

# Blessing the Peacemakers

Four Covenant Group Gatherings



Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
[www.uusc.org](http://www.uusc.org)

# Introduction

Welcome to Covenant Group Ministries with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

With these resources, UUSC supports members of the UU community in: the search for connection with each other and the larger global community; the quest for meaningful engagement with life's most challenging questions; and the pursuit for more effective engagement with local, national, and global social-justice initiatives.

Through the Covenant Group model of intimacy and ultimacy, members will be inspired to take action on human-rights issues that affect our global community. Small group worship and community building changes lives and enlivens commitments with purpose and passion. Individuals will find the strength and courage to take simple action steps or lead social justice projects that will ultimately help to change the world.

This special set of Covenant Group modules is intended for religious educators, and provides opportunities to reflect on the values and ideals that inspire justice-making work.

The modules draw heavily from the writings of Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, a longtime UUSC supporter. Rev. Dr. Gilbert was presented with UUSC's Social Action Leadership Award in 2007, in recognition of his pioneering work to create models for social justice ministries.

## UUSC Covenant Group – The Session Structure

All sessions in this series will follow a simple structure. If you are not familiar with the Covenant Group model, we encourage you to read *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time*, by Robert L. Hill, or go to Small Group Ministry at [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net).

The **opening readings** (1 minute) are taken from "Useable Truth," by Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, in *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education*; and *Relating to Our World*, by Hugo Hollerorth.

The **covenant statement** (1 minute), offered at the beginning of each session, is an optional statement of purpose. The group may wish to read it with the group covenant or replace it with a covenant already adopted by the group.

A **sample group covenant** (1 minute) could include the agreement to abide to a covenant of confidentiality, to refrain from cross-talk, to self-govern (i.e., make certain that everyone has time to speak), to arrive and close on time, and any other elements that are important to those gathered. It could also include the agreement that the covenant may be amended as you continue to work together.

The **chalice lightings** (2 minutes) are taken from *Singing the Living Tradition*; Philip A. Amerson and John W. Woell; and *Teaching & Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching*, by Maria Harris.

The **check-in** (30-40 minutes) is an opportunity for creating connections among members of the group. During this time, all group members are asked to give the gift of active listening, without questions or interruptions.

The **session reading** (5 minutes) sets the theme or focus of the session. Any member of the group can read the selected piece that will focus the group on a topic. All readings for this series are taken from the essay “Useable Truth” by Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, in *Essex Conversations; Singing the Living Tradition; or Teaching & Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching*, by Maria Harris.

A **time for silence** (2 -3 minutes, perhaps started and ended with a chime) gives everyone a chance to reflect on the reading.

The **reflection questions** (60 minutes) offer the covenant group members direction and center for sharing and dialogue. Share from a personal center of truth and love, while other members listen from the heart. Refrain from debating, questioning, or judging other members.

During the **checkout** (10-15 minutes) the facilitator asks each person for a word or phrase that says something about how she or he is feeling as the meeting draws to an end. Group members may answer these questions: How are you feeling about the time we spent together? What do you take with you as you return to the work to which you are called? What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others with whom you are in spiritual and beloved community?

The **closing words** (2 minutes) are taken from *Singing the Living Tradition*, [www.inspirationpeak.com](http://www.inspirationpeak.com), and Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker.

*...the unfolding of the soul is an increase in relationality and engagement. The more the soul has unfolded, the more the person is making it a priority to “improve the neighborhood,” and to find meaning in life in relationships and in creativity and in activism. Our interest in spirituality and social justice is present in the wholeness of our own heritage, which holds these two together in an integrated way. The illuminated, unfolded soul is a presence of creativity and blessing and engagement in the world.*

- Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

This Covenant Group series was created by Carmen Emerson, Candidate for Ministry, Andover Newton Theological School, MDiv., and was inspired by the work of peacemaking and justice done by religious educators.

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689 Massachusetts Avenue • Cambridge, MA 02139  
[www.uusc.org](http://www.uusc.org) • 617-868-6600 • [info@uusc.org](mailto:info@uusc.org)



# Blessing the Peacemakers

## Existential Involvement

### Gathering One

#### Opening reading

Education for justice begins with one's own existential situation in the world. We do not leap from our typically self-indulgent lives into action for others by pedagogical tricks...the Unitarian Universalist church must become a counterculture to critique and transform the culture. Our task is to make the connection between the middle-class lives of most [UUs] and those who are oppressed by sexism, classism, racism, ableism, ageism, and homophobia – the six horsemen of today's apocalypse.

— Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, "Useable Truth"

#### Covenant statement (optional)

We gather as a Covenant Circle to deepen our sense of meaning and community. In this spiritual community, we seek to better care for one another and to work together toward creating a kinder and more compassionate and just local and global community.

#### Group covenant

#### Chalice lighting #431

O Spinner, Weaver, of our lives,  
Your loom is love.

May we who are gathered here  
be empowered by that love  
to weave new patterns of Truth  
and Justice into a web of life that is strong,  
beautiful, and everlasting.

— Barbara Wells

#### Check-in

This is about releasing whatever you need to release in order to be fully present to yourself and others.

#### Reading

Our young people are entering a crisis-ridden world. I do not believe we are equipping them to deal with it. Well-intentioned promotion of our Unitarian Universalist purposes and principles is inadequate. We need to help create experiences where these values bump up against social reality. According to

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Horace Bushnell, “We live ourselves into religious thinking more than we think our way into religious living.”

— Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, “Useable Truth”

### Silence

Two or three minutes of silence (perhaps started and ended with a chime). This is to give everyone a chance to reflect on the reading.

### Reflection questions

1. What religious values ground you in your work as a religious educator? (Move beyond quoting the UU principles and articulate what your faith tradition means to you.) Share a time when your values may have “bumped against social reality.”
2. Do you consider yours to be a “self indulgent” life? What is your response to the reading from Gilbert?
3. What is your “existential situation in the world,” and how does your understanding of this inform the choices you make toward “religious living” (versus “religious thinking”)?
4. Gilbert writes that our “moral indignation and sense of commitment vary inversely with (our) distance from the scene of the conflict.” What truths, if any, do you recognize in this observation, and how do you feel about them?
5. Have you been oppressed by any of the “six horsemen of today’s apocalypse” named by Gilbert: sexism, classism, racism, ableism, ageism, homophobia? If you feel safe to do so, please share your story.
6. Gilbert speaks to religious education as the work of transformation. Share a time when engaging or resisting the work of social justice changed you. Share a time when you know that you made a difference. Talk about a time when you hoped to make a difference, but did not or could not.

7. What does teaching mean to you in terms of peacemaking and justice?

8. How do you most want to contribute to justice and peacemaking in the world? Why?

### Checkout

How do you feel about the time we spent together? What do you take with you as you return to the work to which you are called? What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others with whom you are in spiritual and beloved community?

### Closing words

Spirit Holy — It has been written that from those to whom much has been given, much is expected. I am grateful for the blessings in my life, and I have a deep desire to make a difference in a world whose needs are great. But there are times when matters of justice are so urgent, and people in need seem so distant, that I become overwhelmed. Sometimes I am tempted to surrender my hope to my human inadequacies. At such times, may I remember that holy expectations are evidence of your faith in us, and in me; and may I remember that I am not alone in this work. And as I remember, may I find renewal in body, mind, and spirit for the work of justice and peacemaking in our world.

# Blessing the Peacemakers

## Empathy and Moral Maturity

### Gathering Two

#### Opening reading

We have become victims of our own intelligence because we cannot solve problems essentially moral in nature. Preoccupied by objectivity in intellectual pursuits, we have neglected education in empathy.

— Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, “Useable Truth”

Cognitive dissonance, or the challenge to one’s existing cognitive structures regarding right and wrong, are essential to growth in moral maturity.

— Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, citing Margaret Gorman, “Useable Truth”

#### Covenant statement (optional)

We gather as a Covenant Circle to deepen our sense of meaning and community. In this spiritual community, we seek to better care for one another and to work together toward creating a kinder and more compassionate and just local and global community.

#### Group Covenant

#### Chalice lighting #580, part 1

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

— Mark Morrison-Reed, “The Task of Religious Community”

#### Check-in

This is about releasing whatever you need to release in order to be fully present to yourself and others.

#### Reading

We speak of the people  
who live in this land,  
people who love nature’s freedom  
and beauty,  
who are alive with song  
and poetry.

But many of these people are also poor  
and suffer oppression.

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The poor of our land  
have been wounded,  
but they are not crushed.  
The Spirit still lives.

Their struggles and their poetry  
together keep alive  
a dream  
a tradition  
a longing  
a promise  
which is not just their dream,  
but the voiceless vision  
buried beneath life's bitterness  
wherever it is found.

They sing of a life  
free and simple,  
with time for one another,  
and for people's needs,  
based on the dignity of the human person,  
at one with nature's beauty,  
crowned by poetry.  
If that dream dies,  
all our struggles  
die with it.  
This struggle of resistance  
is a struggle against violence—  
against institutional violence  
which sometimes subtly,  
sometimes brutally,  
attacks human dignity and life.  
At stake is the spirit  
of all our humanity.

— Pastoral Letter,  
Catholic Bishops of Appalachia

### Silence

This is to give everyone a chance to reflect on the reading and the questions.

### Reflection questions

Gilbert writes, "Preoccupied by objectivity in intellectual pursuits, we have neglected education in empathy." Share your thoughts about this observation in light of your own teaching experience(s).

1. How do you understand the difference between empathy and sympathy? Is it possible to "teach" empathy?
2. Share a time when receiving (or failing to receive) empathy from another person made a difference in your life.
3. Share a time when offering (or failing to offer) empathy to another person made a difference in your life.
4. Reflect on any phrases from our chalice lighting or opening reading that carry meaning for you, especially in relation to your work as a religious educator.
5. Is there an empathetic "dream, tradition, longing or promise" toward human dignity that keeps you motivated in your work as a religious educator? (Please be specific.)
6. What do you think/feel when you hear the words, from our reading, "At stake is the spirit of all our humanity"?

### Check-out

How are you feeling about the time we spent together? What do you take with you as you return to the work to which you are called? What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others with whom you are in spiritual and beloved community?

### Closing words #580, part 2

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

—Mark Morrison-Reed, "The Task of Religious Community"



# Blessing the Peacemakers

## Engagement: Integration of Experience with Values

### Gathering Three

#### Opening reading

We need to break through the prophylactic sterility of our suburban experience to make contact, face to face, with those not so ‘favored.’ There is nothing like an hour in a ghetto church, a soup kitchen, or a nursing home to raise consciousness. At the same time, research reveals that giving such exposure itself is of little value in moral growth unless it is accompanied by reflection on the experience. Personal experience needs to be integrated with value reflection to be a genuine experience of praxis learning.

— Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, “Useable Truth”

#### Covenant statement (optional)

We gather as a Covenant Circle to deepen our sense of meaning and community. In this spiritual community, we seek to better care for one another and to work together toward creating a kinder, more compassionate, and just local and global community.

#### Group covenant

#### Chalice lighting

The vocation of peacebuilding is not a place in which one rests on principles but in which one engages dynamically with the world.

— Philip A. Amerson and John W. Woell

#### Check-in

This is about releasing whatever you need to release in order to be fully present to yourself and others.

#### Reading #567, “To Be of Use”

I want to be with people who submerge in the task,  
*Who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along.*

Who stand in the line and haul in their places,  
*Who are not parlor generals and field deserters but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out.*

The work of the world is common as mud. Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.

*But the thing worth doing well done has a*

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*shape that satisfies, clean and evident.*

Greek amphoras for wine or oil, Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums but you know they were made to be used.

*The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.*

— Marge Piercy

## **Silence**

This is to give everyone a chance to reflect on the reading and the questions.

## **Reflection questions**

1. Is there a time when you have moved in “common rhythm” to do work that is “common as mud”? Share the story of what this meant to you and your own religious life/spiritual development.

2. Share a story of “hands-on engagement” in your own life. Where did the experience and your values complement each other? Where did they rub against each other? What did you learn about yourself, and how has it informed your teaching?

3. Is your “real work” something different from what you are doing now? Do you wish to engage with the world in a different way? What (or who) prevents you from this engagement? What (or who) supports you in work that is real for you? What would you need to do the real work you are called to do?

## **Check-out**

How are you feeling about the time we spent together? What do you take with you as you return to the work to which you are called? What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others with whom you are in spiritual and beloved community?

## **Closing words**

The four hardest tasks on earth are neither physical nor intellectual feats, but spiritual ones: to return love for hate; to include the excluded; to forgive without apology; and to be able to say “I was wrong.”

— Author Unknown, [www.inspirationpeak.com](http://www.inspirationpeak.com)

# Blessing the Peacemakers

## Empowerment

### Gathering Four

#### Opening Reading

Education for empowerment is a critical and culminating step in effective religious education for justice. It should be our goal as lifespan religious educator/activists to enable programs of peace and justice designed to do no less than change the world.

— Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, “Useable Truth”

To be a human being is to be a dwelling place for power. To move about the world and interact with it is to encounter power. Religion arises, then, out of the effort of human beings to make their way in a world of conflicting powers.

— Hugo Hollerorth, *Relating to Our World*

#### Covenant statement (optional)

We gather as a Covenant Circle to deepen our sense of meaning and community. In this spiritual community, we seek to better care for one another and to work together toward creating a kinder, more compassionate, and just local and global community.

#### Group covenant

##### Chalice lighting

The grace of power is present when we discover our own power and then exercise it, when we are enabled through revelation to act intelligently, humanly, responsibly, and religiously as beings in the world.

—Maria Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*

May we gather with open hearts, mindful of our own grace and power. Through our sharing and exploration may we gracefully exchange gifts of revelation, discovery, and inspiration, and may we find strength and courage for the work for justice and peacemaking.

##### Check-in

This is about releasing whatever you need to release in order to be fully present to yourself and others.

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## Reading

The grace of power is present when we discover our power and then exercise it...when we are enabled through revelation to act intelligently, humanly, responsibly, and religiously as beings in the world... the power of which I speak, since it is shared power, is directed toward creating a community of intersubjectivity, a power of community where one's capacity and ability to act is with and for others, as well as with and for oneself. It is the receptive power of saying 'yes' to all being, to all beings.

A teacher working with such a vision of power is a kind of priest, ordaining the learner to a world of responsibility. Addressed by such a vision, learners know the moment of ordination in response and feel themselves close to...a laying on of hands, the holiness of myself released. This is the grace of power, recognizing the holiness in ourselves, released, and sent forth into the universe.

— Maria Harris, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*

## Silence

This is to give everyone a chance to reflect on the reading and the questions.

## Reflection questions

Maria Harris references Rollo May's five types of power, including exploitative (power of force), manipulative (power over), competitive (power against), nutritive (power for another), and integrative (power with another). She also references Talcott Parsons's four ways of exercising power, including "persuasion, activation of commitment, inducement, and coercion."

1. Share a time when you (or a group with whom you identify) have been exploited or manipulated by another person's (or group's) power. Have you personally participated in and benefited from exploitative or manipulative power? Share your story.

2. Share a time when you have benefited from "competitive" power. Do you feel that "competitive" power is a healthy kind of power? If so, please share more about this.

3. As a religious educator do you feel a responsibility to teach "nutritive" and/or "integrative" power? Reflect on this responsibility, and what it means to you in terms of your own religious values.

4. Who taught you about your own power? Do you remember when you first felt "ordained" in your own power? Share your story.

5. Share a time when you helped someone claim their own power, when you "ordained" them in the holiness of themselves.

## Check-out

How are you feeling about the time we spent together? What do you take with you as you return to the work to which you are called? What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others with whom you are in spiritual and beloved community?

## Closing words

The unfolding of our capacities is the rising of the presence of God, the incarnating of the presence of God! We are, as human beings, the dwelling place of God and divinity in the world. The calling forth of our power is the emergence of divine presence in the world...To unfold the soul in our [UU] heritage is to foster related and engaged human beings...The illuminated, unfolded soul is a presence of creativity and blessing and engagement in the world.

— Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker