



Greenville Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Participant's Guide to Covenant Circles

Description: “Covenant Circles” is the name we give to our small group ministry. In small groups, participants develop relationships of substance and depth, consider questions and ideas of universal significance, receive encouragement for their spiritual journeys, and join together in inspired action that serves the congregation and community.

Each circle has six to twelve members, and is facilitated by one or two trained leaders. Meetings happen at least once, mostly twice a month, for two hours. Some groups meet at the Fellowship; others are held in private homes.

Covenant Circles create safe and affirming space where all may feel heard and valued. Group members learn to listen deeply to each other, accepting the ideas and stories without trying to fix, save, give advice, or set each other straight. Covenant Circles are not therapy or support groups—they are a way to grow, deepen, and share the journey.

There are pre-arranged topics for each meeting, facilitators send out a copy of the session plan prior to each meeting. The topics are broad, and reflect universal themes like joy, faith, love, failure, forgiveness, humor, etc. During the meeting, members respond to the topic readings and questions by sharing personal reactions and experiences. The focus is on deep listening, personal sharing, spiritual growth, and service.

Covenant Circles also are a wonderful avenue for pastoral care in the congregation. Members are close, so they know when someone is sick, or well, or going through some life transition. When someone has something to celebrate or a particular need, others share in their happiness, or provide assistance or support outside the meeting.

Benefits of being in a Covenant Circle: (These are research based!)

- Feeling of belonging--being part of a safe and trusted community
- Encounter the sacred in yourself and others
- Examine and challenge your personal story
- Sense of shared purpose
- Being drawn into shared ministry
- Improved listening and communication skills
- More empathy and compassion
- Improved immune system/faster healing
- Increased happiness
- More likely to practice what you learn
- Better parenting
- Feeling empowered

Eligibility and Registration: Covenant Circles are open to members and friends of the GUUF community who wish to participate. To get involved, send an email to covenantcircles@greenvilleuu.org or fill out a registration form on the Fellowship's website. When you register, indicate meeting times and places that would suit your schedule. The Registrar will contact a facilitator whose group matches your needs, and the facilitator will contact you promptly.

Covenant Circle Meeting Format:

Welcome and Chalice Lighting: A general reading setting the tone for the Covenant Circle. A circle may choose to use the same welcoming words for each meeting.

Personal Check In: Participants briefly share something from their lives and how they are feeling now.

Opening Words: A reading, relevant to the topic, of the session is shared.

Questions for sharing and discussion: The questions are meant to get participants thinking and talking from their own experience. Each participant may respond to one or as many of the questions as they want to.

Readings: Participants take turns reading the readings from the session handout.

Respectful Sharing: Each person in the group has an opportunity to any share thoughts or stories related to the topic. The sharing happens in no particular order, and passing is OK. Group members listen deeply to each other, without interrupting.

Silence/Break: After everyone has had an opportunity to speak, all sit quietly together for a minute or two. This is a time to reflect on what has been shared.

Discussion: During this time, everyone shares freely, enlarging on and reacting to others' ideas. We practice "No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight."

Closing Reading: A short reading is read, relevant to the topic of the session.

Announcements and Planning: The Facilitator shares any announcements about upcoming events at GUUF, or circle activities.

Check out: Each participant is asked to respond to a simple question, "As we end our time together today, how are you feeling now?" Checkout may also be a time to reflect on how the group is doing with group process, "How are we doing with adhering to our covenant?"

The Chalice is Extinguished

Expectations of Participants:

- Commit to being actively involved in the group for at least one year.
- Come to each meeting, and be on time (or let your facilitator know in advance if you will be absent).
- Listen deeply to others.
- Refrain from trying to fix, rescue, advise, or set others straight.
- Use "I" language, relating only what comes up in you as you listen and reflect.
- Respect and follow the basic session format. It is carefully designed. Subverting the process by suggesting other activities or changes in plan is not OK.
- Share the time and space fairly.
- Treat what people share in the circle with respect outside the circle. Honor requests for confidentiality.
- Participate in group service projects.