

## Why a Covenant? Sermon September 25, 2016 by Wendy Page

Have you ever had the experience of having a topic or idea that keeps turning up everywhere you turn? I have: a topic is in the ether and eventually I am forced to come to terms with it.

Covenants are in the air for me. Last spring this congregation voted to adopt a covenant at the Annual Meeting. We recited it earlier and now have printed copies. [WAVE CARD] In June I went to General Assembly where I was invited to help facilitate a dialog on a how the UUA could recovenant with its congregations. When I returned here at North Parish this fall, I discovered that the Soul Matters topic for the month of September was covenant. Soul Matters is a collection of resources for UU worship, Religious Education and Small Group Ministries which focuses on one topic a month. And the topic of this month is covenant. And, this past Wednesday I went to the Mass Bay District meeting of UU Ministers, and we read the UUMA covenant for the chalice lighting. OK, I sometimes am a slow learner, but when something keeps popping up over and over, I eventually learn it is time to pay attention.

What is a covenant? It is an agreement of how a group is going to interact with one another. Often my classes at Andover Newton Theological School begin with the writing of a covenant. It helps us know what the boundaries are and how we are going to be with one another. It gives us the guidelines for building trust. We usually put in guidelines around confidentiality, respectful listening, and no updating Facebook during class. But we can also add items for our personal comfort or safety. For instance, I am allergic to bananas. It is a rare allergy and I am uncomfortable in a room with a banana peel in the trash bin. So I always add a line about bananas in the covenant, usually it brings some levity to the process. But it helps me feel seen

and accepted in the group and less awkward when I have to ask someone to remove their banana peel from the room.

Writing a covenant and voting on accepting a covenant are processes that need to happen when the group is not in conflict. It is hard to agree to behavior when there is anxiety or hostility in a group. So sometimes it feels weird to be talking about how to behave when things are going well. Last spring at the annual meeting, someone, I forget who, you may be here today, asked the very perceptive question about why we needed to approve our covenant because we already act that way with one another. That is the question I want to answer today.

First of all, how wonderful that we managed to get down on paper what the mores of behavior are for North Parish and we could approve them. And the questioner was right: I saw respect during discussion and disagreement on topics ranging from the covenant to the balance between historical preservation and solar panels. This was all conducted without hostility or rancor. We remained in right relationship with one another as we expressed our deeply held opinions. So why do we need the covenant? We already know how to behave.

I can think of a few reasons. The first is when we welcome newcomers into our community. It is really helpful to have some guidance on how an organization discusses and disagrees and comes to consensus on topics that are important to them. Have you ever gone to an event, a dinner party or a celebration, where you have not known what the rules were: how to dress, or how to act, or how long to stay? When I first moved to Boston, I arrived at the first party I was invited to right on time, as I would have in my small hometown in Upstate New York. The hostess was still in the shower. I had not yet learned about “Boston time” regarding when to arrive at a casual party. Understanding the rules of engagement that are expected is really

important for a newcomer and a covenant, prominently displayed helps convey how we interact with one another.

A second reason, and even more important, is understanding where the boundaries of accepted behavior are, and what we do about them when they are transgressed. And I have to say, this is a growing edge for me. What do I do when I feel someone has crossed the line of behavior in the heat of a discussion, or been thoughtlessly on auto pilot? Do I speak up, or am I polite and let it go? I must admit, my tendency is the latter and that is not always what is healthy for the relationship or the community. Groups who have a tendency to be “nice” to one another may have trouble speaking up. And if we do not, we become susceptible to people who react inappropriately. According to Peter Steinke in his book, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, by not speaking up, I become an accomplice in a system where we are not treating each other respectfully.

On the other side of the coin, I may be the transgressor. I may cross a line in the heat of debate, accidentally commit a micro aggression, or be oblivious to how my behavior has hurt someone’s feelings. How terrible if no one tells me I have transgressed! How can I change my behavior? How can I make amends? How can I stay in healthy relationship with them? But let’s be real. It does not feel great when someone tells me that I have broken covenant, that I have crossed a boundary. How do I react in that moment? Do I get defensive? Do I go into denial? Do I get angry? Do I pull away from that relationship?

Unitarian Universalism does not give us familiar rituals to help us ask for forgiveness or to grant it. Roman Catholic children learn from confirmation on how to do confession. They review their behavior and confess where they have gone wrong, seeking penance on a regular basis.

When I was a child, I thought the practice was really strange, but I am now beginning to see how it trains an individual to reflect on their behavior and verbalize it. In Judaism there is a whole season for making amends. The High Holy days are fast approaching beginning with Rosh Hashanah and culminating in Yom Kippur, the Day of Forgiveness of Sins. But the month leading up to the holidays is called Elul and it is a month of soul searching and making amends.

I spent this summer working at Hebrew Senior Life doing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. An important part of our learning is presenting write-ups in group of some of our pastoral visits to gain insight on what we said and felt during the visits. A Jewish classmate wrote a verbatim on making amends with a resident that she felt she had not listened to compassionately. I was first startled and then impressed by her ability to seek amends and how her faith reinforces, encourages and supports that practice especially this time of year.

This stuff is hard. The covenant will not fix all our interpersonal problems. It does not make the negotiations or interactions easy. But it does give us some sign posts that we can use as we navigate through disagreements or hard moments in community. It can help us stay in right relationship with one another.

Unitarian Universalism comes out of a long history of covenantal relationships. In 2000, Reverend Alice Blair Wesley gave the Minns Lecture series, a total of five lectures on the topic of *The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant*. She says that “The 17th century articulation and practice, of the (then) radical covenantal doctrine of the free church, preceded and led to secular doctrines of political freedom, to the constitutional and democratic government of free states. Two historic political documents, *The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut* of 1639 and *The Massachusetts Body of Liberties* of 1641,

written and adopted by our earliest church founders, served as models for the U.S. Constitution. In both, you can see the doctrine of congregational governance carried over and applied to civil government.”<sup>1</sup>

We are a covenantal denomination. When you look at our UU Principles and Sources in the UUA Bylaws you see that they are written as a covenant. This surprised me. It begins “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote”<sup>2</sup> and then lists our seven principles. It continues by naming the sources and concludes with “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.”<sup>3</sup>

Alice Blair Wesley asks us how we respond when we are asked what Unitarian Universalists believe? That is a creedal question and we are often stumped on how to answer. What if we responded with how we covenant together? She dreams of us getting to the point of saying:

Ours is a covenantal church. We join by promising one another that we will be a beloved community, meeting together often to find the ways of love, as best we can see to do. We have found there’s always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world.<sup>4</sup>

All is not completely rosy with our UU movement however. Wesley goes on to say that “However fine our churches have been, internally or out in the world, never have our churches been noted for the fine ways we cooperate with one another.”

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Blair Wesley, *The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant*, (The Minns Lectures 2000-2001) lecture 3, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> UUA ByLaws

<sup>3</sup> UUA ByLaws

<sup>4</sup> Wesley, *The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant*, lecture 5, p. 15.

This reminds me of the task force I was part of at General Assembly. Moderator Jim Keys and Dr. Susan Ritchie are working on facilitating a series of discussions moving toward a new UUA covenant. Instead of viewing the UUA as an organization providing services to each congregation it would rather be facilitating the interrelatedness of our congregations.

I have seen glimmers of this in action here in New England. When my home church had a problem it was trying to solve and reached out to our, then, district staff, they connected us with leaders from other congregations who had recently experienced a similar situation. They became a support, listening to our problems, acting as a sounding board and sharing their own experiences. It was wonderful to have the support of other UU congregations in our area.

We have examples here at North Parish. Our Religious Education program works closely with our neighboring congregations joining with them in our Our Whole Lives course and in other youth programs. Last year our Caring Committee did a joint training with neighboring congregations on pastoral care. And you probably know of other examples.

On a larger scale, how would a covenant between the congregations of our denomination work? What would it look like? What would it feel like? These are the questions that the initiative will be asking UUs to think about.

Back in 2000 in her lecture series Wesley was dreaming of such an initiative. She summed up her 5 lecture series in two sentences: “Our UU churches are uncooperative, not because congregational polity is our doctrine of the church. Rather, our churches are uncooperative - and far too many are weak and ineffective - because our organization needs to be more covenantal, both in our congregations and among the congregations of our Association.”

And so here we are at North Parish with a new covenant to help us live in right relationship with one another. We read it together earlier in the service. It remains to be seen if we will grow into it, referring to it in our actions, our meetings and our community as a whole. I was once on a board where we had a covenant. Every year we reviewed it, modified it and readopted it. We read it, going around the table, phrase by phrase at the beginning of every meeting. We spent 5 minutes at the end of each meeting reflecting on how well, or not, we had embodied our covenant. That was a living, breathing covenant.

Here in this place, we are building beloved community together as an ongoing spiritual practice. We do this by treating each other respectfully and staying connected and learning together. But, we will break our promises, and then we will remind each other of our covenant and we will ask for and grant forgiveness. This is an individual and a communal spiritual practice. Our North Parish community gives us opportunities to open our minds, open our hearts and open our spirit to the diversity around us. It is a challenge and a blessing.

Blessed Be and Amen.