

Small Group Ministry
Group Session Plan
Covenant -- A Personal Reflection

Opening Words: Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine-
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.
— Arranged by L. Griswold Williams

Check-In/Sharing: How is it with you today?

Topic/Activity: Excerpt from *Choosing Mutuality-The Promise and Practice of Covenant* By Joe Sullivan, Congregational Consultant

In yearning for a better world, we too often neglect the ancient practice that is central to our UU faith - **covenanting** - the religious discipline intended to help us actualize and sustain our will to mutuality. Covenanting is our renewing practice of solemn promises of mutual support and commitment, of mutual fidelity to shared high purpose, and to something greater than ourselves.

When we do consider covenant, we too often limit our understanding of its practice to ritual recitation of core beliefs or values, or we flatten it to a tool to patrol behavior.

Our religious covenants are not about words and not about circumscribing behavior. Covenanting is a resolute daily practice that accepts the reality of human imperfection, of our flawed nature and brokenness, the inevitability of falling short and failure. It presumes our utter dependence on one another and on powers greater than our individual selves.

Covenanting depends not on piousness or enforced consequences. Rather it depends upon humility, love, grace, trust, compassion, mercy. It is inherently forgiving, and when violated (more commonly by neglect than by misbehavior), it seeks restoration and renewal. Nancy McDonald Ladd contends that in converting the will to mutuality by becoming acquainted with the actual conditions and lives around us we become "morally transformed not by ideals, but by compassion and conviction."

How do we really practice covenant? First and foremost, we do so by showing up for one another in spirit and body. We practice covenant in restorative circles and in acts of confession and atonement; in rituals of entering into, renewing, and releasing from covenant. We practice it in authentic mutual relationship with marginalized communities and willingness to follow their lead; and when, as Bryan Stevenson suggests, we "get proximate" to suffering.

We can tell the practice of covenant is truly alive when we see:

- people intentionally putting themselves in uncomfortable, vulnerable encounters, and staying at the table when the going is hard in order to forge or sustain relationship;

- ongoing faithful risking and tolerance for failure in the cause of advancing shared purpose;

- norms, traditions, and expectations intentionally altered in order to be truly welcoming to all, especially those marginalized in our communities.

When freely entered and actualized by the people, our Unitarian Universalist core religious practice of covenant is there to undergird expansive, life transforming mutuality. What if we committed to practicing covenant as if the wellbeing of our congregations, our faith, our lives and hopes depended upon it?

They do!

Questions for reflection:

1. Where and how have you engaged in the practice of covenantal conversation? What repair and healing or learning and growing was seeded or emerged from this conversation?
2. Is there an opportunity for engaging a covenantal conversation that is awaiting your next step? How might you lean into vulnerability and faithful risking?
3. Is there a way your small group ministry might support or bear witness to your practice of living in and returning to covenant?

Check-Out/Likes and Wishes: How was the session for you?

Closing Words:Breath of the divine,
a flame of reflection in all that we do.

Breath of creation,
a flame of connection in our circle of care.

Breath of wonder,
a flame of inspiration to cultivate participation.

We extinguish the flame
but not the light of the divine,
creation, wonder, and presence.
- Rev. Jill McAllister (adapted)

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Opening Words: Love is the spirit of this church,
and service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.
— James Vila Blake

Check-In/Sharing: How is it with you today?

Topic/Activity: Excerpts from *Walking the talk of Covenant*, New England Region UUA

Covenant is the birthright foundation of Unitarian Universalism.

This is not a creedal tradition where we are bound together by what we profess to believe. It is not a sacramental tradition where we are organized around sacraments like baptism or communion.

Instead, Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal tradition.

Covenant is inherently aspirational. It's about who we seek to be, not always who we are now. Covenant also recognizes that there will be times that we will fall short of our aspirations. We will not always be our best selves.

Covenant takes work.

Our covenantal practice accepts the reality of human imperfection, of our flawed nature and brokenness, and the inevitability of falling short and failing. It presumes our utter dependence on one another and on powers greater than our individual selves. The practice of covenant requires us to call one another back into covenant, not to use the covenant to call out persons we perceive to be in the wrong.

We describe two types of covenants: behavioral and religious.

In practice, behavioral covenants are concerned with controlling behavior and are often governed by policies and procedures in which someone (or some committee) takes disproportionate responsibility to respond to reports of misbehavior and/or to mediate conflicts. In contrast, our religious covenant is a fundamental faith practice governed by mutual belonging and mutual accountability in which all who choose to be part of the covenant hold responsibility. In essence, we do not delegate transformation.

Rather than being monitored and enforced by consequences codified in behavioral policies, religious covenants are freely submitted to and reinforced by grace and forgiveness. Religious covenantal practice accepts the reality of human imperfection and the inevitability of neglecting commitments, falling short, and failure — thus necessitating the ongoing call for renewal.

Going about life in the congregation with basic politeness can satisfy the promises of behavioral covenants. Religious covenant calls forth our full presence with one another in authenticity and spiritual vulnerability. In our religious covenants, we approach one another not just as friendly

co-members, but as spiritual partners who are concerned with the wholeness of one another's lives. We claim one another and allow ourselves to be claimed in turn.

The covenantal practice gifted to us by our Puritan religious ancestors called on those in the covenant to **walk together** in the spirit of love, not to simply agree to be congenial with one another. Thus, we say "**Love is the doctrine** of our church."

Behavioral covenants look to keep our actions within agreed upon bounds. Religious covenants seek to enrich, deepen, and liberate our common lives in order to build Beloved Community.

Concerned with ultimacy as well as intimacy, the covenant claims mutual loyalties to powers and purposes greater than ourselves and ongoing mutual support for one another. Rather than calling people out when we feel they've broken a behavioral promise, our religious covenants insist that we call one another back into Covenant through forgiveness and restoration. An ongoing practice of renewing covenant recognizes that this central way of our faith is more commonly threatened by passive neglect than by intentional hurtful acts. When sermons or decisions fail to satisfy, some tend to show up less, give less, thereby neglecting the covenantal claims on us. Thus, we need to continuously renew and call one another back into the covenant.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What behavioral covenants guide your group interactions and expectations?
2. How does your group covenant invite each person into deeper practices of faithfulness, mutual accountability, and forgiveness?
3. What practices support a process for inviting people or calling people back into religious covenant? To this end, what practices might your group adopt?
4. When, where and how does your group renew covenant?

Check-Out/Likes and Wishes: How was the session for you?

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