

A Field Guide to Covenant

AN ONGOING COLLECTION OF RESOURCES
GATHERED BY
SECTION D
COMMITTEE ON THE MINISTRY
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA NEVADA CONFERENCE
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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(The material contained herein is a work in progress by Section D.
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1. Introduction

Our 2006 NCNC Annual Meeting theme is "In Covenant, God is Still Speaking." The churches of the Conference voted a mutual covenant in 1991. Today there is a new excitement and commitment to covenant in all settings of the Conference, as a way to describe and empower our conference, all its ministries and members.

For the past five years, Section D, Committee on the Ministry in our Conference has worked with churches, presented workshops, and gathered resources on covenant, some of which appear on the Conference web site (www.ncncucc.org click on "Documents and Resources," then "Covenant and Congregations.").

➤ You may be wondering "What is the purpose of this Field Guide to Covenant?"

This guide is a "work in progress," but it is our hope that it will offer directed study in preparation for our Annual Meeting. To that end, you will find suggested study questions and activities at the end of the document, under the topic "Study Opportunities."

We commend the material to you, and are open to your suggestions for future inclusions. We hope these materials on covenant will help churches and members prepare for Annual Meeting, and beyond as you study and grow together in faithful covenant.

OUR CONFERENCE COVENANT STATEMENT

We are people of God, a community of congregations diverse in our ethnicity, culture, and lifestyle. We are the Northern California Nevada Conference, United Church of Christ.

We covenant with God and each other

- To worship God through Word and Sacrament,
- To proclaim to all the world the Gospel of Jesus Christ through deed and word,
- To be open to the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

We covenant with God and each other

- To speak of our dreams and visions,
- To share our resources,
- To draw strength from one another in the work of ministry.

We covenant with God and each other

- To affirm our journey together, in our diversity, for justice, peace and healing
Throughout all of God's creation,
- To grow with one another, building our future out of past memories and present hopes.

We covenant with God and each other

- To love and support one another
- To listen and learn from one another
- To forgive and trust one another
- To pray for and with one another
- To answer God's call to be the body of Christ.

– 1991

2. What is a Covenant?

Covenants are faithful, mutual, trustworthy agreements. A covenantal relationship is the state of being bound together through commitments to and expectations of one another in faithfulness to God's will and reliance upon God's grace.

Covenants, Rules, and the Centrality of God

In Christian Ethics, An Essential Guide, Robin Lovin begins her book with a discussion of choices, goals, and rules. She explores the relationships among rules and covenant, change, and the ways in which we define our identity through the covenants we keep. She acknowledges that covenants remain part of who we are, even when we fail to maintain covenant. While she does not call out the role of grace, it is clearly central to restoring us to covenant.

“Covenantal traditions provide for change, not only by setting aside relationships that provide unsatisfactory, but by distinguishing between the rules that are central to the covenant and those that are interpretations and applications of the more basic rules to new conditions and changing circumstances...What makes a covenant is having the rules and acknowledging that they are important and that they remain a part of who we are, *even when we do not keep them.*”

Life in a covenant community, then, does not require that one accept all of the rules as they are. That expectation, may, in fact, be more appropriate to a social contract, where you either agree that the rules are in your best interest or you do not; and if you do not, there is not much reasons for you to be there. In a covenant community there is a *continuing* relationship to others in the covenant, and, in a religious covenant, *continuing faithfulness to God, who calls the covenant community into being.*

Part of life in the covenant is learning what is central to its relationships and what is peripheral, what is the commandment of God that makes the covenant people who they are and what is part of the changing ways that this people have tried to walk in different times and places. It is in fact, by questioning the rules while remaining faithful to the relationship that we find out what is central to the covenant...*An emphasis on covenantal relationships calls attention to who the rules shape our identity as persons in community.*”¹

¹ Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide*, Abingdon Press, 2000, 52-54, with emphasis added by Kevin Omi

Maintaining covenant has never been easy and as a post-modern people in a time of shifting, uncertain, and context-specific values it is ever more difficult. We seek to discern the will of God in covenant with others, even while in the midst of struggles with one another. In the struggle to maintain covenant, we learn what is central and what is peripheral to these relationships. As followers of Christ, we are ever mindful of the centrality of the path he has walked before us, for “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The new UCC Manual on Church² introduces covenant in this way:

Let's take a closer look at what we mean by the word “covenant.” The idea of covenant is firmly rooted in the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures tells of God's desire to find a covenant partner. Initiated by God's action, the covenant at Mt. Sinai, “I will be your God and you will be my people,” became an “ever-present yardstick” by which the events of Israel's history were judged.

Jeremiah, writing after the Exile, prophesies about a New Covenant that God will establish with Israel. A day will come when external law will no longer be the means of enforcing covenant. Instead, each believer will know God in such a way that the law will be written on their hearts.

The Christian testament this concept of new covenant, especially as it relates to God's actions in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At the Last Supper Jesus explained the cup of wine as a symbol of his sacrifice, “a new covenant in my blood.” He initiated this covenant once for all, binding each Christian in obedience to Christ. The new covenant does not do away with previous covenants God has made; instead, as 2 Corinthians 3:6 asserts, Christians are heirs to the covenants of the past. “God never betrays the call, gifts, and promises given to God's people.”

From the earliest roots of the congregational covenant made at Salem, Massachusetts in 1629 to the extensive restructure of the national setting of the United Church of Christ in 2000, (see following section) the discernment of God's will for our Church has been covenantal in nature. To invoke covenant involves the following key factors:

1. God initiates covenant

The foundation of the church is God's gracious invitation, God's call to us. In biblical terms, the covenant is always formed at God's initiative. Covenant is serious; not to be entered into lightly, but diligently and prayerfully.

2. Covenants differ from contracts

A contract is based in law and presumes mistrust. A covenant is based in grace and defined by mutual accountability. A covenant is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Unlike a legal agreement, covenants do not operate under a contractual *quid pro quo*,

² <http://www.ucc.org/ministers/church/>

i.e. "you paint my house, and I'll pay you." Rather, covenant is a broader promise. It declares: "we will walk together in all God's ways" rather than offering a restrictive list of the specific things each partner must fulfill. In covenant, the partners must keep trying to discern what those "ways of walking" are.

3. Covenant promises are to be taken very seriously

Covenant does not dissolve automatically at the point that the parties disagree or experience discomfort, or when change occurs. Relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to maintain and strengthen their mutual covenant, partners will work intentionally and diligently.

4. Covenant knits us together

Regrettably, covenantal partners sometimes see differences as difficulties. Bound by covenant, all settings of Church agree to walk even with people whom we experience as difficult. As John Winthrop declared, we are "knit together as one" despite all our diversities. Covenant demands mutual respect, regardless of the status, behavior, or achievements of our covenantal partners.

In summary, covenant requires great spiritual maturity. Humility and patience, compassion and justice hold us to the mission of being "united and uniting." We may wish for more concrete assertions in our covenant promises. Still, the United Church of Christ affirms the open-ended faithfulness of God who has established covenant with us. "Constituted by divine grace, what holds the United Church of Christ together from the human side are two things: a common faith in Jesus Christ as sole Head of the church, and sets of covenant promises exchanged by the covenantal partners." (UCC Manual on Church, pp. 6-7)

3. Covenant and Scripture

Covenant is a powerful theme throughout Hebrew and Christian scripture. Indeed, the word we translate as "testament" is more accurately translated "covenant." The Biblical record of the intense and varied relationship between God and the Hebrew and early Christian peoples is framed as a series of covenants. The sacred nature of covenant is constantly reiterated.

The following is intended to be an illustrative list, and not exhaustive.

Hebrew Scripture covenants include:

- 1) God's covenant of everlasting faithfulness with Noah and all of creation (**Genesis 9:8-17**) symbolized by the rainbow.
- 2) The covenant with Abraham and Sarah (**Genesis 17:1-10, 15-19**), in which Abraham receives a new name, the promise of descendants and land. The covenant is specifically extended to both of his sons Isaac and Ishmael. In exchange, Abraham and his male descendants are to mark themselves by circumcision as a sign of their faithfulness.
- 3) The Ten Commandments (**Exodus 20:1-17**), a statement of the terms of the covenant with Moses and the Hebrews in the wilderness.
- 4) The new covenant written on our hearts (**Jeremiah 31:31-34**). This covenant would be written within, instead of in external rules and regulations, which the people violated causing their downfall.

In the Christian Scriptures, covenant references include:

- 1) The Last Supper narratives (**Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20, I Corinthians 11:25**). Here Jesus calls the shedding of his blood the sign of a new covenant rooted in grace.
- 2) Paul's contrasts of former and new covenants (**2 Corinthians 3:4-8; Galatians 3:17-18**). Here he declared that the letter of the law constrains, but the Spirit gives new life to our covenant with God which is eternal.
- 3) Ritual aspects of covenant (**Hebrews 9:11-15**) Christ is proclaimed to be the mediator of a new covenant redeeming those who have been guilty of transgressions under a covenant solely of law.

4. Covenant in the United Church of Christ

The UCC is a denomination steeped in covenant. The Pilgrims at Salem in 1629 agreed:

We Covenant with the Lord and with one another and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to talk together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed Word of truth.

Our UCC Constitution also affirms covenant:

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.

UCC Constitution, Article III, paragraph 6.

And our Statement of Faith includes the affirmation:

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races. God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

From the UCC Statement of Faith, adapted by Robert Moss

Since the restructuring of our national denomination in the 1990's, covenant is a prominent style and language for the different partners and settings of the church. "Covenantal partners" are considered to be the church in local, Association, Conference, and national settings. Authorized ministers may also be referred to as covenantal partners.

Former "instrumentalities" are now called "Covenanted Ministries," for example the national setting entities: Office of the General Ministries, Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, and Justice and Witness Ministries.

Within a local church there are covenants among church members, and between members and their pastors. Each congregation is also in covenant with its Association. There is a Conference-wide covenantal agreement among all congregations (noted in Section 1 Introduction). It is very much like the U.S. Constitution, defining us and our mutual obligations.

It is vital to remember that not all covenants are committed to paper. Many are spoken, and some are unspoken. It is important to understand in our lives together the impact of verbal and silent covenants. They should be as clearly understood as those committed to paper, but often they are not.

5. Covenant in the Northern California Nevada Conference

The Northern California Nevada Conference Committee on the Ministry has four sections, of which two deal directly with covenant. Section A works with ministers coming into our Conference, and with authorization for that ministry. Section C likewise relates to churches coming into the Conference, those seeking full standing in the United Church of Christ.

Sections B and D specifically encourage covenant faithfulness – B among clergy, and D among congregations. The Conference encourages all clergy and congregations to learn more about how Sections B and D can help build up our sense of covenant. Briefly ...

Section B, Committee on the Ministry

Section B of the Committee on the Ministry exists for the purpose of supporting, nurturing, and holding accountable our ordained, licensed and commissioned clergy. Section B works with individual ministers in order to encourage, strengthen, and where necessary, provide guidance for, their ministries.

Section B offers **periodic and situational reviews of ministers**. According to carefully documented procedures, Section B may also initiate an **ethical review** of a minister.

This Section also supports our clergy by encouraging **ongoing education, clergy collegiality and continued spiritual growth**.

Section D, Committee on the Ministry

Section D of the Committee on the Ministry is called “Congregations and Covenant.” This group works with congregations to promote healthy covenants – supporting autonomy and accountability – and to offer resources for healing covenants that are strained or broken.

By the same grace of God that gives us covenant, those relationships may be healed or, when appropriate, released. Section D has worked for five years to develop resources for churches, Associations and the Conference for those times when covenants need nurture, or are put to test. Some of these resources, provided by presence, interaction, or printed materials are:

Covenant Check ins

We endeavor to meet with a pastor and representative group of congregational members within 1-2 years of the start of a new pastorate. The purpose is to assess and affirm the strength and unique attributes of this mutual ministry, and offer an opportunity in complete confidence, to share hopes and expectations.

Encouraging Pastor-Parish Relations Committees

We are strong advocates of the institution of the pastor-parish relations committee in each faith community. We are happy to provide written resources, or a presentation or workshop on the healthy functioning of such a group.

Large and Small Group Listening Sessions

With the help and guidance of congregational leaders to devise a process which can be truly Spirit-led, Section D will provide a listening team and worship setting for a small group, or for an entire congregation broken into small groups and then gathered in a large group. These sessions have proven extremely valuable in articulating questions which face a congregation, and enabling factionalized congregations begin to mend their covenant and work better together

Provide a “Fair Witness” Presence

Section D can offer the listening presence of an uninvolved individual at a church meeting, to then reflect back what they have observed. Such observations may not be possible by persons closely involved with a situation.

Offer Meeting Facilitation

Section D can offer the services of a facilitator or moderator for a church meeting where it is important that all persons in the congregation be free to participate freely and equally, that dominant parties be encouraged to listen and that there be no appearance of bias in the leadership of the meeting.

Positive Norms for Congregational Behavior

We have collected a variety of examples of positive norms for behavior in covenant community. We can present them to a congregation in writing, in a workshop format, or assist a congregation in crafting their own.

6. Covenant and Autonomy

The United Church of Christ has been characterized as “a covenanted relationship of autonomous units of church life – a relationship delineated but not regulated by a constitution and bylaws.” Clearly, that dynamic tension between autonomy and covenant are at the heart of what it means to be the United Church of Christ. We have chosen, repeatedly, not to be solely separate churches, each acting alone. We have chosen, repeatedly, not to exercise an apostolic hierarchy that insists on top-down regulation. We have insisted, always, on the importance of “walking together in all of God's ways.”

Autonomy is the discerning capacity to covenant. In such a discernment process, it is wise to turn to others for counsel, critique, and support. That is what “associating” (Association) and “conferring” (Conference) are about. “Walking together in all of God's ways” is a practice of autonomous settings of Church that value input from and community with their covenant partners. Those who have a clear sense of themselves, who have autonomy, have the capacity to make covenant promises and to live in mutual regard.

Autonomy is fundamentally *freedom for*, not merely *freedom from*. It entails a kind of freedom from the rule of others, but this is not a freedom to ignore what others require or have to say; it is freedom to listen, evaluate, decide, and act for oneself through the highest exercise of reason and discernment. Viewing autonomy only as freedom from outside governance or dependence holds the danger of foolish pride, which is itself an expression of irresponsibility.

For many individuals and churches, it is a great point of pride to be part of a congregational tradition where independence is valued and “no one tells me what to do.” However, in no sense is autonomy ever a release from accountability – to God and others. Viewing autonomy as *freedom for* growing together in discernment of God's will and way is a highly responsible way of living out the promises of covenant.

To belong to something (like a denomination or a church) creates a mutual relationship. Congregations hold standing in their Association, just as ministers hold standing in the Conference. As ministers can't just do whatever they please, likewise or so too congregations must honor agreements and congregational principles in order to be accountable members of the United Church of Christ.

7. Covenant and Spiritual Discernment

Ongoing Discernment, Spiritual Practices

We Covenant with the Lord and with one another and do bynd our selves in the presence of God, to talk together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed Word of truth.

So reads the Salem Church Covenant of 1629, the model often put forward as to how the commitment to covenantal life is expressed and lived out. There are assumptions implied, if not explicit, in this statement that call for emphasis.

– God, not humankind, is the initiator of covenant. That understanding reaches back to the Hebrew Scriptures, which testify to God’s action at Mt. Sinai: *“I will be your God and you will be my people.”* The covenant we have with one another is rooted in and dependent upon the covenant God initiates with us. We are bound to one another because of God’s covenant with us. We walk with one another because we covenant to walk in God’s ways.

– Living in covenant requires more of us than making covenant promises to one another. Our covenant promises to one another are made in response to the covenant promises God makes to us. Fundamental to the covenant promises we make to one another are the covenant promises we make to God in gratitude and thanksgiving for God’s grace to us.

– Living in covenant requires more of us than working out among ourselves our disputes and disagreements. We covenant to walk in God’s ways, which is to say we will seek together to discern God’s leading ... which means that together we engage in the disciplines of spiritual discernment hoping to reach through consensus a vision or decision that may very well transcend our own personal options or opinions.

A resource that may be helpful: *DISCERNING GOD’S WILL TOGETHER: A Spiritual Practice for the Church.* Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen. Alban Institute, Inc.

In our work with congregations through and beyond Section D of the Committee on Ministry, the role of the Holy Spirit in discussions and decisions is becoming an ever-more central element. We earnestly seek God's direction and through prayer and silence we are sometime granted this fundamental act of grace.

In "What is Spiritual Discernment by Consensus?", Steven Bryant wrote: "Spiritual discernment makes operational our faith that an ever present Guide...is able to lead us in the way of truth and love as individuals and congregations. It opens our sails as a church to the Spirit whose winds we believe are always blowing and will always move us closer to Christ, closer to one another, and closer to the world that God wills."

In the aforementioned book, "Discerning God's Will Together - A Spiritual Practice for the Church", the authors put forth a series of basic assumptions about spiritual discernment which are most encouraging as we think about the challenges and opportunities facing many of our congregations:

Presence

1. We assume that God is self-disclosing and that God yearns for the created world and enters into a covenant relationship with God's people.
2. We assume that God enters into human existence with such vulnerability that people, in discerning the higher purpose of the divine will, are drawn into the vulnerability of God.
3. We assume that the indwelling Holy Spirit is the active and ongoing guide in personal and corporate discernment.

Practices

4. We assume that seeking God's will is the ultimate value in our knowledge and experience.
5. We assume the need to participate humbly in a faith community of grace.
6. We assume that people and communities need to patiently persevere in practices related to scripture, prayer, and discernment until God's leading is known.

Posture

7. We assume that the willingness to change the heart and to make an appropriate response are preconditions of the gift of discernment.
8. We assume that God uses especially gifted people with skills and insight into the discernment process in the ministry of discernment.
9. We assume that the practice of discernment is ongoing - to discern God's will again and again and again.

8. Resources for Church Life

This section includes a sampling of covenant – related resources for church life – primarily in worship – among the many pieces developed, or gathered, by Section D members.

Invocation

(Matt Smith, Pacific School of Religion, '07)

Almighty God,

Whether we come to you with easy hearts
or with souls hurt from the wounds of the world,
We hear your call and, longing for home,
We come here and now to seek you out,
To simply be with you,
And to draw near with each other.

Lord, teach us trust: the *how-tos* of giving and holding.

Lord, grant us honesty: our lives are what they are; no more, no less.

Lord, give us our voices: and with them, the courage of speech and the wisdom of silence.

Wonderful Creator, we are your people,
broken and made whole,
dwelling entirely in your love.
Be with us here and now.
Be with us.
Amen.

Children's Message

(Rev. David Howell, First Congregational, Palo Alto)

Supplies needed: Dowel, 6 rolls of ribbon or streamers in red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple.

Theme: Covenant means that we connect to each other to make something even more beautiful than we can be on our own.

How many of you have ever heard the story of Noah's ark?

What can you tell me about it? *(allow responses - animals, big boat, flood)*

Sum up with something like: "In the story, God has Noah build a big boat and put two of every kind of animal on it. There is a big flood, but Noah and his family and all the animals are safe on the ark."

At the end of the story, when all the people and animals are coming off the ark, God puts something in the sky to show that God will always love and care for the earth. Does anyone know what that is?

God put a rainbow in the sky, and it was a sign of the covenant between God and all the people.

A covenant is a special promise that includes people and God, and rainbows are great for thinking about those kinds of promises.

I brought all these different colors of ribbon. I brought red. What are some things that are red? *(Slip the rolls onto the dowel as the colors are described, inviting children to name things of are each color.)*

Each of these colors is beautiful by itself, but when they are connected to each other, they are even more beautiful.

(Have 6 children or youth grab onto the ends of each ribbon and walk toward the back, unrolling a rainbow down the aisle.)

People are like the colors in the rainbow. We are beautiful on our own, but when we are connected together by a covenant, we can be even more beautiful, because we can do things together than we can't do on our own.

Yellow is still yellow in a rainbow, but it is a part of the whole thing. Just like we are still ourselves in our church, but together we are a congregation, connected to each other by a special promise called a covenant.

Closing prayer

(Prayer can be said by a leader or repeated by the children after each line.)

Thank you, God,

For all the ways

We are connected to each other.

Amen.

Youth Covenant

(Rev, Laura Barnes, Danville Congregational Church)

Thank you for coming to this review of our group covenant today. We asked your parents to be here as witnesses, but also to ask questions about our agreement if they have any. We are making this covenant to one another, but also with the congregation of DCC as they send us forth to serve/play/lead in their name. It is a very important part of our trip and we all want to be sure we are clear on the expectations of the group, of the leadership and of this congregation.

Entering into a covenant within a community of faith is a privilege. It is an invitation to become a fully engaged and contributing member of that group. A covenant is an individual's pledge to keep the group's sense of purpose and vision intact. It is also a promise by the group to the individual to provide a meaningful experience.

A covenant allows groups to function as a single body, the Body of Christ, and to become more effective as they go forth to serve, offer leadership or simply travel together for fun. Being a member of a group that honors its covenant is like being a part of a team. Each person makes a significant contribution to the team by keeping to their part of the agreement. The group's success depends on each individual's ability to be responsible for their part of keeping the covenant.

Covenant is an ancient practice in the Bible. Following the floods, Noah and his family step out of the ark and God makes a covenant with them. Promising never to destroy Earth by floods again, the gift of the rainbow appears in the sky as a sign of this sacred covenant (Genesis 9:12-17). Our ultimate covenant with God comes to us in the Incarnation, through Jesus. "For God so loved the world, that God sent his only son, that whosoever shall believe in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) God loves us and we love God, through our faith in Jesus. This is the ultimate covenant between God and us. We like to think of it as a covenant of love, which is what every covenant is, ideally.

As we sign this covenant today, to participate in the _____(name of event)____, we come together with the intent of honoring these promises to ourselves, to the group and to God. Sometimes we are the only ones who know whether or not this covenant is honored, but that is enough.

Will you join me in prayer? God: Today we come together to form a covenant for our group. We ask that we become aware of your presence among us as we make this covenant to one another, to our congregation and to You. We thank you for the privilege of having a group like this to be involved in and we ask that you give us the willingness to abide by this covenant for the benefit of ourselves, our group and those we are called to serve.

In Your Name we pray this day, Amen.

Scripture references:

12 God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' 17God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.' (Genesis 9:12-17)

16 'For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Sample Liturgy

A Time of Confession (when covenant is strained)

CALL TO CONFESSION

Jesus said: Ask, and it will be given; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks – with a genuine heart – receives; and those who seek – with a vulnerable spirit – find, and to each one who knocks, the door will surely be opened.

Friends in Christ, God knows our needs before we ask. God is not absent, but is present here in human hands, and voices, and lives full of the Holy Spirit.

Let us open our lives to God's healing presence and forsake everything that separates us from God and neighbor.

Let us be mindful not only of personal evil, but also of our communal sins of injustice and neglect.

Let us confess to God in silence whatever has wounded us or brought injury to others in body, mind, or spirit, that we might give and receive forgiveness, and become for each other, ministers of God's grace. Let us be in silence.

[SILENCE]

CORPORATE CONFESSION

Let us confess our sins together.

Eternal God, in you we live and move and have our being. When we sin, your face is hidden from us, blotted out by our own darkness. Your forgiveness is so free-flowing that it is easy for us to forget the hardness of our hearts. Cleanse us, we pray, individually and as a body, from our offenses. Deliver us from proud thoughts and vain desires.

Keep us meek enough to draw nearer to you, trust in your grace and find in you our refuge and strength.

Make us strong and courageous enough to exercise the power of the Holy Spirit you have placed in each one here to create your beloved community. This we pray in the name of the risen Christ who dwells among us. Amen.

Gathering for Worship or Meeting

SINGING TOGETHER

“Gathered Here”

- Phil Porter

*Gathered here in the mystery of the hour; Gathered here in one strong body
Gathered here in the struggle and the power; Spirit, draw near.*

(the following is read by a worship leader, a candle is lit, and there is a time of silence)

BRINGING THE LIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

*It is not you who shape God;
it is God that shapes you.
If then you are the work of God,
await the hand of the Artist who does all things in due season.*

*Offer the Potter your heart, soft and tractable,
and keep the form in which the Artist has fashioned you.*

*Let your clay be moist,
lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of the Potter's fingers.*

- Irenaeus, 2nd c. theologian

(all are invited to participate in the litany)

LITANY

O God, you sent Jesus into the world, not to be ministered unto; but to minister, and to give his life to set others free. Shape us for your ministry this day.

All: Claim us, O God, for your service, and direct us toward your will.

You have graced each one here with gifts of the Spirit to fulfill the calling you set before us.

You have granted each one a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

All: Therefore, grant that with a singleness of purpose, we might set our hearts upon your beloved community, ___ (name of church)___.

Give us the mind of Christ, O God.

All: Join us, strangers and friends, in the unity of faith in you.

Give us the strength to listen, and to speak our truths in love.

All: Claim us, O God, for your service, and direct us toward your will.

Covenant Community Building Activities

Yes, we can demonstrate and reinforce covenant by “playing together!” God invites us to enter covenant with trust and vulnerability. Here are two group activities which highlight our mutuality in covenant. It is not an accident that they all take place in a circle.

(a) *Holding one another up*

This will work with a group of any size. It is comfortable for people of all ages, sizes, and abilities. Gather the group into a circle, facing inward, standing shoulder to shoulder, but not too tightly. Each person is invited to reach his/her arm around behind the person **on the right**, at about waist level. Then each person is invited to reach his/her arm around the person **on the left** again at about waist level. Each person should “find a hand” waiting back there to be grasped. All grasp hands. Then invite each person to take about a small step backwards, still holding on, and lean very gently backwards into the support of the whole circle. Each will feel the support of the whole group. The strength and unity of the entire circle depends upon each person holding onto, and supporting the people around them.

(b) *Picking one another up*

This activity works best with folks who have the physical agility to get up and down from the floor, but simply watching and appreciating will have impact for those who don't choose to participate. Take a length of clothesline with the ends knotted together so a circle is formed. (The clothesline can be of any length, but the longer the line and the fewer the people involved, the harder the task becomes. You will want to experiment, and discuss the implications of more, or fewer, people engaged in this covenant task.)

The participants stand equally spaced around a circle facing inward. Each person holds the circle of clothesline with both hands. They are not to release the rope during the entire time of the exercise. Invite each person to sit down on the floor, cross-legged. Now, invite the entire group to stand up again, **without using their hands, or props**, but only holding onto the line. They will need to cooperate by regulating their “pull” in order to get what they need in order to stand, without pulling others off balance.

9. Study Opportunities

Each congregation is encouraged to prepare for the NCNC Annual Meeting and covenant life beyond in an intentional way, by studying or discussing themes of covenant. To encourage your conversation, the following questions are offered as discussion starters:

- a) Has your congregation written and adopted a Covenant that services to bind together its members? If your congregation has a written Covenant, Section D, Committee on the Ministry would be delighted to receive a copy.
- b) Are members of your congregation regularly invited to renew their Covenant with each other during Sunday morning worship? If your congregation from time to time observes a time of Recovenanting, Section D, Committee on the Ministry invites you to send us a copy of your Recovenanting Service.
- c) Have there been times in the life of your congregation when your congregation's Covenant has been helpful in setting direction for the life and work of the congregation, or maintaining harmony and reconciling differences? It would be helpful to Section D, as we seek to carry out our work, to receive from you a brief statement on ways your congregation's Covenant has served your church's life and work.
- d) Does your local congregation's Covenant make specific mention of your local church's covenant with other settings of the United Church of Christ: Association, Conference, National? What might the United Church of Christ in its other settings learn from you and your local church's covenantal relationship?
- e) How might Section D, Committee on the Ministry be more supportive of your local church as we together seek to live and minister as the United Church of Christ?
- f) The lectionary passages during this Lenten time are organized around covenant (Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah etc.) Clergy might use sermons on these lectionary texts to reflect on different covenant themes. Examples are: : law vs. grace; the covenant written on our hearts vs. a codified set of laws; new, old and renewing covenants; the God-initiation aspect of covenant; and covenants with all of creation, not just humankind..
- g) Use this Field Guide as a resource for an adult study group. Read together the NCNC covenant in the Introduction section. Then discuss how your congregation feels connected to and/or disconnected from this covenant. How does our United Church of Christ polity (our particular way of organizing ourselves and working together) balance autonomy and mutual accountability?
- h) Have covenants within your congregation been strained or broken, now or in the past? What has that experience been like? What has been helpful in bringing about healing and restoration of trust? In what ways is work still needed?

- i) What do your congregation’s promises of membership say about covenant? What promises do new members make to the congregation at large? What promises does the congregation make to new members?
- j) Learn more about the “layers” of covenant in our Associations, Conference and settings of the wider church. Invite your Associate Conference Minister, or those within your congregation who are representatives to Association, Conference or national setting committees to share with you their connections and interactions across these broader parts of the body of Christ.
- k) Look at your relationship with your pastor(s). Does your pastor have a contract or covenant with the congregation? What is the difference? How do you as a congregation and your pastor maintain/strengthen your covenant bonds? What do you do when they are strained?
- l) What other covenants do you celebrate in your congregation, or as individuals? Examples would be: Membership promises, pastoral installations, ordinations, or commissionings, marriage and commitment ceremonies. How do these celebrations both lift up, and challenge, our sense of covenant?
- m) Reaffirm your covenant as a congregation and commission your delegates for Annual Meeting in a Sunday worship service.
- n) Review the illustrative covenants from scripture offered in Section 3 of this Field Guide (“Covenant and Scripture). Can your Bible study group add to this list?

Appendixes

Appendix A The Early New England Covenants

The Salem Covenant of 1629

We Covenant with the Lord and one with another; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himselfe unto us in his Blessed word of truth.

The Enlarged Salem Covenant of 1636

We covenant with our Lord, and one with another; and we do bind our selves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth; and do explicitly, in the name and fear of God, profess and protest to walk as followeth, through the power and grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We avouch the Lord to be our God, and our selves to be his people, in the truth and simplicity of our spirits.

We give our selves to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the word of his grace for the teaching, ruling and sanctifying of us in matters of worship and conversion, resolving to cleave unto him alone for life and glory, and to reject all contrary ways, canons, and constitutions of men in his worship.

We promise to walk with our brethren, with all watchfulness and tenderness, avoiding jealousies and suspicions, back-bitings, censurings, provokings, secret risings of spirit against them; but in all offences to follow the rule of our Lord Jesus, and to bear and forbear, give and forgive, as he hath taught us.

In public or private, we will willingly do nothing to the offence of the church; but willing to take advice for our selves and ours, as occasion shall be presented.

We will not in the congregation be forward either to show our own gifts and parts in speaking or scrupling, or there discover the weakness or failings of our brethren; but attend an orderly call thereunto, knowing how much the Lord may be dishonored, and his gospel, and the profession of it, slighted by our distempers and weaknesses in public.

We bind our selves to study the advancement of the gospel in all truth and peace; both in regard of those that are within or without; no way slighting our sister churches, but using their counsel, as need shall be; not laying a stumbling-block before any, no, not the Indians, whose good we desire to promote; and so to converse, as we may avoid the very appearance of evil.

We do hereby promise to carry our selves in all lawful obedience to those that are over us, in Church or Commonwealth, knowing how well pleasing it will be to the Lord, that they should have encouragement in their places, by our not grieving their spirits through our irregularities.

We resolve to approve our selves to the Lord in our particular callings; shunning idleness as the bane of any stake; nor will we deal hardly or oppressingly with any, wherein we are the Lord's stewards.

Promising also unto our best ability to teach our children and servants the knowledge of God, and of His Will, that they may serve Him also; and all this not by any strength of our own, but by the Lord Jesus Christ; whose blood we desire may sprinkle this our Covenant made in his name.

Appendix B Section D, Committee on the Ministry

In the Northern California Nevada Conference, United Church of Christ, the functions of the Committee on the Ministry (sometimes known in other locations as the Church and Ministry Committee) are conducted at the Conference level, instead of within each of our six Associations. This has afforded a unique opportunity, in addition to the long-recognized functions of preparing, supporting, and reviewing authorization for ministry; granting standing, and handling disciplinary and ethical questions among clergy; and admitting new churches to full standing in the Conference (Sections A, B, and C of the committee on Ministry)

That unique opportunity became manifest in 2001 with the formation of Section D, dedicated to the nurture and preservation of covenant in all its settings in our church life. This means covenant among church members, between members and pastor, among pastors, among sister churches in Associations and in staff settings. Little did we know the variety of forms our work would take when Conference Minister Rev. Dr. Mary Susan Gast invited the first group of us to form Section D. We have provided education, workshops, resources, support for congregations in conflict, support for congregations making critical decisions, listening and reflection sessions, meeting facilitation, and conflict resolution. Certainly there is “more to break forth!”

For this reason, the material presented in this Field Guide to Covenant is, and will always be, a work in progress. That is also the nature of our covenants with one another. They are ever-shaping, ever-changing in the hands of a gracious God.

The current membership of Section D is listed below. Many of them contributed (or will contribute) directly to this material. Some materials were created by persons outside Section D. They were used with permission and are so noted. We are always ready to receive and share resources which you have found helpful in the building up of your covenant life.

Yours in the peace of the Body of Christ, for which we work,

Rev. Carol Barriger (1st Congregational, Redwood City), *co-chair*

John Crouch (Sierra Arden, Sacramento)

Rev. Elena Larssen (1st Congregational, Palo Alto & United Campus Christian Ministry at Stanford)

Curt Luck (Ladera Community, Portola Valley)

Kevin Omi (Arlington Community, Kensington), *co-chair*

Rev. Harold Pierre (Plymouth, San Francisco)

Mary Richardson (Kenwood Community, Kenwood)

Rev. Faiva Sa’aga (Vaiola Samoan Congregational, Fremont)

Ray Stimson (College Avenue, Modesto)

Rev. Alfred Williams, (interim) (First Baptist, Palo Alto)

Conference Staff:

Associate Conference Minister Rev. Deborah Streeter

