



Take Time to Covenant

by Eunice Benton, Executive Director for the Mid-South District

Small congregations may have a particular advantage when it comes to talking about how members might be in covenant with each other—because, after all, in a small congregation, there are fewer people to come to an understanding about the gist of a covenant—an agreement about “how we agree to be together.” But, like congregations of all sizes, small congregations may put the work of creating covenant on the back burner when there are so many things to do just to keep going.

Creating a covenantal understanding in a congregation can be a powerful experience and a valuable investment for a congregation of any size. Marking out a time to have a conversation about what a covenant should cover and then writing down words which capture the understanding of the conversation can get a congregation into a dialogue about the core values that hold it together.

A congregational covenant is an understanding that embodies an expectation of trust. A covenant can be an understanding that embraces and unites people in spiritual community.

One small Southern congregation found itself in a crisis of understanding when theological issues threatened to create divisions amongst members and misunderstandings among key leaders. A board member announced his intended resignation, naming his reason as a profound difference of belief with others in leadership. A congregational discussion arose when the resignation was announced, and in an unanticipated but healthy exchange of statements, one after another, congregation members spoke along a theme named by an early speaker: “What matters here is not what we believe ... but how we treat each other.”

“How we treat each other” is at the heart of a congregational covenant. And such a covenant seems particularly important for a religious community like a Unitarian Universalist congregation, where there may be many beliefs and points of view, where there is no central creed to call people together.

Creating a congregational covenant is not something a community does to manage conflict, but a covenant, when it is well understood and kept alive as part of the congregation’s culture, can go a long

way to calling folks to their highest and best behaviors. When conflict surfaces, a congregation that is already practicing healthy and caring behavior habits has a much better chance of managing its differences.

Our Unitarian forebearer Francis David said it centuries ago: "We don't have to think alike to love alike."

Taking time to name a covenant of understanding, to talk about "how we agree to treat each other," to set down some words that give voice to that understanding, is time wisely spent for any congregation.

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