

PRINCIPLES, PURPOSES, AND COVENANT:
THE PROMISES WE MAKE!

We have no doctrine nor dogma, and we share no unifying creed, so what holds us Unitarian Universalists together? As we have discussed before, our UU Principles and the shared Sources of our Living Tradition provide guidelines and a general sense of what we commonly believe, but within them lie no creedal test, no obligatory statement of belief. It is not any set of words that holds us together, and yet we are a covenantal people. The covenant that holds us together remains most often unwritten, unspoken, and yet it is a bond between us, a commitment to civility, to living by a high standard of respect and acceptance. Our covenant is to act with justice and compassion toward each other and all persons, in line with our principles and sources.

In decision-making, we practice a congregational polity, in which the congregation is the highest arbiter of all decisions. We have no Pope nor Bishop, nor any outside body to dictate the actions of individuals or of the congregation. Our affiliation with the Unitarian Universalist Association, entitles us to certain services and allows us to be represented by delegates to General Assembly and other meetings in return for our dues, but confers no authority within the congregation to that association or its representatives. The vote of congregational members is our highest authority for calling, ordaining or dismissing a minister, electing board members and other officers, buying or selling property, any other major matter including delegating to the board working authority. We have by-laws approved and amended by the congregation that spell out all such legal and operational authority and qualifications for membership. Beyond these things, it is only our own commitments, the promises we make to ourselves and others, that bind us together and govern our behavior within this congregation.

Over the years, many congregations have made the effort to develop a written statement, a Covenant of Right Relations or a Behavioral Covenant which attempts to describe the intentions of congregation members in regard to general relations as well as the management of disagreements and disputes. Our Committee on Ministry has been considering the development of such a statement over the last few years and is planning to lead us through the development of such a statement later this fall. There are several goals involved in this effort but the main one is to have in place both expectations of behavior and a process by which problems that develop may be addressed respectfully.

One of the hopes for developing a Covenant of Right Relations at this time is that since we have no major disputes or disagreements going on currently, we can better work out such an agreement now and put it in place before any disagreements develop. Today I only want to prime the pump in the sense of getting us all thinking about what holds us together here and how we might describe those factors that matter the most.

I invite you to spend a few moments thinking back to what brought you to the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton. How did you first become aware of 1st UU? When did you first come here? Had you been to other UU Churches before you came here? Were you raised here? What were your first impressions of this congregation? Who did you meet here that made an impression on you? What factors were involved in your decision to return? If you are a member, what factors influenced your decision to become a member?

What role did the UU Principles and Sources have on your decision to become a Unitarian Universalist? Were there other commonly held beliefs or actions that influenced your decision to become a UU?

How have you been involved with First UU since you first came here? What groups and classes have you attended? What committees and task forces have you served on during your time here? What else would you like to do as part of the First UU family?

Though there are probably more introverts in UU Congregations than in most religious communities, active engagement within and beyond the congregation is important. Getting introverts to step outside their comfort zones to join a group or to engage in justice work can be a challenge, and yet the vitality of a congregation lies in our shared efforts. In a small congregation such as this, it is hard to hide in the back row and ignore the call for engagement and involvement. It helps for everyone to feel safe, respected, and accepted. When such is true, even introverts are more likely to step forward, or at least answer affirmatively when asked to take on important tasks.

Another factor in our covenant with each other is the meaning that we find in this congregation. Do we share a sense that what we do together is important, that it has value to ourselves and to others? We will be taking a look at our sense of vision and mission this year to see whether we can better express what this congregation is about. What is our role in the world, in this community, and in the lives of our members and friends? What are we able to offer that isn't available somewhere else? What difference are we making in our community and the world? Is there more that we can or should be doing? Are we reaching all the people in our area that could benefit from what we have to offer? What could we do to reach more people?

Our Principles and Sources provide a powerful statement of what this congregation could offer, but we do not always live up to the call for justice, compassion, respect, and acceptance that they include. I hope that we will continue to strive to do better in living up to the high expectations called forth by our Principles and the Sources of our Living Tradition. With the current situation in the world it is even more important than in many recent years that we strive to make a place for all those persons who have been hurt by the resurgence of white supremacy and the effort to further dismantle the social safety net. These are not the best of times for those without significant wealth and investments, not at all good for those who are just getting by day by day and week by week.

These are also difficult times for any who do not identify as Christian, especially for Muslims but also for Jews, persons of color, and LGBTQ persons as Neo-Nazis and the KKK have come out of their hiding holes to try again to reestablish their hold over the other remaining followers of Trump, particularly unemployed and underemployed white males. These are not great times for women either, as they are being blamed along with Hillary Clinton for all kinds of problems.

Now, as we think about the covenant we share with each other, some will say that we need to be accepting also to the abusers and the white supremacists, and even to the wealthy who are only seeking to increase their own wealth. To an extent I would agree that we need to be willing to enter dialogue with such persons, but those who cannot agree with our broadly inclusive Principles and Sources, who act according to other values really have no place in our community. Most persons of goodwill can accept our Principles even if they may not yet be as accepting of persons from all our source traditions, so it is not that hard to find a place within our community. We also may have a hard time respecting the values of Neo-Nazis, KKK members, and persons only interested in their own success. We may follow the prophets of old in calling for them to repent, but we cannot allow them to disrupt our efforts to reach out to those in need. They have chosen their own lot. We welcome people with a great range of beliefs, but we need not welcome those who have excluded themselves by their own beliefs and actions.

We are an open community, but there are times when some people by their actions become unwelcome in our midst. Those who are disruptive, abusive, or stand against those things on which we commonly agree make themselves unwelcome. But even those who may disagree are welcome to join us if they are respectful of persons and will listen and learn from us. And of course only those who are members are eligible to vote on decisions in the congregation or to serve on the board.

Developing a written Covenant of Right Relations will involve describing our expectations for normal respectful and accepting behavior

based in our Principles and then identifying ways that we will deal with differences and disagreements. We may identify or create a group within the congregation to mediate disagreements that cannot be solved through direct interactions of individuals involved. We may also clarify when and if outside authorities may need to be contacted as a result of inappropriate or illegal behavior. We already have requirements for obtaining background checks of anyone working with children in the congregation.

As an intentional community it is good for us to be as clear as possible about how we want to live together, so a statement of Covenant would be helpful in reminding us of our expectations and also would give us something to share with those new to the congregation. It should also make clearer how we expect disagreements to be handled, preferably in direct conversation between those involved but if that is not possible, then with a caring mediator who can help to find whatever compromise might be necessary to restore relationships.

A Covenant of Right Relations will make explicit those Promises that we make to ourselves and each other about how we will live out our Principles within this community. It then may be used as a reminder of how we have committed to behave toward other members of this community, as well as an introduction for newcomers of what we expect in our interactions. This Covenant will help us make clear that abusive and disruptive behavior is not acceptable, and that respect and acceptance toward all persons are the norms that we seek to live by, at least when we gather here or elsewhere for congregational events.

Just imagine how different our world would be if Respect and Acceptance were societal norms for all human interactions and Justice and Compassion were the standards by which beliefs and actions were adjudicated. Our world is a mess currently, with the disaster in the White House a major epicenter. By spelling out our behavioral expectations we make a clear statement that we shall not act the way the abuser-in-chief all too often acts. By making our covenant explicit we show our faith.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of participating in one of the expressions of our connection beyond the congregation. Rev. Sonya Sukalski was installed as the Minister of the UU Fellowship of Tuolumne County in Sonora. You may remember that a few months ago she and I exchanged pulpits one Sunday. About 20 UU Ministers from this District were able to attend and participate in a very nice service. Among other things we were invited to share bones (from animals or the earth) with Sonya and the congregation as a way of charging them for their shared ministry. I had been a bit skeptical about that request but it turned into a beautiful part of the service, bringing to life many joys and challenges of ministry. I am always glad to connect with my UU Ministerial Colleagues because of the life and experience we share but also because of the covenant through which we agree to support each other. The covenant along with our shared experiences helps to build the connections that we share. My hope is that the effort to make our congregational covenant explicit will help to strengthen the connections that we share.

We live in challenging times. We need the strength of friendship and community that we share together here at First Unitarian Universalist Church. Our Principles and Sources help to guide us, but the covenant we share through our words and actions is what really brings those statements to life. I encourage you to take time this week and frequently to think about the Covenant we share and the Principles and Sources of our Living Tradition which inspire us! May peace prevail in our community and around the world!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!