

Patti Jo Newell presentation in the February 19, 2017 service on “Why Covenant?”

We've been talking about covenant — inviting you on a journey about covenanting. There is a repeat insert this week regarding covenants already in place at Albany UU. Next week, Sam will address the subject of covenant more fully in the service, to be followed by congregational conversations, including one right after service next week.

So why would we do this? Why have a covenant? We have a mission statement; we have seven principles.

Covenant is a unique statement of commitment. Covenants are about relationships, our commitments to each other, our commitment to our selves within the relationship of covenant, meaning a commitment to act in a certain way within our congregation, regardless of whether another keeps the covenant.

Admittedly, not all covenants have taken that approach. There have been covenants to create community, covenants to restrict others outside of the community, covenants to create order out of chaos or to prevent future conflict, but about relationships nonetheless.

As UUs, we approach covenant premised on consent, voluntary agreement. It gives voice to who we are, together, and is also Aspirational: who we want to be, together, in community.

It is not punitive; it is not weapon to be used against one another when we've felt wronged. But covenant states proactively who we are as a people, and, importantly, communicates that to others.

Visitors and newcomers can readily see our aspirations as a community, not just what we do, important as that is, as we pursue mission, but who we are as we journey together as a religious community: the value we place in each other, the commitment we make to each other, the promise of a beloved community.

Community at Albany UU has consistently ranked highest as what is most cherished about our congregation. Maybe covenant is even more important for a non-creedal tradition, as it represents a communal affirmation of our commitment to each other, that community which is key to our UU identity.

We invite you to join us in reflection and discussion about covenant and covenanting, we invite you to explore a deepening of our relationships as a congregation.

Reasons to have a covenant, prepared by the Congregational Covenant Team:

1. By encouraging individuals to be their authentic and even vulnerable selves, to be kind, to listen to each other, and to listen with the same passion that we want to be heard, a covenant should allow people to have difficult conversations in a relatively safe environment. A more safe environment allows us to go deeper in our relationships and the “heart” side of our community; This can also help us to build a stronger and more inclusive community, which will help us to weather more easily a crisis or times of stress.

2. A covenant should create a stronger culture within our walls for speaking about injustice outside our walls by helping us keep our focus on what matters to us as a community and why we are here.
3. A covenant should have a behavioral part, a simple set of promises we make to one another to create a healthy “immune system” for the congregation. Creating a covenant helps to identify unspoken patterns of behavior in the congregation and allows the congregation to establish better practices.
4. A covenant can help us all to better define who we are as a congregation and what it is that draws us together into community. This not only helps us understand better our own motivations for being part of this community. It also is a great help for outsiders and newcomers to our community to understand what it is that motivates us as a community, so they can determine if this is a community they would like to be a part of.
5. A covenant can help us to achieve our hopes and dreams as a community in a number of ways. By defining who we are and why we come together, in other words, what we aspire to, it will clarify what we need to do together to achieve our goals. By defining how we are to be together, in other words how we want to treat each other, we will be better able to support each other in the work necessary to achieve the beloved community here in our back yard, and to make a better world for future generations. We anticipate that a covenant that truly reflects who we are and what we aspire to will give us all better focus, and the motivation to provide each other the mutual support that we all need to make our best mark here in this world.