



Tips for UU Wellspring Facilitators

Creating Sacred Space for the Soul

The role of facilitators in UU Wellspring is to create a bold and sacred space where participants can explore their own spiritual lives. Trust in each person's ability to find answers within, and in the group's presence as a helpful, supportive place.

Often at the beginning of the year, especially after reading *A Hidden Wholeness* for the UU Sources curriculum, participants struggle with the practice of listening and the desire to offer commentary. UU Wellspring groups are not as strict as the circles of trust, nor meant to be the clearness committees also described in Palmer's book, but some participants will want specific guidance about what constitutes acceptable reaction/interaction. It will likely be your biggest facilitation challenge at the beginning. Our greatest gift to one another is trusting that each of us knows what we need to do on our spiritual journey, and the question for us as facilitators is how to create a safe space where the "shy animal" that is the soul, in Parker Palmer's words, can emerge and feel safe.

During sessions, we encourage participants to listen with an open heart, not commenting on what has been said, and leaving quiet space after each person has spoken. This practice helps us to listen without feeling that we have to formulate responses as we are listening – it gives us the freedom simply to listen with our hearts.

The notes in the UU Wellspring Facilitator guide can be considered a detailed plan or a loose set of suggestions, depending on what type of facilitator you are. Check in with the group to adjust your approach to their needs. .

Remember Parker Palmer's admonition during check in and sharing, "no fixing, no advising, no setting each other straight." It is hard not to want to help and not to make judgments – and we are all learning how to be better at this, all the time. Trust that the person speaking knows the answer within and simply needs the safe space to talk about it.

When oppressive comments, microaggressions, or intimidating behaviors occur, our covenant also needs to have a way to pause and address the issue at hand. Anyone in the group can ask for a pause when an oppressive action has occurred. More than just saying, "ouch," we can pause, breath together, and describe the observation.

It is an important skill for people of dominant cultures to be holy disrupters, rather than expecting the person or group on the receiving end of a behavior. The facilitator or a participant can begin, 'I noticed a 'power imbalance/microaggressions/or behavior' that occurred just now. As part of our covenant, and to create sacred space for all of us, we need to take note, discuss, and learn from this situation. Here is what I observed, 'xxx.'" As the facilitator, you can then....(to come)

When reflecting aloud on the readings during sessions, there is ever the temptation, especially in the early days, to go into the more familiar mode of discussion (particularly strong among UUs!) Thus, it is important to encourage people in such moments to remember to listen openly, speak from the heart and from one's own experience, and suspend judgment on any experiences as long as they do not create unsafe space for others in the group. It is fine if what one person says resonates with someone else, but that resonance then needs to be spoken of from that person reflecting on their own experience, not via attempts at direct dialogue.

How to truly listen in quiet, can be confusing, especially at the beginning of the year. Be gentle with participants' questions and feel free to check in with your mentor about how to handle these questions.

Recruiting Participants

Hold one or two informational sessions in the spring or summer. Consider holding at least one session following a Sunday service, especially one when the minister, facilitators or participants can give a UU Wellspring testimonial. Current participants are often your best advocates and often inspire new people to join. Here is a [video of testimonials](#) that you can distribute.

The UU Wellspring website (www.uuwellspring.org) offers a [video presentation](#) that can be linked to announcements or used during an orientation session.

After your first year, create an alumni email list for participants to contact during the recruiting stage. Invite alums to help with recruiting each year. They can talk with people they think would be good candidates for taking UU Sources. Also, alums can talk with people who have completed UU Sources about returning to take subsequent years of UU Wellspring curricula. Consider having alums, or yourself, make phone calls to encourage people who might not have attended an orientation session if they seem interested in this kind of spiritual deepening program.

Be honest about the time and commitment involved in UU Wellspring. Emphasize the five components of the program: spiritual practice, spiritual companionship, ongoing meetings 2-3 times/month, readings, and putting faith into action.

Group Size and Dynamics

We recommend a total of around ten participants in each group. With fewer than six or eight any absence becomes a big issue. With more than ten participants, giving everyone adequate time to speak becomes difficult. Participants commit to attending most (80%) of the ongoing meetings. Absence is hard both for the participant and for the rest of the group.

Diversity (age, gender, sexual orientation, culture etc.) among participants brings a rich tapestry of perspective to the entire group. A recognition that the group will respect the dignity inherent in every person should be made explicit and the covenant will include responses that will disrupt behaviors that compromise the inherent integrity and worth of each person in the group.

Note: It is necessary for participants to have access to internet and email. Many readings are online.

Unique Sessions in the First-Year Program: UU Sources

If you are leading UU Sources, you may want to carefully review the following sessions in advance to make sure that you are clear and comfortable with the expectations of the group. Also, Sessions 3, 7 and 19 require some preparation

Session 3: Spiritual Histories: All participants, including the leader, will provide a spiritual history to the group. This can take many formats and allows the group to practice deep listening as well as a connection to their own histories before they explore UU history.

Session 4: UU History: As you begin the series of sessions on UU history, remind participants of the five components of the UU Wellspring program and how they all fit together. Some may find the history readings somewhat dry, but at the end, they tend to feel a deeper connection to our faith. The readings may also point out negative aspects of our history that participants have not been aware of, which also can promote stimulating discussion and also deep reflection.

Session 7: Winter Solstice: Celebrate winter solstice with the group to deepen connections. This is one of the favorite sessions of UU Wellspring participants. Adjust the schedule so that the session appears at the time of year closest to your winter solstice. If you are meeting online, you might look for Solstice services to attend rather than holding the session.

Session 19: Final Session: Some groups plan for an extended session with a celebration. Each participant provides a culminating project and receives written comments, memories, and kudos from the group. Note the request for donating directly to UU Wellspring using the Donate button at the top of each page of the website. The donations will be used for the annual focus, generally for curriculum development or scholarships for religious professionals.

Listening

The “principles of dialogue” in *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening*, by Kay Lindahl offer helpful guidelines for listening in groups. See pp. 131 – 133 for elaboration of each of the principles below:

1. When you are listening, suspend assumptions.
2. When you are speaking, speak for yourself.
3. Listen and speak without judgment.
4. Suspend status. Everyone is an equal partner in the inquiry.
5. Honor confidentiality.
6. Listen for understanding, not agreement or belief.
7. Ask clarifying or open-ended questions to assist your understanding.
8. Honor silence and time for reflection.
9. One person speaks at a time.

Another suggestion described in more detail in Kay Lindahl’s book, *Practicing the Art of Spiritual Listening*, pp 32 – 40, is how to use the “Listening Stick.” Used by permission of the author.

Group Discussion

During the discussion of the topics and readings, the interchange among participants can be more interactive than it is during the check-in and spiritual practice segments of the session, but it's still important to create a safe space, hold one another in love and respect, and keep open hearts and minds. Our faith values the search for truth and meaning, and we need to put that faith into action by keeping open to differing ideas and opinions.

As a facilitator, it's important to be aware of who speaks and who doesn't. When is it appropriate for the facilitator to ask whether there are dissenting ideas? Or to ask someone who has been quiet whether they'd like to say something about this topic?

While we understand that people may disagree with one another, it's important to keep this part of the session from becoming a debate. The experience in the check-in segment prepares people for putting their ideas and thoughts out on the table without fear of being judged or criticized, unless, of course, there is reason for the holy disruption of oppressive behavior.

As facilitator, you may be seen as the authority on topics that you don't have all the answers for. Remember that it's okay to say, "We're exploring this together. How could we find out the answer to that question?" After all, it's the process of searching as much as the answers themselves that make this program valuable.

Discussions may unfold in unpredictable ways. As a facilitator, ask yourself the following questions. If the answer is yes, allow the discussion to unfold as it will. If no, steer it back toward the topic at hand.

- Are most people engaged?
- Is the conversation deep and heart centered?

Most UU Wellspring sessions have profound significance for participants, and it is important to end on a note that allows them to leave with the sense of sacred time together and shared purpose.

One way in which we have traditionally ended UU Wellspring sessions is this:

- If in person, the participants gather in a circle around the chalice in silence for a moment. If online, everyone takes a breath together.
- The facilitator asks that each person who is so moved share one thing for which they are grateful that they'll be taking away with them. Allow silence between offerings and leave time for everyone who wishes to speak to do so. It can be one word or a phrase or an appreciation of someone in the group who has offered something special. The sharing needn't go in order around the circle, although participants often find it more comfortable to follow one after another.
- After all, have spoken who wish to, the facilitator closes with a short prayer acknowledging the group's time together and hoping that they will carry the love they've shared out into the world.

Communication

Immediately following each session, email participants the assignment for the next session. Cut and paste, then make any needed additions to the email provided for each session. Be prepared 2-3 sessions in advance so that you can have time to process the experience. If a book must be obtained for a session, remind them several sessions in advance. There are also reminders to do this in the Facilitator Guide.

Once the presentations of spiritual practices start in Session Five, add a reminder for who is doing the spiritual practice presentation for the next session by naming them in the email. Also, it is helpful to check in informally at the end of the previous session with the person who is up next to present to see if they need any support.

The email reminders also include context for where the particular topic fits in the flow of the program.

It is also a good practice to check web links a few weeks ahead of the session to be sure they are still active. If you find a link that is not working, please notify the UU Wellspring director Director@UUWellspring.org. Sometimes links suddenly change or become inactive, and it helps when we are notified sooner rather than later to find a new link or to contact the author for a copy.

Think ahead about readings. Most readings are available online or in books which can be purchased or found in the library, but those lead-time reminders are important.

Be sensitive to participants who may not be able to purchase books. Alternate plans could include congregation-owned copies or using the public library.

Encourage participants to join the [Open Facebook Group](#).

If anyone misses a session and no one knows why, follow up with the participant to be sure all is okay.

In the Facilitator Guide, each session has questions which you will use as you see fit. You do not need to feel compelled to get to all of them, you can decide to ask them in a different order, you can start by asking which question most spoke to folks and/or later ask if the readings brought anyone to other questions they answered. As it says at the beginning of the Reflection section of the first session: "In every session, if I'm not asking the right questions, answer the questions you need to answer."

A Guide to Spiritual Practices

Spiritual practice is a key component of the program. UU Wellspring is a powerful vehicle for supporting individual spiritual practice within our specifically Unitarian Universalist context. Participants find their commitment to a spiritual practice strengthened by their commitment to the group, and we try to offer several different ways of reinforcing this practice.

Each participant is asked to read *Everyday Spiritual Practices*, edited by Scott Alexander prior to the retreat. This engaging book provides a diverse offering of spiritual practices that inspire participants to find a unique practice that resonates with them. For some, it takes trying out several before they settle on one practice. For others, who already have a spiritual practice, they will work to increase to a daily practice or expand in some other way.

The check-in at every session focuses on how spiritual practice and spiritual direction are going. This focus reinforces the commitment to spiritual practice and spiritual direction and helps participants know one another better.

Each session, starting several sessions in, one participant will share a spiritual practice in a 5 – 10-minute space. Each participant will present once. Participants sometimes provide a handout. The object of this presentation is to share the actual experience rather than discussing it. Examples might be a short meditation or reading, or the participant might lead the group in prayer. Since the

spiritual practice presentations come from the heart and not from the intellect, immersion versus lecture is required for this experience.

Because spiritual practice is not so familiar to Unitarian Universalists, participants are sometimes hesitant to talk about theirs. In the opening retreat, we try to reinforce that many practices qualify as spiritual, as long as they are intentional and daily and help deepen connection with the spirit of life and love within and beyond oneself. Throughout the year, participants inevitably struggle with not enough time, too much agitation, not having the perfect spiritual practice. Your role as facilitator is to surround them with compassion, not judgment.

If you are leading a group using the advanced curricula, encourage participants to continue their daily spiritual practices, exploring new practices and enhancing current practices throughout all of the curriculum. As the facilitator, you will remind them each week to share these experiences with the group during check-in. Continuing to share the result of daily spiritual practices becomes an important part of check in during the ongoing curriculum.

As the facilitator, you can model exploration and commitment to ongoing spiritual practices by sharing your experiences and the effect on your life during check-in while inviting others to do the same.

A Guide to Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction is new to most UUs, yet it is one of the most powerful aspects of the UU Wellspring program. Participants sometimes feel vulnerable or resistant about this spoke of the program. Sometimes it is a financial obstacle. Thus, there are many different levels of spiritual direction to consider, from a peer spiritual companion, to group spiritual companioning, to one-on-one spiritual direction. Be gentle and encouraging about the importance of finding the right spiritual director/companion and continuing to meet regularly.

In every session, offer the opportunity for people to talk about how their experience with a spiritual director/companion is going. Sometimes hearing about other people's experiences encourages reluctant participants to embrace the process. The ongoing discussion maintains the commitment throughout the year.

Spiritual direction requires one-on-one work with a spiritual director/companion or work in a spiritual direction group. The intimacy of that relationship, the commitment to the work, and the cost can all be barriers for participants. By allowing for extended conversation while being firm that spiritual direction core to the program, participants are usually willing to try it out. The deepening that occurs with the support of a spiritual director/companion is part of the transformational process of the year.

Note that UU Spiritual Director Network (UUSDN.org) has dedicated a page on their website to UU Wellspring. Here you can find spiritual directors and spiritual direction groups who are knowledgeable about our UU Wellspring program.

Encourage everyone to work with their spiritual director/companion both to support their own spiritual lives as well as to deepen the experience of the entire group. We will all learn more from one another when we are each doing our best to search deeply within ourselves.

- Some may prefer to try a new spiritual director/companion midway through the year or in ongoing years. Refer them to a list your congregation may have developed or read more about spiritual direction on the UU Wellspring website.
- During check in, model as well as encourage participants to share their insights from working
- with their spiritual directors/companions if they are comfortable.
- If you are a religious professional, you will develop a boundary appropriate for your situation in
- sharing your personal experiences with a spiritual director. You may need to
- depend more on participants to model for one another.

Bringing Our Faith into the World

The "So-What" that occurs near the end of each session is important for bringing the learning and experiences into our lives. This time provides a public opportunity to share how the experiences over the past two weeks and the learning in the session affects how participants' will choose to live their lives.

The "Faithful Actions" curricula encourages community projects. This can be a strong bonding opportunity and can encourage some who have been reticent about social action or social justice projects to get started on this work.

Creating Sacred Space

During the discussion of the topics and readings, the interchange among participants can be more interactive than it is during the check-in and spiritual practice segments of the session, but it's still important to create a bold, sacred space, hold one another in love and respect, and keep open hearts and minds. Our faith values the search for truth and meaning, and we need to put that faith into action by keeping open to differing ideas and opinions.

As a facilitator, it's important to be aware of who speaks and who doesn't. When is it appropriate for the facilitator to ask whether there are dissenting ideas? Or to ask someone who has been quiet whether they'd like to say something about this topic?

While we understand that people may disagree with one another, it's important to keep this part of the session from becoming a debate. The experience in the check-in segment prepares people for putting their ideas and thoughts out on the table without fear of being judged or criticized.

As facilitator, you may be seen as the authority on topics that you don't have all the answers for. Remember that it's okay to say, "We're exploring this together. How could we find out the answer to that question?" After all, it's the process of searching as much as the answers themselves that make this program valuable.

Pre-work: Readings, Videos and Reflection

The format of all of the UU Wellspring courses are similar. An email is sent by the facilitator to alert the group to the prework and to invite reflection to specific questions. Occasionally a different experiential homework is requested.

At times, participants will be challenged to complete the assignments. You will want to balance

your response, perhaps by saying something such as: "We are all doing what we can and we appreciate and treasure the pre-work that everyone is able to do, which enriches our discussion and deepens our experience."

If you sense that people are not taking the time to reflect, you might invite people to arrive early to a session to write their responses to the reflection questions (or review what they have written) to help them carve out time to attend to their own reflection.

During the reflections on the topics and readings, when the interchange among participants could easily move from deep listening to direct verbal exchange, it is important to attend to helping the group maintain a sacred space, hold one another in love and respect, and keep open hearts and minds. Commit to naming oppressive behaviors and moving forward as a group. Our faith values the search for truth and meaning, and we need to put that faith into action by keeping open to differing ideas and opinions through deep listening. Some groups find speaking to the center of the circle helpful and others prefer to look at the group to be able to share their reflections.

As a facilitator, it is important to be aware of who speaks and who does not. Notice when it is appropriate for the facilitator to offer or ask whether there are different ideas. Or to ask if there is anyone who has not yet spoken, but would like to, about this topic?

While we understand that people may disagree with one another, it is important to keep this part of the session from becoming a debate, including a silent emotional one.

As facilitator, you may be seen as the authority on topics that you do not have all the answers for. Remember that it is okay to say, "We're exploring this together. Let's have anyone who is interested talk together outside the session, to figure out how it might be possible to find out the answer to that question." After all, it is the process of searching as much as the answers themselves that make this program valuable.

Reflections may unfold in unpredictable ways. As a facilitator, ask yourself the following questions. If the answer is yes, allow the reflection to unfold as it will. If no, steer it back toward the topic at hand.

1. Are most people able to stay present to the speaker?
2. Is the reflection deep and heart centered?

Being Present in the Session

Some people may find this small group format challenging at times. As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to bring the group back into covenant and to address issues as they occur. Below are some common challenges and suggested responses.

Working Through Challenges

Most UU Wellspring groups go smoothly because participants attend 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.

Certain participants seem shy and don't say anything.

- Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. It is always permissible to "pass."
- Make eye contact, it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them.

- Look for non-verbal cues that may indicate they are ready to speak. Frequently,
- Participants may feel more comfortable in later UU Wellspring sessions and might join in more readily then. Some people simply need more time or more quiet time to process their thoughts and feelings. It may be helpful to talk informally with people both before and after the formal session. You might also ask the group if they feel there is enough time between speakers to process what they would like to contribute.

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

- 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, "Chris, 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. If this is the case, you might want to bring this back into the group to discuss how to work together around differing cultures.
- 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 through speaking with a gesture or a phrase such as "I am finished" or holding the hands in front of the heart in a namaste position.
 - Have a clock visible to the person speaking for self-monitoring of time or have a timekeeper or use a timer or to indicate when the allotted time for a person's sharing is reached.

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

- 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 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?" If only one participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say, "We seem to be wandering off course and I'd like to make sure others get a chance to speak."

Someone puts forth information which you know to be false.

- 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.

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

- This rarely happens in UU Wellspring 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, 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.

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

- If there is tension, address it directly. 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. It is important to do so because of the established covenant that prohibits such behaviors and encourages tolerance for all views.
- Microaggressions, inappropriate power dynamics, and oppressive behaviors should also be addressed by pausing and naming the observation.
- Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help: If group members committed to the covenant, they will support you. You may also need to talk one-on-one with the person who engaged in the unacceptable behavior.

One member engages in complaining or telling negative stories about a third party or group who is not in the room.

- As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who forget the covenant and engage in questionable behaviors. You must intervene by saying something like, "This 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 topic we are considering. If it is related, could you perhaps tell us how it is related to the topic without naming names?"

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

- As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who forget the 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 asks us to avoid offering advice. Pat, if you want the group's input, let us know and you can chat with folks after the session ends."

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.

- 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."

Attendance or lack of preparation becomes an issue.

- Ask to talk with the participant privately before the next session. Set aside time to meet in person. You might share that you have noticed that attending regularly, attending on time, or preparing has been a challenge.
- Ask if they are comfortable with their level of participation.
- Ask if they are able to commit to the group or if they would like to bring up the issue with the group as part of a revisiting of the covenant.

The goal is always to create space where everyone has opportunities to speak and when the covenant is broken, the group convenes to find a graceful way to return to the group.

Sacred Closings

Most UU Wellspring sessions have profound significance for participants, and it is important to end on a note that allows them to leave with the sense of sacred time together and shared purpose. The way in which we have traditionally ended UU Wellspring sessions is this:

- Participants stand in a circle around the chalice (or pause if online to breath together) in silence for a moment.
- The facilitator asks that each person who is so moved share one thing for which they are grateful that they will be taking away with them. Allow silence between offerings and leave time for everyone who wishes to speak to do so. It can be one word or a phrase or an appreciation of someone in the group who has offered something special. The sharing need not go in order around the circle, although participants may find it more comfortable to follow one after another.
- After all who wish to speak, the facilitator closes with a short prayer acknowledging the group's time together and hoping that they will carry the love they have shared out into the world.

Contact UU Wellspring Please ensure that UU Wellspring has all Facilitator Names, email, and program you are leading to make sure that you get any updates and invitations in a timely manner. Contact Director@UUWellspring.org to share your facilitator contact information.

Thank you for your dedication to bringing
UU Wellspring Spiritual Deepening to your
Unitarian Universalist Community.

