

PACIFIC CURRENTS

Helping congregations honor covenants with the new section D

Editor's Note: Besides editing the Pacific, I also serve the NCNC as Associate Conference Minister for the Santa Clara Association. In that capacity I staff and convene the newest section, D, of the Committee on Ministry. Here are some frequently asked questions about our work.

By Deborah Streefer

What does Section D do? We help congregations maintain covenants.

What are covenants? Covenants are faithful, mutual, trustworthy agreements. A contract is based on law and assumes mistrust. Covenants are built on grace and defined by mutual accountability. Marriage is our best known covenant. The U.S. constitution is also a covenant; it defines a people, creates a body politic, describes common goals and values and outlines how the people will act collectively. "Federal" is Latin for covenantal.

What are our church covenants? In a local church there are covenants among church members and between members and their pastor. Each congregation also is in covenant with its association. There is a Conference-wide covenant agreement among all the congregations, which can be found



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on the NCNC website, <nncucc.org> It is like our constitution, defining us and our mutual obligations. Not all covenants are committed to paper. Many are spoken, and some are unspoken. It is very important in our life together in the church to understand the impact of verbal and silent covenants. They should be as clearly understood as those committed to paper.

But aren't UCC congregations autonomous? What mutual obligations? There can be no autonomy without accountability. To belong to something (like a denomination, or a church) creates a mutual relationship. Congregations hold standing in their asso-

ciations, just as ministers hold standing in the Conference. As ministers can't just do whatever they please, so congregations must honor agreements and congregational principles in order to be accountable members of the UCC.

What's an example of a congregation or some members not honoring a covenant? The same kinds of things that hurt any relationship: dishonesty, unfaithfulness, greed and, especially, misuse of power, like people not honoring elected leaders or the bylaws by seeking their own will in the church even to the detriment of the whole body of the church.

People do these things in our churches? We're hospitals for sinners, not clubhouses for saints. We all mess up. Section D just tries to improve the odds and teach accountability, trust and improved communications.

Like how? What do you teach? We have done workshops at Asilomar on covenant and on Pastor-Parish Relations Committees. We think a good PPR committee can go a long way to dealing with conflict effectively and improving communication in a congregation. We have good resources on conflict and on evaluating ministries.

So maybe churches can avoid some of these problems? Right. We also are beginning a process of facilitating mutual evaluations of new ministries after the first year of a new pastorate, which is when a lot of the rough times surface.

But what if the church conflict surfaces anyway? Then we offer to do listening sessions, facilitated conflict management, empowering of lay leaders to build relationships and accountability. We have training in these skills.

Who is "we"? Our current members are Carol Barriger, Redwood City; Suzanne Bernhard, Alameda; George Meier, Carmel; Jim Truesdell, Sacramento; Harold Pierre, San Francisco; Ty Reinhardt, Sunnyvale; Gayle Madison, Petaluma; Doris Alexis, Sacramento; Kevin Omi, Arlington; Faiva Sa'aga, Hayward; and me.

Sounds like your work would be less if people just learned how to talk to each other and get along. Well, that's a lot of it. We have found that a few congregations have come up with Codes of Conduct for members, or Positive Norms for Communication. We're working on some examples and recommendations to

share with all NCNC congregations.

Are you busy? We've had some kind of listening session in 10 churches and done a lot of individual work. We are getting more calls recently. We hope to train some folks in each association to do this work to cut down on travel and speed up our response.

How can we learn more or get resources? Each congregation received our resource sheet on Pastor-Parish committees; ask your minister. For other questions or concerns, please email me at <dstreefer@nncucc.org> or contact any other member, or your associate conference minister.

Why do you do this work? We are all called to build up the Body of Christ. I like a challenge!

Look for minutes of the 2002 Annual Meeting in the next issue of the Pacific (February.) If you just can't wait, call Marilyn Hughes, 415-474-1606 and she'll mail you a copy!