

Definition of Covenant: a statement of identity reminding congregants who they are collectively, where they are headed, and how they will go there. It reflects the relationship of members of the congregation to one another and what promises they are willing to make. The covenant grows from an affirmation of shared needs, values, and principles. The commitment that is made to oneself and each other helps the congregation understand what their tradition calls them to be and how to move into the future with shared purpose. A covenant speaks to how “We’re all in this together, building a better world.”

Some quotes on covenant:

“Ours is not a creedal but a covenantal faith: how are we going to live here on earth with others? I don’t come here [to Sunday service] to be better than others or to secure a special place for me and my family. Every time we come together here on a Sunday, we are re-upping on a promise we have made about how we will live...in a covenantal community. I have to actually trust you to love me when I screw up, and when I am not right, and when we disagree, and when I have made profound mistakes.” - Rev. Aaron White

“The document [covenant] is meant for internal reflection. We don’t hold it up and say ‘You’re not doing this,’ but rather, ‘Are we living up to this?’ In a healthy system the only people we can change is ourselves.” - Rev. Roger Bertschausen

“Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all other living things.” - Rev. Victoria Stafford

“Believing that congregational polity is primarily concerned with supporting and protecting individual voices is nothing less than heresy.... Equating congregational polity with autonomy undermines our interconnectedness, erodes our covenant, and endangers our communities. It is flat-out ahistorical, not to mention wrong...Participation in our congregations and communities is “voluntary” in the sense that it is not strictly required by external authority. But are we not responsible to the call to manifest the interdependent web by co-creating beloved community? Does our faith not require us to help increase the sum of love and justice in the world? Our faith puts claims on us. Moral, ethical, and for some of us theological duty claims and compels us...Because we claim and are claimed by our faith, participation in Unitarian Universalist community is much richer than the notion of “voluntary participation” conveys.”

-- Rev. Sue Phillips speaking at the 2015 General Assembly

Thoughts on covenant from the Congregational Covenant Team discussions:

As the CCT envisions it, a congregational covenant is not a Moses-like covenant with God and all its lopsided power implications, it’s not a creed (see reading by Rev. Lisa Ward); it’s not to be used as a weapon; it’s not designed to take away anyone’s individuality.

A covenant is a consensual document, in that members of the congregation willingly sign on to it when they join the community. A covenant is, by definition, a living document. As the

congregation grows and members come and go, the covenant should be revisited on a regular basis. The questions should be regularly asked: “Is this the covenant that we want to sign on to and that we want all new members to sign on to? Does it represent who we are and what our aspirations are?”

The process of creating a covenant will help us define who we are as a congregation, how we want to be together and what we exist as a community to accomplish. The process of creating a covenant in itself can be valuable to the community, separate from the actual document that is created.

A congregational Covenant will help to:

- Define who we are as a congregation, what draws us together and what is our purpose;
- Give newcomers an idea whether this community is a good fit for them, one to which they want to commit and belong;
- Put into words our hopes and dreams as a community;
- Clarify how we want to be together and support one another; and
- Reflect our collective commitment and promise to honor those who have gone before us, and to make our best mark in the world now and for future generations.

Rev. Lisa Ward differentiates covenant from creed:

A Covenant Invites Relationship

Reading By [Lisa Ward](#) minister at First Parish in Milton UU

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change, it is humble toward evolution. It 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 on a regular basis.

A creed creates a static truth, something 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. Sometimes we may arrive at a unison, but it is not required.

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 in the Truth (Capital T): 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 because of our limited perspectives—we grow into a deeper sense of the meaning of all things when we take our journeys seriously, with full 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.

Creating Congregational Covenants

General Assembly, Past General Assemblies

[General Assembly 2008](#) Event 3035

Presenters: Eunice Milton Benton, Connie Goodbread

What is a congregational covenant? Eunice Benton, District Executive of the Mid-South District, and Connie Goodbread, Program Consultant for the Florida District, answered this question, and gave some tips for creating a congregational covenant.

"It's about making respectful behavior the norm," said Benton, describing a congregational covenant in plain language. "It's about good manners, what your momma taught you when you were small.... It's about valuing your religious community."

Benton added, "It's a good investment" in helping maintain the individuals and the whole community.

"We've struggled with this word [covenant] for a long time," said Goodbread. "Why is this so?" Because Unitarian Universalists come out of the Abrahamic religious traditions, the idea of covenant can be traced back to the story of Abraham and Isaac in the Hebrew Bible. "We don't like this story," she said, because Abraham offers to sacrifice his son Isaac to Yahweh in order to maintain the covenant with Yahweh. "We don't want to be submissive in this way," she said.

But the definition of covenant has changed considerably in the thousands of years since the Hebrew Bible was written. Goodbread said that Unitarian Universalists directly inherit the definition of covenant set forth in *The Cambridge Platform*, a document drawn up by Puritans in Massachusetts in 1648. [The Cambridge Platform](#) is available in a contemporary reader's edition through the Unitarian Universalist Association bookstore.

"The piece we understand completely," said Goodbread, speaking of the definition of covenant set forth in the Cambridge Platform, "is that you're not the boss of me." But the Cambridge Platform also defined covenant to include promises for mutual support. Goodbread said that means that covenant also means "We are all in this together, building a better world."

Today, Unitarian Universalists also understand covenant to mean that each Unitarian Universalist congregation is in covenant with all other Unitarian Universalist congregations. The Principles and Purposes of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) explicitly state this, according to Goodbread.

"Covenant is a promise, not a statement of belief," Goodbread said. Unfortunately, the children's versions of the UUA Principles and Purposes often begin with the statement "We believe...", but this is incorrect wording which tends to make the Principles and Purposes sound like a creed.

Instead, the Principles and Purposes are "a spiritual path we try to follow," according to Goodbread, "and when we fail to live up to them, we beg forgiveness and begin again."

After defining covenant, Benton and Goodbread then turned tips for implementing a covenant in a local congregation. Benton suggested that the first step to implementing a congregation-wide covenant is to begin by implementing a covenant among church leaders, specifically the governing board and staff. She suggested that church leadership start by naming "common values." She said that it is important to come to a common understanding of values, before putting a covenant into writing.

"A board and staff can practice and maintain a covenant," Goodbread said, setting an example for the rest of the congregation. Goodbread said that it is important to include newcomers who join the board or staff after a written covenant is implemented. "Read the covenant together regularly," she said.

Both Goodbread and Benton emphasized that establishing cultural norms takes time. Congregational leadership has to understand and practice covenant before the whole congregation can do it. "It ain't the finished document," said Benton. "It's the talking about it and the practicing it."

"This is a sacred document," Benton added. "Talk about it as new folks come join your congregation." Revisit a written covenant every five years or so, to be sure it still applies to the congregation.

After the congregational leadership has worked on establishing a covenant for a time, the rest of the congregation can be included in the process. Benton said that congregations should expect the whole process to take plenty of time. "People may feel that this is just a document to beat them over the head with, and that is not the point," she said. "Take time to do this."

Reported by Dan Harper; edited by Jone Johnson Lewis.