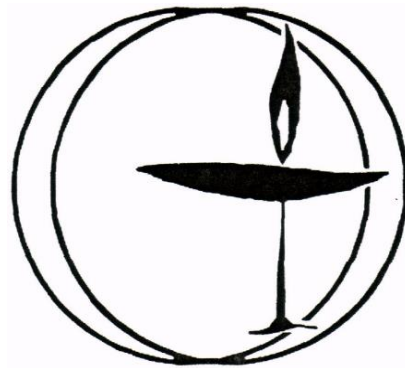


Wisdom Circle

Participant Guide

(Sep 2016)



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.

- 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

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PART I:

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.

PART II: The Wisdom Circles Approach—

Our Specific Vision & Unique Characteristics

“Wisdom Circles” shares many of the same goals as other UU small group ministry programs. But it’s also different. Here are its most distinctive aspects and some background about how these unique characteristics developed.

Rooted in a Theology Focused on Spiritual Connection:

Some religious people look out at the world and see flawed people caught up in sin. Thus their primary offering to the world is forgiveness and a means to purity. Others look out and see people struggling with spiritual disconnection--wanting to remember and live into their best selves. This is the focus on UUism: helping people live lives of greater connection to their deepest selves, life’s gifts and needs greater than one’s own.

This is also the focus on Wisdom Circles: reconnection and depth. Many of us are moved by the way spiritual writer and small group advocate, Parker Palmer, captures this focus by talking about “the blizzard of the world.”

There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives.

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some of us are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home. Some are lost without knowing it. Some of us have just reached for the rope. Others are in the middle of the journey trying to keep hold of our grip. Others have just arrived home.

My own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that the soul's order and life’s hope can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the common compassion of friends, that rope is always close at hand, ...offering, time after time, the chance to regain our bearings...and find our way home again.

From A Hidden Wholeness

So it may sound a bit grandiose, but that is the ultimate aim of Wisdom Circles: Home, helping us find our way back to home, back to what we care most deeply about, back to who we most want to be. Not just “an evening of good discussion.” Not just “intellectual stimulation.” Not just “meeting new friends.” But home.

An Opportunity to Explore the Worship Themes in More Depth

Wisdom Circles is not a “stand alone” program. It is inextricably connected to the worship life of congregations. Simply put, Wisdom Circles provides people opportunities to explore the worship themes in more depth.

However, it is important to stress that Wisdom Circles groups are not sermon discussion groups. The goal is not to explore the sermons in more depth, but to explore the monthly theme in more depth. Having the sermons in the background enriches the experience, but they are not the focus. The focus is on the discussion questions and a “spiritual exercise” that seek to provide a different kind of experience than worship can offer.

And that leads us to the next distinctive aspect of Wisdom Circles:

An Invitation to Experience the Theme, Not Just Talk about It

Unitarian Universalists want to do more than just read and talk about spiritual topics. Provocative readings are important. Thinking about and discussing a topic is essential. But there is nothing like “experiential learning.” Indeed many of us learn and process things best through direct experience.

Given this, group members are also given an activity to do prior to the meeting. For instance, when we wrestled with the concept of grace, we didn’t just read what theologians had to say about it, we also challenged ourselves to find a way that month to bring grace (a gift one doesn’t expect, earn or even deserve) into a person’s lives. The same with the topic of prayer; we didn’t just read theories and perspectives on prayer, we challenged ourselves to find a new way to pray (or even try prayer for the first time!). The types of assignments differ radically. Sometimes they are profound and involved. Other times, simple and playful. Sometimes members report having “the most moving experience of my life.” Other times, they come in and say “I’m not sure that worked for me.” But we always ask members to give the exercises a try, believing that—whether you “enjoyed” it or not—the experience of doing it will help you learn something about life and yourself—something that sitting in a room just thinking about the topic never could.

PART III: Meeting Format & Group Covenant

Ok, enough theory. What about the practical stuff? Below is an overview of the basic meeting structure of Wisdom Circles groups. A word or two about the group “covenant” is also included.

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 a favorite poet/writer 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:** Use this time to welcome new members, review the covenant (if needed), plan upcoming meetings or discuss any other logistical questions.
- ❖ **Discussion of the Spiritual Exercise:** Discussions usually start with members sharing their experience of doing the spiritual exercise. Common questions that facilitators ask are: “What was it like for you to attempt the exercise?” “Did it lead to any unexpected feelings or insights?” “Did it go as you expected?” “How did it challenge, change or deepen your understanding of this month’s theme?”

There is not a lot of back and forth during this section of the meeting. Instead group members focus on listening and providing each other with the space to share freely. It is only after everyone has had a chance to share, that the facilitator “opens the floor” and invites members to comment on the connections they saw between each other’s stories and experiences. A common question at this point is: “How did listening to everyone else help you see or learn something new about your own story?”
- ❖ **Discussion of the “Questions for Reflection”:** These questions vary month to month, but all of them somehow relate to the overarching goal of asking ourselves, “What does it mean for each of us personally to live a life of _____?”
- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **Closing:** Groups end by extinguishing the chalice and sharing a closing reading or offering closing words.

Group Covenant

A covenant is a list of the ways 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. In other words, 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 is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

When starting a new group, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. The following covenant is popular among previous small First Church groups. Many groups end up adopting it as is, but every group is encouraged to adapt it to its unique characteristics and desired ways of being together.

Example Wisdom Circles 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