

What are Companioning Circles?

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Companioning Circles are small innovative practice groups in UU congregations (and other faith communities) designed to enhance and strengthen relations and sense of soul-self through empathic experiences grounded in wisdom teachings and practices. As each of these Circles mature, they may serve as “seedlings” for “building the beloved community,” which is part of the vision of Unitarian Universalism for congregations. The purpose of Companioning Circles is to gradually deepen the group’s experience of the effects of wisdom practices in their lives through their personal and group work. As the participants grow in their feeling awareness, the Circle itself also becomes wiser. That reinforces and enriches the movement of wisdom and love in their midst. In this way Companioning Circles offer the ministry and service of becoming “birthing rooms and nurseries for growing soul” within the congregation.

What is soul? We know soul by sensing its presence as felt, awakened, and resonating within us. Soul is a perspective rather than a thing, a realization that arises from deep feeling awareness. Soul blossoms into being from “seeing with the eyes of the heart”. We perceive and touch soul *indirectly* through immersion in wisdom practices. In Companioning Circles, spiritual seekers—as eager participants from the congregation—engage with each other in experiential learning grounded in those practices. Rather than following traditional strategic or programmatic methods for achieving goals, and remaining ensconced in discussions, these Circles bring interpersonal and intrapersonal feelings and experiences into the foreground. Spiritual practices form the interface. They are the vehicle through which this occurs. They invite a heartfelt relational embrace that develops deep dialogue with one’s soul—our ‘inner teacher’—and among the participants. The dialogue is deep in their verbal sharing *and* in each participant’s receptive listening. This interdependence between sharing and receiving becomes a Companioning Circle habit.

This ethos of mutuality aligns with wisdom from feminist theologian Nelle Morton to “Hear each other into speech.” The shift away from the primacy of content—of information—and into the underlying feeling context-as-primary can awaken full presence with each other. The participants deepen into empathic inquiry and imagination and hold their attention there, ever sustained in the “pregnancy of silence.” Qualities of communion—the joys of shared giftedness and collective creativity—awaken within and among the participants when the mutuality of sharing-receiving is their practice.

Companioning Circles are “presence-based groups,” where love becomes the powerful influence of being present to each other at a deep level. The participants learn to center within their hearts, being guided from that center, grounded in and attuned to the wisdom of the physical and emotional sensations within their bodies. Intuitions, insights, and moments of realization awaken and speak meaning. Here, in these Circles, soul work is done. Companioning Circles evoke and cultivate empathy, empowerment, and perceptual awareness. Wisdom rises in their midst. The Circle practices teach these participants how to attend to each other in ways that nurture capacities to create shared receptive space as their source of orientation and guidance. The space and the shared silence become participants in the dialogue. Empathic love forms the ground of relating and being in the Circle.

Over months, then years, of practicing deep dialogue and empathic presence within the Circle, the participants become “soul companions” of each other. They develop qualities of relating (respect, deep listening, empathy, honest and deep sharing) that will naturally influence the tone and tenor of relationships within their congregation as they model and bear witness to these qualities. The qualities experienced within the Companioning Circle will start to ripple out and reflect a new, deeper, loving ground of relations within the congregation, and from the congregation move outward to influence the world. The outcome of this form of mutual presence promises new hope. It models “being the change” we want to see in the world.

This new format and form of practices offers a way for participants, and eventually their congregations, to become truly transformational. They would be living an ethos of mutuality; love become prophetic practice. Companioning Circles, as a group practice, thus holds out extraordinary promise for progressive congregations. It offers a developmental means for intentionally building the beloved community.