

RE-COVENANTING

There are many kinds of communities, people brought together by accident or intention, joining in or sharing a common purpose, or merely aggregated by happenstance. Religious and other intentional communities usually share a core group of beliefs that creates a common purpose and a unified self-understanding. Unitarian Universalist Religious Communities are a little more complicated, with a nuanced understanding that our most common belief is that we accept multiple beliefs within a framework of shared values and principles. Where others agree to agree, cantankerous lot that we are, we more readily agree to disagree, in an agreeable way, of course! Therein lies the great question, “What holds us together as Unitarian Universalists?”

We have a long history of being a non-creedal, non-doctrinal, religious community. Even our Principles, Purposes, and Sources are carefully annotated to make clear that they are neither creed, nor doctrine, nor any kind of requirement of belief for membership. They do describe in a non-prescriptive way the general outline of things commonly believed by Unitarian Universalists. Often throughout our history it has been easier to describe what we aren't than what we are! We aren't Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Pagan or Humanist, though we include people within our communities that identify as each of those. We are not just a club, nor a debating society, though we have features of each.

We are a covenantal community of people with shared values and principles, though our covenant is more often implied than made explicit. We are a people committed to justice work who seek to approach others with compassion and respect. Some of us are more interested in social justice than in more spiritual matters, while for others the reverse is true. We are a community with room for many different beliefs and practices as long as others are respected rather than harmed.

Many of us value personal freedoms and sometimes resist restrictions and limitations. Sometimes we get so caught up in our own worlds that we forget about the needs of others. Sometimes we forget that our ideas and perspectives are only one set of choices in this wonderful world full of possibilities. Not to suggest that some ideas are not better than others, nor that religious opinions are equivalent with scientific facts, but to remind us that there are many facts and even more opinions and that though we are entitled to our own opinions we may not hold a monopoly on facts!

The idea of making covenants, or in today's case, Re-Covenanting, is to remind us of our commitment to respect each other and each other's ideas. The ways that we behave respectfully toward each other, the accepting behavior that we model, is part of what we covenant together to practice in this and other Unitarian Universalist communities. There have been occasional problems in many congregations, where there have been failures to respect others. We are fortunate that things have been mostly going smoothly in interpersonal relationships in the last few years, but there have been problems here before and even in recent years there have been a few people who left upset over one thing or another.

The process of shaping a covenant is an important one that has been mostly on the back burner since before I arrived. It is important to have as many people as possible engaged in the effort or there will not be enough ownership in the covenant for it to make a difference. A covenant, to be useful will help to remind us to practice all those things that we say we believe when we share our Principles and our Words of Affirmation, and to do so it must take the abstraction of those statements and concretize them into behavioral relational statements. Such covenants are sometimes described as Covenants of Right Relations or Behavioral Covenants, but I think we have settled on calling ours a Covenant of Healthy Relations.

Rather than starting from scratch, we like much of the covenant that you found in your order of service, so we will mostly be making modifications to it to better fit our situation in response to suggestions that the Committee on Ministry has received and receives today. So take time to look at this statement and think about how it might better reflect our intentions toward each other as we interact within this community!

Covenant is the religious equivalent of a contract. In the Bible God made Covenants with the people on a number of occasions. I like the word covenant because it is not the legal ramifications from breaking it that are of most concern, but that a failure is a break in our community life and commitment. When we covenant in a religious community, we are agreeing to act in certain ways toward others, specifically to treat others with respect and acceptance. A covenant will also hopefully include a process to restore relationship when problems arise. If we are successful in crafting this covenant, it will not be more or less restrictive than our statements of belief, but will only clarify the ways that we already intend to act toward each other. It will serve as a reminder of those intentions and give us the opportunity to think about whether we are acting within our covenant when times are challenging. It will also give us a succinct and effective way to talk to others when we are concerned about any behavior, by asking them whether they are acting within covenant.

As the Committee on Ministry continues to work on our Covenant, suggestions will be incorporated and a proposed version will be presented to the Board probably in April and the congregation will be invited to vote on it, possibly at the Annual Meeting in June.

An explicit Covenant will not by its mere existence fix whatever problems may arise, but it will help to set some boundaries around our behavior in dealing with such problems. There are other steps we may choose to take in the future, such as training and empowering a conflict resolution team or implementing an all-church Safety Policy, but this effort to put in place a Covenant will help to provide a baseline of the ways we behave respectfully toward each other when we are together.

As such, it may also serve as a model for our behavior in other settings and for the behavior of all who join us. It is possible that we will never need to remind ourselves of the expectations within our covenant, but by having such a statement, posting it for others to see, and including it in the material that we give new members, we may avoid problems that might otherwise develop.

Like most things within Unitarian Universalist congregations, developing a Covenant is a process which takes time and may need to be repeated in a few years! Like all other statements of belief and practice, our understandings and expectations may change or we may find better words to describe our intentions over time. Hence the disclaimer, that whatever words we use to describe our Covenant during this year may be expanded and revised as our wisdom grows!

As we contemplate the year ahead with all its challenges, this first Sunday of the year is a good time to Re-Covenant with each other our intentions to respect and accept each other, to listen to understand, to share our ideas freely from heart and mind when it is our turn, to be our best and true selves when we are together, and to trust each other to be their best and true selves as we join together in the life & work of this community! So may we gather, and so may we find blessing together!

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