

Wisdom Circle Facilitator Guide

(Sept. 2015)

What is a circle of trust? It is the kind of carefully created space that invites the soul to make itself known. The kind of space where we can practice the paradox of "being alone together," a space that welcomes our inwardness even as it connects us to the gifts and challenges of community, and to the larger world.

~Parker J. Palmer from "A Hidden Wholeness"

There is a quality of listening that is possible among a circle of human beings, who by their attentiveness to one another create a space in which each person is able to give voice to the truth of his or her life. There is the miracle of authentic narrative, made possible by listening that holds still long enough to let the truth be told. Where there is this kind of listening and speaking, a new kind of community is born - a community of life

~ adapted from "Proverbs of Ashes" by Rebecca Parker

I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place.

~Rufus Jones, Quaker historian & theologian

First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego

**“What Small Group Ministry Is and Is Not”
-Adapted from the UUA**

What Small Group Ministry is intended to offer participants:

- A way to deepen our spirituality.
- A way to deepen our connections with the congregation.
- A way to connect across age, gender, ethnic, economic, and other differences.
- A way to help newer members engage with our community.
- A way to better align our lives with our deepest personal values and core congregational values.
- A way to be engaged, included, and heard in a safe, nurturing environment.

What Small Group Ministry is not intended to offer participants:

- A social club, although ties between church members deepen.
- A debate society, although many important topics are discussed
- A support or therapy group, although the atmosphere is positive.
- A worship service, although there is a strong spiritual aspect to the meeting structure and topics.
- A rigid template of activities, although there are general guidelines to follow.
- A closed "fraternity", although groups must be limited in size to be effective

Standard Meeting Format

Basic Meeting Format (Meetings usually last 2 hours and follow this structure):

- **Opening:** Chalice Lighting and/or Centering Words or Music. Facilitators offer a chalice lighting words or opening words—either from the UU hymnal, their favorite poet or by using a small section of the readings that were assigned for that month.
- **Brief Check-In:** Members briefly share what is going on “beneath the surface” for them by listing one thing that is “pulling at or draining them” and one thing that is feeding, filling or lifting them up.” This is an effort to get at deeper issues, to do more than just “catch up.” Typically it takes no more 20 minutes.
- **Business:** This is time to answer any questions about scheduling meetings, clarify expectations for the group, periodically revisit the group covenant, introduce new members, and say goodbye to members who are leaving the group.
- **Discussion of the Readings and “Questions for Reflection”:** The readings and discussion questions are a “jumping off point” for discussion, rather than a rigid guide. We recommend that the time for discussion include some time for people to reflect on the questions before speaking, some time for people to share individually without any “cross-talk,” and then if time allows, some time for open discussion.
- **Check-Out:** Meetings end by each member briefly sharing a statement of gratitude. Facilitators ask participants to think about what they’ve experienced together that evening and then lift up one comment or experience for which they are particularly grateful-- something they are especially glad to be taking with them as they go. Discourage conversation—as everyone to take a deep breath and simply listen and receive what is spoken. Make sure participants know that this is not a time to make a new point or share a new story. As always, modeling is helpful.
- **Closing:** Extinguish the chalice, closing reading and/or closing words.

Creating a Group Covenant

A covenant is a list of the ways in which we agree to be together as a group. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. Historically, we've been a covenantal religion rather than a creedal religion - i.e., we are bound by the way we promise to be with and treat each other, not by common and identical beliefs and creeds. So forming a covenant isn't just good group technique, it's a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

The following covenant has been refined over the past few years and is used by many groups. Some groups decide to edit it to fit their group's particular wishes. As a facilitator, your job is to help remind the group of its commitments to each other by periodically having the group review and reaffirm the covenant, altering as needed and agreed upon by the group. You are encouraged to have an explicit discussion of it in a group meeting at the start of each year. It is a good idea to have another mid-year discussion about how well the group feels it is living up to its covenantal goals. You might also consider periodically sending it out by email as a gentle reminder.

When starting a new group, the covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. Send it out ahead of time by email and reserve about 30 minutes to go over it in a group meeting. A good format is to have members take turns reading one promise at a time, pausing in each case for every person to express their comfort level with and support of the promise. Tell members they are free to suggest changes when they feel strongly about a certain promise. The group then can discuss and make a group decision about the change.

Basic “Soul Matters” Group Covenant

As group members,...

Before our meetings, we agree to...

- make meetings a priority, including being on time.
contact the facilitator (or one of the co-facilitators) ahead of time if we are unable to attend.
- read the material and attempt the assigned spiritual exercise.

During our meetings, we agree to...

- participate in discussion of the reading material and exercise by engaging each other’s ideas with inquisitiveness and support rather than debate, dismissal or argument.
- monitor our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak.
- refrain from interruption during times of personal sharing.
speak for ourselves and try to speak from both the heart and the intellect.
- make time to say good bye when a member decides to leave the group.
- periodically revisit, edit and re-affirm this covenant as a group.

After our meetings, we agree to...

- be willing to follow up with other members as needed, especially any who miss a meeting without notice to make sure they are okay.
- respect the privacy of group members by keeping personal information confidential.
keep each other in our prayers and hearts, reaching out to each other in tangible ways as we feel comfortable.

As the facilitator, I will...

- start and end meetings on time.
- make sure all voices are heard.
- help the group be a circle of caring and concern.
- ensure that another group member facilitates if I cannot attend.
- ensure that the group periodically revisits and re-affirms this covenant
- let the group know in advance that a new member will be joining the group and welcoming them into the group with
- intentionality
- ensure we make time for the group to say good-bye to members who leave

Questions Frequently Asked By New Facilitators

Where do I find the support and training needed to do this ministry?

Your primary source of support and training is the monthly facilitator meetings, usually held on a day during the last week of each month. This is where we run through or “pilot” the sessions that you will do with your group. This is learning by doing. We also hold special training sessions at the beginning of the church. These allow for focused reflection on our experience together and more specific training for those who want it.

How will I get the monthly reading packets and spiritual exercises?

The Adult Religious Education Coordinator (Chris Christiansen) emails the monthly reading & spiritual exercise packets to you at least 2 weeks prior to each facilitator meeting. This allows you time to do the exercise and reading in time for the facilitators’ meeting. It also gives you the freedom to email or hand it out to your group members as best fits your group’s schedule. It is recommended that you get the packet out at least two weeks in advance of the meeting.

What do I do if I have to miss a facilitator meeting?

Contact Rev. Jennifer Channin ahead of time. We promise to do this so group members don’t wait on you to start the meeting. It is also nice to know you are ok and not missing for a serious reason.

What do I do if I have to miss one of my group’s meetings?

It works best to ask one of your group members to cover for you. Try to meet with your “sub” ahead to go over things and address any question they may have. This type of challenge is also why a number of facilitators decide to have a co-facilitator rather than run the group solo.

How do I know when it is serious enough for me to cancel a group? For instance, a snowstorm is coming. What do I do?

This is where having emails for all of your group members is helpful. It allows you to contact everyone easily. Let your group know that in storm conditions you will always confirm whether the group is on or off at least an hour or two before the group is scheduled to meet. It is recommended that you leave a message on BOTH their email and home phone. In terms of judging when the weather is bad enough to cancel, a good guide is your own comfort level. If you are anxious about coming out, go ahead and cancel. If you want to reschedule, the easiest thing to do is to keep the same meeting day just delayed to the next week.

How are new members added to my group?

The ministers or church staff will periodically contact you when someone is interested in joining your group. They will give you background about the potential member and it will be up to you to decide if this person is a good “fit” and if your group is ready to integrate a new person. We ask you to let them know when your group is full so we know not to match someone up with your group.

What do I do if I hear of someone who wants to join my group

One word of caution: make sure you ask your members to refer interested people to you and to the church staff BEFORE they have them show up. Explain that you'd like to initiate newcomers to the group and the small group ministry concept prior to their first meeting. Call the interested person or invite them out for coffee. Basically, make sure they know what they are getting into. Share the covenant with them. Make sure they are in agreement with it. After talking with them, if you feel it is a bad idea or run into trouble, call the minister to think through your options. When you do accept a new person make sure to tell the minister or staff, so they can add them to our master group list.

What can I do to make incorporating new members a positive experience for my group?

- Normalize the situation. Talk openly with all involved about the awkwardness of getting to know and adjusting to new folks.
- Always let the group know a new member is coming ahead of time.
- Meet with or call the new member ahead of time to establish a personal connection and share the covenant and small group philosophy with them. Make sure they get a "Small Group Ministry Guide." You can also download a copy from the Adult Spiritual Development page on our church website. Make an extra effort to stress that the group is about "spiritual development" and that the spiritual exercises require them to be open to trying new and sometimes uncomfortable things. You need to make sure they know what they are getting into.
- Develop some kind of welcoming ritual—doesn't have to be anything fancy. It should focus on the newcomer but not so much that it takes too much time and attention away from that evening's discussion. It is best to do this briefly right before check-in. I like noting that, because we are so glad to have had this group created for us, we feel lucky to have the chance to share it with others. A simple welcoming ritual is to invite them to briefly introduce themselves and share what they hope to get out of this group experience.
- Check-in with the newcomer immediately after the group to ask how it felt. Consider encouraging another group member to do the same, maybe even taking them out for coffee or lunch.

What if a member decides to drop out of the group?

Ask the member to come for one final meeting with the group. This will give the group and the member who is leaving an opportunity to say good-bye to each other. Make an effort to find out why they are leaving the group and let the minister know that they are leaving and the reason why.

If my group meets in the church, how do I get in and set it up?

Your room should be unlocked and set up (with a circle of chairs) before each meeting by the church staff. If you arrive and it is locked or you are missing materials, find staff who are on campus to assist you, preferably Chris Christiansen, our Adult RE Coordinator.

What should I do if our group changes its meeting time – be it for one time or changing the meeting date permanently?

The most important thing is to let Chris Christiansen know so he can make the needed scheduling and space reservation changes.

What do I need to bring with me to the group I facilitate? Coffee? Chalice?

If your meeting is taking place at the church, most of the time, you only need to bring your copy of the night's discussion guide, or a few extra copies in case anyone forgot theirs. We have a coffee maker and beverage supplies on the 2nd floor of the Welcome Center building. Some facilitators' go the extra mile and bring cookies, fruit or popcorn! A chalice and matches are likely available in the room for you to use. They are also available in the church office. If you are hosting the meeting in your home, we recommend that you purchase your own chalice to use and make light beverages (water, tea) available. You may also wish to purchase a copy of the UU hymnals from the UUA bookstore: www.uuabookstore.org

What if I feel like I need additional support?

In addition to reaching out to the minister, you can reach out to one of the other facilitators to be a buddy or a mentor for you. It's become common for facilitators to lean on and get advice from each other. If you're not sure who to reach out to, ask the minister, or Chris Christiansen for help.

What about co-facilitating?

Many facilitators are finding it easier and more meaningful to co-lead a group. This provides a built-in partner to help you wrestle with complicated group dynamics. It's also a chance to bond more deeply with another person you trust, enjoy and respect. Chris Christiansen can help match you up with another facilitator, but we also encourage you to go ahead and select as a partner someone you already know and connect with.

Does my group meet year round?

This is up to you and your group. Most groups choose to take a break from formal meetings for July and August and instead arrange one or two social gatherings of some type. It is helpful to make it clear early on whether your group will go through the summer or take a break.

Can the same group of people meet year after year, or must they disband each year?

We give groups the option, towards the end of each year, to decide whether they wish to disband (in which case group members are welcome to sign up again for different groups in the fall), or to continue with their group members (in which case they must be open to having some new members join them if they have fewer than 12 members). Please inform the staff about your group's decision.

Facilitation Tips & Techniques

(Adapted from material provided by the UUA and written by Reverend Bob Hill)

ASK QUESTIONS

The facilitator's primary role is to get others to participate.

GUIDE THE DISCUSSION

Questions may even be useful on those occasions when one needs to guide the discussion. If someone has gone off on a tangent and others appear uninterested in following, one might ask, "And how is this relevant to our topic tonight?" If the quieter persons in the group are not getting into the discussion, ask follow-up questions to draw them in. For example: "John, how would you answer the question?" Or, "Anybody else have any insights into this question?"

START AND STOP THE MEETINGS ON TIME

If you do, people will become more prompt and they'll take comfort in knowing the meeting will end when it is supposed to end.

AVOID TASK-ORIENTATION

We Unitarian Universalists tend to want closure or at least a sense of progress, but small groups, whether for reflection and discussion or for activities, are not primarily task groups. Whether the group adequately addresses the meeting's topic is not of first importance. Whether the group's trust level grew stronger or was weakened is more important.

MODEL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

When introducing a question to which others are asked to respond, it's a good idea for the facilitator to be the first person speaking on the question. This will let her/him model good practice by keeping her/his answer to the right length (brief, most likely) and the optimum depth of sharing (friendship-level, not therapy). Generally, the aim is to cause people to recall past experiences and share their memories and resulting insights with the group--to share their stories.

SILENCE IS OK (MAYBE EVEN GOLDEN)

Respect each person's contribution or right to keep silent and remind the group to do likewise. Guarantee the right to PASS. It is important for group rapport and trust that persons not feel pressured into sharing more than they feel comfortable' or ready to reveal. Allowing a pregnant pause may give birth to fresh ideas.

PREVENT ONE VOICE

Strive to keep an individual or small group from dominating the discussion. What is happening? Has the topic released an issue of great concern? Are there individuals who feel threatened and are using this as a means to keep control?

HELP THE GROUP KEEP FOCUSED

If individuals start to talk about other things, remind them of the subject or task, and make a note of their concern so that it may be addressed later or privately. Encourage group members to help you keep the focus. This can be a group responsibility.

BE SENSITIVE TO THE POTENTIAL EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF THE MATERIAL

Strong emotions may surface. Anger may spring from unknown sources and mask pain. Difficulty in expressing emotion can bring tears. Give yourself or the other person time and room to express the emotions. Make a decision about how to act when participants become emotional. Do not confuse support with agreement. You may support a person in her grief, fear, or anger, and be critical about what she does with it.

SEEK A BALANCE IN YOUR OWN PARTICIPATION

This balance is dynamic. Encouraging others' participation is usually more fruitful than inadvertently being the one everyone turns to as the "expert." A quote from Parker Palmer is helpful: "The facilitator's role in a circle of trust is easily defined: to be first among equals in creating and protecting a space where everyone's soul can feel safe...and their truth heard.

ENCOURAGE SENSITIVITY AND RESPECT, NOT CONFIDENTIALITY

Therapy groups often have a rule that says, "Everything expressed within the group setting is assumed to be confidential and will not be discussed with people outside the group." Language about respecting privacy would be more appropriate for small groups focused on spiritual growth. What I recommend as a norm is something like: "We will be sensitive to each other's privacy in what we say to others about our exchanges here." Small groups will almost always be taking in new members and, if they grow to nine or ten, sending off members to seed new groups. Also, we hope people will be excited enough about their experiences in their small group that they'll naturally want to talk with their spouses, partners, and friends about their experiences there. So, I recommend a covenant of discretion and respect for the privacy interests of members, and with the expectation of confidentiality regarding personal matters.

SOME GUIDELINES AT A GLANCE—THE 5 ESSENTIALS OF GOOD GROUP PROCESS:

1. Everyone gets an equal opportunity to talk
2. There is no right or wrong answer
3. Persuasion is not the goal
4. Questions are OK; Challenges are not
5. Talk from personal experience; Tell your story not "the one right answer"

Resources for Small Group Ministry—Theory and Theology

There are some great resources created by teachers and ministers who have studied the importance of small group ministry. We encourage you to study them for yourself and to feel free in incorporating what you learn into your own facilitation practices.

“Circles of Trust,” A Hidden Wholeness, by Parker J. Palmer

Parker Palmer developed a model of small group ministry called “Circles of Trust.” There is a national network of Circles of Trust facilitators and you can easily find retreats to attend if you do some searching. Attending one of these retreats is often a powerful experience. The Circles of Trust approach emphasizes creating spaces of open, non-judgmental listening, to help people access their own inner teacher.

The Way of Council, by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle

This model of small group ministry emphasizes the use of ritual to create spaces of trust, honesty, and deep sharing.

“Soul Matters,” by Scott Taylor

This is a model for small group ministry developed by the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY, that is now used in hundreds of UU congregations. It is tied to theme-based ministry. You can find many resources by searching “theme based ministry” online.

“Covenant Groups,” UUA

Covenant Groups are a model for small group ministry promoted by the UUA. You can find resources on their website: <http://www.uua.org/care/57702.shtml>

Evensong: An 8-week Series of Gatherings, by Barbara Hamilton-Holway

These books are collections of discussion guides for small group ministry, each centered around important life themes. If you are leading a small group and want an “out-of-the-box” curriculum for 8 weeks of deep and personal sharing, these books are an excellent resource!

Resources for Small Group Ministry—Openings, Closings & Chalice Readings

Worship Web

<http://www.uua.org/worship>

The UUA created this online collection of free readings, rituals, and guides for worship that is very useful for finding opening and chalice readings.

UUA Bookstore

<http://www.uuabookstore.org>

The UUA publishes a wide range of collections of readings, for purchase, which can be used for openings, closings, and chalice readings.

UU Small Group Ministry Network

<http://www.smallgroupministry.net>

This website includes many resources for small group ministry, including a collection of discussion guides arranged by topic. Browsing these guides – most of which were created by UU ministers—is a great way to find readings on a topic.

UU Hymnals: *Singing the Living Tradition*, *Singing the Journey*, *Las Voces del Camino*

*The UU hymnals are a great resource for songs and readings. The back of the grey hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, contains indexes that organize the songs and readings by theme.*