice.” What do any of these words mean to you, and how have their meaning changed for you over time?
2. What do you regard as your “spiritual practice” and how does it grow your soul? How does it connect you with your larger world?

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, “Sexual Being/Human Wholeness.”

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

Closing (1 minute)

Hear the words of Langston Hughes, whose life filled the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Hughes was an African-American writer whose legacy of poetry, short stories, plays, translations, and news columns is a gift to us all. I offer you this afternoon an excerpt from “In Time of Silver Rain.”

In time of silver rain

“The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence;
not for the one good deed, or single thought,
but deed on deed, and thought on thought,
until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.”

Go with persistence into a life worth living.

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!