



Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia CHALICE CIRCLES FACILITATOR GUIDE

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.

- Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Theologian

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

- Rufus Jones, Quaker historian & theologian

Helping Each Other Become the People We Most Want to Be at Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia

We hold the following mission and vision at Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia (UUCC)

Mission

In the spirit of courageous love, we forge a community of radical welcome and deep connection that moves us together to heal the world.

Vision

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia:

- Transforms lives by calling us to deeper connection, service, and spiritual exploration within an uplifting community of diverse beliefs.
- Lights a moral beacon for Columbia and Missouri by creating intentional welcome, relational solidarity, and compassionate action in response to injustices.
- Grows in environmental consciousness and advocates for the health of the earth and all living things.
- Engages our intergenerational community in faith development and lifelong learning with a spirit of curiosity and openness.

As a core aspect of adult ministries, Chalice Circles help further UUCC's mission and vision by offering its participants:

- Formative space for deeper connection, service and spiritual exploration
- Opportunities for faith development and learning
- A place of welcome in the midst of the larger church community

What are Chalice Circles

Chalice Circles are a form of Small Group Ministry which attempt to create formative space within community. This is a place of acceptance and safety in which an individual can explore their deepest values without judgment or coercion. The following readings help explain the power and importance of this formative space and its accompanying circles of learning, support, and deep listening.

What Small Group Ministry Is and Is Not -Adapted from the Unitarian Universalist Association

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 care for one another.
- 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 congregational 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 & connected by common affection to be effective.

UCC Chalice Circle Components

Structure of a Chalice Circle

- Has 7-10 participants.
- Meets a minimum of once per month following the session plan format. Twice is encouraged and if a second meeting is held, it may be a social/service gathering.
- Commits to meet from October to May with the option of meeting through the summer.
- Has the option for a member to recommit to the same group, sign up for a new group, or leave Chalice Circles altogether in May.
- Are facilitated by invited, trained, and supported facilitators. Each group has two facilitators who will cultivate leadership within the group.
- Are not closed – they are open to new members up to 10 people (including facilitators). When a group is full, it is encouraged to evolve and to generate new groups.
- Creates and adheres to a behavioral covenant, and uses the covenant to guide their process and relationships.
- Takes on one service project in the church and two service projects outside the church per year.
- Uses the standard meeting format laid out by the Chalice Circles Leadership Team and reflects upon the Congregation's monthly worship theme.
- Engages in deep listening so that each member of the group is listened to during each meeting.
- Acts as the site of deep listening and conversation, not as a therapy or support group. The minister is alerted by facilitators to any emerging pastoral issues.
- Decides together if communal food and/or drink is to be shared before or after the formal meeting. Because it may distract from deep listening and sharing, food and drink is limited to before or after the chalice is lit and extinguished.
- Is not strictly confidential but is sensitive to personal information and the depth and vulnerability that Chalice Circles seek to create.

Chalice Circle Discussions

The Chalice Circles Leadership Team develops the order of service (OOS) for the upcoming session based on the worship theme for that month. Because Chalice Circles are not a 'stand alone' program, exploring the worship theme in more depth each month provides an inextricable connection to the worship life of the

congregation. Besides helping participants go deeper, this has the added benefit of connecting to the wider church community. At the same time Chalice Circles are *not* sermon discussion groups or an exploration of the sermon in more depth, but to explore *the monthly theme* more deeply. This provides a different kind of experience than worship offers.

As a facilitator, you are asked to treat the discussion/sharing portion of Chalice Circle as the heart of the spiritual work to be done and help create sacred space. The readings/questions are meant to be tools for individual exploration. Urge participants to find what speaks to them and leads to deeper, personal learning. In this way the discussion is a spiritual exercise.

Here are some specific ways to model deep listening and help create sacred space by coaching your group's participants to:

- Attend to the person who is speaking with full attention.
- To allow periods of silence which leaves room for each person to speak from his or her own experience and thus hear their own “inner voice” or “deepest self.”
- To NOT engage in cross-talking, fixing, saving, advising, setting the other straight.
- To use reflective discussion where a respondent looks for themes and speaks from one's own experiences.

Meeting Format

Meetings usually last 1½ hours and follow this structure:

Song: Select a song that is easy for the group to sing. You can use the same one each time or something pertinent to the theme. Find what works best for your group.

Chalice Lighting: consider using the same candle/chalice each time

Brief Check-In: Members briefly share what is going on in their lives. As the facilitator help the group get beyond chit-chat and do more than “catch up”. You could use a specific question such as: *how is it with your spirit now*; or *comment on one thing that is “pulling at or draining your spirit”* or *share one thing that is “feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit”*. Ask each member to only take a couple minutes to share so that check-in is limited to no more than 20 minutes. In some instances a member may have particular needs that must be shared in order to be fully present for the group. Allow the time that is needed, while gently guiding the individual to allow the next person to speak.

Topical Reading/Poem/Song/Film Clip: This is based on the monthly worship theme and is provided in the OOS for that month.

Moment of Silence: This is a time for members to quietly reflect on their own experience related to the monthly theme. Allow approximately 2-3 minutes for reflection. Use a chime or other method to end the silence.

Deep Reflection: Members are given a chance to share their reflections with the group while everyone respectfully listens without crosstalk or feedback. As the facilitator, model the hard work of deep listening. Discourage any back and forth conversation or response that individuals may try to give. Encourage each member to be cognizant of allowing sufficient time for everyone to share.

Optional Open Discussion: After everyone has had a chance to share and if there is time, open the

floor and invite members into a time of reflective discussion. A question you could ask: *How did listening to everyone else help you see or learn something new about your own story?* Remind the group this is not a time to offer advice or argue about anything that has been shared. The guidelines are: “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!”

Check Out: Monitor the time so there is sufficient time for this valuable portion of the meeting and still end on time. Invite the group to briefly share one comment or experience as part of check out. You could select one or two of the following questions to prompt the brief sharing: *What are you grateful for? What are you taking with you? What touched you today? Is there anything left unsaid that you want to share?*

Extinguishing the Chalice/Closing Words: Offer a closing reading or closing words and extinguishing the chalice. Make any announcements that may be needed.

Group Covenants

A covenant is a list of the ways the group agrees to be together. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism (UU). Historically, UU has been a covenantal religion rather than a creedal religion. In other words, members of a congregation are bound by the way they promise to treat each other, rather than by common beliefs and creeds. So forming a covenant isn't just good group technique, it is a core UU practice. It is the means by which the community is held together.

In Chalice Circles we engage each other in a covenantal relationship. We commit to honoring a purpose, method and format for our group meetings so that we can find meaning and connection.

When starting a new Chalice Circle or coming back together, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. At the first meeting explain to the group what a covenant is. Review the sample covenant below or the covenant the group had last year if appropriate. Allow sufficient time for the group to go over each element and come to agreement that they understand and accept each one or revise the wording accordingly. Be sure the group's covenant is according to the unique characteristics your group desires for being together. Periodically review the group's covenant especially if the group seems to be stuck or is having issues.

Sample Covenant:

- We agree to make attendance at Chalice Circle a priority in our lives, and to let the others know if we will not be able to attend a meeting.
- We will start and end on time. If we come in late, we will quietly enter and join the Circle in progress.
- What we say in the Circle will be held in confidence. This allows us to be open and share deeply.
- We acknowledge the right to pass or not share if that feels appropriate.
- During sharing time we will respectfully listen, without questioning, judging, commenting, cross talking or giving advice.
- We will speak for ourselves from the heart as well as the intellect and monitor the length and frequency of our speaking to ensure there is sufficient time for everybody to share.
- We will use “I” and “my” and “mine” when speaking, owning our own experience.
- We will participate in service projects as a spiritual practice.
- When it is time to leave a group, we will let the group know of our wish and allow sufficient time for the group to say good-bye.
- Between meetings, we will keep each other in our thoughts and hearts, reaching out to each

- other as needed in tangible ways to ensure that we are a caring community for one another.
- We fully and gladly welcome new members to the group when the group is not at capacity.
- We will do our best to abide by our covenant, but know that we are fallible human beings. When our covenant is broken, we will work to make amends and to treat one another with grace.

Adding New Participants

The regular sign up period will be online in early September of the church year. After that sign up period, members may indicate an interest in joining a group that has available space through a conversation or email to the Chalice Circle Leadership Team. The team will contact the group facilitators to determine if the group can accommodate a new member and how to follow up with the new member.

When starting your group at the beginning of the church year:

- Send the group participants details of when and where to meet along with the Participant Guide so they can review it ahead of time.
- At the first meeting, use the same meeting format with the following differences:
 - Allow a longer time for check in so that members can introduce themselves and share a bit of who they are.
 - During the reading and discussion period, use the participant guide to explain and discuss Chalice Circle.
 - Continue the discussion by establishing the group's covenant.
 - Use the check out portion to determine if there are any concerns or unfinished business among group members.

When a new participant desires to join the group after the initial start:

- Send the new participant the Participant Guide so they can review it.
- Set up a time to meet or talk electronically with the new participant to go over the guide and share the group's covenant.
- Ask if they have any questions about the process, if they are comfortable with and agree to join the group. If there are any concerns, discuss these with the Chalice Circle Leadership Team.
- If possible, send out a welcome email before the first time attending.
- When the new participant comes to the first meeting, offer a warm welcome and introduction to the group before the check-in.
- After a more extended check in for the new and old members of the group, it would be a good time for the entire group to review the group's covenant.

Leaving the group

When a participant wants to leave the group, invite them to one final meeting to give everybody a chance to say good-bye. Try to find out the reason(s) for dropping out. It may not always be possible for the participant who is leaving to attend another meeting. Through discussion with the individual and the group determine what is appropriate to share and how the group could say good-bye.

Notify the Chalice Circle Leadership Team when someone drops-out, and pass along the reasons(s) for the decision.

Support for Facilitators

When group challenges and developments arise, facilitators are advised to discuss these with the CC

Leadership Team. When pastoral concerns arise, facilitators are advised to suggest that the participant seek help from Rev. Molly or ask if it would be OK to share this concern with her. If anything feels beyond the capacity of the facilitator or the facilitator is in need of personal care, seek guidance from Rev. Molly.

Absences

Although facilitators and members make the Chalice Circle meeting a priority, absences cannot be avoided. If a member of the group is absent without any notification, check in with them and address any issues that are of concern.

Let your co-facilitator know as much in advance as possible if you need to miss a group. As facilitators you are nurturing leadership potential in your group. Invite one of those you identify as a potential leader to co-facilitate the group in your absence.

Cancellations

If weather is a concern, put the safety of the group first. One guide in determining whether to cancel is if the area schools have closed. Determine a system of notifying your group in such situations.

For Further Reading:

The Soul is Shy: The Importance of Deep Listening and Formative Space

Parker J. Palmer, from *A Hidden Wholeness*

So what do we do in a circle of trust? We speak our own truth; we listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter... Our purpose is not to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a chance to teach us.

Spaces designed to welcome the soul and support the inner journey are rare. But the principles and practices that shape such spaces are neither new nor untested. Some are embedded in monastic tradition, for the monastery is the archetypal "community of solitudes." Some emerged over four hundred years of Quaker faith and practice. Some were revived in the transpersonal psychology movement of the mid-twentieth century. And some are embodied in the processes of spiritual formation that can be found at the heart of most of the world's great wisdom traditions.

"Formation" may be the best name for what happens in a circle of trust, because the word refers, historically, to soul-work done in a communal setting. But a quick disclaimer is in order, since "formation" sometimes means a process quite contrary to the one described in this book—a process in which the pressure of orthodox doctrine, sacred text, and institutional authority is applied to the misshapen soul in order to conform it to the shape dictated by some theology. This approach is rooted in the idea that we are born with souls deformed by sin, and our situation is hopeless until the authorities "form" us properly.

But all of that is turned upside down by the principles of a circle of trust. In a circle of trust, formation flows from the belief that we are born with souls in perfect form. As time goes on, we are subject to powers of deformation, from within as well as without, that twist us into shapes quite different from the shape of the soul. But the soul never loses its original form, and never stops calling us back to our birthright integrity.

In a circle of trust, the powers of deformation are held at bay long enough for the soul to emerge and speak its truth. Here, we are not required to conform ourselves to some external template. Instead, we are invited to conform our lives to the shape of our own souls. In a circle of trust we can grow our selfhood like a plant—from the potential within the seed of the soul, in ground made fertile by the quality of our relationships, toward the light of our own wholeness—trusting the soul to know its own shape better than any external authority ever can.