

'Heart and Soul' Gatherings:

Essex Church - Guidelines for Leaders - 2020

'Heart and Soul' spiritual gatherings have been held once a month, on the first Thursday from 7-8pm, since January 2013. Members of the congregation, and the minister, take turns to lead these gatherings. Typically about 8-14 people attend.



Things you need to bring/set up on the evening:

N.B. – leader(s) must arrive early – ideally allow 30-45 minutes for set-up.

Chalice, lighter(s), enough tealight candles for everyone, singing bowl or alternative 'dinger', any special items needed for ritual, orders of service, music and means of playing it (ideally phone/bluetooth setup to avoid clicks!), refreshments (water and glasses, kettle and mugs, various teabags, coffee, sugar, milk, cake, fruit)

Essential Elements of a 'Heart and Soul' Gathering:

Theme for the Evening:

You will need to choose a theme a few weeks ahead of time so that it can be advertised in the newsletter. Send your title and an explanatory sentence or two for inclusion in the newsletter to Jane (contact her to check the deadline). It is a good idea to choose a theme that people can easily relate to so that they will have something to say in the sharing.

Printed Order of Service:

People like to know where they are in a service. If Jane/Sarah is making the orders of service for you then please speak to them a week before to check when is the latest point at which you can get the text to them for printing. You can either choose a picture for the order of service and email it to Jane/Sarah or ask them to choose an appropriate picture for you.

Words of Welcome and Introduction:

Before the evening starts it is good to introduce yourself and say something about the format of the evening (particularly for the benefit of newcomers but also to reinforce the intentions behind 'H&S' with everyone).

Example Words of Welcome:

Welcome to the 12th of our 'Heart and Soul' midweek spiritual gatherings – thank you for coming.

It is a spiritual gathering, something worshipful, not just a social circle for a chat.

So let's try to keep a meditative atmosphere, a sense of reverence, and let's take our time.

We've got some opening music to listen to as we settle down and relax, it's about 5 minutes long.

Opening Words:

The opening words might connect to the theme you have chosen or they might be something more general to gather people in and set the tone for a contemplative evening. You can choose opening words from any source or write your own. We have some books of worship materials in the church library (for example, 'Rejoice Together' ed. by Helen Pickett) or you can look at the UUA 'Worship Web' and choose/adapt something from there: www.uua.org/worship/words/

Chalice Lighting:

The chalice lighting is a specifically Unitarian ritual which affirms our connection to Unitarians elsewhere. The words often specifically refer to lighting of the flame. Again, the UUA Worship Web is a useful source.

Prayer Ritual:

The most important part of the evening and the core element – the heart – of a 'Heart and Soul' gathering. This time of prayer and reflection can easily take 20-25 minutes and it's important not to rush. It is really important to leave long gaps in the prayers (especially the 'Knowing' prayer) so that people have time to do the reflection. If you are not so confident about leading prayers you might wish to ask someone (Jane, Jeannene, Sarah) to take care of this entire section for you. This also helps to vary the voices. The prayer has a very particular structure and all the elements are there for a good reason. This is based on Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom's excellent book 'Simply Pray' (Skinner House, 2005).

Gathering:

This part of the prayer is intended to set the mood and perhaps settle and centre people in the space. It might reflect the theme for the evening or it might tie in with the date or the season or other events. You might want to use an 'off-the-peg' prayer that someone else has written (look at Worship Web) or you might be happy to write your own words. This does not need to be a particularly long prayer.

Example Gathering Prayer:

I invite you to join me now in a time of prayer and reflection.

We gather once again, together in beloved community here in the heart of our building.

*May the spirit of life and love bless our gathering
as we feel the divine presence amongst us.*

*In the quiet of this hour, set apart from the rest of the week,
may each person find what they most need.*

*May the troubled find peace,
may the confused find insight,
may the downhearted find comfort,
may the lonely find a sense of companionship,
may the strong find moments of challenge, learning and growth.*

*As the weather outside changes from strong wind to quietness, from sunshine to rain and even snow,
we know the foolishness of trying to change the weather; we accept the difficulty of predicting
from one day to next what the weather might be. In our own lives might we also find ways
to accept that which is, ways to live through the storms and grey days, knowing that
in time the sun will shine again for us. May this be our prayer in the changeable month of February.*

Naming:

This part of the prayer is for thanksgiving – naming the things we are grateful for – give this plenty of time. There may sometimes be long periods of silence so try to relax into them. We have a standard form of words for this section (see below) or you can adapt them to say the same sort of thing in your own voice.

Example Naming Prayer:

We've now come to a time for thanksgiving prayer.

This is a time to reflect on the things we feel grateful for and to give a voice to them.

*I invite you, if you wish, to think back over you day, week or month
and notice what or who you feel grateful for.*

Take your time with this. Then in your own way, name them - as you feel moved to - one at a time.

*They can be big or small things. Many things or one thing. We can take our time with this,
leaving space between speakers, and feel free not to speak, if you don't want to.*

In a few minutes I will sound the bell and that will bring our time of thanksgiving prayer to a close.

Knowing:

This part of the prayer is for reflecting on our own lives – explicitly examining and acknowledging our own successes and failures – not just in general terms but directly looking at the reality of our life as it is now. After each 'Consider this...' or 'Become aware...' prompt it is very important to leave a long pause (at least 30 seconds; count up to 30 in your head to make sure you leave enough time so that people do not feel rushed). This is perhaps the most sensitive element of the prayer so you may just wish to use the standard words:

Example Knowing Prayer:

Let us take a few moments now to look back over our day, or maybe the last few days. [PAUSE]

Consider all the good that has happened, and everything you've done that you're proud of. [PAUSE]

Gently consider things that you are not so proud of: faults, mistakes, unintentional hurts. [PAUSE]

Become aware of your moods and feelings, words and actions, over the last day or so:

Looking back - what has brought you joy, consolation and a sense of being alive? [PAUSE]

Looking back - what has disheartened you, made you uneasy, or bad-tempered? [PAUSE]

Looking back - how have you used your time and gifts wisely over the last few days? [PAUSE]

*As this time of knowing prayer comes to a close, you might like to speak inwardly now,
in your own words, to God, or that which you hold to be Divine... perhaps asking for comfort,
compassion, or forgiveness... perhaps asking for guidance, or ways to live your own life more fully.*

[PAUSE... before ringing the bell to move on and then introduce the longer silence of listening prayer]

Listening:

This is simply a time of shared silence and stillness and just needs a few words of introduction. As long as you are not desperately overrunning by this point then try to have a silence of at least 3 minutes.

Example Listening Prayer:

*Let us take a good few minutes now to sit here together in stillness and silence,
allowing ourselves the time to listen for the still, small, voice within.*

I will sound the bell in a few minutes to bring the period of silence to a close.

Loving:

This part of the prayer invites people to offer loving prayers for others and light a candle as they do so. We have moved towards using a lighter rather than a taper so as to avoid wax damage to the tablecloth so make sure you have at least one functioning lighter that is easy enough for everyone to use without it becoming a distraction). Be alert to people who might struggle to light a candle and gently offer to light it for them if it feels appropriate. It is important to leave enough space for people to respond and light a candle in their own time. Be aware that some people may feel anxious about lighting candles (or participating in any part of the prayer ritual) so you need to strike a delicate balance: allowing them to do so when they feel ready, if they want to, without waiting so long it feels awkward for everybody and puts those people who have not lit a candle under pressure to do so. Try to keep aware of who has or has not lit a candle, and allow them space to join in, yet also make it comfortable for them *not* to join in. Try leaving a minute or so in silence before you bring this part of the prayer to a close, and then perhaps give people one last invitation to light a candle, before you move on.

Example Loving Prayer:

We have come to a time for loving prayer.

There is a candle for each of us on the table. You are invited to light your candle, either in silence, or with a few words to let us know who or what you are lighting it for.

You may choose your prayer to be for a loved one, or for someone you don't know so well, for someone you are in need of resolution with, or maybe for yourself.

There may be a situation that is concerning you in your own life or in the life of the world. Whoever or whatever you feel is in need of our loving prayers right now.

When all the candles are lit, I will sound the bell and our time of prayer will come to a close

Reflection on the Theme / Time for Sharing:

This is a space of about 10 minutes where people are invited to share their own thoughts and reflections on the theme. Generally the person who is leading 'Heart and Soul' will offer just a few words on the theme to spark other contributions. It is OK if people sit in silence for a long time or if there are pauses between speakers. It should not be a chatty conversation. When you get to this point check how much time is remaining and indicate this to the group so that you do not overrun. It is worth reminding everybody that they need to be aware of the amount of time they are taking so everybody gets a chance. You might suggest that people hold something (for example, the chalice) while speaking to help them be aware of time.

Example Words of Introduction (from the session on 'Life Savers'):

What or who have been 'life savers' for you? Are there people, communities, organisations, or events that have played a significant role in changing your life? Perhaps there are particular sayings, readings, books, songs, pieces of music, works of art that have helped you get through difficult times? You are invited to share your thoughts, feelings and stories connected to tonight's theme.

If you would like to speak, please take the chalice, and return it to the table when you have finished.

Let's keep this worshipful atmosphere, listening carefully to one another, rather than having a discussion.

As ever, nobody is obliged to speak, but let's keep our contributions short enough to allow space for all. As we are few in number there might be time for each of us to speak more than once.

I'll sound the bell when we need to bring this sharing to a close.

A Sense of Spaciousness:

It is really important not to over-fill a 'Heart and Soul' session. It is better to leave more space for silence and sharing (or even to finish a bit early and have more time for fellowship) rather than fill the whole hour with your own voice.

Closing Words:

The closing words should round the evening off gently and send people off with a blessing and a sense of uplift. Again you might write your own words or you could look for something 'off-the-peg' on Worship Web. Sometimes we invite people to join hands as a blessing for the closing circle.

Refreshments and Fellowship:

The time for tea and cake at the end of the gathering is an essential part of 'Heart and Soul'! This is an opportunity for people to connect with each other, get to know each other more, and it can help to deepen our sense of community.

Clearing Up:

Usually there are many people willing to help clear up after the refreshments. It is, however, generally expected that the person leading 'Heart and Soul' will be involved with the clearing up and stay behind until everyone else has left.

Optional and Variable Elements of a 'Heart and Soul' Gathering:

Music:

The session will typically open and close with recorded music and have one musical element in the middle. Try to make the use of music as seamless as possible. We have found that using a phone and bluetooth speaker works really well. If you don't have access to such a setup you can contact Jane/Jeannene a few days before the event and they may be able to download your music ahead of time and take care of this for you. We have found that the clicking on and off of a CD player and clattering changing of discs can be quite jarring so this requires more thought and care to work well. If you do use a CD player practice using the machine to do it smoothly (or get an assistant) so that it doesn't end up spoiling the mood.

You might prefer to have chants or singing instead of recorded music. Generally we will have no musical accompanist so take care to choose chants/songs that people know well or can pick up very easily. If you want to try something challenging you can have an unofficial rehearsal beforehand to build confidence.

Readings:

There is usually space for just one or two short readings in the hour. These are usually linked to the theme. You need to think about the placement of the readings in the running order. One model is to have the readings near the start of the evening to establish the theme (if you do this you might think about getting other people to do the readings for you so that the start of the session is not dominated by one voice). Another possibility is to save the readings until after the prayer ritual, to set up the time of sharing on the theme, so that they are fresh in people's minds. Sometimes we have a selection of very short readings and quotes printed on slips of paper for everybody to take one to read out.

Ritual and Other Activities:

We have had various other rituals and other activities during 'Heart and Soul'. Feel free to use your imagination but take care not to do anything that will make people (especially newcomers) feel ill-at-ease. Whatever you do, make sure that there is a clear pass option, and people do not feel unduly pressured (by the leader or by others) to join in.

Examples of Rituals and Other Activities:

- *Providing slips of paper with quotes connected to the theme for people to ponder.*
- *Giving away mystery parcels for people to save until they got home (for the theme of 'waiting').*
- *Joining hands across the table in an evening about bridge-building.*
- *Having a service in the park in connection with the theme of 'openness'.*
- *Colouring in together as we considered mandalas in nature and religion.*
- *A simple 'join in if you wish' vocal improvisation in an evening about jazz.*
- *Writing acrostics (for the service entitled T.R.U.S.T.)*
- *Moving in the space to music (for 'Midnight at the Oasis').*
- *Giving people cards with inspirational words to take away as a reminder.*
- *Encouraging people to go and affirm someone in their life in the week to come (for 'The Art of Affirmation').*

If you would like us to send a sample session script to adapt please contact jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Example Running Order: *(this is just one possibility!)*

- Words of Welcome and Introduction
- Opening Music
- Opening Words
- Chalice Lighting
- Short Reading(s)
- Time of Prayer and Reflection
 - Words for Gathering
 - Naming: an opportunity to give thanks
 - Knowing: a gentle reflection on our own day
 - Listening: a time of silent meditation
 - Loving: offering prayers for others
- Musical Interlude
- Reflections on the theme – an opportunity to contribute:
- Closing Words
- Closing Music

