

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Circle Ministry Session Plan

The Christmas Story

Rev Janet Carlsson-Bull, for Circle Ministry at First Parish UU Cohasset, MA

Adapted from the session plan developed by Bob Zeeb
and 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)

Consider these seasonal observations of Jeff Jacoby in the *Boston Globe*, December 13, 2006:

From the land that produced “A Christmas Carol” and Handel’s “Messiah,” more evidence that Christianity is fading in Western Europe: Nearly 99 percent of Christmas cards sold in Great Britain contain no religious message or imagery.

”Traditional pictures such as angels blowing trumpets over a stable, Jesus in his manger, the shepherds and three wise men following the star to Bethlehem are dying out,” the *Daily Mail* reports. A review of some 5,500 Christmas cards turns up fewer than 70 that make any reference to the birth of Jesus. “Hundreds . . . avoided any image linked to Christmas at all”—even those with no spiritual significance, such as Christmas trees or Santa Claus.

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

Topic: The Christmas Story

While *Globe* reporter, Jeff Jacoby, calls attention to the secularization of Christmas in Great Britain, what about right here at home, specifically, in our homes as Unitarian Universalists? How are we all dealing with this wonderful myth, this simple story known as The Christmas Story? Perhaps it would help to “think off the same page” as we refer to the Christmas Story. The most common rendition comes from the New (or Second) Testament’s Gospel According to Luke and reads as follows:

“In those days a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news

of great joy, which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

As we hear this story once again, some of us grow nostalgic; others, anxious; others, repelled; and some of us, completely indifferent. What about you?

Take a few moments of silence and ponder your responses to these questions:

1. Where and how did you first encounter “the Christmas Story?” How did you relate to it in your youth—as a young child and then as a teenager?
2. What meaning does this story hold for you now? Tell a story illustrating how you feel about it now.

(Read through both 1 and 2 and choose for discussion the questions that best fit your group.)

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

First response

Cross-conversation

Concluding statements

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, the first session of the New Year, we’ll consider the topic, “Doing It Differently.”

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

Closing (1 minute)

In the words of the late Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs, “Each night a child is born is a holy night—a time for singing, a time for wondering, a time for worshipping.” May the peace of Christmas and the miracle of each and every birth—yours included—be with you and linger for years to come.

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!