

Combined Notes
Congregational Conversations on Congregational Covenant
January 28, 30 & February 14, 2018

In attendance (not including team members):

(1st conversation -17) Marietta Angelotti, Carol Butt, Dawn Dana, Ed Hancock, Tina Haq, Kathy Harris, Karen Kaufmann, Julie Lomoe, Lee Newberg, Don Odell, Reese Satin, Martha Schroeder, Nancy Shay, Nancy Willie-Schiff, Robb Smith, Linda Way, Betsey Wright.

(2nd conversation – 5) Tim Hathaway, Kathy Hodges, Jill Peckenpaugh, Phil Rich, Deb Vogel .

(3rd conversation -9) Mary Applegate, Zach Cunningham, Arlene Gilbert, Chuck Manning, Jon Newell, Jessica Rae, Reese Satin, John Sherman, Peggy Sherman.

What obligations does our congregation have with respect to our UU principles, history and traditions?

1. To align what we do (our actions) with those principles and values. (It was noted that though the congregation is in covenant with the UUA and through that relationship in theory commits to the UU principles, but that our congregation has never formally committed to those principles, as far as we know. In addition, we as individuals never make that commitment either, which is a good thing: we are invited to join on the basis of being a worthy human being who is willing to think for one's self.)
2. To learn about them.
3. To evaluate how to apply them: we agree with the principles, but what do we do to “affirm and promote” them as the covenant with the UUA states. This brings up the ambiguity between the collective and the individual commitment.
4. To send delegates to General Assembly.
5. Inform/teach the next generation about our history, principles, and traditions. Stated differently, to provide opportunities...
6. To continue traditions and to create new ones.
7. To continually refer to our principles, to keep them active and use them as a reference guide.
8. Use the principles as a standard by which to judge our actions.
9. Celebrate our traditions.
10. Examine our traditions to see if we want to continue them, for example do we want to continue to use the name Emerson to refer to our community hall?
11. Continue visiting them and discuss what they mean / remain fluid.
12. participate in all of these things.
13. adhere to them to a great extent.
14. Inclusivity,
15. welcoming everyone,
16. consistency/congruency,
17. abiding by the principles,
18. know, learn, and teach about history/traditions and include those we left out,
19. apply our values in our neighborhood with presence/compassion.

What matters to us as a community?

1. Having a safe place in which to explore ideas and to receive feedback, i.e., a place to test our beliefs.
2. Having a place to feel included
3. Having a community that helps me to make a positive difference.
4. Having a community where I can connect with people.
5. Working together to make the world a better place.
6. Helping the next generation grow.
7. Creating opportunities/opening up different avenues to make a positive difference.

8. Encouraging ourselves and each other to think through our beliefs, e.g., the Build Your Own Theology curriculum.
9. Having a place to find inspiration.
10. The opportunity to be part of a multi-generation, multi-cultural (this is largely aspirational) community, a diverse community.
11. The opportunity to be synergetic (the whole is greater than its parts).
12. Have a sense of community and belonging.
13. leverage the better angels of my nature.
14. extended family that gives strength to go out into the world.
15. care for individuals in need, the whole body, the building, etc..
16. safety net.
17. obligation to outer world to fulfill social responsibility.
18. making a difference; inclusivity – they all matter.
19. manage/maintain our physical space for us and community, and enhance...
20. Caring for each other.
21. lasting impact on people around us.
22. Welcoming.
23. good music.
24. inspiration/challenge.
25. supporting each other.
26. promote personal growth and development.
27. teach children.
28. Reputation.
29. commitment to social justice.
30. Fun.
31. Equity.
32. Integrity.
33. respect for individual conscience.
34. space for reflection.
35. facilities, etc., resources.

What is it that facilitates trust in a community?

1. Consistency, confidence in reliability, predictability.
2. No surprises: well informed well in advance.
3. Open, honest, and respectful communication, including a willingness to hold difficult conversations.
4. Shared commitment to a community.
5. A mutual understanding of what the commitment is to.
6. Openness to new ideas.
7. Individuality (we are each unique with value to contribute to the whole) , not individualism (it's all about me; individual autonomy trumps any community needs).
8. Loyalty to what I think is right.
9. Shared mission.
10. Priority of inclusion.
11. Compassionate communication.
12. Transparency.
13. sense of being heard/really being heard (democracy).
14. accountability (fiduciary, etc.).
15. being accepted.
16. sincerity – aspire and follow through.
17. Integrity.
18. Authenticity.
19. acceptance of diversity / open minded.

20. Reasonableness.
21. use of thought.
22. Support people on their journey.
23. Integrity,
24. transparency,
25. honesty,
26. be brave.
27. Respect.
28. self-connection.
29. share time together.
30. sense of humor.
31. complete information.
32. Accountability.
33. Safety.
34. take risks.
35. no gossiping.
36. good process.
37. process for reconciliation.
38. institutional structures.
39. Foundations.
40. shared experiences.
41. tools for navigating difference.
42. don't take it personally.

What is our obligation to our larger denomination and to the wider world?

1. To understand congregational polity: we are part of a larger whole, but we need to decide for ourselves what this congregation is willing to do on not willing to do.
2. We have an obligation to our denomination: it's a contractual relationship.
3. We have a moral obligation to the wider world, because it's the right thing to do, with no expectation of receiving anything in return.
4. Any sense of obligation to the world is generated by us, and not the world: self-generated - an intrinsic motivation and not an extrinsic motivation.
5. Many of our principles have to do with our relationship to the wider; none of them have to do with our relationship to the UUA.
6. We have an obligation to the UUA to be good exemplars of the principles and a beacon to the wider world not to be evil – “don't mess up the brand.”
7. Use of democracy in our processes.

As friends and members of this congregation, what are the promises that we are willing to make to one another? (The group altered the question from “As a congregation...”)

1. Financial support.
2. Service support (effort support).
3. We are all equally deserving of each other's support (inherent worth & dignity).
4. Commitment to each other to be our best selves.
5. Commitment of mutuality of purpose: we need to agree that we are collectively about something.
6. Commitment to be there for each other with care and support: it's a privilege we all enjoy; we are a “family of choice.”
7. Obligation to remind each other and ourselves that while we are special, we don't have a lock on the truth. Avoid tribalism!
8. Commitment to beware of idolatries of the mind and spirit.
9. Don't go away mad, commit to staying with it.
10. financial responsibility.

11. support each other in times of need.
12. participate in the life of the congregation / activities of daily living.
13. treat one another as we would want to be treated.
14. pay attention to other's needs.
15. Mechanism for striving to do things but with understanding.
16. be present, contribute, support others in life journey.
17. listen, show up.
18. love one another.
19. Open mind, respect, listening.
20. have fun, participate.
21. empathy flexibility, full attention, consideration, non-judgmental, thoughtfulness, honesty.
22. kindness patience, effectiveness.
23. Honest, open, willing to listen, willing to share, curiosity.
24. patience, discernment about contribution.
25. balance participation, engage in compassionate listening/ empathy, respect all opinions, voice to everyone including those on margins.
26. have fun, pay attention.
27. end on time.

What brings us together tonight?

1. Commitment to community – need to build in immunity to outside stress, be a part of community – soften difficulties of the world,
2. the word covenant – bound together in the world through our commonalities,
3. making the world a better place,
4. identify aspirations for the congregation, hear input from the congregation, our largeness makes it more important,
5. relationship, have fun, curiosity about process.
6. Interest, curiosity, learn,
7. food uncertainty, concern,
8. input questions commitment to the institution, community.

Comments of the participants:

A successful covenant should not tie people to a set of beliefs. It needs to be structural: how we're going to behave, not what we believe.

We're confused between congregation and individual. Individual versus collective is a very important issue we need to grapple with.

I like the language "Affirm and promote" from the covenant with the UUA. We don't need any more covenant than what we already have with the UUA: it speaks of dogma to me.

Covenants have nothing to do with beliefs. Rather than creeds we have expectations.

Nothing is inherently good or bad about covenant; we need to focus on a non-creedal covenant.

We need to amplify the inclusion language.

We love the poetry. It needs to be poetic enough to inspire.

Stick to behavioral and aspirational in the covenant: avoid going beyond these. {Many present seemed to agree with this.}

A covenant needs to promote a willingness to communicate compassionately, to be open to new ideas. Stay away from values.

Covenant is a critique. It's a circle which you are either inside or outside.

The covenant becomes a property of the institution and as such lays out requirements for membership.

Can you distinguish between a covenant and a creed?

Be careful that we are not creating dogma

For generations ahead it may be handcuffs.

How can we put something in writing and still remain fluid?

Are we putting something in stone that shouldn't be in stone?

Call it “aspirational statement” not covenant.

We already have a covenant, between congregations and the UUA which says “we covenant and affirm...”

We are proposing a covenant between and among individuals, which is more than trivial.

It’s putting us in a box.

There needs to be a sixth element: what does the group do for the individual? It’s a 2-party agreement. Speak up and affirm the covenant or remain silent –“take a knee.”

It’s a contract, verbal or written.

Certainly we need an identity.

Is it a formal pledge?

A concern that when we created the Strategic Plan several years ago, comments were taken and then it went into a black box and came out the other end as something that didn’t reflect the input from the congregation.

I like the word covenant

The word curiosity has come up a lot this evening

How to move into the future with shared purpose; I like that language; there’s a hopefulness about it.

Intent to Join form and Responsive Reading that the congregation and new members recite

There were several questions regarding the language on the intent to join (ITJ). A copy of the ITJ form was obtained and a part of it was read, including an excerpt from our bylaws, as follows: “We unite in order to create and sustain a non-creedal religious community. Our unity is based upon our concern for the individual and society and for the quality of life reflected in each. Thus we join together to inspire and support one another in a search for the insights and action that will foster and strengthen this concern.”

And also the following from the ITJ form:

“The expectations of membership are:

1. Participation on Sunday morning
2. Involvement in and helping with our activities
3. Financial support of the congregation.”

There were also questions regarding the language in the responsive reading that the congregation and new members recite in the new members’ recognition ceremony. We did not have a copy to read. [The language is as follows:

“INGATHERING RESPONSIVE READING

Congregation: We the members of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, gratefully acknowledge your choice to join with us in our continuing religious life.

New Members: I become a member of this congregation aware of the significant responsibilities of membership and with a deep feeling that I have come home this day.

Congregation: Ours is a faith which reveres the past, envisions the future and lives with passion in this moment. Even as we honor those who have brought us to this day, so we celebrate your new-found commitment and eagerly anticipate your participation.

New Members: I bring you my talents and enthusiasm, my short-comings and doubts. I

ask you to direct me into opportunities for service.

President: As representative of this congregation, I welcome you into our membership.

All in Unison: Having affirmed one another in love and having renewed our best intentions, let us be on about the noble work of seeking and speaking the truth in love, and serving the greater good of our world community.”]

What personal qualities do you bring to the congregation?

A willingness to learn from others/ a willingness to pitch in where needed; inspirational words/wisdom/warm heart; the long view; skill in finding consensus at meetings/historical perspective; my unique experience as a woman with health challenges & a child free woman; enthusiasm/creativity/financial support; commitment to the community; long-term commitment to UU values; History (I've been here for over 50 years)/loyalty to the community/belief in the inspirational potential of my relationships in this community/commitment to freedom of thought; generosity and gratitude for the AUU community; belief in this congregation's mission, commitment to it; consensus driven; energy, commitment and enthusiasm; sense of humor/awareness/perception/intelligence; desire to learn/trust/ears for listening; open mind/open heart/optimism; optimism/faith in us as a community/willingness to help out; reflection/innovation; interest in creating community; open mind/desire to grow/curiosity; ability to bring people together/a willingness to take on jobs that I've never done before; commitment/desire for connections/want to create community for all to share; intelligence/warmth/compassion/wisdom; curiosity/empathy; committed helper/idea generator; joy/commitment/welcoming; energy/passion/commitment; my historical memory of Albany UU (since 1957)/loyalty; respect for the teachings of Jesus/faith in my own mind/trust that most people intend good; reliability; passion & commitment to social justice and to a healthy and vibrant community; an interest in secular humanism/volunteering for (too) many tasks/more focus on the first; good listening skills/commitment to participate; the willingness to do what I'm asked to the best of my ability/an inclination to take the long view to see the implications of immediate actions and policies; love/hopefulness/ energy;; curiosity/enthusiasm/perspective; holy curiosity – different from mundane - centered on the greater whole/patience/listening; creativity/writing skills/group facilitating skills; generosity/big ears for listening; willingness to learn about building community; experienced/contemplative/speaks in public; positive energy/helpfulness/financial support; thoughtfulness/sense of responsibility/willingness to commit time, energy and money.

Notes prepared by Dick Dana