Facilitator Notes for Listening

Preparation for the first meeting

- Bring name tags, a marker or two, and pencils and pens for the Words of the Day. You will bring these to all meetings.
- Bring a list of participants’ names, phone numbers, and email addresses. Bring a basket and slips of paper (approx. 2” x 5½”) for the Words of the Day: When I was truly listened to, I felt ….
  Some facilitators put the sentence for the Words of the Day on the individual slips, but you can also write it on a large sheet of paper for the table.
- Bring copies of the Gathering for participants to use.
- Bring a chime or copies of song possibilities for ending, and decide about your preference.
- Bring an electric candle for a chalice. *If you don’t have one, contact the covenant group steering committee to get one.*

Before the meeting begins

- Prepare the materials for the **Words of the Day**: When I was truly listened to, I felt ….
- Write your own Words of the Day ahead of time and put them in the basket.

As participants arrive

- Hand them slips of paper and invite them to write a few phrases for the **Words of the Day**. Collect the slips in a basket, then shuffle them so that privacy is maintained.
- Ask each person to check the list of the group for accuracy of name, phone, and email.
- Collect $5.00 from each person. If they don’t have it, tell them they can bring it next time.

The Gathering

**Chalice Lighting** *(Read or ask for a volunteer)*

We light this chalice to shine on our time together. In its light we celebrate the relationships and understanding we are creating in this place and time. May our sharing be deep.

**Introductions** *(10 minutes)*

We usually have a check-in time here. Today we are using this time to introduce ourselves briefly. Let’s take about a minute each to tell a little about ourselves and why were drawn to a covenant group. *(Go first to model.)*

I grew up in …
I have been … (teacher, parent, engineer, artist, caregiver, salesperson … )
I am interested in … (gardening, reading, social justice, painting, … )
My family or support system … (partner, children, friends … )
In this covenant group I hope …
The Basket  *(Read the first slip and begin passing the basket around)*

Silence, holding ourselves and each other in silent support *(3 minutes)*

Business *(15 minutes)*

Usually business is handled briefly at the end of the meeting. Today is longer since we’re beginning.

Basics

- Tell everyone how glad you are that they are in the group and how much you’re looking forward to getting to know them.
- Each gathering will last an hour and a half to two hours and will be centered on a particular topic. Today’s topic is Listening.
- We will meet for fourteen gatherings.
- Ask participants to let you know if they need to miss or come late to a meeting.
- Announce the location of the bathrooms and other information they may need.
- Discuss security – like locking meeting room doors, walking together to the parking lot after dark.
- Give instructions on how to access topic preparation on the church website.

Being Together in this Group

The facilitator leads a brief discussion on inclusion.

1. Ask members to go around the circle and say whether they have been in a covenant group before or know other members, either from covenant groups or from other circumstances.

2. Invite the group to consider: if you didn’t know anyone in a group, what would it take for you to feel comfortable when some people already knew each other? What should the “acquainted” members do, and what should they not do?

Examples: Don’t spend time before or after the meeting catching up with each other or setting up private meetings, especially in front of newcomers. Don’t say “Last year we did it this way.” Do include others, especially newcomers, in conversations before and after meetings.

The Covenant

Look at the covenant together. Ask one participant to read the first item in the covenant. Explain or elaborate if needed. Ask whether there are any comments or problems. Can everyone agree to this? Continue around the circle through all the items in the covenant.

I commit myself:

- to come to meetings when I possibly can, knowing that my presence is important to the group
- to let the facilitator know if I will be absent or need to quit
- to share responsibility for good group process by watching how much time I take to speak, noticing what is going on for others, and considering problems if they occur
- to do the reading and thinking about the topic ahead of time
- to not gossip about what is shared in the group, and tell only my own story to others
- to honor the safety of the group by listening to what others share with an open heart
- to refrain from cross-talk, judging, giving advice, or advocating a specific view
- to share as deeply as I can when it is my turn and to stay on the “I-message.”
Shared Readings

Ask the person next to you if they’re ok with going next. Then start with the first reading yourself.

It is by speaking and listening to each other that out of the darkness of our separate mysteries is brought to light the truth of who we are. Frederick Buechner

There’s something beyond technique when two or more people are deeply listening to each other. It is an awareness that not only are we present to each other, we are present to something that is spiritual, holy, sacred. Kay Lindahl

If we want to support each other’s inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. Parker J. Palmer

Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God. Maya Angelou

Most people need a few experiences of simply being listened to before they can really believe that just listening is enough. In time, we discover that to be listened to is a way of being loved, and that listening is a way of being loving. Christine Robinson

The greatest gift we can give another is our presence. Thich Nhat Hanh

Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don’t have to do anything else. We don’t have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen. Margaret J. Wheatley

The first duty of love is to listen. Paul Tillich

I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention … When people are talking, there’s no need to do anything but receive them. Rachel Naomi Remen

Listening is about being present, not just about being quiet. Krista Tippett

Introducing Deep Sharing and Deep Listening

Members will go around the circle, each reading a paragraph in the following exploration.

Read or explain this: You’ve read the Preparation material, so you’ve been thinking about “deep listening.” Deep sharing and deep listening make up the core of a covenant group. It is a unique way of sharing and listening, so we want to spend a few minutes getting acquainted with this process.

Ask three participants to read aloud one each of the paragraphs below. Explain or elaborate as needed as you go along.

Rounds of Sharing. There are two rounds of sharing. During each round, one person speaks at a time. Speakers share from the heart as deeply as they are willing, reflecting on the topic and their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The job of listeners is to listen deeply, keeping their hearts open.

Round 1. Each person in the group takes about five minutes to reflect aloud on the topic and the preparation materials. The facilitator starts. Everyone who wants to speak gets one turn, in any order they choose. Anyone may pass. As each person finishes speaking, there are a few breaths of silence. Then the next person speaks.
Round 2. This is an opportunity to share additional reflections as well as thoughts about what others have shared. Speakers still focus on their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences and remain mindful of our commitment not to judge another’s sharing, give advice, or advocate a position. Everyone who wants to speak gets a turn, and everyone is mindful of time so that each person has an opportunity to speak.

Read or explain: Some participants may feel a little uncomfortable with the lack of response after someone has shared. Be assured that this silence during and after the sharing can become a powerful, sacred time for the group. One facilitator explained it this way, “When listeners have been allowed into the recesses of the speaker’s life, there is a rich intimacy. Silence seems to be the best response.” Give yourself a few gatherings to get used to this new way of listening and sharing.

So that each person has an equal opportunity to share, the facilitator an eye on the time. Some groups use a 5-minute sand “hourglass” timer. In other groups, the facilitator watches the time and signals when the speaker has 15-30 seconds left. The signal can be a small wave, a tiny bell, or a rain stick.

Deep Listening and Sharing (60 minutes)

Round 1. Go first to share as a model for the group. Also, note the time available for each person. Share some reflections on listening and the preparation materials.

Round 2. If there is time for Round 2, note how much is available. Go first as a model for the group. As time allows, share additional thoughts or reflect on what others have shared.

Closing Circle

Now we will go around the circle. Each person says a word or two, maybe a sentence, about what you are taking away from the session or how you are feeling. (Ask the person next to you if it is ok for them to be next. Then start.)

Extinguishing the Chalice (Read it yourself, ask for a volunteer, or read in unison)

We extinguish this flame and we remember the warmth of our community, the light of our wisdom, the generosity of our sharing. We keep these in our heart until we meet again.

Song/Chime

The group or facilitator can decide on whether to sing a song or play a chime or gong.

Announcements (Announce the topic for next time)