



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network

WHAT'S RIGHT WITH YOU? Session Plan

Small Group Conversations, Anne Bailey coordinator

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Universalist Church of West Hartford, CT

(TOPIC READINGS start on p. 4)

OUR SMALL GROUP MISSION

These Small Group conversations are offered as a way to get to know each other better, as we explore the various topics selected by our Small Group Team, related to our life experiences, questions, joys, and challenges. We are free to share our thoughts and feelings, joys and struggles, as we choose, and are here to listen to and care about each other. (We are NOT here to be a therapy group ~ or to tackle “church politics”!)

We look forward to building closer connections with each other, as we spend this time together, and form new or deeper friendships and build our sense of community.

OUR SMALL GROUP COVENANT

As members of this Small Group of the Universalist Church, we covenant with each other to help make this experience both personally and spiritually rewarding, to nourish our sense of community, and to learn and practice right relationship.

We will try to arrive before the beginning of each session so that it can start on time. We will try to attend all of the meetings of our group unless we are ill or away, and will let the group know in advance when that will occur or by contacting the facilitator:

Facilitator Contact information:

We use these guidelines for sharing, as a pathway to a caring community:

- We will deeply listen and ask honest and open questions.
- We will respect confidentiality. What is said here stays here, unless we agree to share something outside of our group.
- We will allow others to speak without interruption.
- We will not try to fix, save, advise or correct.
- We will honor time for reflection and quietness and respect a member’s right to remain silent, as they choose.
- We will treat others with respect and without judgment.
- We will honor the diversity of thought and feeling and values among us.

CHECK IN

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Connection is the energy created between people when they feel seen, heard, valued and understood. One of the goals of small group is to move out of our heads and into our hearts in order to deepen our connections with one other.

Authentic sharing from a place of honesty and vulnerability allows us to build a community of trust, caring, and belonging. The connections we build with one another become contagious. They grow and spread and infuse our larger church community with life and vitality.

1. WELCOME / INTRODUCTIONS :

Let's remember to **Silence cell phones! Speak up clearly, so all can hear.**

Remind folks to let us know and to remind us if they have a hearing issue or if we aren't speaking up enough, so we can be aware.

• At FIRST SESSION of the series: Let's introduce ourselves:

"Tell us a bit about yourself, for example:"

- Your name, where you live and how long you've been in this area
- How long have you been a UU, coming to our church
- Your family, what you do (or did) for work, any special passions or hobbies
(Model this by starting with yourself.)

Distribute MISSION/COVENANT/CHECK IN handout.

- **Read the MISSION statement orally - volunteers read COVENANT**
- **Remind folks to contact the facilitator if you are unable to come to a session** (if not included, give them your contact info. to add to their copy)
- **Read the CHECK-IN orally, in turn.**
- "Since time has been spent on introductions today (tonight), **we'll keep our check-in short**"; ex. "**Might you have a joy or feeling of gratitude you can share with us?**"

2. CHECK IN: (at 2nd and later sessions: repeat names again, if needed, and read the following aloud, as you choose):

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Some **CHECK-IN PROMPTS:**

- *How have these past couple of weeks gone for you?*
- *Can you share some of your "highs" and/or "lows"?*
- *Has anything brought you a sense of gratitude or accomplishment? - of joy - or sorrow?*

3. OPENING: Use "chime" or bell to quiet folks; **LIGHT CANDLE:**

(3 reading choices below, you might vary this from session to session)

- *May "our separate fires kindle one flame" as we gather in this circle—bringing our stories, our reflections, our hopes and our struggles.
May our candle flame lend light and promise for our time together.*
~~~~~
- *May we know once again that we are not isolated beings, but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.*  
~~~~~
- *May our time together bring learning, understanding, compassion, encouragement, and hope as we share about our life journeys and passions.*

4. CENTERING: *In preparation for our conversation, let's take a few moments to center ourselves and be thankful for this time we have together in community.*

Please get comfortable, place both feet solidly on the floor, rest your hands on your thighs and let your shoulders drop. Gently close your eyes or focus on a spot a few feet in front of you on the floor. Bring your attention to the flow of your breath.

*Breathing in I calm my body.
Breathing out I smile.*

*Dwelling in this present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.*

Our life's path is not one we travel alone. We are in it together, and the company of spiritual friends helps us feel our interconnectedness.

Ring the chime: *"Slowly open your eyes."*

5. DISTRIBUTE READING:

Ask for **volunteers** to **read the paragraphs aloud, in turn**. You might include a **pause after the reading**, to allow time to reflect before responding.

6. POSE QUESTIONS to prompt sharing, invite folks to respond if and as they choose;

If you choose, you can **split readings into sections**, with questions/conversation as you go along (some readings are already done this way).

Encourage silent spaces between reflections; be comfortable with silence.

You might prompt: **"Take some time to think about that."** - or the like.

FEEL FREE TO ADJUST or ADAPT THE QUESTIONS PROVIDED

You may not get to all of them, or you may want to modify them slightly or skip around a bit, even make up a new question, depending on what comes up in the conversation, to keep it moving along.

KEEPING YOUR GROUP ON TRACK: If a group member should go on and on, or responds inappropriately so that **conversation needs redirection**, gently ask that they give others an opportunity to share or say something like:

- **"Let's reconsider the question"**
- **"Let's stop now and take a moment to reflect."**
- **"Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Now let's move on".**

You can also make reference to the covenant.

(If you are co-facilitating, work out a collaboration system with your partner, such as: when the other is facilitating, feel free to help guide the conversation, step in if you see a need to redirect.)

If the conversation has slowed down, you as facilitator can model responses to help the conversation along. **Some prompts could be:**

- **What are your thoughts about that?**
- **How does it make you feel?**
- **Can you say more about that?**
- **What does it make you think of?**

If the topic is really not going well, turn it back to the group:

- **"What do you want to do with this topic?"**

TOPIC READINGS start on next page:

WHAT'S RIGHT WITH YOU?

(can modify, if used at a different time than the New Year)

It's time to put your brain in the right mode for the upcoming New Year. So take a moment to reflect back on this past year, not to examine and dissect all that went wrong, but because you have a real opportunity to strengthen your brain's resilience and willpower. Think about the following questions, and you'll enhance your abilities to follow through on New Year's Resolutions, and boost your serotonin in a key region of the brain. As you think about your answers, your brain might have a tendency to slide into the negative, focusing on your mistakes and shortcomings, but if it does, just guide it gently back to the task at hand.

QUESTIONS:

- Did you help anyone this year – perhaps a friend or a co-worker?
- Did you thank anyone who helped you? When was the last time you tried to make someone feel better, even if it was just with a smile?
- Did you forgive anyone for his or her mistakes?
- And changing gears briefly, what was your favorite moment from the year?
- What was the last fun thing you did with other people?
- Were there any holidays you particularly enjoyed – St. Patrick's Day, the 4th of July, Thanksgiving?

These questions are designed to help you focus on (1) your positive qualities, and (2) your happy memories. Several studies have shown that reflecting on your positive qualities is a type of self-affirmation that actually strengthens your abilities to change bad habits). On top of that, thinking about happy memories boosts production of serotonin in the brain. Enhancing the serotonin system can help increase positive emotions, and give you greater impulse control. Lastly, this whole thing was a mindfulness exercise that gave a workout to the prefrontal cortex. Strengthening the prefrontal cortex improves your ability to set goals and follow through with them.

Good luck with your upcoming New Years Resolutions (if you have any) and if you run into trouble in the New Year take a moment to reflect on your positive qualities and your happy memories and you'll be back on track. ~ Alex Korb Ph.D. Alex Korb Ph.D.

If you liked this article then check out his book — "The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression, One Small Change at a Time"

Let's continue recalling some things that WENT RIGHT for you this past year:

- What comes to mind first for you?
- Thing(s) you Learned
- Best Thing you did for someone else, a time you helped someone
- Happiest day of the year
- Best trip/holiday of the year
- Day this past year you'd live over and over
- Some favorite Moments of the year
- What you look forward to next year

As CONVERSATION comes to an end, you might ask for last thoughts on the topic:

“Do you have a thought from this conversation that you will carry home with you?”

CLOSING (if this topic is used around the New Year): to be read by volunteer:

Some reminders for the New Year:

“I literally have to remind myself all the time, that being afraid of things going wrong isn’t the way to make things go right!”

“When nothing goes right, go left.”

“Sometime good things fall apart so better things can fall together.”

“Infuse your life with action. Don't wait for it to happen. Make it happen. Make your own future. Make your own hope. Make your own love. And whatever your beliefs, honor your creator, not by passively waiting for grace to come down from upon high, but by doing what you can to make grace happen... yourself, right now, right down here on Earth.” ~ *Bradley Whitford*

HAPPY NEW YEAR AHEAD!

RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE (Choose one of these or one of your choice)

As our time together comes to a close, we give thanks for one another, for the chance to share our lives, and to renew our spirits in the company of friends. May we go forth enriched by our gathering, committed to living life fully, to loving life with more passion, and to supporting one another.

OR

Remembering that the universe is so much larger than our ability to comprehend, let us go forth from this time together with the resolve to stop trying to reduce the incomprehensible to our own petty expectations, so that wonder -- that sense of what is sacred -- can find space to open up our minds and illumine our lives.

OR

May we value our shared reflections and take away new understandings of ourselves, each other, and our being together. Thank you for sharing your story. Thank you for creating a place of safety. Thank you for listening with appreciation.

ANNOUNCE NEXT SESSION’S TOPIC: (unless last session)

Ask for a volunteer to bring in a CLOSING reading (if needed) for this next session (It can be something they particularly like, doesn’t necessarily have to relate to the topic.)

if providing SNACKS, ask for a volunteer