



COVENANT CIRCLES

Covenant Circle Participant Guide Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson

INTRODUCTION

Welcome. Your choice to join a Covenant Circle is a step into a journey of self-exploration and spiritual growth. Covenant Circles are small groups that agree to meet together on a monthly basis. Trained facilitators lead the sessions, each of which follows a firm structure. The structure is designed to foster a sense of emotional safety and fairness in your group. The emphasis is on deep listening and deep sharing.

Rather than the usual back and forth conversational flow we are all used to, the sessions are structured in a way that allows for equitable sharing of time. For some, the structure feels uncomfortable at first, mostly because it is new and unfamiliar. With practice, the process starts to feel more natural.

Topics for Covenant Circles focus on the same monthly themes explored in the congregation's monthly journal, *The Transforming Times*, and in Sunday services. Each session comes with some preparatory materials, which include a few quotations and a short essay on the topic. Activities are suggested that will help you engage the topic. Use the advance materials to stimulate your own thoughts and ideas.

Every member of a Covenant Circle is a unique individual with different perspectives on the world, preferred modes of learning, and ways of communicating. Likewise, each Covenant Circle develops its own personality over time. As such, the handout materials are offered as tools to be used to enhance individual exploration and participation. While the Covenant Circle structure is firm, there is also flexibility. Facilitators and group members together will inevitably develop a style that works best for them, while being faithful to the format, covenant, and guidelines.

TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR COVENANT CIRCLE EXPERIENCE

Do some preparation work. Again, the Pre-Session Packets, which are available at the AFD table or on the website, are meant as tools, NOT as assignments to be completed. At the very least, do the reading. Then, do the activities as time allows, focusing on the ones that work best for you. The readings and activities are meant to stimulate your own thoughts and ideas. The goal *is not* to come to the session with a fully prepared thesis on the topic. The handouts act like seeds. Your thoughts and ideas will germinate during your preparation time and then fully sprout during your Covenant Circle session.

Commit to regular attendance. Others in your Covenant Circle count on your presence. Once you've signed up, mark your calendar. Of course, emergencies always arise. If you aren't able to attend a meeting, let one of your facilitators know. Other than emergency situations, plan to be at every meeting.

Trust the process. The structure of Covenant Circle sessions may feel uncomfortable at first. Follow it anyway. Give it a chance. It will get easier over time and feel more natural. The structure is intentionally designed to foster deep listening and deep sharing. You will be surprised at the insights that arise – from other group members, and from within you!

BASIC FORMAT OF COVENANT CIRCLE MEETINGS

Every session follows the same basic format that includes the following elements:

Chalice Lighting: The gathering begins with a short reading and the lighting of the chalice.

Reading of Covenant: The Covenant Circle covenant is a brief statement of how groups agree to be together. It is read in unison at every session.

Review of Guidelines: The guidelines form the structure of Covenant Circles. They are posted and reviewed at every session.

Moment of Silence: Shared silence is a rare commodity in our culture. A moment of silence allows each person to still the mind in order to be more fully present and ready for deep listening.

Check-in: Each person is given the opportunity to speak briefly of events having a personal impact.

Shared readings: There are readings to set the tone and introduce the topic. Group members are invited to participate in reading these aloud.

Sharing: This is at the heart of the Covenant Circle experience. The time of sharing is structured in three sections. In the first section, members respond to questions posed by the facilitators. There is no cross-talk; that is, each person responds in turn, speaking of his or her own personal thoughts, ideas, and experiences. During the second section, members are invited to share more deeply on the questions posed in

the first round, or to respond to the essay, readings, or activities. During the third section, members may share additional thoughts or reflect on what others have said.

Moment of Silence: A time of silence allows for the sharing to settle in more deeply. It helps participants to internalize new awareness and insight

Closing Reading: A brief reading focusing on the topic helps bring the time of sharing to a close.

Check-out: Each person is given the opportunity to briefly share feelings or insights that came up for them.

Extinguishing the Chalice: The chalice is extinguished, following a brief reading.

Announcements: Facilitators make announcements about the next meeting time, place, and date. Materials for the next month's session are handed out.

GROUP COVENANT

We covenant to create a sacred space for spiritual community by deep listening and deep sharing with open hearts and open minds.

COVENANT CIRCLE PARTICIPANT GUIDELINES

- One person speaks at a time.
- Speak from the heart.
- Give your complete attention to each person speaking.
- Listen respectfully and non-judgmentally.
- No advice giving.
- No putdowns of yourself or others.
- Speak from your own experience. Use "I" statements.
- Share the time.
- Be on time.
- All that is shared within the group is confidential.
- It's okay to pass.
- We're not here to "fix" each other.
- No praise or blame.

FAQs – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT COVENANT CIRCLES

Will I be told what to think or believe in a Covenant Circle?

No. Each Covenant Circle meeting centers on a topic. Questions are posed and participants are given the opportunity to reflect on their own responses. Everyone is then invited to share. Often people are surprised by the depth of their own sharing, surprised at their own insights and wellsprings of wisdom. Each participant learns from the responses of others, deepening their own understanding of the topic.

Why can't we have the questions for each session ahead of time so that we can prepare our responses?

Covenant Circles are not about homework, research, or polished answers. Handout materials given in advance of the session are meant to stimulate ideas. They do not include specific questions that will be asked in the Covenant Circle session. No one is expected to come with fully formed answers to given questions. In fact, the experience is better for everyone if you don't! The goal of Covenant Circles is to create a safe place where people can access sources of knowing and wisdom beyond the intellect, an opportunity to share what is most authentic for them in the moment. This safety, along with the deep listening provided by the other participants, allows respondents to be open, honest, and maybe even vulnerable enough to speak from their hearts about what matters most to them. This is not a response one can prepare ahead of time.

Why can't we just have a free-flowing discussion on the topic?

The sharing in Covenant Circles is done in a structured way. The structure allows participants to actually listen to what someone else is saying without being distracted by thinking of one's own judgmental response. It is deeply affirming to be listened to without judgment. The combination of these two conditions, listening without forming a judgment, and being listened to without judgment, makes for an environment that fosters understanding, tolerance, and appreciation.

Why can't I be in the same group as my spouse or life-partner?

Experience has shown that couples in the same Covenant Circle tend to self-edit their responses more than people without an intimate partner in the group. This self-editing response limits the ability to go deeply into one's own wellspring of wisdom. Two concurrent Covenant Circles are offered on the same Sunday afternoon, making it convenient for couples to participate in Covenant Circles. Couples obviously will want to talk with each other about the topic and what came up in their individual groups. This is fine to do, even encouraged. The only limitation is that of confidentiality. Couples may share thoughts and ideas they hear in their groups without sharing who said what. Participation in Covenant Circles can have a residual effect for couples, enhancing communication in the relationship with deeper listening and deeper, more authentic sharing.

Why do Covenant Circles disband each spring and re-form in the fall?

Answer: This question is heard most often In Covenant Circles during the spring when groups have developed spiritual intimacy and are well bonded -- the group members really like each other and wish they could stay together. The happy answer to this question is that when we consider how close we've gotten to each other, how connected we are after a year of meeting in a Covenant Circle; our relationships do not have to end. We can continue to see each other at church and beyond as we choose. AND, next year we have the opportunity to build this kind of wonderful relationship with nine more people in the congregation. The goals of Covenant Circles include creating bonds of religious community in a program-sized church like ours and acclimating and welcoming newcomers into our community. Ask people who've participated in a Covenant Circle – it works! As our small group ministry program grows over time we can build a strong web of relationships throughout our congregation that keeps people connected.