



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network

WHAT IS A BLESSING? Session plan

Small Group Conversations, Anne Bailey coordinator

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(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.*

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- *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.*

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- *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 IS A BLESSING?

CANDLE LIGHTING:

“I drink this day as a prayer to life, spilling all over me... blessing, baptizing, and filling my heart. A gift from eternity.” ~ *anonymous*

READING: How to give a blessing

I didn't mean to give an honest answer when asked, 'How are you?'

We're asked a dozen times a day, “How are you?” Most of the time it's not a real question and doesn't invite a genuine answer. It's more like an alternative “hello,” and we're well-trained in the ritual response: “Fine, thanks.”

But every once in a while we are asked this question when things are really not fine at all. At those times—when we're walking around in a little bubble of anxiety or sorrow—something inside us can suddenly balk at giving out the standard, meaningless answer. We are too hungry for an authentic word, too raw to pretend that things are okay.

The morning after my father died, following three days and nights of an around-the-clock vigil with my siblings, I had to go to the grocery store to buy a few things for dinner. When I arrived at the check-out counter and the clerk distractedly said, “How are you?” my brain went blank. I couldn't say “fine,” or even “okay.” I wasn't okay. I wasn't even in my right mind. I was numb, sleep-deprived, and saturated with the mystery of our mortality. That's the only explanation I have, because to my horror I found myself blurting out a real and honest answer. “I'm not so good,” I said. “My Dad died last night.”

With his hands filled with the apples, chicken, and bread, the poor clerk turned red and started to stammer. The people behind me looked longingly at the check-out lines they should have chosen, the ones that would not have placed them in earshot of the too-much-information lady. I was mortified at having revealed to an unprepared stranger just how not-fine I was. Everyone froze in this moment of uncomfortable paralysis—except the young man bagging the groceries, who had Down syndrome. He stopped moving completely, looked straight at me, and with a little slur and great emphasis said,

“I bet you feel really sad about that.”

The simplicity of that little expression of kindness and solidarity allowed both the clerk and me to escape. “Yes, I do. Thank you,” I said to him, and then I was able to walk out with my groceries and not feel quite so much as though I had just undressed in public. I thought about that encounter for a long time. The young man bagging groceries would be considered disabled, in thought, speech, and movement. Yet he was the only one able to offer what counted in that particular moment: He knew how to give a blessing.

~ *from Shine and Shadow: Meditations by Kathleen McTigue (Skinner House, 2011).*

“The capacity to bless life is in everybody...A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another.

“When people are blessed, they discover that their lives matter, that there is something in them worthy of blessing. And when you bless others, you may discover the same thing is true about yourself.”

~ *from My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging, by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen*

QUESTIONS:

Some dictionary definitions of 'blessing':

- a prayer asking for God's help or protection, or a little gift from the heavens.
 - something that is very good or lucky - I 'count my blessings'
 - the approval to do something - giving your blessings to someone's endeavor
- What do you think of when you hear the word "blessing"? ... Does the story about the grocery store incident broaden your concept as to what a "blessing" could be?
 - What are the blessings in your life?
 - How have you blessed someone? Or, how have you been blessed? What are some ways this was done?
 - What are some ways you might you acknowledge someone's loss or difficult life situation?

LET'S READ ON:

One way to practice generosity is to give energy where it is needed. Giving money to a cause or person in need is one way to give energy. Giving attention, love, or a smile to another person are other acts of giving that we can offer. After all, there are people all over the world that are hungry for love.

Sometimes when we practice generosity, we practice it conditionally. We might be expecting to "receive back" from the person to whom we gave. We might even become angry or resentful if that person doesn't reciprocate. However, trust in the natural flow of energy, and you will find yourself practicing generosity with no strings attached. This is the purest form of giving. Remember that what you send out will always come back you. Selflessly help a friend in need without expecting them to return the same favor in the same way, and know that you, too, will receive that support from the universe when you need it. Besides, while giving conditionally creates stress (because we are waiting with an invisible balance sheet to receive our due), giving unconditionally creates and generates abundance. We give freely, because we trust that there is always an unlimited supply.

Consciously remember the times you've received support from expected and unexpected sources. Remember anyone who has helped you when you've needed it most, and bless all situations that come into your life for the lessons and gifts they bring you.

~ by Madisyn Taylor

QUESTIONS:

- Does "giving energy where it is needed" serve as a blessing? Can you think of times when it felt that way? What made that happen?
- Is a blessing something good that just happens, or is there intention involved, a continuing relationship which promises spiritual or material support?
- Does these readings give you some ideas of things you do that serve as blessings to others?

As CONVERSATION comes to an end, you might ask for **final statements/last thoughts on the topic**. *"Do you have a thought from this conversation that you will carry home with you?"*

~ CLOSING on next page:

CLOSING WORDS:

“The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will with the intention to do good. It's an act of recognition, a grateful acknowledgment that in the midst of a broken world, unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide. What will you do with your gifts??...Choose to bless the world. ~ *Rebecca Parker*

RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE:

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.

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