

Journey Groups for New Participants

Why a Journey Group?

To help each other become the best we can be...

Unitarian Universalism is about connection. We are a religion that sees people struggling against a shallow, frantic and materialistic world that often leaves us disconnected from our deepest selves, life's gifts, and needs greater than one's own. And so our congregations work to heal that divide by helping each other listen to our deepest selves, open up to life's gifts and serve needs greater than our own. Journey Groups support this mission by offering participants:

- Formative space and circles of learning, support, and reflection
- Opportunities for spiritual deepening and practice
- An intimate home within a larger congregational community

...so they become the people they want to be.

In other words, Journey Groups are about becoming.

Journey Groups are a Circle of Trust

The core purpose of Journey Groups is to create a space of acceptance and safety in which group members can explore their deepest values and inner voice without judgment or coercion – a circle of trust.

What we do in this circle of trust is well described in “The Soul is Shy: The Importance of Deep Listening and Formative Space” by Parker J. Palmer, from *A Hidden Wholeness...* and this really forms the basis for the way we are asked to approach this journey group...

“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....”

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.”

We are all, on some level, struggling to find our way back home—to what we care most deeply about and who we most want to be. So Journey Groups are not just “an evening of good discussion” or “an opportunity for intellectual stimulation” or even “a chance to meet new friends.” At their best, they are a path back home.

A Theology of Connection

The Journey Group approach is central to our Unitarian Universalist Theology.

To put it simply, our congregations gather to heal disconnection by listening to our deepest selves, opening to life’s gifts and serving needs greater than our own. Journey Groups are a container in which we explore the genuine meaning of this theology in our lives.

The four distinctive attributes of the Journey Groups program supports this journey toward a deeper connection with ourselves, the mystery of life, and others.

Journey Groups are:

1. rooted in a theology focused on spiritual connection;
2. an opportunity to explore the worship themes in more depth
3. a reminder that UUism is distinctive, not an “anything goes” religion; and
4. a source of questions to “walk with”, not “walk through”.

Journey Groups as Community

In Journey Groups we engage each other in a covenantal relationship. So we commit to honouring a particular format and clear relational commitments during our group meetings. Below is the format and covenant we use to accomplish this.

Meetings usually last 90 minutes and follow this structure:

1. **Opening:** Chalice Lighting and Centering Words. Facilitators offer opening words from a favorite poet/writer or by using a small section of the readings that were assigned for that month.
2. **Brief Check-In:** Members briefly share what is going on in their lives. The goal is not to be a “catch up” but to allow members to comment briefly on one thing that is “pulling at or draining your spirit” and one thing that is “feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit.”

3. **Discussion of the “Questions To Wrestle With”:** Participants do not engage every single one but find the one that “hooks” them most. After living with it for a few weeks (or days) they come to the meeting prepared to share their thoughts with their group. This is a time of “deep listening”, without back-and-forth conversation. This is absolutely not a time to offer advice or argue about who’s right. We follow the guidelines of “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!” And they spend time in silence before the next person speaks.
4. **Check-Out:** Each member briefly shares a comment or experience for which they are particularly grateful from their experience in the group.
5. **Closing:** Groups end by extinguishing the chalice and sharing a closing reading or offering closing words.

Our Covenant

A covenant is a list of the ways we agree to be together as a group. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. Historically, we’ve been 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 good group technique, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

Facilitators have the group revisit and re-affirm the covenant yearly. The following covenant is a possible template for our Journey Groups. Most groups end up adopting it, as is, but every group is encouraged to adapt it to its unique characteristics and desired ways of being together.

Journey Group Covenant

May we endeavour to be present as fully as possible. May we be here with our doubts, fears and failings as well as with our convictions, joys and successes; our listening as well as our speaking. May we have the wisdom to understand ourselves, and the strength to keep this space safe, loving and supportive of our growth.

We covenant:

- to honour that our speaking is always invitational and that we can always pass,

- to honour each other with attentive listening and reflective quiet, free of judgment,
- to refrain from asking questions, interrupting, advising, or engaging in cross-talk,
- to respect the privacy of group members by keeping all of our sharing confidential,
- to monitor the length and frequency of our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak,
- to share with honesty and depth as we are moved, speaking for ourselves from both the heart and the intellect,
- to share with discernment, mindful that the mode of the group is conversational, not therapeutic,
- to be a caring community, carrying each other in our hearts, and reaching out to each other in tangible ways,
- to honour our well-being and the well-being of the group by seeking outside support when needed,
- to be mindful that, if we wish to pursue something a person has shared in the group outside our formal group time, we should first ask whether that person is willing to extend the discussion,
- to honour our commitments to attendance, punctuality, reading the material and engaging in the spiritual exercise,
- to contact the facilitator ahead of time if we are unable to attend,
- to make time to say good-bye when a member decides to leave the group,
- and to periodically revisit, edit, and reaffirm this covenant as a group.