



Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia CHALICE CIRCLES PARTICIPANT 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.

UUCC 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.
- 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

Each month 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.

Meeting Format

Meetings usually last 1½ hours and follow this structure:

- Song
- Chalice Lighting
- Brief Check-In: Members briefly share what is going on in their lives. Each member takes only a couple minutes to share so that check-in is limited to no more than 20 minutes.
- Topical Reading/Poem/Song/Film Clip: This is based on the monthly worship theme.
- Moment of Silence: This is a time for members to quietly reflect on their own experience related to the monthly theme.
- Deep Reflection: Members are given a chance to share their reflections with the group while everyone respectfully listens without crosstalk or feedback. Each member is 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, the facilitator opens the floor and invites members into a time of reflective discussion. A common question at this point is: *How did listening to everyone else help you see or learn something new about your own story?* It 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: One comment or experience is briefly shared by each member.
- Extinguishing the Chalice/Closing Words: Group ends by sharing a closing reading or offering closing words and extinguishing the chalice.

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.

When starting a new Chalice Circle or coming back together, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. The following is an example covenant a group may choose to use. Some groups adopt it as is; others adapt it or add covenants according to the unique characteristics their group desires for being together.

- 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.

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.