



Soul Matters

Facilitator Manual

I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles.
—Rufus Jones

Through others we become ourselves.
— Lev S. Vygotsky

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WELCOME

Welcome to Soul Matters facilitation! Thank you for offering your time and talent. You are giving a great gift to others. This manual is here to help ensure that the experience is also a great gift to you.

We begin by sharing the deeper purpose of Soul Matters groups. While most of this manual covers the “how” of leading groups, we also want you grounded in the deeper “why.” Facilitation requires good *technique*, but it thrives when leaders are clear about *the deeper transformation* our small groups offer.

We then talk about how Soul Matters groups differ from other small group models. As a facilitator, your job isn’t just to run an effective meeting. It is also to introduce others to a new and unique way of being together. For instance, Soul Matters is designed to help us experience the themes not just talk about them. Its structure also helps us avoid the safety of abstract analysis and instead invites us to courageously dive into the work of vulnerable, honest and heart-centered sharing.

After that, we get into the nuts and bolts of facilitation, from getting your group off to a good start, to structuring your group meetings, to what to do when things don’t go as planned.

Next, we discuss how Soul Matters’ distinct process and practices shape the role of facilitator in unique ways. So we tease out how your role differs from traditional facilitation. And the truth is you play numerous roles as a Soul Matters facilitator. We walk you through them one by one.

Finally, we talk about where you can find additional support and inspiration. We want you to be well-prepared and well-nourished. So we close out the manual with readings and quotes that remind you why small groups matter so much. This is not just a volunteer “job”; it’s a ministry. These readings and quotes highlight that. They also support your spiritual formation, not just sharpen your skills.

You’re about to begin a wonderful and precious journey. Let’s begin!



Facilitation thrives when leaders are clear about the deeper transformation small groups offer.

Purpose

Why Join a Soul Matters Group?

Before we talk about the *how* to run a Soul Matters group, let's be clear about *why* they matter. Facilitation requires good technique, but it thrives when leaders are clear about the deeper transformation they are supporting.

Simply put, Soul Matters groups mend the threads of spiritual connection. Around us swirls a shallow, frantic and materialistic culture that leaves us cut off from our deepest self, life's gifts and needs greater than our own. Many of us come to church hungry to mend these sacred connections that get frayed and torn. Soul Matters exists to support this journey of reconnection to life, others and our deepest self.

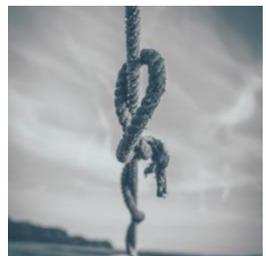
We do this work of reconnection by listening. Fundamentally, that's what Soul Matters is: an invitation to listen more deeply and intentionally, in three distinct ways:

First, we listen to each other. It's a gift not often offered in our culture. Most of the time, we are talked at rather than listened to. We are bombarded with information and demands that drown out our own voice. Being listened to by trusted companions helps us hear our own voice again. And more than that: It gives us our story back. Theologian, Rebecca Parker, puts it this way:

"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 our truth be told."

Second, we listen to our lives. This is not easy to do. Directly or indirectly, we are taught to see life as a challenge not a companion. The goal is to conquer it, not listen to it. Soul Matters invites us to take another look and dance with life in a new way. Through spiritual practices and questions focused on our daily living, we engage the world not as an obstacle course to get through, but as a host of holy moments and voices calling us to greater loving and living. Christian novelist, Fredrick Buechner beautifully captures this sacred way of engaging the world:

"You never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it.... You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not [the Sacred] is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next."



We come hungry to mend the sacred connections that get frayed and torn.

Finally, we listen to our deepest self. Introspection is often understood as solitary work, but Soul Matters understands it as largely a gift given to us by others. Ironically, we hear that “still, small voice inside” best when the voices of friends speak and offer their presence in a disciplined way. Quaker teacher Parker Palmer explains this well:

“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.”

Together, these three sacred practices of listening – to each other, the world and our deepest self – add up to a more intentional and authentic life. It’s a journey back to connection, and ultimately a journey back home. Again, we turn to Parker Palmer. Here’s how he describes the journey that Soul Matters hopes for us all:

“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. And some are using the blizzard as cover while cynically exploiting its chaos for private gain...

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 can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul’s backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.” (From A Hidden Wholeness)

Realizing we are in the soul’s backyard. Hoping to grasp again the rope that leads us back home. This, ultimately, is why one joins a Soul Matters small group. This is what your role as facilitator is ultimately all about. You are not just ensuring good process; you are offering the gift of wholeness, and home.



We are always in the soul’s backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.

Approach

What Makes Soul Matters Different?

We've already begun to answer this question. Soul Matters' distinguishing characteristic is a focus on deep listening that helps us heal spiritual disconnection. But the way Soul Matters goes about that is also unique. Here's how:

Soul Matters Invites Us to Listen to Each Other Deeply and With Discipline

There is nothing passive about deep listening. It requires effort and intentionality. Soul Matters invites group members to practice three distinct disciplines of deep listening during their meeting time, captured simply in this three-part mantra:

- Hold still – *the practice of offering inviting presence and witness*
- Hold at bay – *the practice of offering safe space*
- Hold up and hold out – *the practice of responding with gratitude and noting meaningful connections*

“Hold still” is about offering each other the gift of inviting presence. It is what Rebecca Parker calls “a listening that holds still long enough to let others’ truths be told.” In practice, this means responding to people’s sharing with silence rather than interruption or immediate response. In our groups, each member takes a turn sharing before any group reactions or discussion occur. We “hold” each other’s sharing, rather than react to it with comments or questions. Responding to each other with silence can feel awkward, but it makes room for the one speaking to hear themselves. It’s about offering a spaciousness that allows one’s sharing to wander without worry so new insights to emerge. Parker Palmer refers to this as the practice of “honoring the shy soul.” He writes,

“The soul is shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out... A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly “in the woods” with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up.”

“Hold at bay” is about offering and ensuring safe space. It involves keeping our often-unhelpful reactions in check when it is time to respond to each other. This guides what happens in the “second round” of sharing, after everyone has taken a turn of uninterrupted sharing in the “first round.” After listening to someone share their thoughts and stories, it’s natural to analyze and assess what we’ve heard. It’s understandable that we want to offer advice and try to help people solve the problems they are struggling with. But it’s also **not** what we need. So, this is why Soul Matters asks us to hold our unhelpful responses at bay by following the rule of “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.” Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins explain our discipline of “holding at bay” this way:



A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly “in the woods” with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up.

“It’s hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told, and the feelings behind it... Even the most experienced listeners repeatedly will slip into judging and analyzing. When you realize that this has happened, gently set aside your thinking for later and open your heart. Buddhist meditators, who face the same problem, speak of treating the mind like a beloved but sometimes inappropriate child who wants to show off to guests. ‘Not now, sweetie,’ says the kind parent. ‘You go and play, and we will join you in a bit.’ Similarly, when we are listening and notice that we are commenting to ourselves about what is being said, we can tell our minds, ‘This is not the time for analysis. I just need to hear this story.’ (Heart to Heart)

“Hold up and hold out”: Whereas “Hold at Bay” reminds us of what *not* to say during the response round, Hold Up and Hold Out is our guide for what *to say* when do talk and react to what we heard from others. Instead of responding to each other with “fixing, advising or saving,” we *hold up gratitude* for one thing that especially struck us as we listened and *hold out* how that one thing connects to our lives and clarified something about our own situation. This requires a different kind of listening from the start. Instead of analyzing or judging what people are saying, we need to listen in a disciplined way. Instead of allowing our brain to ask, “What do I think of this person’s sharing?” or “Do I agree with it?”, we direct ourselves to the question of “Where is this person’s sharing trying to take me?” In particular, Soul Matters encourages you to think about how the other person’s sharing might be trying to take you back in time and reconnect you with a forgotten memory. Or how their sharing might be trying to take you inside to a forgotten piece of wisdom. Either way, the goal is to allow people’s sharing to transport you, to reconnect you with a memory or an important piece of wisdom waiting within.

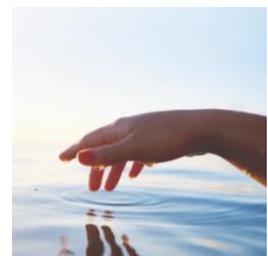
Soul Matters Invites Us to Experience the Themes, Not Just Analyze Them

Spiritual analysis without spiritual practice leaves us unchanged. This is why we make spiritual exercises a central part of each monthly small group packet. These spiritual practices force us to come down from the lofty perch of *analyzing life* and instead invite us into the nitty gritty work of *engaging our lives*.

For instance, when we wrestled with the concept of grace, we didn’t just share what theologians had to say about it. The packet’s exercises also challenged group members to find a way to bring grace (a gift one doesn’t expect, earn or even deserve) into another person’s life. The goal was to “be grace” not just talk about it. Another example is how we handled the theme of prayer. The packets included theories and perspectives on prayer, but they also invited members to find a new way to pray (or even try prayer for the first time!).

Multiple spiritual practices are suggested each month. This allows people to pick the one that meets them where they are. Some exercises are intense; others are playful. Some involve a lot of time and commitment; others can be done in one sitting.

The goal is to get us out of our heads and into our lives. It’s all about disrupting daily patterns and shaking things up a bit, so that holy crack takes root in our entrenched narratives. It’s important to think differently, but our spiritual exercises hope we also end up living differently.



Come down from the lofty perch of analyzing life and instead engage.

Soul Matters Offers Questions That Walk With Us, Rather Than Quiz Us

Soul Matters takes a unique approach to discussion questions. In traditional small groups, questions are an opportunity for the group to think together. Soul Matters, in contrast, treats questions as tools for individual exploration and spiritual discernment. Instead of going through the list of questions one by one as a group, Soul Matters asks participants to read all the questions ahead of time and find the one question that “hooks them” or “pops out in neon lights” - the one question “gets under their skin” or seems to contain a personal message. This is why we title the question section “Your Question.” The goal is not so much to answer the questions, but instead figure out which question is “yours” and why?

After identifying “your question,” you are asked to then live with -- or “walk with” -- that question for a couple weeks leading up to the group, with the goal of coming to your group meeting, not with an answer to each of the question, but with a story about how this one particular question led you to seeing your life differently. This technique leads us away from abstraction and intellectualizing and instead invites us into a deeper focus on daily living.

It also invites us to listen to our own inner voice. By asking us to pick which question is “yours,” the packets put you in the mindset of spiritual discernment. The packet doesn’t so much ask you questions as it invites you to figure out which question your deepest self is trying to ask you. In this way, our approach to questions doesn’t just foster good conversation; it also introduces people to the practice of spiritual discernment.

Soul Matters Offers Us Conversation Partners Throughout the Entire Month

Our monthly group conversations are a gift, but we know that spiritual development is not a once-a-month thing. Honoring this, Soul Matters’ packets are designed to give participants the experience of a month-long conversation with multiple conversation partners. Along with spiritual exercises and personal discernment questions, the packets contain extensive recommended readings, poetry, quotes and multimedia on the monthly theme. Engaging these “voices” is another way we invite participants to “listen to life.” As Unitarian Universalists, we honor the way the holy speaks through sacred texts, but we also see the world itself as a holy text. Additionally, our belief in ongoing revelation calls us to listen to new & current voices. For us, this means taking the voices of bloggers, musicians and “ordinary people” as seriously as those of philosophers, theologians and academics. Treating blogs, YouTube videos, movies and music videos as “sacred texts” is not just an attempt to “be current.” It is an effort to remind us that the voice of the Holy is all around us, even in the most unlikely of places. The goal these recommended resources is to help us remain always open and always listening!



Which question is “yours” and why?

Soul Matters Adapts To You

Our small group packets are intentionally filled with an abundance of resources so congregations can select, modify and edit the packet to match their unique settings. Most congregations use the packets as is, but don't hesitate to alter them as needed. For instance, some congregations narrow the spiritual exercises down to the one or two they think will connect with their members the best. Some congregations also alter or add to the list of questions.

You can also modify our approach not just the content. For instance, some groups break up the monthly small group packets and create two monthly session guides. Some pull out one question from the Your Question list and use it to have a more typical group discussion before moving on to the Soul Matters practice of sharing the one question that popped out to you and why.

The bottom line is that you know your people the best. Our packets are designed to support you, not constrain you. So edit and modify as you wish.

Soul Matters Small Groups Are Part of a Greater Whole

Ideally, Soul Matters is not a stand-alone ministry. It is designed as a companion program to your congregation's worship experience. Congregations using Soul Matters small groups often position them as "an opportunity to explore our worship themes in more depth." This creates an entirely different experience for small group members and the whole church. In this model (often called "theme-based church"), one's small group experience isn't a separate and isolated experience in and of itself; it is part of a larger church-wide discussion and journey that the whole congregation is engaging in during the month.

In other words, Soul Matters groups connect one to the greater whole. I may not be in your Soul Matters group. You may not even be in a small group at all. But since we are all exploring the same monthly theme (in worship, RE and other small groups), we are already connected and already in conversation. Our various church groups and activities don't create cliques and silos. They become points of connection. It's why we are fond of saying that the Soul Matters approach doesn't just transform individuals; it also transforms coffee hour! We don't have to think of something to talk about over our cups of joe. We can deepen the conversation that's already been going on among us all. This new level of connection and cohesion is no small thing. Too often our congregations are segmented into pockets of unrelated experiences. Soul Matters and theme-based ministry heals those unnecessary divisions and distances. It's not just about creating interesting conversations; it's about cultivating and restoring wholeness.



A holy crack takes root and suddenly we are challenged, and changed.

Process

How do small group meetings go?

So how are Soul Matters small group meetings structured? And how does a facilitator keep them on track? Here's the meeting format we recommend, a suggested group covenant and a few tips.

Meeting Format & Structure

Prior to the Meeting

- Members make time to engage the monthly packets at least 1-2 weeks prior to each meeting.
- Members select and complete one of the spiritual exercises.
- Members reflect on the list of questions and pick the one that speaks most directly to them. They then “live with” that question for a week or two. Some make the question a part of their meditative practice. Others print it out and pin it somewhere they can see it each day. Some just pull it into awareness in a more informal way.
- Members set aside time to look over the recommended resources (“Companion Pieces”). They may also want to follow the Soul Matters Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle>). This extra reading and Facebook engagement is optional but deepens one’s engagement with the themes.

At the Meeting

Meetings are usually held once a month and last for 2 hours. Here’s the recommended format for those 2-hour sessions:

Centering

Begin with a chalice lighting and centering words. Most often the facilitator or a group member shares a favorite quote, poem or video from the recommended resource section of the packet. Some leaders offer a prayer or lead the group in a guided meditation. There are lots of ways to do this. The point is to provide a moment of pause so members can shift into the slower mode of receptivity and bring themselves into the present moment.

Brief Check-In – around 10-15 minutes

Members briefly participate in a focused check-in. The goal is to avoid longer and more involved reports about all that has happened since the group last met. Instead of asking, “How is everyone doing,” it helps to offer a more focused and spiritually oriented question. One recommendation is to ask members “How it is with your spirit?” and have them share one thing that is “pulling at or draining your spirit” and one thing that is “feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit.” Each member takes just a couple minutes to share. The group listens quietly as each person shares rather than engaging in crosstalk.



How is it with your spirit?

Spiritual Exercises Discussion – around 40 minutes

Members share their experience of doing their chosen spiritual exercise, using the two-round process explained below.

“Your Question” Discussion – around 40 minutes

Members share their experience of selecting and reflecting on their chosen question, using the two-round process explained below.

Check-Out – around 10 minutes

There are many ways to do this. Some groups offer a sentence about the challenge they received for their living and loving. Others have everyone name the feeling/emotion they came into the group with and feeling/emotion they are now leaving with because of the time the group spent together. The goal is for the group to explore different options and decide what works best for them.

Closing Words

The meeting ends by extinguishing the chalice and maybe sharing a closing reading, prayer or blessing.

Our Two-Round Discussion Process

Here are some more details (and tips) about using the Soul Matters “deep and disciplined listening” process to discuss the packet’s Spiritual Exercises and Your Question section.

Round One – “The Sharing Round”

Members take turns listening silently as each shares the exercise/question they picked, why it spoke to them and where reflecting on it led them. It helps if the facilitator invites members to share not only where that exercise/question took them, but also why they picked that one over others.

It is also important to remind the group about what to do as they listen to others. The first is our deep listening practice of “hold at bay,” where members avoid interrupting each other with questions or commentary. The second reminder is the practice intentionally turning off that part of our brain that wants to ask, “What do I *think* of this person’s sharing?” or “Do I agree with it?” and instead turning on that part of our brain that asks “Where is this person’s sharing trying to take me? Either back to a forgotten memory or inside to a forgotten or new piece of wisdom?”

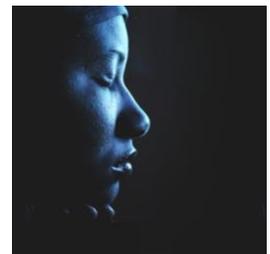
Round Two – “The Response Round”

After everyone has had a chance to share, the facilitator opens the floor and invites members to respond to what they’ve heard using our practice of “Holding up and holding out.” This involves each member of the group lifting up (“holding up”) gratitude for one person’s sharing which particularly impacted them and then explaining (“holding out”) how that person’s sharing reconnected them to an important memory or important piece of wisdom. Invite them to think of it as “holding out” the gift they received as they listened.



Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings.

Often group members will say it is too hard to offer up gratitude for just one person's sharing. They may also worry that someone will get left out of the gratitudes. As a facilitator, you will want to discuss this with your group in advance, usually during the covenant discussion. Start with explaining that the purpose of the process is to honor time limits but more importantly to push people to do the work of spiritual discernment – i.e. to push ourselves to identify whose sharing most powerfully connected to them and offered a personal message or challenge to them. Having said that, it's important to also not be rigid with this practice. Many groups support members lifting up one or two people if they are moved, with everyone promising to be aware of the time they take to share.



A message is being offered. Do you hear it?

Establishing a Group Covenant

A covenant is a list of the ways we agree to be together as a group. It includes the promises, practices and behaviors that guide a group's time together. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. We are 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 about good group process, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

When starting a new soul Matters group, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. Facilitators promise to help the group revisit and re-affirm the covenant at least once a year.

The below draft covenant captures the core promises and practices of the Soul Matters approach. We encourage groups to use it as the base for their own covenant, adding commitments of their own or put the commitments listed into their own words.

Template

Before our meetings, we agree to:

- Make meetings a priority, including being on time
- Contact the facilitator(s) ahead of time if we are unable to attend
- Engage the packet ahead of time: reading the material, doing one of the spiritual exercises and identifying which question is "my question."

During our meetings, we agree to:

- Practice deep listening, offering each other time to share without interruption. ("Hold still" and offer presence and witness)
- Honor the rule of "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!" during times of discussion and crosstalk. ("Hold at bay" and offer safe space)
- Monitor the length and frequency of our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak.
- Speak for ourselves, offering reactions rooted in gratitude and connecting the sharing of others to our own experience ("Hold up and hold out")
- Make time to say good bye when a member decides to leave the group.
- Periodically revisit, adapt and re-affirm this covenant as a group, especially when new members join the group

After our meetings, we agree to:

- Follow up with members who miss a meeting without notice to make sure they are okay.
- Respect the privacy of group members by keeping personal sharing confidential
- Keep each other in our prayers and thoughts, reaching out to each other in tangible ways to ensure that we are a caring community for one another
- Keep a look out for other church members who might benefit from and fit with our group, recognizing that inviting is the job of us all and a way to express our gratitude for the gifts the group has given us.



Forming a covenant isn't just about good group process, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

- Connect potential new members with our group facilitator so they can go over the New Participant Packet to make sure the potential new member is comfortable with and agrees to our process and practices.

As facilitator, I agree to:

- Start and end meetings on time
- Make sure all voices are heard
- Remind the group about our covenant, process and practices of deep and disciplined listening
- Help the group be a circle of caring and concern
- Recruit another group member to facilitate if I cannot attend
- Ensure that the group periodically revisits and re-affirms this covenant
- Include the group in decisions about new members joining
- Welcome new members with intentionality by personally meeting with them to go over the New Participant Packet to make sure they are comfortable with and agree to our process and practices
- Ensure we make time for the group to say good-bye to members who leave

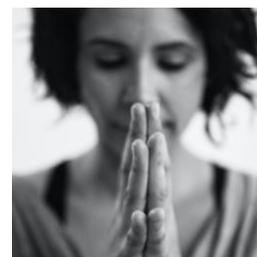
Template – abbreviated version

We agree to:

- Make meetings a priority
- Engage the packet in advance
- Practice deep listening (“Hold still & offer presence and witness”)
- No fixing or advising (“Hold advice at bay and offer safe space”)
- Monitor our participation
- Speak with gratitude and look for connections to our experience (“Hold out gratitude and hold up connections”)
- Make time to say goodbye
- Remember and re-affirm our covenant
- Follow up with absent members
- Honor confidentiality
- Keep each other in our hearts & reach out when wanted
- Invite others and share the gift of small groups with others

As facilitator, I agree to:

- Start and end meetings on time
- Invite everyone’s voice
- Remind the group about our process and practices
- Foster a circle of caring and concern
- Recruit facilitation if I cannot attend
- Ensure re-affirmation of our covenant
- Include the group in decisions about new members joining
- Welcome new members with intentionality
- Make time for good-byes when members leave



Speak with gratitude and look for connections.

Leading

What's your role as facilitator?

Soul Matters' distinct process and practices shape the role of facilitator in unique ways. So we turn next to teasing out how your role differs from traditional facilitation. The truth is you play numerous roles. Let's walk through those one by one:

Keeper of the Process

First and foremost, your role is to remind the group about the process and practices to which members have already committed themselves. You do not have to stimulate interesting conversation. You do not have to offer provocative questions. You don't even have to "control unhealthy behavior." The Soul Matters format and structure does that for you and the group. Your job is to remind more than stimulate, hold the space more than "get people to talk." In a sense, the process guides the group more than you do.

This is especially true when it comes to guiding the group through its discussion of the spiritual exercises and questions. Since members are asked to work with the exercises and questions prior to coming to the group, all you have to do is set the stage for them to share the work they've done and remind them of how we've promised to listen to each other and respond. We've already addressed this above, but it may help to read an example script of what one might say as they set up the sharing:

"Let's now turn to sharing our experiences with the spiritual exercises. As always, we will first offer each other deep listening as everyone takes an uninterrupted turn sharing which exercise, they picked and how it clarified or changed your understanding of this month's theme. After that, we'll open the circle to reactions and comments as each of us lifts up one person's sharing and how that took them back in time to a forgotten memory or took them inside to piece of forgotten wisdom.

As you share your experience with your chosen exercise, feel free to share not only what you did but also something about your process of picking the one you did. Sometimes it's the process of picking between the exercises that offers the deepest insights, not just the process of doing the exercise.

Ok. Let's now sit in silence for a moment and then whenever you feel ready to share feel free to speak."

[Members take turns sharing while others receive the sharing in silence.]

"Now that everyone has shared, let's open the discussion to reactions. Remember our promise to each other about "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!" Instead, when you share, just lift up, in gratitude, one part of one person's sharing that particularly struck you. Something that left you especially grateful. Something that challenged or clarified something important for you, by taking you back to a forgotten memory or inside to forgotten wisdom."



We are taken back to a forgotten memory or forgotten wisdom.

That's all there is to it. Yes, there will be times you need to gently interrupt the process if someone steps outside of the process. Yes, there will be times you will need to kindly redirect a member when they slip into fixing or advising rather than offering gratitude and speaking about their own experience. Yes, you may need to remind people to monitor how much time they are taking. But because the ground rules have been established and the processes of deep and disciplined listening is agreed upon, your reminders will have the support of the group.

Model

Don't underestimate the power of your role as model. The most effective way to teach the group the practices of deep and disciplined listening is for you to embody them. Be very intentional and strategic about your use of self. Consider sometimes being the first person to share in order to model best practice. Also model comfort with silence and don't rush in to share. Be sure to do the spiritual exercise ahead of time and if you've not had a lot of time that month, show that you made some attempt to do it in a modified way rather than blowing it off. Your role as model matters more than you know.

Host

You are also a host. Your work as facilitator goes much more smoothly if you tend to the work of "setting the table." This occurs in a number of small but important ways, such as beginning and ending the meetings on time, giving care to the chalice lightings and closing words, making sure the packets are sent to members early, sending out an email reminder a day ahead of the meeting and telling everyone you look forward to seeing them. These are all little ways you can make a big difference.

Being a host also includes being intentional about how you welcome new group members and say goodbye to ones that have to leave. Be sure to always make decisions about adding members as a group. Some groups will entrust you to decide as long as you keep them advised. Other groups will want a more collaborative process. Make sure you spell out your process in the covenant ahead of time.

Also make sure that members don't invite new members in by themselves. Members should be encouraged to look out for people who could fit with and are interested in the spiritual discernment focus of the group. But out of respect for the group as a whole, the group should make sure that you spend some time with a potential newcomer prior to joining to go over the New Participant Packet to make sure prospects are comfortable with and agree to the group's process and practices.

Giving care to goodbyes is equally important. Whenever possible, ask members to announce that they are leaving at least one meeting before they stop coming. This allows the group to make time at their last meeting for a goodbye ritual, and maybe even some farewell desserts!



Hold the space, and let the process guide the group.

Pastor

This may sound intimidating at first. But don't worry. It's not your role to be pastor to the group members as much as it is to cultivate pastoral practices within the group. You can do this early on when building the covenant. Be sure to spell out in the covenant how the group will be a caring community for each other. Make it explicit that it is ok for members to reach out to each other between meetings or check in on each other when going through hard times. Make it a practice that a group member will always follow up when another group member misses a meeting without letting the facilitator know they will be absent. Stay after the meeting and check in with a member who shares a particularly hard story during the meeting. Or even better, right before-check out and closing words, pause and ask if anyone needs some kind of extra support or if anyone would like the group to keep them in their thoughts and prayers.

Participant

Never forget that you are also a participant. This is one of the biggest gifts of the Soul Matters model. Since the process for sharing is highly structured, you are able to set the stage for sharing and then largely just sit back and be a participant. As mentioned earlier, your main work involves kicking the sharing off more so than keeping it going. Sinking into the role of participant is easier said than done. But be sure to give yourself that gift.

Part of a Network of Support

Finally, remember that you are not alone in your role. Every church differs but all have some network of support. Some pull facilitators together for regular coaching and problem-solving meetings. Some ask a minister or program leader to function as your mentor. Others establish a model of co-facilitation, so you have a partner and coach every step of the way. Still others engage the national network of Soul Matters facilitators and get their support and coaching through [our online trainings](#). Whatever model you function within, be sure to speak up when challenges arise, or you are feeling a bit in over your head.



May we be for each other a circle of concern.

Going Deeper

Where do I find inspiration & support?

Facilitation is about more than learning skills. It's essential to understand all the guidelines and techniques, but it's equally important to be rooted in the deeper purpose and spirituality that gave rise to the practice of Soul Matters and the general UU covenant group movement. So we end by introducing you some of the voices that have inspired and sustained small group leaders over the years.

We also share some facilitator support opportunities offered by the Soul Matters community.

Inspiration

I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed their faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek -- quietly bolstering my faltering faith.

Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness

Instead of telling our valuable stories, we seek safety in abstractions, speaking to each other about our opinions, ideas, and beliefs rather than about our lives. Academic culture blesses this practice by insisting that the more abstract our speech, the more likely we are to touch the universal truths that unite us. But what happens is exactly the reverse: as our discourse becomes more abstract, the less connected we feel.

Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness

Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings.

Henry Nouwen

Listening is not passive. It's hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told, and the feelings behind it. Some people say they can feel themselves shift from their minds to hearts when they are listening... It is the mind's nature to think, and so even the most experienced listeners repeatedly will slip into judging and analyzing. When you realize that this has happened, gently set aside your thinking for later and open your heart. Buddhist meditators, who face the same problem, speak of treating the mind like a beloved but sometimes inappropriate child who wants to show off to guests. 'Not now, sweetie,' says the kind parent. 'You go and play, and we will join you in a bit.' Similarly, when we are listening and notice that we are commenting to ourselves about what is being said, we can tell our minds, 'This is not the time for analysis. I just need to hear this story.'

Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins, Heart to Heart



To not flee or save,
but simply be present.

When someone deeply listens to you,
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you,
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

John Fox

Moments of hearing for the first time; you never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next.

Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words

Listening to the World: An On Being interview with Mary Oliver

<https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world/>

Healing Community: Small group ministry creates a sacred time where the stories of our lives are heard

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/small-group-ministry-creates-sacred-time>

Thandeka

Inside everyone is a great shout of joy waiting to be born. Even with the summer so far off I feel it grown in me now and ready to arrive in the world. All those years listening to those who had nothing to say. All those years forgetting how everything has its own voice to make itself heard. All those years forgetting how easily you can belong to everything simply by listening.

David Whyte



Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention.

Support from the Soul Matters Team

New Facilitator Trainings

Each quarter, the Soul Matters Sharing Circle offers a two-hour on-line training for new facilitators. In addition to going over the Soul Matters model in more depth, these basic trainings share tips for handling facilitation challenges, strategies for program growth, and best practices for facilitator recruitment and support. These trainings are for congregations that have existing facilitator training programs as well as congregations that don't. To learn more and sign up for one of these trainings visit the Trainings Page our website: <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/webinars--trainings.html>

Advanced Facilitator Trainings

This is a more advanced facilitator training and covers the three core stages of small group development:

- Getting Groups Off the Ground (covenant formation, start-up meetings, teaching the Soul Matters discernment practices, advertising, etc.)
- Ensuring Good Group Practice (facilitation tips, handling challenging group dynamics, check-in & check-out strategies, introduction scripts, etc.)
- Adapting and Enhancing the Group Experience (strategies for adapting & expanding our model)

To learn more and sign up for one of these trainings visit the Trainings Page our website: <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/webinars--trainings.html>

Monthly Facilitator Meetings: in-depth formation & nourishment

Small group facilitation is one of the most important ministries in our congregations. And one of the most challenging! You need support as you build and fine-tune your skills. You also need spiritual nourishment of your own, since it is sometimes challenging to lead a group and fully participate at the same time. So our Soul Matters team offers monthly-meeting small groups for facilitators from around the country. These serve as both experiential training and personal nourishment.

Each monthly meeting is run as a small group, facilitated by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler and follows the packet for the upcoming month. This allows participating facilitators to have a “dry run” of the session they will lead the following month. It’s an entirely different way of thinking about training. Instead of being instructed about how to run the upcoming session, you get to directly experience it. Maybe most importantly, this approach allows facilitators to be nourished by the personal sharing of fellow facilitators from around the country. After each 2-hour session, facilitators can stay on the call for an optional and more personalized coaching session with Rev. Tayler. To learn more and sign up for one of these trainings visit the Trainings Page our website:

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/webinars--trainings.html>

Facebook Support Page for Small Group Leaders

For on-going support and to connect with other facilitators around the country, join the closed Facebook Facilitators page. Here’s the link to the page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/340749289661184/>

For daily inspiration and engagement with the monthly themes, like and follow the Soul Matters Inspiration Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>





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Learn how to join at <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/>