

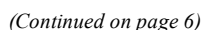


Covenant



While the concept of covenant goes back to the ancient Israelites, its relevance to Unitarian Universalist churches is rooted in two events. The first was the founding of Unitarianism in 16th century Transylvania. Words attributed to Francis David were, “We do not need to

Although it is not apparent given the early history of Unitarianism in Europe, American Unitarianism was di-



Covenant & Building Beloved Community

M. Scott Peck made a distinction between pseudo-community and real community. The difference is the hard eyes of judgement versus the soft eyes of respect. Beloved community requires that we see each other through those soft eyes. This is part of the covenant the beloved community must adopt because it matters how we see each other. It also matters that we know each other's story, because those stories inform how we see each other. Beloved community is built on a covenant of radical connection in which we understand that we belong to each other. The covenant is love. As Rev. Alice Blair Wesley wrote "we have found that there is always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world." We can learn the ways of love in beloved community.

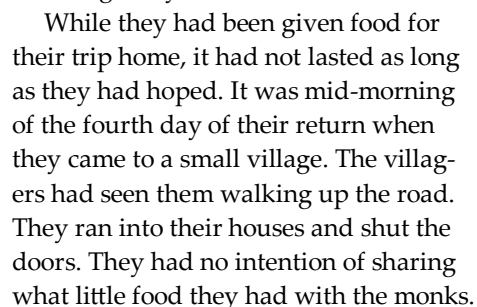
A Theme-Based Ministry Project

This project is supported by subscriptions from Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Wisdom Story

Stone Soup

Many years ago, three monks had been on a pilgrimage to the Drepung Monastery, which was located outside Lhasa at the foot of Mount Gephel. It was the largest and most beautiful monastery in Tibet, along with two other monasteries called Ganden and Sera. Together, they were known as the “great three.” Drepung was famous because it had once been home to the Dalai Lamas. It was huge with over 7,000 monks living and working there. The three monks had been overwhelmed with the majesty of the monastery. And, now, on their way back to their small and modest monastery in the mountains they talked about all of the things they had seen.



As was their custom, the monks took out their begging bowls and approached the first hut they came to. The oldest monk knocked on the door. When a middle-aged couple opened the door, he asked, "We are quite hungry, and still have a long journey ahead of us. Would it be possible for you to give us some cooked barley." The woman said, "We are sorry, but the harvest was so bad that we have none left even for ourselves."

(Continued on page 2)

Building Beloved Community

Fit for the Emperor

(Continued from page 1) **Stone Soup**

The three monks went to the next home. The youngest monk knocked on the door. An old woman answered the door. The monk asked, "Could you spare a few carrots so we can continue on our journey?" The old woman explained that her carrots had spoiled and she had to throw them out. They visited five more homes, but the response was the same: no barley and no vegetables.

The middle-aged monk told his companions that they needed to take a different approach. All three began gathering firewood at the edge of the village. They then started a fire. A curious villager left his house to ask what they were doing. The middle-aged monk said, "We are hungry and everyone in the village is hungry. We are trying to make some stone soup, but we need a big pot and water so that we can feed everyone." The man left and came back in a few minutes with a large pot. A number of other villagers brought water jugs to fill the pot.

As the water began to boil, the old monk took a large stone out of a bag and dropped it into the water. He said, "While it will take a while, you will love stone soup, although it is much better with carrots." A villager ran back to her house and returned with an armful of carrots. He then added, "And cabbage." And cabbages were brought by another villager. And so it continued. Potatoes! Yes. Turnips! Yes. Onions! Yes. Celery! Yes. Finally, the old monk said, "The soup is almost ready, but if we added barley, it would be fit for the Emperor." The oldest villager got two bags of barley and dumped them into the soup. Finally, the soup was done.

Everyone agreed that it was delicious, the best that they had ever had. For years afterward, the villagers told the story of how the monks made a delicious soup using just a stone. (This story is told in many countries and languages. In France, Hungary, & Russia, the travelers are soldiers returning home. In Eastern Europe an axe is used instead of a stone. In Scandinavian countries a nail replaces the stone. In a Native American version, a bear provides the stone.)

Fulfill the Promise

Let Us Covenant

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

Let us covenant with one another
To keep faith with the source of life
Knowing that we are not our own,
Earth made us.

Let us covenant with one another
To keep faith with the community of
resistance
Never to forget that life can be saved
From that which threatens it
By even a small band of people
Choosing to put into practice
An alternative way of life.

And, let us covenant with one another
To seek for an ever deeper awareness
Of that which springs up inwardly in
us.



Even when our hearts are broken
By our own failure
Or the failure of others
Cutting into our lives,
Even when we have done all we can
And life is still broken,
There is a Universal Love
That has never broken faith with us
And never will.

This is the ground of our hope,
And the reason we can be bold in
seeking to fulfill the Promise.

Source: https://mdduua.org/download/beloved%20community/2009%20BC%20Race%20Class%20Privilege/Readings/Parker_BC2009.pdf

A Covenant of Being

The Five Major Ingredients of Covenant

James Luther Adams, (1901-1994)

1. ...The human being..., as Martin Buber ...[said], is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature. The human being is the promise maker, the commitment maker.
 2. The covenant is a covenant of being. It is a covenant with the creative, sustaining, commanding, judging, [and] transforming powers which may be interpreted theistically or ...humanistically. In a religious covenant, the orientation is to something we cannot control but ...upon which we depend—even for our freedom. ...
 3. The covenant is for the individual as well as the collective. The individual is brought out of separateness into covenant. We are responsible for individual behavior but also for the character of society.
 4. The covenant responsibility is especially directed toward the deprived, whether these ...[are] people suffering from neglect and injustice or those who are caught in the system that ...suppresses their own self-determination. It is the gap between covenant and system, between ideal and behavior that creates deprivation....
 5. The covenant includes a rule of law, but it is not fundamentally a legal covenant. It depends upon faithfulness, and faithfulness is nerved by loyalty, by love. Violation of the covenant is a violation of trust. What holds the world together, according to this dual covenant then, is trustworthiness, eros, love.
- Ultimately, the ground of faithfulness is the divine or human love that will not let us go. Here we see the theological basis for accountability, by persons and by the church. This may be the fundamental ...agenda for today: a doctrine of ...covenant....

Source: *From Cage to Covenant* by James Luther Adams, 1975 in *Kairos*, 1976

Readings from the Common Bowl



Day 1: "So if you have made covenants, keep them. If you haven't made them, make them. If you have

made them and broken them, repent and repair them. ...Don't delay. It's getting late." Jeffrey R. Holland

Day 2: "We covenant to walk together in the spirit of love."

First Church, Dedham, MA 1637

Day 3: "All contracts have terms, but covenants don't. They last forever. In a contractual relationship, you're always worried about breaking the rules. In a covenantal relationship, you're only concerned with loving the other party as much as you can." Lecrae Moore

Day 4: "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a covenant between equals." Gregory Boyle

Day 5: "Church is where we practice becoming more human. The ground of our being together is covenant."

James Luther Adams

Day 6: "Congregations can provide an embodied experience of covenant and commitment among people; they can foster freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence." Rebecca Parker

Day 7: "I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power and a respect for all people, places, and things...."

Shirley Strong

Day 8: "Political campaigns offer Americans an opportunity to adjust direction, reaffirm values, and recommit to the covenant that binds them together."

Stanley A. McChrystal

Day 9: "The ancient question, 'Who am I?' inevitably leads to a deeper one, 'Whose am I?' because there is no identity outside of relationship." Douglas Steere

Day 10: "There is another element that must be present in our struggle that then makes our resistance and nonviolence tru-

ly meaningful. That element is reconciliation. Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community." Martin Luther King, Jr.

Day 11: "Every human activity can be put at the service of the divine and of love. We should all exercise our gift to build community." Jean Vanier

Day 12: "Jewish philosopher Martin Buber saw the making of promises as essential to human nature. Indeed, he described humans as promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking and promise-renewing beings." Andrew Clive Millard

Day 13: "The heart is where everything begins: the grounded place within each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another." Parker Palmer

Day 14: "The central task of religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. ...Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice." Mark Morrison-Reed

Day 15: "The essence of marriage is that it is a covenant, a commitment, a promise of future love." Timothy Keller

Day 16: "Covenant as a concept is not just about commitment to a particular community. Because of its connection to hope, it is also about a community's commitment to a vision without which we all perish."

John Buehrens

Day 17: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Martin Luther King, Jr.

Day 18: "Out of the stars swung the earth. This is why we are in covenant with creation." William Schulz

Day 19: "Our covenant is an essential statement of what we hope to do together. It is also an expression of why it matters that our community is here, how it will change our lives and how it will make a difference...." Susan Fredrick-Gray

Day 20: "A covenant is a set of enduring but evolving deeply held promises made between people ...While ...taken seriously, the promises are often so intense that it is impossible to always live up to them." Thom Belote

Day 21: "Everything you do is connected to who you are as a person and, in turn, creates the person you are becoming. Everything you do affects those you love. All of life is covenant." Paul E. Miller

Day 22: "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community." Dorothy Day

Day 23: "When we encounter a kindred spirit—a person to whom we belong and who, in turn belongs to us—we are reminded of the holiest of religious truths: all of us are sisters and brothers in the things that matter most." Stefan Jonasson

Day 24: "We need more people who live as if they are in covenant with Unconditional Love, which is our best definition of God." Robin R. Meyers

Day 25: "It's very frightening to imagine that we have no obligations, because it is our obligations, our promises that define who we are." Rabbi Irwin Kula

Day 26: "If we want a beloved community, we must stand for justice, have recognition for difference without attaching difference to privilege." bell hooks

Day 27: "The English word 'truth' comes from a Germanic root that also gives rise to our word 'troth,' as in the ancient vow 'I pledge thee my troth.' With this word one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in mutually accountable and transforming relationship...."

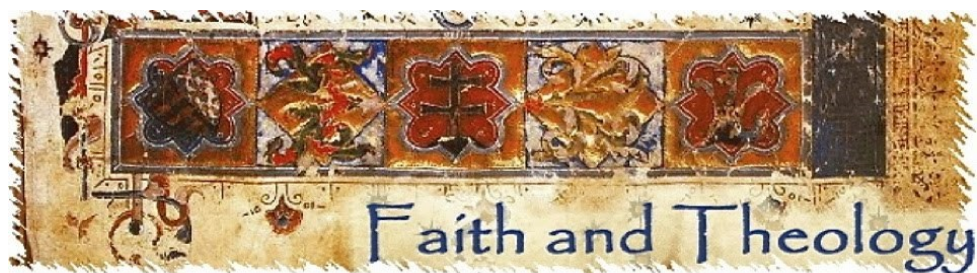
Parker Palmer

Day 28: "We cannot do both covenant and individualism; individuality, yes, but not individualism." Fredrick Muir

Day 29: "I call that church free which enters into the covenant with the ultimate source of existence. It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority." James Luther Adams

Day 30: "We need to make plans which are not only wishes but covenants." Henry B. Eyring

Day 31: "One instrument: many strings. One rainbow: many colors. One choir many voices. One tapestry: many threads. One people: many beliefs. The fiber that binds the many into one is the fiber of covenant." Diane Dowgiert



Beloved Community

"Beloved" means "dearly loved," and it is especially poignant and powerful when we dearly love our church.

"Beloved Community" bespeaks a deep affection for a church as a whole, but it also points to the quality and depth of relationships within a congregation. The quality and depth of relationships is guided by the covenant that binds people together. The covenant is an articulation of promises that are both practical in the sense that they form the building blocks of beloved community and aspirational because they are challenging to live into and up to. To be sure, we will falter and fail in meeting the obligations of covenant from time to time, but this is mitigated by our willingness to recommit to the covenant.



The Beloved Community emerges as a tapestry of right relationships woven among the individuals who comprise the congregation. This weaving must be intentional, because right relationship takes imagination, commitment, creativity, humility, compassion, and sacrifice. If we are to create the Beloved Community, we must be willing to sacrifice some of our rugged individualism to balance the narcissistic ME with the communal WE. It is also necessary to carefully and continually tend those relationships to prevent the

tapestry from being torn or completely unraveled.

The Beloved Community is not an accidental creation. It is the result of hard work and the ongoing, intentional practice and mastery of specific elements.

The Beloved Community requires the **practice of inclusivity**. Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt writes, "What I know about being inclusive—crossing from culture to culture, learning the language of diversity—is that it's the work of a lifetime."

Often, our Unitarian Universalist churches are far more diverse than they realize, and not as inclusive as they need to be.

The Beloved Community requires the practice of **commitment**. Rev. Tom Owen-Towle writes, "A steward is literally 'a keeper of the hall.' Stewards know it

takes many hands to sustain a vigorous church community: hands to uphold each other, hands to maintain church property, hands to nurture offspring, and hands to spread our common faith." Without commitment, the Beloved Community would neither endure nor flourish.

The Beloved Community requires the practice of **contemplation**. Through the reflection prompted by contemplation, we can identify dis-ease in a congregation as it emerges and respond to it creatively and effectively. Through contemplation, the Beloved Community pursues health and wholeness and the holy.

The Beloved Community requires the practice of **trust** so that people can come as they are and be encouraged to grow. M. Scott Peck observes, "Community is a safe place precisely because no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you. Instead, the members accept you as you are. You are free to be

you. And in being free, you are free to discard defenses, masks, disguises; free to seek your own psychological and spiritual health; free to become your whole and holy self." We will achieve an adequate level of trust in our congregation when the patina of respectful silence has been discarded and, increasingly, we hear people freely and openly sharing their deepest beliefs.

The Beloved Community requires the practice of looking at each other with the **soft eyes of respect**. "As long as we look out at each other only through the masks of our composure," Peck counsels, "we are looking through hard eyes. But as the masks drop and we see the suffering and courage and brokenness and deeper dignity underneath, we truly start to respect each other as fellow human beings." While we rightly affirm tolerance in our interactions in the world, let us remember that, within the Beloved Community, respect is the essential virtue.

Finally, the Beloved Community requires the practice of **fighting gracefully and fairly**. A congregation is not damaged by the emergence of conflict. In fact, conflict within community can promote health and vitality. The problem occurs when we forget our covenant and fight in ways that lead to emotional and spiritual bloodshed. People in community fight best, Peck observes, when they "have laid down their weapons and their armor, where they have become skilled at listening and understanding, where they respect each other's gifts and accept each other's wounds, where they are committed to a struggling together rather than against each other." Universalist theologian Hosea Ballou argued for the primacy of love as the foundational covenant of the Beloved Community. He wrote, "If we agree in love, there is no agreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good."

We create the Beloved Community through the practice of inclusivity, commitment, contemplation, trust, the soft eyes of respect, and the practice of fighting gracefully and fairly. As you create and sustain Beloved Community, may all of your deepest desires be satisfied.

Children's Covenant

Rev. Chris Fry

When we come to church, we make promises to each other, spoken and unspoken. These promises are sometimes called a "covenant." A covenant describes how we will treat each other, what we will do to create a safe and sacred space where all may learn and grow. Our covenants are grounded in our Unitarian Universalist Principles.

*Our Unitarian Universalist Principles
Children's Version*

#1: We believe that each and every person is important.

#2: We believe that all people should be treated fairly and kindly.

#3: We believe that we should encourage one another and learn together.

#4: We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life.

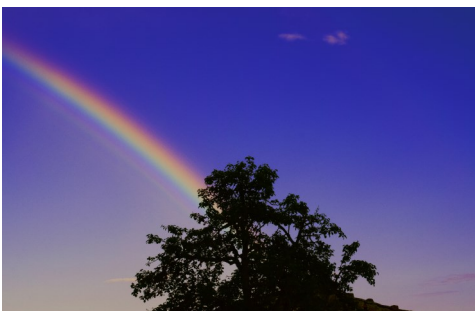
#5: We believe that all persons should have a say about the things that concern them.

#6: We believe in working for a peaceful, fair and free world.

#7: We believe in caring for our planet earth, the home we share with all living things.

Living our UU Principles in our daily lives — at church and at home — can be hard work. All of us, young and old, will make mistakes at times, will fail to live up to the promises we have made to one another. At those times, it is important for us to talk honestly, with respect and love; to get the help from someone we trust; to listen to one another; to apologize and make amends; to explore what we can do differently next time. In this way, we learn and grow. In this way, we keep our church a safe and special place. In this way, we make a difference in the world.

Source: no longer online



Family Activity: Block Tower

Have you ever broken a promise with somebody you love? Did something your mom or dad asked you not to do? Or maybe you fight with your sibling, even though you love them. This is the nature of promises, sometimes they get broken, but this doesn't mean that our relationships become broken. When we love and are loved, we can renew our promises to one another and make them even stronger in the process.

Try making a block tower with your family by placing one piece on top of the other. Can you do it without speaking? Make it tall and narrow. Keep building it up until... it falls!



The blocks crashing down can be like how it feels when promises are broken. We can feel scattered, hurt, or confused.

Now, start building it again. This time, talk with your other builders about how you could build the tower to make it stronger. How do you want to lay the foundation differently? Allow everyone to have equal input. How is this experience different from the first?

Making Promises, Making Covenants

Janeen K. Grohsmeyer

At school, the teacher shows us where things are and explains how things work. She tells us the rules.

Sometimes, though, there is no teacher. On the playground, it's just kids. Sometimes we make up our own game, and we decide how it ought to be played. Sometimes we make the rules.

On the jungle gym, we can decide that the red bars are fire and you can't touch

them when you climb. When we play tag, we can decide that the person who is "It" has to count to ten before they start chasing everybody else. It can be a lot of fun to make up the rules to your very own game. You get to make it just the way you like it.

That is, if the other kids agree. But, what if you think the red bars on the jungle gym are fire and can't be touched, but another kid says that the red bars are fine and you can touch them however you want?



Somehow, some way, after discussing and changing and arguing and compromising, everybody agrees on what the rules should be. Maybe you don't like one of the other kids' rules all that much, and maybe someone else doesn't like your rules all that much, but you both agree to them anyway because you got some rules you liked and so did the other person. Then, finally, everyone promises to each other to follow the rules, with no cheating, and we can play the game.

When we agree to follow the rules we make together, we are covenanting with each other. A covenant is a promise to each other about what we are going to do, and how we are going to behave. We need a covenant to have fun playing a game.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/welcome/session2/118157.shtml>

Family Activity: Promises

Who are you in relationship with? You probably have quite a few relationships — to family, friends, classmates, pets, even your favorite tree in the neighborhood! What are the promises you make to these people and things? What promises do they make to you?

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

rectly descended from the Puritans in America and not from European Unitarianism. As Unitarianism emerged in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the concept of covenant, as articulated in the Puritan *Cambridge Platform* of 1648, remained important, but, as the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley explained in her 2000-2001 Minns Lectures, its influence began to decline until its meaning and practice became nonexistent. The title of her third lecture is, *How We Came to Forget Covenant for a Long Time*.

The recovery of covenant occurred as part of the process that led up to the development of new *Purposes and Principles*, which were adopted in 1985. Prior to that, as Rev. Robert Latham wrote, "We have forgotten that covenant is the keystone of our religious experience. This has resulted in diminishment of meaning in membership, confusion of identity, and distortion in gauging ministry effectiveness." Since 1985, the concept of covenant has slowly grown in our understanding.

In the fall of 2015, the UUA Board of Trustees appointed the *Task Force on Covenanting* to facilitate a reimagining of how Unitarian Universalist congregations relate to each other and to the UUA. During the winter of 2019, there was a telephone survey of selected UU congregations to determine the role that covenant plays in the life of those congregations. At the 2019 General Assembly in Spokane the *UUA Commission on Appraisal* held a workshop entitled, *Power in Covenants—Redeeming Our Time Together?*, which asked "How do we honor and make real our own covenants? How do our congregational covenants guide our governance and UU identity?" (This workshop title recalled the 1999 book, *Redeeming Time*, edited by Walter Herz and published by Skinner House Books, which explored the role of covenant in Unitarian Universalism. This was followed by Rev. Alice Blair Wesley's 2000-2001 Minns Lectures, *The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and*

the Promise of Our Covenant.)

In 2002, the Rev. Roy Phillips presented a paper to the Prairie Group, a study group of UU ministers formed in 1951. Phillips articulated five ways in which we are covenanted together. They are

We share a common human journey, and so we covenant to value what is common among us over what separates and divides us.

Each of us has unique dignity and gifts, and so we covenant to recognize and celebrate the dignity and gifts among us in the common life we share.

We have a responsibility to envision and create a better world, and so we covenant to support and encourage our individual and common efforts towards its attainment.

Despite the mystery that surrounds our ultimate destiny as a human race, our lives are worthy of praise, and so we covenant to help each other engage the mystery with praise.

Religion is a human response to the mysterious otherness we encounter in our lives, and so we covenant to cultivate and explore the religious response among us as a defining and ennobling activity of the human race.

Phillips articulation is important because it can function both as an internal covenant within a congregation, as well as an external covenant between a congregation and the world.

Covenant focuses on right relationship, not right belief as is true with creeds. Given our theological diversity there is no way that any creed could bind us together. While right belief is typically how traditional religious communities are held together, it is an exclusionary approach that constricts the possibility of beloved community.

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley adapted the covenant of the Pilgrims to match Unitarian Universalist sensibilities of today. Her version is as follows: *We pledge to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now or may learn them in days to come that we and our children may be fulfilled and that we may speak to the world in words and actions of peace and goodwill.*



The Cambridge Platform

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley

Both the Pilgrims in 1620 and the 20,000 or so Puritans who came to New England in the Great Migration of the 1630s were primarily concerned with a theology of organization: how churches ought to be organized in the spirit of mutual love and who in these churches should have authority and why. They came to gather themselves into free churches "in the liberty of the gospel." ...In doing so, they invented—or rather reinvented—what we call congregational polity, in which each congregation is independent and ecclesiastically sovereign.

...The *Cambridge Platform* explains and justifies how congregational churches work.... For the authors of the Platform, free churches are groups of people who have covenanted to "walk together," as they are called by God to do, in the spirit of mutual love.

...These Congregationalists understood the Bible to be mainly about the free and covenanted social practice of love. As they understood church history, the "substance" of a free church has always been the same, the Holy Spirit of mutual love.... The living, gathered bodies of the members are the "matter" of the free church. Its "form," the covenantal promise, defines the membership, determines its organizational structure, and imbues the church with promise, the potential to be a life-giving organization in the larger world, "a city set upon a hill" that gives light to all.

...Jesus famously commended a reading of the law in which the "second commandment" is given as "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The Platform can be understood to declare that the substance of the free church is the spirit of neighborly love.The one end ...is ...mutual learning and teaching concerning the many and complex ways of love.

Source: *The Cambridge Platform: Contemporary Reader's Edition*, Peter Hughes, editor, Skinner House, 2008.

Our Great Covenant

Bound by Covenant

Rev. Victoria Safford

When we say, *we are bound by covenant and not by creed*, we mean it. What we believe, or believe in, one by one by one, matters less to the church than how we behave, how we will be together, as a people. What matters is the plane of conduct where we agree to meet. *You need not think alike to love alike*, said Francis David, a Unitarian centuries ago, which is not to say there are no creeds and no convictions

here—there are many, maybe an infinite number, and they are tested in practice, lived out (we hope) as much as spoken. What matters more, from the standpoint of the institution, is the *covenant*, the way that we will walk together, the principles that bind us. “Freedom of belief” is one of them. “Compassion” is another, what the Buddha meant by “lovingkindness,” which was not all warm and fuzzy, sweet and simple, but difficult and complicated, a deliberate orientation of the heart, defying logic, sometimes, defying common sense, and sometimes defying even rules of justice, when mercy hovers as an option. We wrestle with these principles together, and in so doing may discover, each of us, what we believe most deeply about God, or mystery, or love, or death.

...We will walk together toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, forgiveness, joy and gratitude. Our great covenant is the work of intimate relationship, with one another, with the holy, with this whole wide world.

Source: <https://whitebearunitarian.org/our-great-covenant-10-18-15-sermon/>

Who & Whose?

Covenanting

Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

Covenanting means we promise loyalty to one another ...within the caring critique and support of a beloved community.

...Covenanting refers not to a joint theology but to a shared process, not to



tenets of faith but to bonds of faithfulness. Covenant specifies what we do together.

...Our entire movement is, in the richest sense, an ever widening cluster of covenantal ties. Covenant is the

spiritual practice by which we embody the interdependent reality we affirm and promote at every level of our religious experience.

...Note that “covenant” is a verb at the outset of our Principles and Purposes and a noun at the conclusion. This implies that covenanting includes a blend of movement and substance, action and context.

...In being united more by promises than beliefs, much is gained (our integrity for starters), and nothing major is relinquished (neither our personal convictions nor our favored theologies).

...We are naturally promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise-restoring creatures. Our theological mission is not *orthodoxy* (shared beliefs) or even *orthopraxy* (shared rituals and practices) but what ...James Casebolt has coined [as] *orthovotumy* (shared vows) [which means] doing everything we can to sustain mature vows, and when we break them, to repair them.

... Promises point us not only to *who* we are but primarily to *whose* we are. Promises remind us that we’re beholden to one another in the “living tradition” of Unitarian Universalism. Promises awaken us to the reality that our theological quest is never merely personal but always public as well.

Source: *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism* by Tom Owen-Towle, 2011

Dance of Co-Creation

Not Creed, But Covenant

Rev. Lisa Ward

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant ...claims: “I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming.” This calls for a level of trust, courage, and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed, and affirmed....

A creed creates a static truth ...that does not incorporate new insights and realities. A covenant is a dance of co-creation, keeping in step with one another in the flow of our lives.

A creed seeks uniformity and a unison voice. A covenant seeks harmony and a shared voice. ...

A creed gives authority to the statement. A covenant gives authority to shared intention.

A creed creates an “us” and “them.” A covenant invites relationship.

A creed is a prescription that must be relied on. A covenant relies on the treasures of shared truth.

The overall trust within this covenant is ...Truth...: something which no one person can fully see, yet something which each and every person can come to know—in glimpses, in another’s story, in epiphanies. Truth is ever changing in our seeking to understand...—we grow into a deeper sense of the meaning of all things when we take our journeys seriously, with ...heart and mind.

The courage within this covenant is in the acceptance and celebration of life, with all of its challenges, pain, ironies and joys. And the sacrifice within this covenant is in the letting go of dogma, of assumptions, of control—and giving over to a greater wisdom which comes to us in bits and pieces.

The task of this covenant is to take responsibility for the freedom we espouse. We know that we are interconnected and that what we do creates ripples of hope or despair, of affirmation or negation. What we do with and for one another is powerful and beyond our imagining.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/covenant-invites-relationship>

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion: Covenant

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of *Explorations* and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: We covenant with one another and do bind ourselves together in the presence of this religious community to express our deepest and most cherished convictions, as they are borne by each person to find a common vision for a better world; to seek the life of the spirit, as it is known by each person, choosing with reverence its name; and to walk together in the way of truth and love, as it is shown to us and to all people, in word and in deed.

Rev. Michael Hennon

Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake)
(In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: "A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a matter of love. A contract speaks this way: if you do this, and only if

hedged, cautious, risk-averse. Its most basic principle is 'no surprises.' A covenant speaks this way: you and I will do whatever is needed to achieve our shared purpose." Rev. Preston Moore

Living the Questions:

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. While a contract has the force of law, a covenant has the force of love. What are some of the covenants you have made whether implicit or explicit?
2. Although we may break promises, we also have the ability to renew broken promises. How does this ability support relationships with others?
3. Why for Unitarian Universalism is covenant more important than creed?
4. Do you agree that all of life is a covenant? Why or why not?
5. James Luther Adams said that through covenant church is where we practice becoming more human. Is this true? How?
6. How do the covenants we enter into and the promises we make help define who we are?
7. Rebecca Parker writes that we, "We inherit covenant before we create covenant." Do you agree with her? Why or why not? What covenants did you inherit from your family of origin?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice:

(Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words:

Rev. Philip R. Giles

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

Walking Together

Covenant

Conrad Wright

The authors of the *Cambridge Platform* acknowledged that a covenant might be implicit... as people walk together and show concern for one another. But an explicit covenant is far better, they argued, for reminding the members of their mutual duty and stirring them up to it.

...These early covenants did not take the form of creedal statements, nor did they prescribe doctrinal standards for admission to the church fellowship. ...In the eighteenth century, when religious liberalism began to appear, ...the orthodox fenced in their churches with very explicit creedal statements.

...Unitarian Universalists long ago rejected creedal tests for membership....

...Covenant ...emphasizes that the church is a community of mutual obligation, which involves a sense of commitment. Even the freest of free churches needs that much discipline if it is to last long enough to accomplish anything of value in the world.

Source: *Congregational Polity & Covenant* by Conrad Wright

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