

**Information for Participants**  
**Small Group Ministry**  
**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville**

**Parker Palmer reading**  
*from "A Hidden Wholeness"*

*"No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight."*

The rule is simple, but abiding by it is hard work for people accustomed to straightening each other out as a way of life. Once, when I introduced the rule at the start of a long-term circle, someone blurted out, "Then what in heaven's name *are* we going to do with each other for the next two years? You've just excluded the only things we know how to do!"

In the face of our deepest questions – the kind we are invited to explore in circles of trust – our habit of advising each other reveals its shadow side. If the shadow could speak its logic, I think it would say something like this: "If you take my advice, you will surely solve your problem. If you take my advice but fail to solve your problem, you did not try hard enough. If you fail to take my advice, I did the best I could. So I am covered. No matter how things come out, I no longer need to worry about you or your vexing problem."

The shadow behind the "fixes" we offer for issues that we cannot fix is, ironically, the desire to hold each other at bay. It is a strategy for abandoning each other while appearing to be concerned. Perhaps this explains why one of the most common laments of our time is that "no one really sees me, hears me, or understands me."

... When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul back into the woods. So the best service I can render when you speak to me about such a struggle is to hold you faithfully in a space where you can listen to your inner teacher.

**The Small Group Covenant:**

*(Below is a sample covenant which should be affirmed and/or modified by the group during the first session)*

*As we light this chalice,  
We covenant to honor each other with attentive listening without judgment or interruption,  
To share honestly our own experiences as we are moved,  
To maintain trust through confidentiality,  
To support each other as we explore our lives in this safe place.*

**The Goals of the Small Group Ministry (SGM) Model:**

SGM groups are – and are not – certain things. They are *not*:

- Adult education classes
- Therapeutic support groups
- Social gatherings
- A forum for debate

SGM groups *are* an opportunity to connect more deeply:

- with our own viewpoints and questions
- with our own story and journey
- with the perspectives of fellow participants
- with our shared religious traditions

### **How the SGM Model Works:**

#### Responsibilities:

- Begin and end on time.
- Attend every meeting if at all possible, missing no more than two times, and notify the facilitator in advance if you can't attend.
- Maintain appropriate confidentiality by telling only our personal stories when speaking outside the group.

#### Sharing:

- One person speaks at a time.
- Speak without judgment.
- Speak from your own personal experience, and only for yourself.

#### Listening:

- Listen openly and humbly, not attempting to judge or fix others.
- Listen for understanding, not agreement or belief.
- Listen rather than react.

#### Being together:

- Welcome humor, and use it mindfully.
- Share the air time.
- Ask only brief clarifying questions, those that assist your understanding.
- Honor silence and time for reflection.

### **Why No Cross-talk?**

Crosstalk – defined as responding to, interrupting, affirming, or questioning another's remarks – takes us away from the important task of listening to ourselves. Crosstalk takes the attention off the speaker and his or her thoughts, and puts the attention on the listener. Inward reflection, not external reaction, is the focus of Small Group Ministry.

**A note about leaving:** Not every small-group model works for every person. If you decide that SGM isn't for you, please let your facilitator know before the third meeting.