



Return to Covenant

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No person is perfect. That's true enough. It only makes sense then, that in our Unitarian Universalist congregations we will have to learn to live our values together. We can count on the fact that we will fall short and make mistakes along the way.

Many congregations have created covenants—statements of how we intend to be with one another in our communities of faith. A covenant expresses what we hope and expect of ourselves and each other in relationship.

Once the covenant is written and shared widely, it offers a vision to move towards. It sets the bar high for how we want to learn to be in the world. A covenant can help us take a breath before we do something difficult. Read before each meeting, it can remind us to bring our best selves into the work. It is also what we return to when we have strayed.

Think about what it is like to get so frustrated or defensive that you say and act in ways that are not clear, not compassionate, and not helpful to the group. We have all done it. Think about choosing not to tell a difficult truth because of habit or a desire not to be unkind. Remember what it was like in anger to fall short of your ideals of being in good relationship. We have all done it.

So what do we do to prepare for when—not if—this happens? How do we hold each other accountable? How do we return to covenant?

We prepare realistically. We practice. We get better and better at it.

How we ask each other to return to covenantal relationship may be different in each area of the country because we have different cultures and traditions. But regardless of our regional differences, we can help one another find ways to hold each other accountable and still feel true to our cultures.

A few suggestions might help.

Strategize for this while you and your community are not in the middle of a difficult interaction. Our best and most creative thinking will happen when we are not feeling anxious, angry, or disappointed. It makes some sense to brainstorm what it would look like to compassionately hold each other accountable as part of the process of writing a covenant.

Think about whether it might help to have someone at meetings whose job it is to pay attention to the body language, underlying tensions, individual silences or tirades—and encourage the group to check in with each other. It might help to ask if there is something that needs to be said in compassionate truth.

Some congregations have a physical cue, a thing that anyone can use to express a concern. One congregation uses red, yellow, and green cups or cards. A person who puts a red cup in front of her is saying, without words, “Wait. We seem out of covenant.” Put the yellow cup in front of your place to indicate, “I’m not sure this is right.” A green card states, “Doing fine.”

Using symbols like colored cups may seem silly or contrived. But many of us have learned to blurt out a barbed, harsh opinion as if it were fact, while others have learned to adjust to a hurtful interaction rather than interrupt it. Some of us have learned that it is better not to rock the boat than to tell the truth. Most of us have noticed that we are not often rewarded for taking the group off its agenda to get back into covenantal relationship. But in communities of faith, being in covenantal relationship might be the most important agenda. Changing habits will take practice and maybe some props.

A facilitator can check how the group is doing by asking for thumbs: hold a thumb up for “Good process so far,” to the side for “Not sure,” or down for “I feel like we are not in covenant—can we stop for a few minutes and figure out what is happening?”

Another congregation had a special stone in the middle of the table that anyone could pick up. By picking up the stone the person effectively says, “This feels off. Does anyone else feel it would be good to check out what is happening?”

Beyond using props, people can take the risk to ask something like, “Could you rephrase that so I can hear what you are saying?” or, “I am committed to being in community with you, but this is hard. Can you try another way of talking to me?” Saying things like this may help give each other the chance to take a breath and try again without the barbs we too often add, or the silences we keep.

A congregation that writes its covenant, then practices in their own way returning to covenant again and again, may find over time that they do not need props anymore. Developing these skills helps us recover from our mistakes more quickly and forgive more readily. We laugh more when we feel we are moving together with fewer unaddressed injuries. We get more done without unspoken issues roiling under the surface of our agendas.

Writing a covenant is important and powerful. Living it is quite another thing. It takes practice. It takes commitment, and when put to use, it can transform who we are together, which in turn will help us transform our world.

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