

Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene (UUCE)
Small Group Connection Circles (SGCC)
[formerly Small Group Ministry (SGM)]
Facilitator Training Manual, Revised August 21, 2021

Table of Contents

Small Group Connection Circles (SGCC)	1
Criteria for Choosing SGCC Facilitators	3
A few Fundamental Roles and Responsibilities	4
When It's Time to Begin	5
UUCE SGCC Covenant of Right Relationship (Revised 8/21/21)	6
UUCE Covenant of Right Relations and other statements	7
About Service Projects	8
SGCC Facilitator Tips	9
Frequently Asked Questions	10
How to Handle Challenging Situations	12

This manual was revised by the Small Group Connection Circles Steering Committee 2021-22:
Dick Loescher, Chair; Kat Johnson; Bonnie Koenig; Jennifer Tucker
(Revised August 21, 2021)

This page left blank intentionally.

Small Group Connection Circles

Small Group Connection Circles (SGCC) is a structured program within the UU church community. A majority of UU congregations have a similar program with various names, such as Small Group Ministry, Chalice Circles, Covenant Groups, and other names.

What are Small Group Connection Circles About?

The purposes of the SGCC program are to build community with deeper connections and friendships, to explore personal and spiritual growth, and to provide service. These purposes are implemented through a series of meetings with a small group of people with a trained facilitator, a structured format, and a covenant or ground rules each group agrees to.

Group size is limited to enhance the opportunity for personal sharing and the development of trust and friendships. As we share our own truths and listen to the truths of others about topics of universal significance, our connections deepen, and we are better able to lend care and support to each other. The spirit of community that develops in such a group radiates outward, and often increases the members' sense of connection to UUCE as a whole. Each group also does a service project, which broadens our ministry and adds meaning to our lives by contributing to the well-being of others.

What Happens at Small Group Connection Circles Meetings?

Participants briefly share what is going on in their lives, and share regarding a topic of spiritual or personal significance, following a particular meeting format and covenant (group agreements and guidelines).

- Light a chalice or sound a chime.
- Moment of Silence
- Opening Words: These serve to remind participants of the special opportunity of the gathering and often reflect the topic of the session.
- Check-in: Participants share news of what has been happening in their lives. Each group develops its own customs as to the length of sharing. This portion of the meeting may expand from time to time if circumstances call for it. Helpful lead-ins are: “What is most on your mind today?” “What do you need to share to be fully present to the group?” “Share something that has happened to you since we last met that is significant to you.”
- Topic: Readings, questions, and requests serve to stimulate responses to each session’s topic.
- Sharing. Each person has an uninterrupted time to share what comes up for them in response to the readings and questions. There can be time for discussion after all have shared if the group wishes.
- Administrative matters: Reminder about the topic, date, time, and location of next meeting; service project; announcements; other
- Likes (celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met) and Wishes (mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)/Check-out: Each person has the opportunity to state what they are feeling as the meeting draws to a close.
- Closing: Reading, extinguishing the chalice or sounding a chime, and other possible closing ritual if the group chooses

Optional: review the covenant, especially around confidentiality and respectful listening without interrupting; consider a break about halfway through the session.

SGCC groups are not . . .

SGCC groups are not a debate society, a discussion group, or a study group. The point is not to convert other people to your opinion or to impress them with your intelligence and knowledge, but to speak your truth so that others can know you, and to listen to others speak their truth so that you can know them.

SGCC groups are not therapy groups. The point is to get to know one another, not to solve each other's problems or give each other advice. People get to know each other not by confessing their deepest darkest secrets, but by participating together in discussion and sharing. The topics are intended to focus the group's attention on the experiences we have in common just by being human.

SGCC groups are not affinity groups. The topics do not assume any shared special interests or experiences. But everyone was born and everyone will die. Everyone has successes and failures, loves and losses. Everyone has the same fundamental needs and the same basic emotions. Just being human gives us a great deal to talk about.

The topics are not ends in themselves. They are a way to get to know each other. By watching and listening to each other grapple with the topics, the participants learn about each other in a different way than they would by serving on a committee or meeting at a purely social event.

Criteria for Choosing Small Group Connection Circles Facilitators

Facilitators are the heart of this sharing of our ministry. With input and insight from the minister and the SGCC Steering Committee, facilitators have been chosen who:

- are trusted members of the church
- are clear about their role as sharers in the ministry of the church
- understand the importance of appropriate confidentiality
- commit to an average of 7 to 9 hours a month in facilitating and continued training
- understand the difference between a “class” and a covenanted group
- agree to participate regularly in ongoing facilitator meetings
- agree to follow the structure of Small Group Connection Circles
- are aware of the difference between leading a meeting and facilitating a meeting.

The kind of people we’ve looked for as facilitators expect to listen a lot and talk only a little!

Thank you!

A Few Fundamental Roles and Responsibilities

Facilitators

The role of the facilitator is to oversee the structure of their Small Group Connection Circle:

- Set the meeting time
- Keep the discussion on track
- Model good listening skills and inclusion of every one in discussion
- Focus on process rather than outcome
- Identify and handle awkward situations
- Help the group maintain the covenant they have made to each other and the church.

Each facilitator is appointed and trained by the minister and the SGCC Steering Committee, and each is expected to:

- Participate in the training
- Attend the SGCC Facilitator Group
- Follow the SGCC format
- Commit to facilitate (or co-facilitate) their group for the specified number of sessions.

Members

The role of group members is to care for the well-being of the group by attending to its primary purposes: the building of community, personal and spiritual growth, and service.

Group members' responsibilities include:

- Attending all meetings unless illness, family, or another situation prevents
- If absence or lateness is unavoidable, letting facilitator know in advance
- Offering support to group members if welcomed and appropriate
- Keeping the group covenant.

Host

The role of the host(s) is to provide a place for the group's meeting if meeting in person.

The host's responsibilities include:

- providing chairs or other appropriate seating for members
- providing water.

Meeting in the UUCE building is also an option.

If the meeting is via Zoom, hosting might be provided by a UUCE or personal Zoom account.

Church program staff and Steering Committee

The role of the church program staff is central to the work of the SGCC Program. They and the SGCC Steering Committee will choose and train the facilitators and will meet regularly with the facilitators.

The Steering Committee will meet regularly to support the program and help in planning and act as mentors for the facilitators as needed.

When It's Time to Begin

Your group information, sorted with attention to preferred days and times, ages, gender, location, and a fair amount of magic, will include people's names, phone numbers, email (if present), street addresses, and special needs listed by the person. For in-person meetings, we will indicate who has offered to be a host and may suggest a good home to line up first. A group may have several offers of meeting places, but usually it works best to have a primary place and a second as back up. We suggest you not meet in your own home unless it really is easier for you. Another option for meeting location is to meet in a room at church if needed for child care arrangements, accessibility, or other reasons. For Zoom meetings, the host options include using a UUCE or personal Zoom account (that of the facilitator or of a group member). Some meetings might be in dual format with some attending in person and some via Zoom.

Here's a suggested checklist:

- Decide on your first meeting date. You'll need to look ahead at your calendar and aim for a schedule that works best for you. Set the meeting dates for your group through all 10 sessions. It is suggested initially to schedule the meetings during the 1st and 3rd or 2nd and 4th week each month on the specified day, rather than every 2 weeks. Of course, there will be sessions that people will occasionally miss. The group does have the option to reschedule a meeting date if agreed to by the group members.
- For in-person meetings, find your first host. Be sure that they have enough chairs or appropriate seating for the number of people in the group. Assure the host that they do not need to prepare refreshments. Get clear directions to their home so you can tell the others as you call them. Ask the host if you can give their phone number and email address to other group members in case they need more directions. You may want to line up a backup host, but it will probably work best if the groups meet at the same place each time.
- Call each member of the group. Introduce yourself, and warmly invite them to the first gathering of the Small Group Connection Circle. Encourage people to come to the first meeting and let them know that the group plans to begin and end on time.
- Get confirmation that each person does indeed want to be in the group. If needed, changing to a different group can be arranged if logistically feasible. Please let the SGCC Steering Committee Chair know if there is anyone on your list that you would be uncomfortable working with. No need to explain. Just don't call that person. Call or email the Steering Committee Chair and we'll attempt to find another group for the person. If someone withdraws from your group, please let the SGCC Steering Committee Chair know. It opens up a space for others. Our practice is that we can make changes in group composition up through the second session, but not after that.
- Give them your phone number/email address in case they have questions, and let them know it is very helpful for them to contact you if they're unavailable to make a meeting so that you and the group won't worry about them. It is never too early to start building the covenant!
- Verify the contact information for each person and ask if they prefer email, phone call, text, or paper mail contact from you. Sending a reminder of each upcoming meeting is usually appreciated.
- Prior to or at the first meeting, ask if it is okay to share contact information with group members. If okay, arrange to provide a contact list to each group member.
- At the first meeting determine if members would like to receive the topics for the next sessions in advance of the group times, and if so, how to best receive the information.

**Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene (UUCE)
Small Group Connection Circles (SGCC) [formerly Small Group Ministry (SGM)]**

**Small Group Connection Circles (SGCC) Covenant of Right Relationship
Group Agreements and Guidelines to Meet Our Needs and Support Our Values**

Within the group

Trust and Safety

- Confidentiality: keep what is shared in the group within the group. The facilitator is considered to be a “mandatory reporter” to appropriate authorities for suspected abuse or neglect of vulnerable people or other risks for people’s safety.
- Follow the meeting format. It provides a safe and predictable environment.

Empathy and Understanding

- Speak from personal experience and use “I statements.”
- Refrain from giving advice or trying to fix problems, either yours or someone else’s.

Learning and Contribution

- Remember we are all learners and teachers.

Respect, Consideration, and Support

- Practice respectful listening and sharing of “air time” by listening to each person’s check-in and sharing of the topic without interruption or cross talk.
- The facilitator and group members will call the group back to the covenant when needed.
- Respect the right to pass. A person may choose to talk later, or to sit/share in silence.
- Begin and end on time.
- Have a strong commitment to attend every session.
- Let the facilitator know when you will not attend.

From the group to the church

Respect, Consideration, and Support

- Affirm and promote the principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the UUCE mission statement.
- Do a service project for the church or the larger community.

From the church to the group

Nurturance and Support

- Provide the organizational and logistical support to maintain the Small Group Connection Circles program.

(Revised August 21, 2021. Small Group Connection Circles Steering Committee:
Dick Loescher, Chair; Kat Johnson; Bonnie Koenig; Jennifer Tucker)

Why a covenant? This covenant is an essential part of the Small Group Connection Circles program. Groups can revisit the covenant if they flounder or need to refocus. This is how we hold each other to our religious principles, how we agree to act with one another.

UUCE Covenant of Right Relations

We covenant to build a religious community guided by respect and sustained by our principles. We will listen appreciatively, speak with care, express gratitude, honor our differences, and assume good intentions. We will communicate directly, honestly and compassionately – particularly when we are in conflict. When we hurt one another we will ask for forgiveness and make amends, and when we are hurt we will try to forgive and reconnect in a spirit of right relationship. In celebration of the common mission that unites us, we will abide by this covenant.

UUCE Mission Statement

Empowered by love, we transform ourselves and serve our world.

UUCE Aspirations

As a people of faith, grounded in our principles, we cultivate lives of meaning, reverence, and depth; we create sanctuary where all hands are held; together we work toward justice, healing, and sustainability.

Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA)

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.
(The above 7 principles were revised in 1984.)
8. Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions. (8th Principle added to the UUCE bylaws by vote of the congregation at the Annual Meeting on June 13, 2021.)

Optional Meeting Strategies for SGCC Groups

- Use a talking stick or object to indicate who is talking and when the person is finished.
- Indicate when one is done talking with a gesture or a phrase, such as “I am finished.”
- For time management, consider having a clock visible to the person speaking for self-monitoring of time, or have a timekeeper or use a timer to indicate when the allotted time for a person’s sharing is reached.
- Save time for response and dialog after all have shared.
- Consider having a time of silence, perhaps up to 30 seconds or so or three breaths, after each person has shared to allow for reflection and to allow people to think about comments or questions they may want to bring up during the open discussion after all have shared.

Service Projects

Service projects connect us to the congregation and/or to the larger community. They give us an opportunity to put our faith into action. Working together strengthens bonds among group members, lets us get to know each other in a different way, and gives us the satisfaction of contributing together. And it's fun!

- Unless doing a service project is mentioned as being optional, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic when the meetings are via Zoom, doing a service project is an essential component of the SGCC program and should be talked about as early as Session 1.
- If group members are resistant, explore their resistance with them.
- The facilitator is not responsible for the service project idea or organization.
- If your SGCC group decides to collect money or items (books, art supplies, coats, etc.) from the congregation for their service project please attempt to coordinate the scheduling by discussing the potential dates of the collection with the SGCC Steering Committee Chair, with the intent of having one collection at a time, if possible.
- UUCE is not in a position to give individuals receipts for donations to outside agencies. If a receipt is needed, it must come directly from the outside agency.
- Encourage the group to choose a project that is doable within the time frame of the SGCC program and the physical abilities and time availability of the group members.
- Information and ideas about service projects for UUCE may be obtained from these sources: church program staff, various church groups, and possibly the UUCE website.
- Information about community volunteer opportunities may be obtained from United Way: www.unitedwaylane.org, 541-741-6000.

Examples of Service Projects

UUCE Related:

- Be Greeters or Ushers at Sunday Services
- Be responsible for Coffee Hour for some number of Sundays
- Help set up and clean up for an event
- Participate in a church work day, with providing lunches being one option
- Help out at a New Member reception or dinner
- Help organize the reception after a memorial service
- Help with a fundraising event
- Help with a UUCE Justice project
- Help with a SpiritJam project

Community Related:

- Volunteer at a soup kitchen or Food for Lane County
- Volunteer at a homeless shelter or warming center
- Join a neighborhood work day or a Habitat for Humanity project
- Sponsor a collection of non-perishable goods for a food bank
- Collect and deliver children's books to a homeless shelter
- Call blood-drive donors for the blood bank
- Volunteer with a literacy program
- Provide lunches for an outside group work party

Small Group Connection Circles Facilitator Tips

1. A few days prior to each meeting, send out an email, text, phone call, or paper mail reminder to members regarding the date, time, and place of the meeting, the topic for the session, and, if desired, the questions or session plan.
2. Arrive at least 10-15 minutes prior to each meeting to allow time to get settled, have handouts ready, review the agenda and topic and covenant, and to greet each member as they arrive. This also gives you a moment to thank the host. If meeting via Zoom, start the Zoom session 10-15 minutes early to allow for visiting before the actual meeting time begins.
3. Possible helpful strategies during the meeting, if needed:
 - Review parts of the covenant, process, and agenda, if necessary to help the group get focused, especially if there have been challenges in the past.
 - If you have found that members take too much time for check-in or use it to explain some position vs. experience, take a moment before starting to review what the check-in is for and model it by being the first to check in.
 - Consider having each person read a portion of the opening words, readings, questions and requests so everyone has an opportunity to get involved and be heard.
 - Mention that the quotes used in the session plans are selected to provide a diversity of viewpoints to stimulate reflection and sharing. We attempt to have a balance of quotes from authors of different genders, sexual orientations, ethnic and racial backgrounds, cultural perspectives, religious and philosophical points of view, ages, and abilities. However, the balance may not be exactly equal in each session or overall. The quotes do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of the SGCC Steering Committee or UUCE, and selection of a quote does not imply that it necessarily is considered to be truth. Also, some quotes may contain gender or other references that were used by the author of the quote and may not be considered to be inclusive by today's standards.
 - Be aware of both verbal and nonverbal communication of members. Sometimes it is not what is said, but how it is said that is revealing. Also note what is happening during silence, observing body language and facial expressions.
4. If you have a concern about a member, try to check in with that person privately as soon after the meeting as possible to check your perceptions. Seek assistance from an SGCC Steering Committee member or church program staff if necessary.
5. If the meeting is held at church:
 - Consider parking lot safety. Encourage people to walk in pairs or groups in the lot.
 - Leave the room the way you found it, or neater.
 - Lock the doors as appropriate.
 - Turn out the lights.
6. Don't hesitate to contact a member of the SGCC Steering Committee or church program staff if you have a question, concern, or feel uncomfortable or unsafe for any reason.

Frequently Asked Questions

What if an SGCC member needs help with personal, work, or relationship problems?

Giving advice and trying to fix problems are not part of the SGCC program. If a person is asking for help, consider sharing information after the SGCC group meeting is over about possible resources at UUCE (church program staff, Lay Pastoral Associates, Kindness Team, other) and community resources, including 211info (www.211info.org, telephone number 211 or 866-698-6155). See also the answer to Challenge 8 on page 14.

How will the meetings feel?

In the beginning people may be a little anxious about the group—whether they will like it, whether it will work—and they will be getting to know you and each other. The first two or three meetings may be a bit stressful for you. However, as the group becomes accustomed to the format and to each other and starts to benefit from the sharing and new relationships, they usually will become more relaxed and comfortable. This is a natural process in the group’s development.

What if no one speaks after a topic question is asked?

Silence is okay; it means the group is taking the opportunity to reflect on their experiences related to the question. Peter Bowden, SGM consultant, says this process may take up to 7 seconds. Learn to welcome and be comfortable with the silence; it is a gift to each other, a sacred space in time. The group will respond when they are ready. Also, allow time between responses for everyone to reflect on what the last person said. On infrequent occasions, it may be helpful for the facilitator to go first if no one else speaks.

What if a member doesn’t like the idea of a relational group?

It means that the individual doesn’t want what covenant groups have to offer. Suggest other group settings as you wish them well and say you’ll miss them.

What if people drop out of the group?

If a group member misses a meeting without explanation, call to ask if they are okay and still want to be part of the group. There may be a life event or other situation that is preventing the person from participating. If a person decides to leave the group, the person may inform the group directly, in writing, or ask the facilitator to inform the group.

What about social events outside of group meetings?

Some groups meet socially in addition to SGCC meetings, particularly during the summer. Such get-togethers are not necessary or essential to the group’s mission, but can provide an enjoyable and different way of being together if everyone agrees with the event. There is the risk, however, that some participants may feel that the group has not honored the original agreement of two meetings per month. If additional social events are scheduled outside of group meeting times, be clear that participation is optional.

What can the facilitator do after a participant shares a particularly sad or emotional part of their lives?

The facilitator can ask for a moment of silence before the next person speaks. Occasionally, a group member has important and pressing things to share and it takes longer than usual. In this case, the facilitator should be sensitive to the member's need to speak and flexible enough to let their sharing time run its course. If this becomes the norm rather than the exception, however, the other members may become uncomfortable with the unequal use of meeting time. One solution is to agree to an approximate time limit for each person.

What can the facilitator do when the discussion becomes argumentative or abstract?

In either case, the facilitator can remind the group of their purpose for meeting and refer to the covenant, which everyone has agreed to abide by.

What if my group wants to change the format? For example, what if some group members want to substitute social activities or another common interest for the discussion of a topic related to participants' lives?

The facilitator can simply say that such a group would no longer be an SGCC group. The group can withdraw from the SGCC program and you can continue to facilitate or be a member of it, but it will not be part of the SGCC program.

What if a member of my group makes a comment at a meeting that sounds racist or homophobic?

This is an example of a boundary issue, and it is your responsibility as facilitator to help the group address it. Using "I statements" is a way to tell the member what you are hearing and avoids making an accusation. See Challenge #9 in following section "How to Handle Challenging Situations."

(The above "Frequently Asked Questions" section has been adapted from the Facilitator Training and Development Manual written for the UU Small Group Ministry Network.)

How to Handle Challenging Situations

Most SGCC groups will go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. However, there are challenges that occasionally arise in any group process. Here are some of the most common challenges you are likely to encounter, together with some suggestions about effective ways to deal with them.

Challenge 1. Certain participants seem shy and don't say anything.

Suggested responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. It should always be permissible to pass. Make eye contact. It reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that may indicate they are ready to speak. Frequently, participants will feel more comfortable in later sessions of an SGCC group and will join in then. Some people need more time or more quiet time to process their thoughts and feelings. When someone finally does speak after staying long on the sidelines, you can give encouragement by expressing interest and saying something like "Please tell me more." It may be helpful to talk informally with people both before and after the formal SGCC session.

Challenge 2. An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion or interrupts people who are speaking.

Suggested response: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide domineering participants. Once it becomes clear to you what this person is doing, you **MUST** intervene and set limits. If you suspect that making eye contact with this person would make her/him feel as though you are encouraging them to speak, then start by limiting your eye contact with them. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate. "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the talkative person by name, "Charlie, we've heard from you. Now let's hear what some of the others have to offer." Be careful to moderate your comments and tone of voice; you are trying to make a point without offending the dominating person.

Ask the person who constantly interrupts to please stop interrupting by saying, "Our covenant calls for us to listen without interrupting, and Pat has not finished yet." You may also need to check in with the interrupter outside of the group meeting, since speech patterns can be cultural and the interrupter may not see it as an interruption.

Here are some optional strategies to consider that may be helpful with facilitating each person being able to have a fair share of time for speaking, and for time management:

- Use a talking stick or object to indicate who is talking and when the person is finished.
- Indicate when one is done talking with a gesture or a phrase such as "I am finished."
- Have a clock visible to the person speaking for self-monitoring of time, have a timekeeper, or use a timer to indicate when the allotted time for a person's sharing is reached.

Challenge 3. Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off topic.

Suggested responses: Responding to this challenge takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the dialogue along, but it is not always clear which way it is, or should be, going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off topic now. How is the group feeling about this? I'd like to make sure others get a chance to speak."

Challenge 4. Someone puts forth information that you know to be false.

Suggested response: Ask, “Has anyone heard of conflicting information?” If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the dialogue, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that even experts often disagree.

Challenge 5. Lack of interest, no excitement, and no one wants to talk; only a few people are actively participating.

Suggested response: This rarely happens in SGCC groups. However, if a facilitator talks more than the group enjoys or does not give people plenty of time to collect their thoughts and respond, members may become silent and passive. People need time to think, reflect and get ready to speak up; give it to them. Occasionally, you might have lack of excitement in the topic because the group seems to be in agreement or dealing only with the surface issues of the topic. Sometimes members may not think that discussing a topic is appropriate based on something revealed during check-in. Regardless of the reason, you should check out the appearance of a lack of interest with group members by saying something like, “I’m not sensing much energy in the room for this topic. Do we want to continue with it or talk about something else?” Then be silent and wait to hear from several members, not just one. You may need to go around the whole circle in order to get a clear idea of what is going on.

Challenge 6. Tension or open conflict in the group arises, perhaps when two participants lock horns and argue, or when one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Suggested responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas help to clarify one’s thinking. Explain that for conflict to be productive, it must be focused upon the issue, and on the legitimately different ways of viewing it. It is acceptable to challenge someone’s facts, but personal attacks and challenges to personal beliefs are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so because of the established covenant that prohibits such behaviors and encourages tolerance for all views. Don’t hesitate to appeal to the group for help: if group members bought into the covenant, they will support you. You may also need to talk one-on-one with the person who engaged in the prohibited behavior.

Challenge 7. One member engages in working toward an ulterior purpose or selfish end or telling negative stories about a third party or group who is not in the room.

Suggested responses: As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who forget the SGCC covenant and engage in questionable behaviors. You must intervene by saying something like, “I am not comfortable hearing this in this SGCC setting. It sounds like something between you and someone who is not here to present their side of the story. I’m not clear how it relates to the SGCC topic we are considering. If it is related, could you perhaps tell us how it is related to the topic without naming names?”

Challenge 8. People start offering unsolicited advice and trying to problem solve for a group member.

Suggested responses: As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who forget the SGCC covenant. You must intervene, but you must also use caution here. You may choose to say something like, “Please let me remind the group that our covenant prohibits offering unsolicited advice. Pat, if you want the group’s input, let us know and you can chat with folks after the group session ends.” If the issue is a cataclysmic one, the group may choose to abandon its topic time and minister to its members. Usually, however, the ministry of the group is focused on witnessing each other’s personal and spiritual growth.

Challenge 9. A member uses categorical language or engages in slurs presenting some category of people in a stereotypical way; often this can be presented under the guise of humor.

Suggested response: As facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who engage in questionable behaviors. You must intervene by saying something like, “I am not comfortable with this sort of language (or humor). It seems to be that it is stereotyping certain people in a negative way that really is not funny to me or them. I hope you will not use it again.”

(Some of the material in the above “How to Handle Challenging Situations” section has been adapted from First Unitarian Society in Newton, Massachusetts.)

An Additional Resource for Dealing with Conflict: Nonviolent Communication

Many people have found nonviolent communication (NVC), also called compassionate communication, to be a very helpful process in approaching situations of conflict or any other communication situation. NVC is a process and language of compassionate, empathic communication, which has the intention of establishing a connection with a quality that leads to everyone’s needs being met peacefully, and encouraging compassionate giving. There are two parts: fully and honestly expressing ourselves without blame or criticism, and empathically receiving the communications of others without hearing blame or criticism, even if others express themselves in hostile ways. Helpful steps in the process include: making observations free of evaluations, acknowledging feelings, identifying needs and values which give rise to feelings, and making requests expressed clearly in positive action language. Online resources for this process include the Center for Nonviolent Communication (www.cnvc.org), and the Oregon Network for Compassionate Communication (www.orncc.net).