

Some reflections on "covenant" from the work of Section D, Committee on Ministry, NCNC

Biblically: Is "covenant" a noun or a verb; a process or a document? ... or is a choice? It is most certainly a root theme of scripture. It occurs in many places and times, but never in precisely the same shape. Who initiates covenant – human beings or God? Can covenant be refused?

Historically: In congregational (Congregational) tradition, "covenant" has strong historical meaning. The framers of the American Constitution were steeped in this tradition and shaped our government by their understanding of covenant. They understood that a covenant –

- a. defines a people
- b. creates a body politic (the "incarnational statement")
- c. describes common goals and values
- d. outlines the institutions through which the people will act collectively

Biblical covenants do the same thing. The major difference is that Biblical covenants are instituted by God; historical covenants are instituted by people. The quintessential covenant statement is:

I will be your God, and you will be my people.

What does it mean to be in covenant as a people, not as individuals? As pervasive as covenant language is in the United Church of Christ, those who come from E&R backgrounds rather than the Congregational tradition are not steeped in that concept. Also, many people have come to the UCC from other, more hierarchical denominations, or from a position of being unchurched. Therefore, we cannot assume that the concept of covenant is equally understood

In discussing the difference between a covenant and a contract, it was suggested that

- (a) A contract is based on law, and built on fear; a covenant is based on grace, and built on love.
- (b) A covenant "has a gratuitous, growing edge which nourishes rather than limits."
- (c) Each addresses accountability differently. In a covenant, accountability must remain mutual
- (d) Covenants require public affirmation and re-affirmation.

CONTRACT

Based on law, built on fear

Limits

Accountability may be one-sided

Requires no further attention in order
to remain enforceable

COVENANT

Based on grace; built on love

Nourishes

Accountability is always mutual

Require (re-)affirmation in order to live

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY - CHURCHES IN COVENANT

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WHAT IS COVENANT?

Essential covenant statement: ‘

I will be your God and you will be my people.” Jeremiah 7:23

Covenant in the early American church:

“The Cambridge Platform defined the church as a company of professed believers, ecclesiastically confederate.” *Charles Hambrick-Stowe*

Covenant vs. Contract:

A contract is based on law, and built on fear.

A covenant is based on grace, and built on love.

Contracts hold one party accountable to the other.

Covenants are defined by mutual accountability.

“Covenant has a gratuitous, growing edge which nourishes rather than limits relationships.”
William F. May

The US Constitution as a covenant statement:

A covenant

defines a people,

creates a body politic,

describes common goals and values,

and outlines the institutions through which the people will act collectively.

Covenantal Relationships,

“Within the UCC 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 UCC seek to walk together in all God’s ways.”

Article III, paragraph 6, UCC Constitution

QUESTIONS

-What are the different kinds of covenants in our lives?

-What are the different kinds of covenants in our UCC conference (such as, among church members, between churches in an association, between the conference structure and the

churches. More?)

-What are the unstated covenants in our congregations which promote healthy relationships?

-As individuals, what do we need from each other in our congregation in order to be in healthy covenantal relationships, person to person?

-Where do you see that manifesting in your church?

-As churches, what do we need from each other in order to be in healthy covenantal relationships, church to church?

-Where do you see that manifesting in your church's relationship with other churches?

COVENANT OF THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA NEVADA CONFERENCE

*** OUR SHARED COVENANT (In Unison)**

We are the 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 to 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.**
