



The Practice of Inclusion

Covenant Group Session Plan

Greenville Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Greenville, South Carolina

Based on material from Soul Matters-Small Group: Living Love Through the Practice of Inclusion February

2025. Compiled & adapted by Marie McIntyre, January 2025

Optional Spiritual Practices: TWO WAYS TO EXPLORE INCLUSION

This month's spiritual practices can be found on the last page of the handout. Two possible activities are provided. If you choose to complete one or both, please feel free to share your experience during our discussion.

Welcome & Chalice Lighting

The flame of our chalice
symbolizes the warmth and brightness of our connections.
It lights our way back together again
from our separate lives
and lights our way forward
Into the coming days.
~Janet Parsons, UU Minister

Personal Check In

Briefly share something from your life since we last met and how you are feeling now.

Opening Words

You hardly knew how hungry you were to be gathered in,
To receive the welcome that invited you to enter entirely...
You began to breathe again...
You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing is that it will not leave you alone,
It will not let you linger...
This blessing will ask you to leave, not because it has tired of you
But because it desires for you to become the sanctuary that you have found...
~Jan Richardson, Methodist minister

The poem begins with hunger - the primal hunger to belong - because no one wants to be left standing outside the circle. From the time we are small, belonging is what we seek and inclusion is what we hope for. But to belong is only the beginning. Deep down we know this: be wary of those who welcome you with a members-only card, then engage you in the work of keeping others out.

Of course, a part of us may find exclusion appealing. After all, a closed circle can both set us apart and place us above. But closed circles also keep us small, because they block the fresh air. The true blessing of inclusion is not being invited to come inside the circle, but to participate in its expansion. As our circle grows, so do we.

~Adapted from Soul Matters, The Practice of Inclusion

Questions for reflection & discussion

1. Have you ever had an experience of being excluded which had a lasting effect on you? How did you suffer or grow from that experience?
2. When you have joined an existing group or community, what has helped you to feel included?
3. Have you ever felt the need to hide a part of yourself in order to be accepted by a particular group? How did you handle that situation?

4. Can you describe a time when your life was changed for the better by inviting in a person or group that you might have chosen to exclude? Are there certain types of people that you tend to avoid? What is your emotional reaction to them? What ways have you found to be more accepting?
5. If you could go back and change an experience of excluding someone, what would it be? Thinking back, what do you wish you had done differently?
6. How have your perceptions or feelings about being included or excluded changed as you have grown older?

Readings

It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences. ~Audre Lorde - American writer, professor, philosopher, intersectional feminist, poet and civil rights activist.

When everyone is included, everyone wins. ~Jesse Jackson - American civil rights activist, politician, and ordained Baptist minister

Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance. ~Verna Myers - American diversity consultant, author, speaker, lawyer, and corporate executive

They want you thinking you're bad at being a girl instead of good at being yourself. They want you to buy your blush from a store instead of letting it bloom from your butterflies. They're telling you to blend in, like you've never seen how a blender works, like you've never seen the mess made by the blade. ~Andrea Gibson –*Take Me With You*, American Poet and activist

Inclusion isn't better just because it's kind. We should bring disabled perspectives to the center because these perspectives create a world that is more imaginative, more flexible, more sustainable, more dynamic and vibrant for everyone who lives in a body. ~Rebekah Taussig - American Writer and teacher

It's okay to distance yourself from spaces which demand a version of you that is no longer true. Belonging should not depend on an illusion. ~Cole Arthur Riley - American Writer and poet

Continue...

...Put the mantle of your protection

Around the bodies of

The young and defenseless...

Take the hand of the despised

And diseased and walk proudly with them

In the high street.

Some might see you and

Be encouraged to do likewise.

~Maya Angelou – from the poem *Continue*

Sitting in silence - Time to reflect on the questions and readings before sharing begins.

Sharing

Time for deep listening and speaking without interruption. Deep listening means no interrupting, no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight. Please share your responses to one or more of the session questions or readings.

(This is usually a good time to take a brief break)

Open Discussion, Response – Hold Up & Hold Out

Hold up with gratitude one thing that you heard in the sharing that especially struck you as you listened. Hold out how that connects to your life or clarified something about your own situation. Continue to practice deep listening

Closing reading

Being excluded kills. It kills the spirit and sometimes kills the body. So here's my thought - if, like me, you are attachment rich, if you are included in most or many circles, if you belong in almost any place you find yourself, then we have the opportunity and responsibility to include the unincluded... to look for someone who appears not to belong and choose them. ~ Jan Edmiston, Presbyterian Minister

Announcements/Plans

Check out

As we close today, how are you feeling now?

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

OPTIONAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

OPTION A

Exploring Differences

We often have access to more diverse perspectives than we realize. Although our friends, co-workers, neighbors, and family members may differ from us in many ways, it is often easier to ignore or downplay those differences. So here's one way to explore some different views.

Choose a person who differs from you in some way and agree on a plan to learn more about your respective worlds. You might give each other recommendations for a book, podcast, or playlist, then compare your perceptions. Or you could each attend an unfamiliar event which the other enjoys, then discuss. If you go to different churches, perhaps you might attend one another's services.

As you debrief your experiences, ask questions to better understand one another's perspectives, then discuss what you have learned.

OPTION B

Asking About Inclusion

A simpler and quicker activity is to use some of the questions on page two of this topic to have a discussion about inclusion with someone close to you. To make this a true conversation, you must also answer the questions. Otherwise, it will feel more like an interview.

Explain the purpose of this discussion and see if your chosen partner would be willing to participate. Be sure to emphasize (and to remember!) that the goal is simply to learn about and understand each other's experiences, not to analyze, judge, or debate.