



What does it mean to be a people of Covenant?

Small Groups: September 2015

Every week, at the beginning of our Sunday services, we say these words together:

*Love is the doctrine of this congregation
The quest for truth is our sacrament
And service is our prayer.
To dwell together in peace
To seek knowledge in freedom
To share our strength in fellowship,
Thus do we covenant.*

This is the covenant of our congregation – words that connect us in fellowship and common purpose. James Luther Adams is one of the most prominent Unitarian scholars of recent times. He taught ethics and theology at University of Chicago Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School. Adams defines Covenant as one of the cornerstones of Unitarian Universalism and argues that human beings become human by making commitments and promises, both individually and collectively. Covenant reminds us we are not alone. It connects us to others in relationship, but also connects us to the creative and sustaining power of life, and to the earth itself.

One reason covenant is so foundational to Unitarian Universalism is because we are not a creedal religion. Creeds are statements of belief, religious doctrine explaining religious teaching and beliefs. Unitarian Universalists do not have a creed. There is no profession of faith, no particular belief one has to subscribe to in order to be a UU or to be a member of the congregation. Instead, we are a covenantal tradition and covenanted community. Members of our congregation identify as humanist, theist, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, atheist, agnostic, pagan, and more. But covenant connects us across our differences. Through covenant, we make promises to each other of how we will try to dwell together in peace, in service, seeking truth and living out love for one another and the world.

This can seem a little strange, if you are new to Unitarian Universalism. Many people still want to know “what we believe,” or “how we can be a religion if we don’t all believe the same thing.” One of the things I treasure most about our tradition, is that while doctrine and dogma are generally fixed, covenant is based on relationship and it allows for growth and change and new wisdom and insight to develop. Being in covenant means learning together, growing together and helping one another. It also means working together on things that reach beyond our own lives. There is an old, and familiar saying in UUism, “We need not think alike to love alike.” Covenant helps us find more authentic ways of living in diverse community, discovering deeper truths by learning together through and from our differences, and honoring each other in the process.

Throughout this year, we will look more closely at our covenant. We will look at the values in our covenant, for instance love, truth, peace, freedom and what it means to be a people who covenant to live these promises. This month as we look at what it means to be a people of covenant. We will look at the various promises and covenants we have in our lives, from those within our families, to these very words we promise each other every Sunday.

Rev. Susan



Living the Theme: Covenant

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience covenant and what you learned from the practice.

1. Keep A Promise...To Yourself!

It's the promise we most often forget, or maybe it's better to say it's the promise we most often sacrifice. We are often so good at keeping our commitments to others and yet fall flat on our face when it comes to the commitments we make to ourselves. And if we can't keep our promises to ourselves, how will we ever keep our promises to each other? The commitments we make to ourselves serve as the foundation for the pledges we make to those around us. If we break our commitments to personal physical health, we sacrifice the strength to support others. If we cheat on our promises to personal spiritual health, we lose our ability to serve and see needs greater than our own. Those who can't promise kindness and forgiveness to themselves are rarely able to extend kindness and forgiveness to others.

Here is your challenge:

Read these two articles:

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/11-promises-you-should-make-yourself.html>

AND

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/30/promises-to-yourself_n_5628259.html

Identify one of the promises they mention that most resonates with you. Which promise calls to you the most? Which promise is your heart most hungry for? Which promise have you wanted to keep to yourself, but regularly break?

Find a way to keep that promise front and center. Print it out and tape it to your office desk. Put it in your wallet or your purse. Write it in lipstick on your bathroom mirror.

Spend the month keeping it! Give yourself the gift of finally following through.

Come to your group ready to share your experience, what you learned about yourself and how the month was different because you remained true.

2. Speak the Language of a Covenant (liberally adapted from covenantmarriage.com)

When we commit ourselves to a person, a family or an organization, it is important to differentiate between a contract and a covenant. Contracts exist to protect all parties' rights, whereas covenants build upon trust and choice. Examine the difference in contractual vs. covenantal language below. Try to notice your language in interactions with others and see if you can tell the difference.

Contract: I need you to do this.

Covenant: What can I do for you?

Contract: I'll meet you halfway.

Covenant: I'll give you 100% plus.

Contract: What do I get?

Covenant: What can I give?

Contract: I have to

Covenant: I want to



Some Questions to Live With

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. **What makes a covenant different from a contract?**
2. **What are the covenants you were born into?** Do you still abide by those covenants?
3. **What covenants have you created with your own efforts?** Have those covenants been with your family, your congregation, your coworkers? How does it feel different from other types of relationships?
4. **What relationships in your life have a covenantal quality?** What are some of the explicit and implicit promises within that relationship?
5. If someone secretly monitored your life for a month, what would they conclude is **your most important covenant?**
6. It's been said that our very humanity lies in the way we carry out our promises. **How have you made yourself more human through a promise? What promise is asking you to renew your humanity right now?**
7. What promises have you made to your spiritual life? **What is the connection between your spirituality and covenant-making?**
8. **Is there a covenant in your life that needs to be broken?** Are you keeping a commitment that is limiting your growth?
9. **Do you need to forgive yourself for breaking a promise?**
10. **When a covenant is broken, how have you found ways to return to covenant?**
11. It's been said that we promise according to our hopes, and perform according to our fears. **How do you see this in your life?**
12. **Has time and age changed how you think about covenants?** Are you slower or quicker to make commitments? Have your commitments grown narrower or broader?



Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Covenant: a usually formal, solemn, and binding agreement; a written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action

A covenant requires trust. I must do all I can to fulfill the requirements of the covenant, and I trust the other members of the covenant will do the same. Knowing that I am human and subject to failure in attaining perfection, I trust the others in the covenant will forgive my failings but expect me to learn from my errors. I, in turn, must forgive any members failings while expecting them to learn from their errors.

Small Group Facilitator

The central task of a religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others.

Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

It is easier to understand the moral constraints on action when we believe that there is someone to whom we owe responsibility that we are not owners of the planet, and that we are covenantally linked to those who will come after us.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [The Dignity of Difference](#)

Mother Earth needs us to keep our covenant. We will do this in courts, we will do this on our radio station, and we will commit to our descendants to work hard to protect this land and water for them. Whether you have feet, wings, fins, or roots, we are all in it together.

Winona LaDuke

To every people the land is given on condition. Perceived or not, there is a Covenant, beyond the constitution, beyond sovereign guarantee, beyond the nation's sweetest dreams of itself.

Leonard Cohen

In marriage ceremonies, before the couple exchanges their vows, I always say, "The vows through which you accept one another as married partners have no hidden power in and of themselves. They have power only to the extent that they express in words your ongoing intention and commitment to one another." In this way, I wish to express that while marriage and the covenants we make do indeed change us, that the power of the covenant is not in the ceremony, and it is not in our public profession of these vows. Rather their real power, to change us, to help us grow, remains always in our ongoing commitment to live them, to understand them more truly through experience, and discovering each day, each year, what it means to grow together in commitment, devotion and love.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

...a covenant might be implicit, expressed by silent consent as people walk together and show concern for one another. But an explicit covenant is far better ... for reminding the members of their mutual duty and stirring them up to it. ... there is something to be said for the word covenant, ... It emphasizes that the church is a community of mutual obligation, which involves a sense of commitment. Even the freest of free churches needs that much discipline if it is to last long enough to accomplish anything of value in this world.

Conrad Wright

Everything you do is connected to who you are as a person and, in turn, creates the person you are becoming. Everything you do affects those you love. All of life is covenant.

Paul E. Miller, [A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World](#)



For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of your unity, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Rev. Robert Eller-Isaacs
Singing the Living Tradition, #637

Human beings are at our best when we make solemn promises to one another and try hard to keep them... We are promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures. Our very humanity lies in the way we carry out our promises to our families, our coworkers, our neighbors, and our fellow members of the human family...to be genuine, a covenant must be a covenant of being. It's not just about good words, but about actions."

Dennis McCarty on James Luther Adams

A covenant is a list of the ways in which we agree to be together as a group. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. Historically, we've been a covenantal religion rather than a creedal religion - i.e., we are bound by the way we promise to be with and treat each other, not by common and identical beliefs and creeds.

Wisdom Circle- First UU Church of San Diego

Contract with Myself

I, _____, understand that I am undertaking an intensive, guided encounter with my own creativity. I commit myself to weekly reading, daily morning pages, a weekly artist date, and the fulfillment of each week's tasks.

I, _____, further understand that this course will raise issues and emotions for me to deal with. I, _____, commit myself to excellent self-care--adequate sleep, diet, exercise and pampering--for the duration of the course.

Julia Cameron, The Artist's Way

To me, being "a people of covenant" for UU's means we are a community based on commitment to certain principles rather than a commitment to a theology or a faith. According to one definition, a covenant is not just any agreement between people, but a sacred agreement... My personal "covenant" with the universe, is to take my turn at life as well as I can for as long as I can.

Small Group Facilitator

A group is as healthy as its "social contract" is clear; a congregation, as faithful as its covenant is mutually understood; a pastor as effective as the pastor's and people's commitment to trust and integrity is honored, guarded and fulfilled.

David Augsburg

When we live in covenanted communities of support and accountability, we live deeper, more authentic, more creative lives.

Walter P. Herz

Covenant is a binding commitment, entered into by two or more parties, to work and care for one another while respecting the freedom, integrity and difference of each. Covenant is politics without power, economics without self-interest. What difference does it make? For one thing, it gets us to think about the common good, the good of all-of-us-together.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Home We Build

Say Yes. Whatever it is, say yes with your whole heart & simple as it sounds that's all the excuse life needs to grab you by the hands and start to dance.

Brian Andreas



When we create a covenant together in our SGM groups, we make a solemn promise to ourselves and to each other that we will honor certain ways of being together.

These are usually based at least partly on our beloved UU principles – to listen respectfully to each other, withhold judgment, share our own stories with honesty and love, start and end on time, and whatever else the group decides is important. Because the group creates its own covenant, each participant feels a strong commitment to honoring its various parts. Some groups are much more relaxed and informal than others. Some are centered around a common bond, such as those groups designed for singles, parents, men, women, youth, or elders. Others help to bring together a mixture of different lifestyles and generations. But the common thread is always the covenant to be together in respectful, thoughtful ways and to learn from each other how to live richer, more meaningful lives.

Small Group Facilitator

Additional Resources

Books:

The Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book by Don Miguel Ruiz

Four promises that can transform how we live our lives

Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church With the Power of Covenant, edited by Walter P. Herz
A Skinner House publication that includes James Luther Adams' five aspects of covenant.

The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien
A small band of four innocents and their allies covenant to take the One Ring to Mordor to destroy it. They don't know the way, but they know that if they can succeed, middle earth will be saved from evil.

Articles:

“15 Promises All Couples Should be Able to Make to Each Other”

<http://www.lifehack.org/299342/15-promises-all-couples-should-able-make-each-other>

“Making Promises, Making Covenants”

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/welcome/session2/118157.shtml>

“Bound in Covenant” by Rev. Victoria Safford

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>



Covenant of Commitment to Our Congregation

I am committed to the role our congregation plays in my religious exploration, and I respect the shared ministry of each congregant, staff member and our called minister, therefore

- I donate my talents, efforts and financial support,
- I assume everyone's good motives by emphasizing the positive in each encounter,
- I create a safe haven by listening to what others say,
- I welcome sentiments, beliefs and feelings different from my own,
- I state my own views with directness and humility.

I know conflict among us is inevitable and manageable, therefore

- I recognize that we each have limited time, ability and energy,
- I take my concern, anger and hurt directly to those involved,
- I say of another only what I would say to him or her,
- I support those who take leader positions,
- I accept leadership when called and guide with love, warmth and humor,
- I remember to thank others for their contributions.

I know our practice of this covenant may be imperfect, and I am committed to our religious community living up to its aspirations, therefore,

- I welcome others' reminders to me, and
- I use kindness when I remind others of what we here vow.

Thus do I covenant.

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
Adopted January 27, 2002

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congregation
The quest for truth is our
sacrament
And service is our prayer.
To dwell together in peace
To seek knowledge in freedom
To share our strength in
fellowship,
Thus do we covenant.*