

Process

How do small group meetings go?

So how are Soul Matters small group meetings structured? And how does a facilitator keep them on track? Here's the meeting format we recommend, a suggested group covenant and a few tips.

Meeting Format & Structure

Prior to the Meeting

- Members make time to engage the monthly packets at least 1-2 weeks prior to each meeting.
- Members select and complete one of the spiritual exercises.
- Members reflect on the list of questions and pick the one that speaks most directly to them. They then “live with” that question for a week or two. Some make the question a part of their meditative practice. Others print it out and pin it somewhere they can see it each day. Some just pull it into awareness in a more informal way.
- Members set aside time to look over the recommended resources (“Companion Pieces”). They may also want to follow the Soul Matters Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle>). This extra reading and Facebook engagement is optional but deepens one’s engagement with the themes.

At the Meeting

Meetings are usually held once a month and last for 2 hours. Here’s the recommended format for those 2-hour sessions:

Centering

Begin with a chalice lighting and centering words. Most often the facilitator or a group member shares a favorite quote, poem or video from the recommended resource section of the packet. Some leaders offer a prayer or lead the group in a guided meditation. There are lots of ways to do this. The point is to provide a moment of pause so members can shift into the slower mode of receptivity and bring themselves into the present moment.

Brief Check-In – around 10-15 minutes

Members briefly participate in a focused check-in. The goal is to avoid longer and more involved reports about all that has happened since the group last met. Instead of asking, “How is everyone doing,” it helps to offer a more focused and spiritually oriented question. One recommendation is to ask members “How it is with your spirit?” and have them share one thing that is “pulling at or draining your spirit” and one thing that is “feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit.” Each member takes just a couple minutes to share. The group listens quietly as each person shares rather than engaging in crosstalk.



How is it with your spirit?

Spiritual Exercises Discussion – around 40 minutes

Members share their experience of doing their chosen spiritual exercise, using the two-round process explained below.

“Your Question” Discussion – around 40 minutes

Members share their experience of selecting and reflecting on their chosen question, using the two-round process explained below.

Check-Out – around 10 minutes

There are many ways to do this. Some groups offer a sentence about the challenge they received for their living and loving. Others have everyone name the feeling/emotion they came into the group with and feeling/emotion they are now leaving with because of the time the group spent together. The goal is for the group to explore different options and decide what works best for them.

Closing Words

The meeting ends by extinguishing the chalice and maybe sharing a closing reading, prayer or blessing.

Our Two-Round Discussion Process

Here are some more details (and tips) about using the Soul Matters “deep and disciplined listening” process to discuss the packet’s Spiritual Exercises and Your Question section.

Round One – “The Sharing Round”

Members take turns listening silently as each shares the exercise/question they picked, why it spoke to them and where reflecting on it led them. It helps if the facilitator invites members to share not only where that exercise/question took them, but also why they picked that one over others.

It is also important to remind the group about what to do as they listen to others. The first is our deep listening practice of “hold at bay,” where members avoid interrupting each other with questions or commentary. The second reminder is the practice intentionally turning off that part of our brain that wants to ask, “What do I *think* of this person’s sharing?” or “Do I agree with it?” and instead turning on that part of our brain that asks “Where is this person’s sharing trying to take me? Either back to a forgotten memory or inside to a forgotten or new piece of wisdom?”

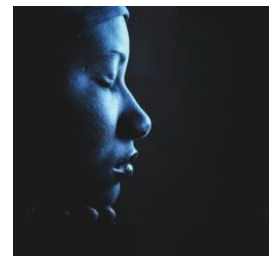
Round Two – “The Response Round”

After everyone has had a chance to share, the facilitator opens the floor and invites members to respond to what they’ve heard using our practice of “Holding up and holding out.” This involves each member of the group lifting up (“holding up”) gratitude for one person’s sharing which particularly impacted them and then explaining (“holding out”) how that person’s sharing reconnected them to an important memory or important piece of wisdom. Invite them to think of it as “holding out” the gift they received as they listened.



Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings.

Often group members will say it is too hard to offer up gratitude for just one person's sharing. They may also worry that someone will get left out of the gratitudes. As a facilitator, you will want to discuss this with your group in advance, usually during the covenant discussion. Start with explaining that the purpose of the process is to honor time limits but more importantly to push people to do the work of spiritual discernment – i.e. to push ourselves to identify whose sharing most powerfully connected to them and offered a personal message or challenge to them. Having said that, it's important to also not be rigid with this practice. Many groups support members lifting up one or two people if they are moved, with everyone promising to be aware of the time they take to share.



A message is being offered. Do you hear it?

Establishing a Group Covenant

A covenant is a list of the ways we agree to be together as a group. It includes the promises, practices and behaviors that guide a group's time together. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. We are a covenantal religion rather than a creedal religion. In other words, we are bound by the way we promise to treat each other, rather than by common beliefs and creeds. So forming a covenant isn't just about good group process, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

When starting a new soul Matters group, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. Facilitators promise to help the group revisit and re-affirm the covenant at least once a year.

The below draft covenant captures the core promises and practices of the Soul Matters approach. We encourage groups to use it as the base for their own covenant, adding commitments of their own or put the commitments listed into their own words.

Template

Before our meetings, we agree to:

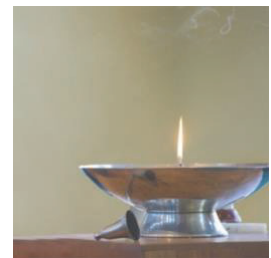
- Make meetings a priority, including being on time
- Contact the facilitator(s) ahead of time if we are unable to attend
- Engage the packet ahead of time: reading the material, doing one of the spiritual exercises and identifying which question is "my question."

During our meetings, we agree to:

- Practice deep listening, offering each other time to share without interruption. ("Hold still" and offer presence and witness)
- Honor the rule of "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!" during times of discussion and crosstalk. ("Hold at bay" and offer safe space)
- Monitor the length and frequency of our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak.
- Speak for ourselves, offering reactions rooted in gratitude and connecting the sharing of others to our own experience ("Hold up and hold out")
- Make time to say good bye when a member decides to leave the group.
- Periodically revisit, adapt and re-affirm this covenant as a group, especially when new members join the group

After our meetings, we agree to:

- Follow up with members who miss a meeting without notice to make sure they are okay.
- Respect the privacy of group members by keeping personal sharing confidential
- Keep each other in our prayers and thoughts, reaching out to each other in tangible ways to ensure that we are a caring community for one another
- Keep a look out for other church members who might benefit from and fit with our group, recognizing that inviting is the job of us all and a way to express our gratitude for the gifts the group has given us.



Forming a covenant isn't just about good group process, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

- Connect potential new members with our group facilitator so they can go over the New Participant Packet to make sure the potential new member is comfortable with and agrees to our process and practices.

As facilitator, I agree to:

- Start and end meetings on time
- Make sure all voices are heard
- Remind the group about our covenant, process and practices of deep and disciplined listening
- Help the group be a circle of caring and concern
- Recruit another group member to facilitate if I cannot attend
- Ensure that the group periodically revisits and re-affirms this covenant
- Include the group in decisions about new members joining
- Welcome new members with intentionality by personally meeting with them to go over the New Participant Packet to make sure they are comfortable with and agree to our process and practices
- Ensure we make time for the group to say good-bye to members who leave

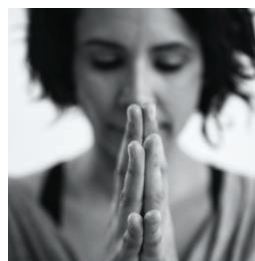
Template – abbreviated version

We agree to:

- Make meetings a priority
- Engage the packet in advance
- Practice deep listening (“Hold still & offer presence and witness”)
- No fixing or advising (“Hold advice at bay and offer safe space”)
- Monitor our participation
- Speak with gratitude and look for connections to our experience (“Hold out gratitude and hold up connections”)
- Make time to say goodbye
- Remember and re-affirm our covenant
- Follow up with absent members
- Honor confidentiality
- Keep each other in our hearts & reach out when wanted
- Invite others and share the gift of small groups with others

As facilitator, I agree to:

- Start and end meetings on time
- Invite everyone’s voice
- Remind the group about our process and practices
- Foster a circle of caring and concern
- Recruit facilitation if I cannot attend
- Ensure re-affirmation of our covenant
- Include the group in decisions about new members joining
- Welcome new members with intentionality
- Make time for good-byes when members leave



Speak with gratitude and look for connections.

Leading

What's your role as facilitator?

Soul Matters' distinct process and practices shape the role of facilitator in unique ways. So we turn next to teasing out how your role differs from traditional facilitation. The truth is you play numerous roles. Let's walk through those one by one:

Keeper of the Process

First and foremost, your role is to remind the group about the process and practices to which members have already committed themselves. You do not have to stimulate interesting conversation. You do not have to offer provocative questions. You don't even have to "control unhealthy behavior." The Soul Matters format and structure does that for you and the group. Your job is to remind more than stimulate, hold the space more than "get people to talk." In a sense, the process guides the group more than you do.

This is especially true when it comes to guiding the group through its discussion of the spiritual exercises and questions. Since members are asked to work with the exercises and questions prior to coming to the group, all you have to do is set the stage for them to share the work they've done and remind them of how we've promised to listen to each other and respond. We've already addressed this above, but it may help to read an example script of what one might say as they set up the sharing:

"Let's now turn to sharing our experiences with the spiritual exercises. As always, we will first offer each other deep listening as everyone takes an uninterrupted turn sharing which exercise, they picked and how it clarified or changed your understanding of this month's theme. After that, we'll open the circle to reactions and comments as each of us lifts up one person's sharing and how that took them back in time to a forgotten memory or took them inside to piece of forgotten wisdom.

As you share your experience with your chosen exercise, feel free to share not only what you did but also something about your process of picking the one you did. Sometimes it's the process of picking between the exercises that offers the deepest insights, not just the process of doing the exercise.

Ok. Let's now sit in silence for a moment and then whenever you feel ready to share feel free to speak."

[Members take turns sharing while others receive the sharing in silence.]

"Now that everyone has shared, let's open the discussion to reactions. Remember our promise to each other about "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!" Instead, when you share, just lift up, in gratitude, one part of one person's sharing that particularly struck you. Something that left you especially grateful. Something that challenged or clarified something important for you, by taking you back to a forgotten memory or inside to forgotten wisdom."



We are taken back to a forgotten memory or forgotten wisdom.

That's all there is to it. Yes, there will be times you need to gently interrupt the process if someone steps outside of the process. Yes, there will be times you will need to kindly redirect a member when they slip into fixing or advising rather than offering gratitude and speaking about their own experience. Yes, you may need to remind people to monitor how much time they are taking. But because the ground rules have been established and the processes of deep and disciplined listening is agreed upon, your reminders will have the support of the group.

Model

Don't underestimate the power of your role as model. The most effective way to teach the group the practices of deep and disciplined listening is for you to embody them. Be very intentional and strategic about your use of self. Consider sometimes being the first person to share in order to model best practice. Also model comfort with silence and don't rush in to share. Be sure to do the spiritual exercise ahead of time and if you've not had a lot of time that month, show that you made some attempt to do it in a modified way rather than blowing it off. Your role as model matters more than you know.

Host

You are also a host. Your work as facilitator goes much more smoothly if you tend to the work of "setting the table." This occurs in a number of small but important ways, such as beginning and ending the meetings on time, giving care to the chalice lightings and closing words, making sure the packets are sent to members early, sending out an email reminder a day ahead of the meeting and telling everyone you look forward to seeing them. These are all little ways you can make a big difference.

Being a host also includes being intentional about how you welcome new group members and say goodbye to ones that have to leave. Be sure to always make decisions about adding members as a group. Some groups will entrust you to decide as long as you keep them advised. Other groups will want a more collaborative process. Make sure you spell out your process in the covenant ahead of time.

Also make sure that members don't invite new members in by themselves. Members should be encouraged to look out for people who could fit with and are interested in the spiritual discernment focus of the group. But out of respect for the group as a whole, the group should make sure that you spend some time with a potential newcomer prior to joining to go over the New Participant Packet to make sure prospects are comfortable with and agree to the group's process and practices.

Giving care to goodbyes is equally important. Whenever possible, ask members to announce that they are leaving at least one meeting before they stop coming. This allows the group to make time at their last meeting for a goodbye ritual, and maybe even some farewell desserts!



Hold the space, and let the process guide the group.

Pastor

This may sound intimidating at first. But don't worry. It's not your role to be pastor to the group members as much as it is to cultivate pastoral practices within the group. You can do this early on when building the covenant. Be sure to spell out in the covenant how the group will be a caring community for each other. Make it explicit that it is ok for members to reach out to each other between meetings or check in on each other when going through hard times. Make it a practice that a group member will always follow up when another group member misses a meeting without letting the facilitator know they will be absent. Stay after the meeting and check in with a member who shares a particularly hard story during the meeting. Or even better, right before-check out and closing words, pause and ask if anyone needs some kind of extra support or if anyone would like the group to keep them in their thoughts and prayers.

Participant

Never forget that you are also a participant. This is one of the biggest gifts of the Soul Matters model. Since the process for sharing is highly structured, you are able to set the stage for sharing and then largely just sit back and be a participant. As mentioned earlier, your main work involves kicking the sharing off more so than keeping it going. Sinking into the role of participant is easier said than done. But be sure to give yourself that gift.

Part of a Network of Support

Finally, remember that you are not alone in your role. Every church differs but all have some network of support. Some pull facilitators together for regular coaching and problem-solving meetings. Some ask a minister or program leader to function as your mentor. Others establish a model of co-facilitation, so you have a partner and coach every step of the way. Still others engage the national network of Soul Matters facilitators and get their support and coaching through [our online trainings](#). Whatever model you function within, be sure to speak up when challenges arise, or you are feeling a bit in over your head.



May we be for each other a circle of concern.

Going Deeper

Where do I find inspiration & support?

Facilitation is about more than learning skills. It's essential to understand all the guidelines and techniques, but it's equally important to be rooted in the deeper purpose and spirituality that gave rise to the practice of Soul Matters and the general UU covenant group movement. So we end by introducing you some of the voices that have inspired and sustained small group leaders over the years.

We also share some facilitator support opportunities offered by the Soul Matters community.

Inspiration

I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed their faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek -- quietly bolstering my faltering faith.

Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness

Instead of telling our valuable stories, we seek safety in abstractions, speaking to each other about our opinions, ideas, and beliefs rather than about our lives. Academic culture blesses this practice by insisting that the more abstract our speech, the more likely we are to touch the universal truths that unite us. But what happens is exactly the reverse: as our discourse becomes more abstract, the less connected we feel.

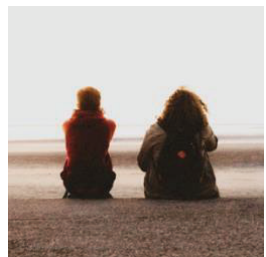
Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness

Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings.

Henry Nouwen

Listening is not passive. It's hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told, and the feelings behind it. Some people say they can feel themselves shift from their minds to hearts when they are listening... It is the mind's nature to think, and so even the most experienced listeners repeatedly will slip into judging and analyzing. When you realize that this has happened, gently set aside your thinking for later and open your heart. Buddhist meditators, who face the same problem, speak of treating the mind like a beloved but sometimes inappropriate child who wants to show off to guests. 'Not now, sweetie,' says the kind parent. 'You go and play, and we will join you in a bit.' Similarly, when we are listening and notice that we are commenting to ourselves about what is being said, we can tell our minds, 'This is not the time for analysis. I just need to hear this story.'

Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins, Heart to Heart



To not flee or save,
but simply be present.

When someone deeply listens to you,
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you,
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

John Fox

Moments of hearing for the first time; you never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next.

Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words

Listening to the World: An On Being interview with Mary Oliver

<https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world/>

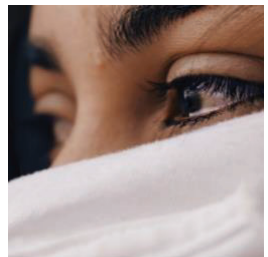
Healing Community: Small group ministry creates a sacred time where the stories of our lives are heard

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/small-group-ministry-creates-sacred-time>

Thandeka

Inside everyone is a great shout of joy waiting to be born. Even with the summer so far off I feel it grown in me now and ready to arrive in the world. All those years listening to those who had nothing to say. All those years forgetting how everything has its own voice to make itself heard. All those years forgetting how easily you can belong to everything simply by listening.

David Whyte



Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention.

Support from the Soul Matters Team

New Facilitator Trainings

Each quarter, the Soul Matters Sharing Circle offers a two-hour on-line training for new facilitators. In addition to going over the Soul Matters model in more depth, these basic trainings share tips for handling facilitation challenges, strategies for program growth, and best practices for facilitator recruitment and support. These trainings are for congregations that have existing facilitator training programs as well as congregations that don't. To learn more and sign up for one of these trainings visit the Trainings Page our website: <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/webinars--trainings.html>

Advanced Facilitator Trainings

This is a more advanced facilitator training and covers the three core stages of small group development:

- Getting Groups Off the Ground (covenant formation, start-up meetings, teaching the Soul Matters discernment practices, advertising, etc.)
- Ensuring Good Group Practice (facilitation tips, handling challenging group dynamics, check-in & check-out strategies, introduction scripts, etc.)
- Adapting and Enhancing the Group Experience (strategies for adapting & expanding our model)

To learn more and sign up for one of these trainings visit the Trainings Page our website: <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/webinars--trainings.html>

Monthly Facilitator Meetings: in-depth formation & nourishment

Small group facilitation is one of the most important ministries in our congregations. And one of the most challenging! You need support as you build and fine-tune your skills. You also need spiritual nourishment of your own, since it is sometimes challenging to lead a group and fully participate at the same time. So our Soul Matters team offers monthly-meeting small groups for facilitators from around the country. These serve as both experiential training and personal nourishment.

Each monthly meeting is run as a small group, facilitated by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler and follows the packet for the upcoming month. This allows participating facilitators to have a “dry run” of the session they will lead the following month. It’s an entirely different way of thinking about training. Instead of being instructed about how to run the upcoming session, you get to directly experience it. Maybe most importantly, this approach allows facilitators to be nourished by the personal sharing of fellow facilitators from around the country. After each 2-hour session, facilitators can stay on the call for an optional and more personalized coaching session with Rev. Tayler. To learn more and sign up for one of these trainings visit the Trainings Page our website:

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/webinars--trainings.html>

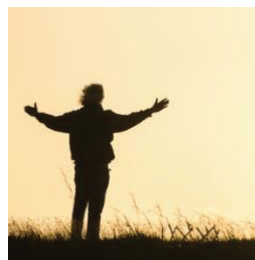
Facebook Support Page for Small Group Leaders

For on-going support and to connect with other facilitators around the country, join the closed Facebook Facilitators page. Here’s the link to the page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/340749289661184/>

For daily inspiration and engagement with the monthly themes, like and follow the Soul Matters Inspiration Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>





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