

# *Theme Listening Circles*

## **New Participant Guide**

2014-2015

**Unitarian Church of Calgary**

*There is a quality of listening that is possible among a circle of human beings, who by their attentiveness to one another create a space in which each person is able to give voice to the truth of his or her life. There is the miracle of authentic narrative, made possible by listening that holds still long enough to let the truth be told. Where there is this kind of listening and speaking, a new kind of community is born - a community of life.*

- Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Theologian

*I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place.*

- Rufus Jones, Quaker historian & theologian

# I. We Help Each Other Become the People We Most Want To Be

Unitarian Universalism is about connection. We are a religion that sees people struggling, not against our own sinful souls, but against a shallow, frantic and materialistic world that all-too-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 to life's gifts and serve needs greater than our own. TLCs support this mission by offering participants:

- Formative space and circles of learning, support, and challenge
- 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, TLCs are about becoming.

## II. We Offer ~ Formative Space

The core purpose of TLCs is to create formative space for individuals. This is a space of acceptance and safety in which group members can explore their deepest values and inner voice without judgment or coercion. The below reading explains the power and importance of this sacred space.

“The Soul is Shy: The Importance of Deep Listening and Formative Space”  
by Parker J. Palmer, from *A Hidden Wholeness*

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.

Spaces designed to welcome the soul and support the inner journey are rare. But the principles and practices that shape such spaces are neither new nor untested. Some are embedded in monastic tradition, for the monastery is the archetypal “community of solitudes.” Some emerged over four hundred years of Quaker faith and practice. Some were revived in the transpersonal psychology movement of the mid-twentieth century. And some are embodied in the processes of spiritual formation that can be found at the heart of most of the world's great wisdom traditions.

“Formation” may be the best name for what happens in a circle of trust, because the word refers, historically, to soul-work done in a communal setting. But a quick disclaimer is in order, since

“formation” sometimes means a process in which the pressure of orthodox doctrine, sacred text, and institutional authority is applied to the misshapen soul in order to conform it to the shape dictated by some theology. This approach is rooted in the idea that we are born with souls deformed by sin, and our situation is hopeless until the authorities “form” us properly.

But all of that is turned upside down by the principles of a circle of trust. In a circle of trust, formation flows from the belief that we are born with souls in perfect form. As time goes on, we are subject to powers of deformation, from within as well as without, that twist us into shapes quite different from the shape of the soul. But the soul never loses its original form, and never stops calling us back to our birthright integrity.

In a circle of trust, the powers of deformation are held at bay long enough for the soul to emerge and speak its truth. 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.

### **III: We Embrace ~ A Theology of Connection**

The TLCs approach is central to our Unitarian Universalist Theology.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology is complex and yet at the same time it can also be boiled down to a single focus on healing spiritual disconnection. 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. TLCs are a container in which we explore the genuine meaning of this theology in our lives.

Below are five distinctive attributes of our TLCs program. They are our way of supporting this journey toward a deeper connection with ourselves, the mystery of life, and others.

#### **1. TLCs are Rooted in a Theology Focused on Spiritual Connection.**

Unlike some religious traditions that emphasize concepts of sin and forgiveness, Unitarian Universalism responds to the challenge of spiritual disconnection. We see ourselves and many around us hungering to re-connect to our deepest selves, life’s gifts and needs greater than our own.

At the Unitarian Church of Calgary, we bring together individuals with differing needs, gifts and beliefs, and we are inspired and encouraged to live life as an expression of our common values. We do this by creating an environment and opportunities for contemplation and celebration, loving interactions with one another, lifelong learning, and engagement in social action, together or individually. All of this is supported by the deep listening that takes place in small groups.

TLCs offer an opportunity to heal spiritual disconnection, as we listen to each other in circles of trust.

Spiritual writer and small group advocate, Parker Palmer, talks about small groups as helping people survive “the blizzard of the world.” He writes:  
(ETC.)

There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives.

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some of us are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home. Some are lost without knowing it. Some of us have just reached for the rope. Others are in the middle of the journey trying to keep hold of our grip. Others have just arrived home.

My own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that the soul’s order and life’s hope can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the common compassion of friends, that rope is always close at hand, ...offering, time after time, the chance to regain our bearings...and find our way home again.

- from *A Hidden Wholeness*

The gift of Parker Palmer’s words is to remind us that we all on some level are struggling to find our way back home—to what we care most deeply about and who we most want to be. So TLCs are not just “an evening of good discussion” or “an opportunity for intellectual stimulation” or even “a chance to meet new friends.” At its best, they are a path back home.

**2. TLCs are an Opportunity to Explore the Worship Themes in More Depth** (and get the bonus of spiritual connection to the congregation as a whole)

TLCs are not a “stand alone” program. They are inextricably connected to the worship life of our congregation by providing group members with opportunities to explore our congregation’s monthly worship themes in more depth. Besides helping us go deeper, this has the added benefit of

connecting us to the wider First community. “I may not be in your TLC, but since we are dealing with the same theme, we have a point of connection that allows us to feel part of the same journey” (and even strike up a conversation a bit more easily!).

It is important to stress that TLCs are not sermon discussion groups. The goal is not to explore the sermons in more depth, but to explore the monthly theme in more depth. Having the sermons in the background enriches the experience, but they are not the focus. The focus is on the monthly questions and spiritual exercises, which provide a different kind of experience than worship offers.

### **3. TLCs are an Invitation to Experience the Worship Theme, Not Just Talk about It.**

Unitarian Universalists want to do more than just read and talk about spiritual topics. Provocative readings are important. Thinking about and discussing a topic is important. But there is nothing like experiential learning. Indeed many of us learn and process concepts best through direct experience.

Given this, group members are given a “spiritual exercise” each month to engage prior to the meeting. For instance, if we’re wrestling with the concept of grace, we can’t just read what theologians had to say about it, we also need to challenge ourselves to find a way to bring grace (a gift one doesn’t expect or earn) into another person’s life. If we’re exploring the topic of prayer; we can’t just read theories and perspectives on prayer to understand what it means; we have to challenge ourselves to find a new way to pray (or even try prayer for the first time!). These spiritual exercises differ radically month to month. Sometimes they are profound and involved; other times, simple and playful. Sometimes they will turn out to be “the most moving experience of my life.” Other times, people might say, “I’m not sure that worked for me, but it did make me realise...” No matter what, we ask everyone to try the exercises, believing that—whether you “enjoyed” it or not—the experience of doing it will help you learn something about life and yourself—something that sitting in a room just thinking about the topic never could.

One last thought: we can think of our spiritual exercises as koans. In Zen practice, koans are thought of as “unanswerable questions.” The point is not to “figure it out” or “find the right answer.” In fact, many spiritual questions cannot be answered by the rational mind but must be experienced. The meaning is in the engagement, wherever that engagement leads. They take us on a journey whose destination is neither right nor wrong, but always enriching. At their best, this is what our spiritual exercises do for us.

It is also important to stress the difference between spiritual exercises and spiritual practice. Our monthly exercises are not intended to take the place of on-going, even daily practices that centre us. They supplement our practices and ask us to delve deeper.

### **4. TLCs Offer Questions To Walk With, Not Walk Through.**

TLCs also take a unique approach to questions. Most small group material includes discussion questions. In this traditional model, questions serve as group tools to keep the discussion focused

and structured. TLCs use the questions differently. We see them as tools for individual exploration. Instead of asking our groups to go through the questions one by one and discuss them, we invite group members to read all the questions ahead of time and find the one or two questions that “hook them”—that speak to them in some dramatic or challenging way. We then invite the group members to “live with” or “walk with” that question for the few weeks leading up to the group. One way to put this is to say: “Find the question that hooks you and let it take you on a ride.” Group members then come to the meeting, not with an answer to each of the questions on the list, but with a story about the one or two questions that spoke to them and led to deeper, personal learning. In this sense, the questions serve as an additional spiritual exercise, another experiential exercise prior to the group that helps them connect the theme with their daily living or personal history.

## **5. TLCs are a Reminder That UUism is Distinctive, Not an “Anything Goes” Religion**

Each month, our theme focuses us on a spiritual value that our faith tradition has historically honoured and emphasized. So with each meeting, we are reminded that our liberal religion dreams of a preferred way for us to be in the world, challenging each of us to ask, “What does it mean to live a life with these particular values front and centre?”

There’s an important reminder here: Unitarian Universalism is not a religion of “anything goes.” Rather our faith has a unique vision of the good life. Yes, we affirm personal choice and individuality, but there are some core values that our faith asks all of us to engage, take seriously and apply to our daily living.

## **IV: We Create ~ Community**

In TLCs we engage each other in a covenantal relationship. So we commit to honouring a particular format and clear relational commitments during our group meetings. Through these promises to each other, we find meaning and connection. Below is the format and covenant we use to accomplish this.

Meetings usually last 2 hours and follow this structure:

\* *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. Some leaders offer meditative words or a prayer. There are lots of ways to do this. Each group finds what fits them best.

\* *Brief Check-In:* Members briefly share what is going on in their lives. The goal is to get beyond chit-chat and do more than “catch up.” The technique that is most often used is to ask members to briefly share “how it is with your spirit” by commenting on one thing that is “pulling at or draining your spirit” and one thing that is “feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit.” Each member usually takes only a couple minutes to share. This part of the meeting typically takes no more than 20 minutes.

\* *Discussion of the Spiritual Exercise:* Discussions start with members sharing their experience of doing the spiritual exercise. Common questions that facilitators ask are: “What was it like for you to attempt the exercise?” “Did it lead to any unexpected feelings or insights?” “Did it go as you expected?” “How did it challenge, change, or deepen your understanding of this month’s theme?” This is where we work hard to practice deep listening. To start, there is no back-and-forth conversation. Instead group members focus on listening and providing each other with the formative space to hear ourselves think or, as Parker Palmer puts it, to let our shy soul speak. It is only after everyone has had a chance to share that the facilitator opens the floor and invites members into a time of reflective conversation. This is when members speak from their own experience, and comment on the connections they saw between each other’s stories and experiences. A common question at this point is: “How did listening to everyone else help you see or learn something new about your own story?” 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!”

\* *Discussion of the “Questions To Wrestle With”:* We don’t treat these questions like “homework.” We do not engage every single one. Instead, participants look them over a couple weeks ahead of time and find the one that “hooks” them most. Then they let that question take them “on a ride.” They live with it for a while and allow it to regularly break into—and break open—their ordinary thoughts. And then come to our meeting prepared to share that journey with our group.

\* *Check-Out:* Meetings end by each member briefly sharing a statement of gratitude. Facilitators ask participants to think about what they’ve experienced together that evening and then lift up one comment or experience for which they are particularly grateful.

\* *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.

When starting a new group, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. Facilitators also promise to have the group revisit and re-affirm the covenant yearly. The following covenant is possible template for our TLCs. 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.

## TLCs 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, interruption, advising or 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 be a caring community, carrying each other in our hearts, and reaching out. (This can be discussed within each group.)
- to honour our commitments to attendance, punctuality, reading the material and engaging in the spiritual exercise,
- to contact the facilitator/co-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,
- to periodically revisit, edit and reaffirm this covenant as a group.

Additionally, Theme Group Facilitators covenant to:

As the group facilitator, I will...

- start and end meetings on time,
- make sure all voices are heard,
- help the group be a circle of caring and concern,
- ensure that another group member facilitates if I cannot attend.
- let the group know in advance if a new member is joining the group,
- welcome new members and provide an orientation for them to make sure they are comfortable with and agree to our process,
- ensure that we make time for the group to say goodbye to members who leave.