

## New Member Journey Group Plan

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This group is meant for new members as a way to give them a sample experience of covenant groups and to deepen the experience of sharing their spiritual journeys as they did in the Orientation Toward Membership Class. It is also meant to deepen relational connections with others joining the church and longer standing members as represented by the New Member and/or Member Engagement Team.

### New Member Journey Group Unitarian Church of Evanston 2012 Session One

**Send an email the week before**, asking participants to bring in a sacred or meaningful object that can illustrate or symbolize an aspect of their spiritual journey, something from the beginnings, from your childhood, from the root of your questioning or seeking answers to ultimate questions. It may be an artifact from the tradition of your childhood or something that reminds you of one of the first big questions you asked.

**At the first session** explain that although this is not a covenant group, we will follow the general format of a covenant group so that you can experience what that is like. There are several covenants that give a covenant group its name: a relational covenant, a covenant of service, and a covenant to create new groups. For this group, we will deal with only the first, the relational covenant. This is an agreement about how we want to be together. Because our time is abbreviated, I would like to offer a general covenant that facilitates deep listening and honest sharing for covenant groups all over the country. As we read this covenant, however, I want to invite anyone who has a question or concern about any of the items to share their feelings about it so we can discuss and modify it to our use.

We agree to:

1. Fully participate in the group as we are able
2. Be present in mind, body and spirit as much as possible
3. Be open to knowing each other and ourselves
4. Allow one person to speak at a time while others listen respectfully
5. Maintain confidentiality when requested and as appropriate
6. Avoid giving feedback or offering advice unless it is solicited and at the appropriate time
7. Allow for silence, even though it can be uncomfortable
8. Share the time equitably – be willing to share and understanding of others desire to do so

Read each, asking if there are any questions or disagreements. Is there anything that should be added or changed? Can we all agree to these?

At each session we will read these together.

### **Chalice Lighting and Reading:**

We come together in an attitude of openness - not knowing quite

what will happen, yet daring to receive a new idea, a new experience, sustenance for our minds and our hearts.  
We come with an attitude of praise, expressing our thankfulness for the good that has come into our lives.  
We come with an attitude of humility, knowing how much we need one another, how alone we can be in the world, how vulnerable if we face life solely by ourselves.  
We come in the spirit of love, seeking human warmth and fellowship in the hands and faces of those around us.  
We come in the spirit of joy, seeking reconfirmation and renewal of life, of love, and of hope.

--Adapted from Peter Lee Scott

### **Sharing of sacred objects**

As the spirit moves you, please share with the group what you brought with you today. What is it's meaning to you and what does it symbolize on your spiritual journey? Expand on 2 to 3 other pivotal or transitional points on your journey. Think about times when experiences or people in your life led you to see things in a different way. Think about moments that defined you. Each person should have about 5 minutes to share, depending on the size of the group.

**After everyone has shared – brief follow up questions or comments.**

### **Likes and wishes for the group**

### **Closing Reading and Extinguishing the Chalice**

“The central task of religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of each of our individual lives. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice {and with compassion}. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

- Mark Morrison-Reed

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Session Two

Ask participants to bring an object that represents something you want to keep from your religious past, and something you want to let go of. It could be a bible passage or a hymn you loved or hated. It might be a concept, idea, or value that you want to further explore or relinquish once and for all. If you can't find an object, you might draw a picture, or write a poem or think about how you would describe these things to the group. It could also be certain words that you want to understand differently, talk back to, reclaim, or let go of.

Bring small pieces of paper and pencils to the group in case people want to write something and burn it. Bring a bowl for burning.

### **Reading Our Covenant**

#### **Opening Reading and Chalice Lighting**

You Reading This, Be Ready by William Stafford  
Starting here, what do you want to remember?  
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?  
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened  
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world  
than the breathing respect that you carry  
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting  
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this  
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening  
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent  
reading or hearing this, keep it for life –

What can anyone give you greater than now,  
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

#### **Deep Sharing/Deep Listening**

What do we want to hold onto? What do we want to let go of?

Share your object

What have you learned from your spiritual journey so far? Are there parts you would like to hold onto and celebrate? Are there things you would like to let go of?

What words do you get stuck on? Faith, worship, blessing, prayer, religion, belief, spirit, soul, God? Do you want to reclaim them or reinterpret them? Do you want to let them go?

Letting go of the things we want to – if they are on paper can we burn them?

If you we set the objects that we want to lift up on the table can we witness them for each other and celebrate them?

### **Feedback/questions**

### **Likes/wishes**

### **Closing Reading**

“To live in this world you must be able to do three things:  
to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and,  
when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.”

- Mary Oliver

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Session Three

**Chalice Lighting and Reading:**

The breezes at dawn have secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep!

You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep!

People are going back and forth

Across the doorsill where the two worlds touch;

The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep!

Rumi

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**Deep Sharing/Deep Listening**

Mandalas

The word "mandala" is from the classical Indian language of Sanskrit. Loosely translated to mean "circle," a mandala is far more than a simple shape. It represents wholeness, and can be seen as a model for the organizational structure of life itself--a cosmic diagram that reminds us of our relation to the infinite, the world that extends both beyond and within our bodies and minds.

Describing both material and non-material realities, the mandala appears in all aspects of life: the celestial circles we call earth, sun, and moon, as well as conceptual circles of friends, family, and community.

**A mandala is...**

**An integrated structure  
organized around a  
unifying center**

*Longchenpa*

Materials: 8" squares of white paper, markers, colored pencils, soft background music – cd player or computer.

Read the words about mandalas. Explain to them what mandalas are, show some examples. Then, ask each person to take a piece of paper and some of the markers/colored pencils.

Assure the participants that the end product is not the point. This is meant to be a relaxing and meditative exercise. Allowing your creativity to take the lead. Even if you don't think you are not a creative person, I believe we all are created and are therefore born to create. This is only one way of accessing your creativity and it may not be the most effective for you but I'm asking you to give it a try anyway.

Start from the outer circle and begin to think about what brought you to this church. Think about the way you felt when you first arrived. What questions did you have? What curiosities and interests were you looking to fulfill? Allow the colors to call to you and create shapes or designs that move out of these thoughts. Rather than trying to accurately depict your precise ideas, allow this to be a fluid, non-linear expression.

Moving to the next circle in, what has been surprising or interesting to learn about yourself? In what ways have you felt energized in this community? Where have you felt drained?

Moving toward the center once again, what are your hopes? When you think of yourself as a happy, fulfilled person, what do you see, what do you feel and experience? In what ways do you see yourself participating in the life of the congregation?

Moving toward the center again, where are your vulnerabilities, your growing edges, your fears about being in community here? What worries or concerns you?

Finally, the center, what are your greatest gifts to share? What is it you value most about yourself and your life? Does that feel safe to share? If not now, does it seem possible in the future? If not, how do you want to protect that? What are your boundaries?

As people are drawing, slowly, with pauses in between, ask questions such as:

**Where you are? What is your essential self? Represent that center in some way. It can be literal, non-literal, representational, symbolized with color or shape or just a feeling. Don't over think it and try to let go of how it will look to others. When those thoughts show up, gently dismiss them and continue to listen to your inner-most self. What is your center? What appears as you draw?**

Allow about 10-15 minutes to do the mandalas and then share with each other, using these questions as reflection points:

What do we want to explore on our religious journey right now?

What are we hoping to find at the Unitarian Church of Evanston?

What have we found so far that draws out our questions and hopes?

What are the next steps in front of us? What will it take for us to step there?

Be sure to let participants know that it is okay if they don't want to share everything or even show their mandala. They may want to simply talk about the experience of creating it and if they learned anything about themselves during the process.

### **Feedback/questions**

### **Likes/wishes**

### **Closing Reading**

Be a gardener.  
Dig a ditch,  
Toil and sweat,  
And turn the earth upside down  
And seek the deepness  
And water the plants in time.  
Continue this labor  
And make sweet floods to run  
And noble and abundant fruits  
To spring.  
Take this food and drink  
And carry it to God  
As your true worship.

Julian of Norwich

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Session Four

*Adapted from Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene  
Small Group Ministry Program  
Meaning and Purpose in Life*

**Chalice lighting/Opening words**

*Excerpt from The Summer Day by Mary Oliver*

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

**Reading our Covenant**

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**Check-in** Briefly (about 2 minutes) How is it with your spirit?

**Reading**

In a recent issue of *Utne Magazine* (Jan.-Feb. 2006), Nina Utne asked Robert Gass, a teacher and spiritual activist, "How do we know what to do? How do we know what matters?" He replied, We don't! But still we choose to engage. Each of us is here for a purpose. Not an idea, not something we invent, but something we discover. If each of us answers this unique call, somehow it will all get done. For some of us, our purpose might express itself through standing up against racism or sexism. For others, it's about caring for a family. We may live our purpose through community service, through art, or through business. As one who trains activists, I believe my job is to help each person find a true and powerful expression of that authentic purpose.



### **Questions (you can answer any or all of these)**

- What activities and roles in your life are associated with a sense of meaning, purpose, and satisfaction for you? Why?
- Are there parts of your life that do not seem to have meaning or purpose and lack satisfaction? Why?
- Where might your journey take you in the future? How do you envision your life's purpose unfolding ahead of you?
- Where do you want to go? What challenges do you see?

**Sharing** (up to 6 to 8 minutes each, with time at the end for comment and discussion if the group wishes)

### **Setting our intentions for the future**

Each person takes a piece of paper. **Write your name at the top** (in small letters to leave room). Pass your paper to your left. Taking the person's paper on your right, write a word or phrase wish for that person, either what you see in them or what you wish for them (ie. peace, joy, abundance, insight, hope). You can write different words or phrases for each person or it could be that you wish one thing for everyone. When the card with your name comes back, flip it over and take a minute or two to write your intentions for yourself. All of those ideas that you hope for others, you may feel that you want for yourself. Write down how you intend to bring those values, hopes, and ideas into your life. You might think in terms of your hopes for your future at UCE or more generally about the ways you want to grow.

This paper is seed paper. Take it home and you can plant it in the ground and watch your intentions grow.

**Likes and wishes** How has this experience been for you? What have you gained? Were there wishes for this group that went unmet?

### **Closing words**

"As our time together comes to a close, we give thanks for one another, for the chance to share our lives, and to renew our spirits in the company of friends. May we go forth enriched by our gathering, committed to living life fully, to loving life with more passion, and to supporting one another."

From "Gatherings" by Tony Bushman and Bill Hamilton-Holway.

For all who see God, may God go with you.  
For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.  
For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...  
And the courage to take it, step by step.

--Robert Mabry Doss

**Extinguish the chalice or candle or sound a chime**