Agenda for Workshop about Covenanting

Part of Committee of Chairs (CoC) Meeting

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**Opening Readings: (1 minute)**

* “The root idea of our entire tradition is the covenant. A covenanted free church is a body of individuals who have freely made a profoundly simple promise, a covenant: We pledge faithfully to walk together in the spirit of mutual love.” - Rev. Alice Blair Wesley
* Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith, created and sustained by relationships. We come together not around religious dogma or creed, but unite to walk together in affirmation of our core values expressed in our Seven Principles as well as the mission that our congregation has named. How we walk together, holding and honoring our congregation's diversity, is a challenge and the value of covenant.

Adapted from Conrad Wright, “Congregational Polity and the Covenant”

**Introductions: (5 minutes)**

Please introduce your names, your committee or task force association, and briefly answer these questions about covenants:

1. One statement about what you understand a covenant to be?
2. Are you using a covenant in your committee or task force?

**Important Points about Covenants: (12 minutes)**

History, purpose and value of covenants in the context of our church:

Activity: Please share your experiences with the use of covenants

**Creating Covenants: (13 minutes)**

How covenants are being used in our church and future plans for developing covenants

Guidelines for Developing Covenants

Activity:

Given a specific covenant statement “. . . “, consider a different way to reword the statement to improve clarity and meaning. Write down at least 2 variations of the statement. Share your reworded statements. Discuss how some statements could be better than others.

**Closing and Feedback: (8 minutes)**

Complete the sentence: “For me, the value of a covenant is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

Please share any questions or concerns you have about covenants.

Please give us feedback about this workshop, especially with a view toward next year’s CoM work with the congregation. What was of most interest, of least interest, etc.? What information or process was unclear or missing?

History, Roles, and Importance of Covenanting for UUs

*BB: Covenant is the means by which we carry out the mission and vision of the church. It is the heart of the church. It is how we choose to relate to our members and friends (including in other UU churches and the UUA). When practiced with attention and devotion, it can transform us!*

* By Rev. Robert Latham –
  + “The lesson is clear: if we wish to change society with any measure of permanency, we must change its heart and heart change is belief change. And that is the business of religion.”
* By Rev. Alice Blair Wesley –
  + “The spirit of mutual love is alone worthy of our religious loyalty, our ultimate loyalty. So, we will meet often to take counsel concerning the ways of love, and we shall yield religious authority solely to our own understanding of what these ways are, as best we can figure them out or learn or remember them, together.”
* By Rev. Sue Phillips –
  + Our Unitarian Universalist ancestors in 1648 wrote the Cambridge Platform which “was not a declaration of independence. It was a declaration of covenant...They put covenant at the center because they believed, in the words of scholar Alice Blair Wesley, that *‘The* task of the free church could be summed – in their terms – as loving God and loving one another so well that in their own study and discussion, dispute and conference, prayer, consultation and more discussion in the free church, the members might learn together the divine will of the loving God...[as it] relates to justice, peace, and reasonable laws. And, if so, the members would be called, compelled, bound to proclaim it and try to bring it to bear in their whole society.’...Our ancestors organized themselves around loving one another in service of God. That is the beating heart of congregational polity.”
  + “In many of our congregations the meaning of ‘covenant” has been compressed into the means by which we convey expectations and exercise a degree of control over individual behavior. Behavioral covenants are the only way most of our congregations experience covenant, and there’s no mistaking the function – to manage unhealthy individual behavior. We have inadvertently taught our people that covenants are about getting other people to stop behaving badly.”
  + “For our Puritan ancestors, though, the motivation for governing individual behavior wasn’t just copacetic community life but deep community awareness that people who practice loving each other are best able to love God. Absent the Cambridge Platform’s abiding focus on faithful relationships to holiness and grace, the potential depth and breadth of our modern covenants are hobbled to the realm of interpersonal relationships.”
  + “Meanwhile, other congregations and communities use covenant as a way to express their deepest aspirations and values. These covenants are engaged liturgically so that the worshipping community regularly remembers the greater good to which they are collectively called. The covenants are revisited and reinterpreted, and every time new folks become covenant partners the entire community re-commits to their collective purpose and practices.”
  + To be a Unitarian Universalist person or congregation is to claim and be claimed by covenant. There is no such thing as a disconnected UU – to eschew associational connection is to repudiate our polity. Echoing the words of Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, we do not make the covenant, the covenant makes *us.* Our ancestors knew this in their bones. It’s time we remembered. The future of our faith is at stake.”

There are at least five ways that a covenant can support and facilitate clear expectations and deepening of relationships in a congregation. (source: <http://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/leadership/165735.shtml> )

A covenant

* is a statement of agreement about how congregants choose to be in relationship with each other. When they live by these statements, they are modeling their Unitarian Universalist values for each other, their children, and the wider community.
* Comprises, promises, not rules. Unlike rules, promises are discussed, lived, broken, and renewed. Promises and commitments describe how we wish to live together as a faith community, knowing that if these promises don’t work, the congregation may choose to rewrite them.
* is a framework of expectations. Virtually every context we enter has behavior expectations. Our congregations should be no different; in fact, given the reason that we come together—to create a Beloved Community—clear expectations are vital.
* is about behavior, not personality. Behavior that encourages, nurtures, and supports our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is important to the life of the faith community, not the qualities that have shaped and show a person’s character.
* offers an opportunity to explore and deepen our spirituality. Promises made to others in a faith community and the relationships that can form from such a practice can strengthen and broaden commitment in deliberate, intentional, and disciplined ways.

By Dr. M’ellen Kennedy - Suggestions for Developing Relational Groundrules for Small Group Ministry Groups:

The Value and Function of Explicit/Overt Statements

* Everyone is in the know
* Increases comfort level
* Creates safe environment for deeper sharing
* Newcomers integrate more easily and quickly
* Shared leadership is encouraged
* Higher level of participation
* More dynamic and vital groups
* We learn how to create community together
* More likelihood to accomplish the purpose and goals of the group

Developing a Covenant Guidelines:

* All members of the group should participate in developing the covenant.
  + Members are more likely abide by the covenant if they have a sense of ownership.
* What the Chair can do to facilitate the process:
  + Ask the group questions like:

“What do you need in order to accomplish our goals of . . . (your committee’s purpose is)?”

“What do you promise to the group?”; “What do you want the group to promise to you?”

* + Have the members write down at least three statements individually; compile individual statements
  + Keep it succinct and concrete like “One person speaks at a time” and avoid amorphous, global ideals like “Everyone should be loving and caring”
  + Look for commonalities between statements that can be combined into one statement.
  + Discuss each statement, clarify, and refine the wording. Seek consensus on each statement. It is crucial that everyone understands each statement and that everyone is on board. Consider rewording statements to give better clarity to its meaning. If an important item is missing the facilitator can suggest adding it.
  + Don’t let the list get too long. Keep it to one page.
  + Treat the covenant as a living document. Facilitator can say “Let’s try these out and review next time to see if we would like to make any changes.” Either give it as a typed handout or have it showing up on a flip chart. Each member can read out loud one of the statements. Ask whether or not there is anything about the statement that needs clarification or changing. With new members, you may need to cover the covenant in more detail. Revisit the covenant periodically in subsequent meetings.

The following example is taken from the covenant used by Committee on Ministry at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier:

**As members of the Committee on Ministry, we covenant to:**

Remain conscious of the purpose of the committee as we do our work.

Foster open and honest communication and encourage the expression of diverse views.

Listen actively and see clarification when needed.

Directly address feelings and behaviors that damage healthy relationships within the committee, being mindful that it is behavior, not personality or character that is the issue.

Respect members by starting and ending meetings on time.

Equally share in the work and responsibilities of the committee, and come to meetings prepared in mind and spirit.

Be an engaged church member, actively seeking out an understanding of all aspects of church life.

Resolve issues *within* the committee, so we may speak as one voice in relation to our work in the church.

Faithfully keep in confidence sensitive issues being addressed by the committee.

Honor requests for confidentiality from members of the congregation, while encouraging direct communication between involved parties.

The following example is taken from the covenant used by the Small Group Ministry Facilitator meetings at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier:

* Listen deeply and respectfully
* Presume good faith in each other
* Be willing to reach out for help
* Don’t interrupt (unless you don’t understand something, or can’t hear…etc.)
* Start and end on time
* Respect each individual’s experience
* Share the responsibility of helping the group function well
* Respect confidentiality
* No negative body language (eye-rolling, deep sighs, etc.) be non-judgmental
* Speak from your own experience
* Hear from each Facilitator individually, not just one from each group.
* Don’t give advice, we are not here to “fix” each other, but to listen.
* Make your best effort to attend each meeting, your presence makes a difference.
* Email facilitator if you can’t attend
* Both laughter and tears are OK
* Practice ”Double Confidentiality”, i.e .don’t approach a group member outside the group about something they have shared in group.
* Take care of yourself.
* Be here for each other.

The following examples were taken from “Writing a Covenant” by Frederick Muir (<http://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/leadership/165735.shtml> )

**Safe Congregations Panel (8 members)**

United by a shared mission, we covenant together to honor ourselves, our task, and each other by:

* being fully present and prepared—spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually
* listening compassionately for and sharing generously of the wisdom and experience we bring
* maintaining confidentiality while not perpetuating secrecy
* holding each other accountable to our individual convictions and shared Unitarian Universalist Principles

Welcoming the cloud of witnesses who sit with us—listening especially for the voices of victims/ survivors, we join our hearts, minds, and hands to this continuing work recognizing the magnitude of speaking truth to power, transforming hearts, and bringing hope.

**Men’s Covenant Group (10 members)**

We are a covenant group that follows a nurturing path in order to grow as individuals and as a group. So that the group can function effectively, we commit to attend on a regular basis and to start and end our meetings on time. We will “show up” mentally, physically, and emotionally and vow to keep personal items confidential (erring on the side of confidentiality). The group promises to be a safe environment where we as individuals are able to open our souls to one another and go beyond our normal comfort levels so that we can truly know one another and ourselves better. In order to grow together we will practice aggressive listening. We will practice speech that is non-judgmental, open and heartfelt, compassionate, honest, and supportive. The group has permission to remind individuals when they go out of bounds; conversely, members have a responsibility to let the group know when they have been hurt by something that was said. We pledge to be there for one another in and out of the meetings. We pledge a commitment to the men’s covenant group, the congregation, and the greater community.

**Board of Trustees (10 members)**

As members of the Board of Trustees, we covenant to keep the best interests of the congregation at heart and to carry out the trust placed in us as guardians of the Mission and Principles and as stewards of the resources of our church. We will embrace and share our experience, wisdom, and gifts in carrying out this work. We will celebrate our diversity by working to create an environment in which all are heard and respected. We will speak the truth in love. As we seek consensus, we will give and accept constructive feedback.

We will faithfully attend and be fully engaged in board meetings. We will show our commitment by being prompt, prepared, and focused. We will support the decisions and policies of the board.

We will be honest and realistic in our expectations and commitments, both individually and collectively. At the same time we will accept and forgive our failures. As part of a faith community, we will seek to minister to each other, sharing our joys, sorrows, successes, and struggles.

In this spirit, we covenant to further the mission of the congregation as we strive to make real the vision of Unitarian Universalism.

Additional Statements that may be considered in a covenant (source: <http://getthepicture.ca/a-list-of-ground-rules-for-effective-meetings/> )

* Everyone participate, no one dominate
* Share the airtime
* Success depends on participation – share ideas, ask questions, draw others out
* Listen to understand
* Use I statements
* Listen for the future to emerge
* One speaker at a time
* Seek unity (not separation)
* Disagree without being disagreeable
* Share your unique perspective
* Share your experience (not others)
* Speak honestly
* Stay open to new ways of doing things
* All ideas are valid
* Critique ideas, not people
* Be positive, non-judgmental and open to new ideas
* Remember responsibility and non-defensiveness
* Stay at the strategic level (out of the operational)
* Everything happens through conversation
* Meaning is in the listener
* Listen from the “We” but speak from the “I”
* Respect each others’ thinking and value their contributions
* Listen for understanding – inquire (ask) before you advocate (persuade)
* Be aware of meaningless abstraction
* Treat everything you hear as an opportunity to learn and grow
* Articulate hidden assumptions
* Challenge cherished beliefs
* With transformation, expect anxiety
* Manage group work
* Show up and CHOOSE to be present
* Staying on schedule is everyone’s responsibility; honor time limits
* State your “headline” first, then the supporting information as necessary
* Be brief and meaningful when voicing your opinion
* Speak your truth, without blame or judgment
* Be intrigued by the difference you hear
* Expect to be surprised
* Allow ever voice to be heard
* Let go of the outcome
* Whatever is said in the room stays in the room
* Ask “what’s possible?” not “what’s wrong”? Keep asking
* Listen with care instead of “building your story”
* Participate 100%
* Seek common ground and understanding (not problems and conflict)
* “Yes…and” thinking (not, “Yes…but”)
* Stay out of the weeds and the swamps
* Listen for the future to emerge
* Have fun!