



# Greenville Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

## Participant's Guide to Covenant Circles

“Covenant Circles” is the name we give to our small group ministry. Each circle develops their own covenant, which is a list of the ways they agree to be together in the group. The covenant includes promises, practices and behaviors that guide the groups time together.

In Covenant Circles, 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 seven to ten members and is facilitated by one or two trained leaders. Meetings happen at least once, mostly twice a month, for one and a half to two hours. Some groups meet at the Fellowship, others are held in private homes and some are virtual (zoom).

Covenant Circles create a 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. While some topics are pre-arranged, the circle members also select topics reflecting their own interests.

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.

### **Deep Listening is a key practice in Covenant Circles.**

Deep listening is not passive, it requires effort and intentionality. Here is a three-part description of how deep listening is done in covenant circles:

- Hold still – this is the practice of offering each other the gift of inviting presence. In circles each person takes a turn sharing before any group reactions occur. We “hold” each other’s sharing, rather than react with comments or questions.
- Hold at bay – this is the practice of offering and ensuring safe space to the person speaking. We hold at bay any temptations we may have to interrupt or give advice to try to “help” someone.
- Hold up and hold out – This is a guide on how we do talk and react to what others have shared. Instead of responding to each other with “fixing, advising, or saving” we hold up gratitude for one thing that especially struck us as we listened and hold out how that one thing connects to our lives or clarified something in our own situation.

### **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:** At times during the meeting, all sit quietly together for a minute or two. This is a time to reflect on what has been read or shared.

**Discussion:** During this time, everyone shares freely, enlarging on and reacting to others' ideas. This is the time members can share by the "Hold up and Hold out" method described above.

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

**Announcements and Planning:** The Facilitator and members share 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?"

## **The Chalice is Extinguished**

### **Expectations of Participants:**

- Commit to being actively involved in the group for at least one year.
- Make meetings a priority, including being on time.
- Practice deep listening.
- 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.
- Monitor the length and frequency of our own participation, so all members have opportunities to speak.
- Treat what people share in the circle with respect outside the circle. All personal information that is shared will be considered confidential unless otherwise specified. Honor confidentiality.
- Participate in group service projects.

### **Eligibility and Registration:**

*Covenant Circles are open to members and friends of the GUUF community who wish to participate and abide by the group's covenant. People who are very new to GUUF may benefit by taking the Starting Point course before they join a circle.*

*To get involved, send an email to [covenantcircles@greenvilleuu.org](mailto: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. A Covenant Circle Coordinator or a Facilitator will contact you promptly.*

**We look forward to including you! To register for a circle please go to this link:**

**<https://forms.gle/AosgwCkAPycVhaMo7>**