

First Parish Church of Groton, Small Group Ministry

Session 1: Mindful Listening / Covenanting

Facilitator/Date: _____

Supplies: Chalice, matches, printed questions & Covenant copies for each participant (last pages), pencils, pens

1. Chalice Lighting/Opening Words (3 min.)

Listening is the first step in making people feel valued.

Mindful listening allows us to do more than take in people's words;
it helps us better understand the how and why of their views.

When understanding occurs, a sense of calm is achieved on both sides,
even if no point of agreement is reached.

From understanding, respect and trust for one another are possible.

Listening is also the first step in any negotiation, whether it means getting your teenager
to clean the garage or arranging a cease-fire in the Middle East.

~The Zen of Listening by Rebecca Shafir~

Luckily, here we put aside conflict and are simply here to be listened to and known.

We need to be known. This knowledge of being known we call love.

~Alan Jones~

We light the chalice in honor of the opportunities for connection to ourselves and to one another that the Small Group Ministry program makes possible.

2. Coaches Introduction: [Paraphrase]

Our role is to guide the group and keep us on time and on topic as best we can. In Small Group Ministry there are usually two coaches for each group. We'll be full participants as well as guides.

The Purpose of SGM is connecting more deeply to whatever you experience as holy and sacred and connecting more deeply to the other people in the group. SGM is a place where the soul may show itself. It is a place for honest conversation about topics and issues we may never get to talk about in the course of daily life and yet which matter deeply.

The Format: Each session maintains the same five-fold format although the topic changes each week. After lighting the chalice, we individually Check In, quietly Reflect on the Topic, Share our Reflection (practicing mindful listening to others), Check Out, and hear some closing words on the topic while we extinguish the chalice. In between our sharing, we ring the bell (singing bowl) to honor the silence and the sharing of the preceding person. To explain further, after lighting the chalice, we:

Check In: (30 min.) we'll go around the circle with equal amount of time to share each person's response to "*How's your spirit?*" or "What has stirred your passion in the past week?"

Today we're going to ask that you share something about *who you are/how you are/why you're here/ and what you're hoping for in the Small Group ministry experience.*

Reflection: (10 min) Coaches will introduce the topic and hand out several powerful questions upon which to reflect. Then we'll have 10 minutes of quiet reflection (writing or drawing) before we offer our deep sharing and listening.

Deep Sharing: (40 min) We'll share as we feel moved (vs. circularly)

Covenant: Before we start any of this, we need to discuss The Covenant. Small Group Ministry groups are sometimes called Covenant Groups because one of the most important characteristics is that the group abides by a covenant or set of agreements. The purpose of the covenant is to make it possible for members to share deeply and safely, from their hearts. [Distribute Covenant (page 5); read out loud around the circle stopping for questions or clarification as needed.]

3. Check In: up to 30 minutes

Ask each person to take an equal amount of time to check-in. For this first meeting, invite people to check in by sharing something about who they are, how they are and what they are hoping for in the small group ministry experience.

Explain how much time each person will have to check in (depending on group size) and **that we'll keep time for each other using the watch, passing the watch to the person speaking when the time is up.** Ask people to simply go around the circle one by one, keeping a few seconds of silence before they speak in which they might hold the person who just spoke in their thoughts or simply be in the stillness.

Note: The coach should go first as an example. Ask the person sitting to your right to keep time for you. Please make sure you don't go over the allotted time. Please make sure to remind people to take a few seconds of silence before they speak and model that yourself.

4. The Topic – Mindful Listening TOTAL TIME 60 min.

A. Introduction and Questions: 5 min.

Today's topic is Mindful Listening.

We listen to other people a lot. We listen to pass the time, to get information, to be entertained.

We listen waiting for our turn to speak. We listen because it is expected of us.

Most of the time, we don't listen deeply, even when our intent is to be helpful.

We think we are listening, but we are spending most of our energy thinking about things to say that are encouraging or insightful.

Why is it so difficult just to listen?

Perhaps because we have a hard time believing that it is simply our presence that helps, rather than our thinking and advising.

In time, we discover that to be listened to is a way of being loved, and that listening is a way of being loving.

We can take what we learn here into the rest of the world and bless the world.

~ *Heart to Heart* by Christine Robbins and Alicia Hawkins~

What if we were to be together and listen to each other's comments with a willingness to expose rather than to confirm our own beliefs and opinions?

What if we were to willingly listen to one another with the awareness that we each see the world in unique ways?

And with the expectation that I could learn something new

if I listen for differences rather than the similarities?
We have this opportunity many times in a day, everyday.
What might we see, what might we learn, what might we create together,
if we become this kind of listener, one who enjoys the differences and welcomes in disturbance?
I know we would be delightfully startled by how much difference there is.
And we would be wonderfully comforted by how much closer we became,
because every time we listen well, we move towards each other.
From our new thoughts and our new companions, we would all become wiser.
~ Margaret Wheatley, mid-20th century~

QUESTIONS (Distribute Questions, last page, & Read out loud)

These are the questions we invite you to reflect on in the silence ahead:

B. Silence for Reflection/Writing: 5 min.

After handing out copies of the questions, invite the group into 5 minutes of silence during which time they are asked to reflect on the questions. Participants are invited to use this time for reflecting or for jotting down thoughts or words or drawings.

C. Sharing: 50 min.

Invite each person to share their response as they feel moved, rather than clockwise. Each person has an equal amount of time to share with the group and the person next to you will serve as a timekeeper/subtle reminder. Before speaking, try to let your attention rest on sensations of silence and breathing for a few moments, as we pass the watch. The silence respectfully acknowledges the end of another's words and the beginning of yours. Also, please remember, there's no real need to comment to one another right after someone's spoken. There will still be time to make overall comments during check out and possibly time for more free flowing discussions towards the end of the group if time permits.

We're here to be heard and known and to simply hold one another's thoughts, as said beautifully in this poem:

Just when you seem to yourself nothing but a flimsy web of questions,
you are given the questions of others to hold in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves in your cupped palms,
trusting you not to injure their scintillate fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others as if they were answers to all you ask.
Yes, perhaps this gift is your answer.
~Denise Levertov, "The Gift"

5. Check Out: 10 min

Encourage people to check out with a final thought or reflection about what it was like to reflect on listening (or any other thoughts or reflections about the session) and how having done so might shape or impact their life in the week ahead.

6. Closing Words/Extinguish the Chalice: 1 min

It is perhaps a paradox that only in our own silence
can we hear the stories of other bright and broken hearts,
the still small voice within us,
and the song the universe sings to itself when it is lonely.
~Source Unknown~

7. Introduction of Next Week's Topic

8. Blessing 1 min

May the efforts we have made here today
To listen with caring and compassion
Sustain us in the days ahead.
May these efforts bring peace into our lives
And into the lives of all those whom we touch.
And now, may love surround us,
May joy gladden us,
May peace lie deep within
May our lives and the lives of all those we love
Go well.

1st Parish Church of Groton
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY COVENANT
rev. 9/14

Small Group Ministry is about being heard and about listening. We are here to witness one another. In practice this means that we do not interrupt, engage in cross talk, or have side conversations. Nor do we give advice, even out of kindness. Sitting with the feelings of others, without judging or trying to fix them, is where the real treasure is found. Thus, we agree to the following:

1. Engage in careful and respectful listening. Try to understand the underlying concerns and values of the speaker, whether you agree or disagree. Listen with an open heart and mind.
2. Maintain confidentiality. Do not share the experiences, stories, or private information of anyone else in the group with others, now or in the future.
3. Speak from your own experience. Use “I” statements, e.g. I feel, I think, I am. Be mindful of staying on topic.
4. Value your own experiences and opinions. Your insight is a gift to the group. However, you always have the right to pass, or not speak.
5. Help share time fairly. We all have the responsibility and privilege of making the group work.
6. Contact one of the coaches if you cannot attend a session. If you decide to leave the group, please let one of the coaches know, so they can inform the group. We ask you to share your reasons for leaving with one of the coaches.
7. Arrive on time. If you are running late, call the church office at 978-448-6307 (daytime groups) or one of the coaches (evening groups).
8. Turn all electronic devices off, or to silent mode, during meetings. Use only in cases of emergency.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION: MINDFUL LISTENING

1. To what extent have your growing up experiences shaped your capacity to listen to others?
2. If mindful listening allows us to do more than take in people's words, what might it look, sound and feel like?
3. What gets in the way of mindful listening, and what might we do to change that?
4. How do you know when you've been heard? How does it feel?
5. What would it mean if you listened with the intention of welcoming in the disturbance and delighting in the differences?