

Circle Ministry

Welcoming the Stranger

Rev. Jan 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)

Wisdom comes through well-seasoned living. Parker Palmer embodies both as writer, teacher, activist, and consultant to leaders in religion and higher education. As we gather in our ministry of circles, I offer you these words of Parker J. Palmer:

I have argued that the church, picturing itself as a close and warm family, tends to suppress conflict, depriving its members of a vital lesson in public life. That same familial image undermines the public life in another way – by excluding the stranger from its midst. If the church is to serve as a school of the spirit, and as a bridge between the private and the public realms, it must find ways of extending hospitality to the stranger. I do not mean coffee hours designed to recruit new members for the church, for these are aimed at making the stranger “one of us.” The essence of hospitality – and of the public life – is that we let our differences, our mutual strangeness, be as they are, while still acknowledging the unity that lies beneath them.

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: Welcoming the Stranger

There are times in our lives when we are open to the stranger, when we see the connections between all of us and feel secure enough to welcome the stranger into our lives. There are times in our lives when we welcome the strange—not always a stranger, but often someone in our midst who strikes us as, well, strange; nonetheless we find ourselves warm and open to this person.

There are also times in our lives when we can't seem to summon the security to practice the hospitality resident in our mission of welcoming “all to our inclusive spiritual community.” We find ourselves not inclusive, not just of the stranger who comes as an outsider, but of the one whom we deem strange in our midst. Our discomfort pre-empts our openness, our readiness to affirm “the worth and dignity of every person,” including the one who makes us uncomfortable. Our “us/them” behavior kicks in, and the lower angels of our nature flutter about.

We all know both feelings, both experiences. We've also most likely experienced the other ends of these circumstances. We know what it feels like to be a stranger welcomed; we perhaps know what

it feels like to be someone deemed strange who is welcomed. Likewise, we know what it feels like to be the stranger not welcome and perhaps what it feels like to be the one deemed strange and avoided.

Let's consider together what Palmer talks about, the essence of hospitality, as it's played out in our own lives, which may well include the life of this congregation.

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

1. Recall a time when you welcomed a stranger or someone you deemed strange into your home, into this or another congregation, or simply into a conversation. OR recall a time when you did NOT welcome a stranger or someone you deemed strange, when you perhaps avoided this person. What did you feel like while it was happening? How did you become aware of it? Why does it matter now?
2. Tell a story about a time that you were welcomed as a stranger taken in, a stranger invited to worship with a new congregation, or a person deemed strange in some way and nonetheless welcomed. What did you feel at the time? How has it changed you?

(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, we'll consider the topic, "The Christmas Story."

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

Closing (1 minute)

I offer you the words of Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz, former President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, past President of Amnesty International USA, and current Board Chair of our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Bill describes "the mission of our faith:"

To teach the fragile art of hospitality;

To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;

To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;

And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

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!