

WHAT BINDS US TOGETHER?

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Priorities

“We had a wretched singer once, a guest from a Canadian congregation, a hulking blonde girl with chopped hair and big shoulders, who wore tinted spectacles and a long lacy dress, and sang, grinning, to faltering accompaniment, an entirely secular song about mountains. Nothing could have been more apparent than that God loved this girl; nothing could more surely convince me of God’s unending mercy than the continued existence on earth of the church.” - Annie Dillard in *Holy the Firm*

The use of the word *wretched* brings to mind our hymn number 205 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. It is *Amazing Grace!* The exact line in the first verse reads: “How sweet the sound that saved a wretch* like me!” I imagine that we have the only version of that hymn with an asterisk in it. So the congregation is offered a choice of words. The alternative is *soul*. It is an awkward moment when voices throughout the congregation ring out in a kind of competition. *Wretch* sing some and *soul* others sing.

In that moment of discordant sound, the cause of amusement for some, my heart sighs in a wretched way as I despair about what binds us together. Could it really be as simple as the freedom to choose different

words while singing a communal hymn? I think there can be a tyranny of choice that keeps us on the surface and disconnected from the nurture of deep down things. The reason for choice, its importance in our faith, is to discern priority in relationship rather than lifting up personal preference as the highest goal of our spiritual aspirations. To choose one person in marriage or partnership is not to choose all others. To join in covenant with members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation is not to enter into faithful membership with all other faith communities. That may sound alarmingly intolerant but a tolerance that is indifferent to priority is a weak virtue impotent to mustering the kind of courage needed to face difficult challenges and bold oppressions.

While serving on a panel of our Fellowship Committee that credentials candidates in preparation for ordination, I asked the seminary student to imagine himself in his first church: “The Welcoming Team responsible for membership asks you to write a pamphlet in the form of a catechism. They want five questions with responses that teach what you believe most important for new members to know about the history of our faith tradition. What would those questions be?” The student looked at me in incomprehension. During that lengthening pause I thought to be gracious. “*Any* five questions would do,” I said.

One difficulty the lack of historical consciousness generates is that our faith becomes disassociated and weakened in the capacity to know which things are first. The hope of regaining historical consciousness is that it enables clarity about priorities. That, and to my mind the unending mercy of the Holy, offer hope for the continued existence of our church grounded in the understanding of what binds us together.

Interpreting History

“It [the Unitarian Universalist church] is for reminding us that we are all members of the web of life, that no one is an island, and that no person is an individual outside the context of that web. / The web includes more than the present; it includes the past. Church is an important agency by which great traditions become living presences within the community.”
 - from a statement by process theologian Bernard Loomer on becoming a member of the First Unitarian Church in Berkeley, CA

If our religion, that which binds us together, includes a shared history and a common story, it behooves us to know that history. To be ignorant of that history or indifferent to it is to sever the sense of continuity that gives substance to the claim that we are a movement. I, for one, would not mind standing still for a moment, from time to time. Not because I lack faith in progress, change or evolution, but because I am suspicious that all our busyness to leave one place for another may represent something not entirely healthy in us.

T. S. Eliot, who migrated away from his Unitarian roots toward Anglo-Catholicism, offered in 1936 this critique of the liberal impulse to burn its bridges:

In religion, Liberalism may be characterized as a progressive discarding of elements in historical Christianity which appear superfluous or obsolete, confounded with practices and abuses which are legitimate objects of attack. But as its movement is controlled rather by its origin than by any goal, it loses force after a series of rejections, and with nothing left to destroy is

left with nothing to uphold and with nowhere to go.¹

Our own fine scholar and theologian, James Luther Adams, published an article in the third issue of *The Journal of Liberal Religion* on “The Liberalism That Is Dead.” That critique took four positive characteristics of liberalism and describes how they become corrupted. (1) The understanding that truth is multifaceted and that nothing is above critical examination bleeds into a relativism that proclaims all beliefs are equally true. This makes a historically rooted faith passé and the vacuum is filled with whatever is in vogue spiritually. (2) The prominence of voluntary consent and freedom of belief transmutes into a hyper-individualism with anti-institutional attitudes. The result is that it weakens consensus building and the capacity to create shared commitment. (3) The emphasis on democratic community becomes distorted into the myth of its accomplishment. Believing in the superiority of one’s own culture, the prophetic dimension is compromised. (4) Finally, faith in the capacity of individuals and society to improve and progress leads to the lack of appreciation for the tragic element in history. Insensitivity to the shadow side of one’s own sense of goodness represses recognition of deep spiritual and moral needs.²

These insights from half a century ago remind me of a contemporary play, Monty Python’s *Spamalot*. In particular, Act I, Scene 4, set in the plague village. The cart goes up and down the street and with it the cry. “Bring out your dead!” There is one bedraggled fellow who keeps raising his head up from the bodies to announce, “Not dead yet.” The not quite dead yet liberalism plays its part in the interpretation of our history.

¹ T. S. Eliot, “The Idea of a Christian Society,” in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), pp. 12-13

² George Kimmich Beach, *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005), pp. xx-xxi

The tendency is to focus attention on our intellectual history rather than our institutional history. What makes famous Unitarians and Universalists famous to us is how their thought broke the intellectual and social molds of the day. In a way they are idealized and reflect back how we like to imagine ourselves. The intellectual free spirits receive appreciative applause while the institutionalists are cast in the role of hidebound conservatives who resist them. In a religion that makes the term *liberal* golden and triumphant, the designation *conservative* takes on a more shadowed and pejorative patina. As the imminent historian of our faith, Conrad Wright, has observed, there are no churches named after Henry Whitney Bellows.

There is more than one way to interpret our history. One story takes our Unitarian and Universalist heritage even past merger as a series of doctrinal and theological disputes both within and without the faith. This narrative takes a progressive linear path toward the expansion of being liberal that is sometimes in tension with being religious.

The account of our movement that eternally moves to the left creates a dynamic that recycles two questions from generation to generation. One is the question of our relationship to the Jewish and Christian traditions that we are historically rooted in and how we are in any sense today still bearing forth the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation. The first question carries the seed of the second one. It is the struggle to define our identity as a people of faith, that which binds us together.

Both questions are reflected in the once often-quoted Edwin Markham quatrain, *Outwitted*:

He drew a circle that shut me out—

Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
 But Love and I had the wit to win:
 We drew a circle that took him in!

This somehow militant love that is an ever-expanding circle reminds me of the infamous Borg of the *Star Trek* series. When they came into contact with another species they intoned their standard greeting: *Resistance is futile*. But like the Borg, to know us is not necessarily to love us.

The image of the distending circle is descriptive of the positive value we place on an inclusiveness that is strong on diversity. The question again is how do diverse people share a sense of identity; how can they belong to each other? The intellectual historian John Patrick Diggins talks about the difficulty of a culture that leaves us with “the ability to question everything and the capacity to affirm nothing.” James Fowler, well known for his work on stages of faith, once offered his impression of Unitarian Universalists. He said that we are the people who tell our children fabulous stories, and afterward inform our children they are not true. The problem with a steady diet of skepticism and ironic detachment is the tendency to remain distant emotionally. Likewise, our strong value for tolerating beliefs coupled with the fear of conflict over different beliefs inhibits us from getting to know one another deeply. In an environment where matters of the heart are dominated by the intellect, spiritual vulnerability is a rare gift we share with each other.

The inclusive circle understood rightly does offer a clue to what binds us together. Theologian Martin Buber captured it well:

The real essence of community is to be found in the fact—manifest or otherwise—that it has a center. The real beginning of a community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations; the circle is described

by the radii, not by the points along its circumference.³

On the circumference of our circle are many different spiritual practices informed by a number of theologies. What could be at the center? Perhaps the second way of interpreting our history that does not frame the story as a series of theological controversies but rather traces the way we order our relationships in our institutions. Polity--congregational polity--the way we create churches through covenantal relationships, is at the hub. Covenant takes us back to ancient beginnings and brings us to the central and lasting gift of the Radical Reformation. Covenant is found at the beginning of our nation and is brought forward to this very day from the Pilgrims and Puritans to the Principles and Purposes. And as it turns out covenant and governance cannot be separated from theology because they paint a relational picture of our understanding of the nature of the Holy. To the story of covenant that is our story we turn.

The Origins of Covenant

“And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds I will remember my covenant which 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.’” - Genesis 9:12-15

³ Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 135

Covenant is not a Unitarian or Universalist invention. It is ours by inheritance. It comes to us from the Western, Biblical, Protestant, Puritan and Congregational traditions. It comes from the fact that we are a historical religion.

The Western tradition is historical in nature. It does not promote a mystical transcending of human events that make them irrelevant nor does it reduce the significance of the individual to the private interior life. What is important about existence is that events take place. The focus is on why and how events unfold, and to what end. A meaningful past is interpreted through the achievements, disasters, and influences of events.

Historical religion is embedded in the context of place and time, and understands the individual not to be isolated but connected to groups and institutions. It is the relatedness of the individual to groups and institutions involved in events that give personal and social identity. Historical religion is also oriented toward the future. The present is connected to a past and there is a sense that the future can be influenced by the goals and actions of people bonded in groups and institutions.

So groups and what they do matter. How one is bonded in a group is important also. Covenant is one way of forming relationships. The first covenants were political in nature and can be traced back to the fourth millennium B.C.E. They were a form of treaty making among chieftains, usually between a sovereign and smaller jurisdictions in the ancient Near East.

The Hebrew people took the political covenant that came before them and elevated it into another dimension. They used covenant to describe the divine / human relationship thus imparting to it a deep theological and moral significance. It is with Noah in the ninth chapter of Genesis that the first

explicit covenant between God and humanity is recorded being made. It represents what Adams calls a “covenant of being.” What Adams means is that the covenant is not just between human beings but also with the very ground of reality itself. It is the reality that human beings exist in and it is not of their own creation. This reality that is a “creative, sustaining, commanding, judging, transforming Power,” requires a mutuality that is ethical and sustained by a loving trust. It is a covenant with all living creatures that endures through every generation into the future.⁴

One interesting point in the first covenant is the use of the rainbow. It is a visible sign of the covenant that will cause God “to remember” the promise made. Why does it need to be remembered? So that it can be renewed in future generations. Sacred activity includes remembering in a historical context. Memory is a function of the sacred as we so well know when we conduct memorial services. This original covenant of being with reality itself connects past through the present to the future. The conduit is memory.

In Exodus 6:2-8 God recalls the divine credentials before Moses and affirms the memory of covenant. This leads to the exodus. Two things are required of the covenanted people. They shall form a society with specific norms that are rooted in the notion of justice. Of particular note is Exodus 22:21: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The second requirement concerns worship and festivals. The primary purpose of these activities is to remember a history shaped by covenant. Covenant is not just an idea or a procedure but a way of being in the world, a way of being in relationship with reality. It involves the practice of what the covenant requires in the context of the

⁴ Ibid, pp. 233-234

present informed by the past and hopeful for the future. Thus a “living tradition” is created, one transmitted by memory.

The origin of covenant reminds us about the importance of having visible signs that are symbolic of relationship. It teaches that communal memory based in covenant requires something more than issuing an invitation to membership that promises the freedom to believe what you want. The freedom of conscience so important and necessary for a genuine response to be in covenantal relationship does not have its foundations in individual preference but in an evolving history and tradition that values a particular kind of integrity in relationships between people, and between people and that holy, creative, sustaining power in which we live and move and have our being. That reality we are born into is grounded in mutuality. Indeed, part of the ethical and loving and just nature of that mutuality may actually bend a person’s choice away from individual preference and toward a greater good. In this way covenantal relationship may be transforming.

It is the communal memory of the historical nature of covenant that gives depth to the present reality of covenant. It creates a people rather than a disparate collection of individuals. It joins past to the future. It binds the many into one community without sacrificing the individual. It grounds the power of voluntary belonging. It lifts us up and bears us through the world when by ourselves we would be bereft of courage and without consequence in the larger culture. It bonds us to something more than ourselves and calls us beyond self-concern to be partners in justice making. It causes us to remember the promise of who we are and who we might become. It gives the context for the present day reality of our covenant that joins individuals from all peoples. It makes rich our worship that is the primary location for the covenantal practices of memory. It makes real how we practice a faith.

The Principles and Purposes

“In the church we accept the truth: *By their fruits you know them*. But we also accept the truth: *By their roots shall you know them*. Where there are no roots, there will be no fruit.”⁵ - James Luther Adams

We have inherited so much, a rich depository of connected stories, events and people that reach deep into a particular religious heritage and a particular nation. It is through the particular that the universal is discovered. This historical narrative forms a tradition. The umbilical cord that runs through that tradition to the present day is called covenant. I wonder how many people who join in the covenant of a local congregation understand that they have gained a tradition? The current rendition of our hymnbook is called *Singing the Living Tradition*. A living tradition might suggest an evolving tradition attached to a discernable past and informed by it. It might also harbor a kind of eclecticism that is suspicious of how belonging to a tradition includes an individuation that necessarily requires a sense of boundaries.

The question of identity, of how we belong together, of how we inhabit a tradition together, is in part a question about the relationship between pluralism and primacy. A host of conundrums arise. Does the pluralism that we enjoy and support, those diverse practices we honor that populate the great circumference of our circle, somehow contradict the center? Does the impulse of pluralism rush away from the recognition of

⁵ Beach, *Transforming Liberalism*, p. 250

primacy? Is it not the nature of covenant to establish, freely by choice and commitment, priority?

Part of the difficulty is confusion between personal religion and covenantal relationships, between individual practice and the purpose of the covenanted community, between tolerance and religious freedom. Diversity and the tolerance it requires are so often promoted as reasons for joining our congregations. Diversity and tolerance are valuable for civic unity and to the extent that they represent our desire for inclusiveness important to articulate. They are not sufficient, however, for sustaining a community and a deeper sense of belonging. As church consultant Lyle Schaller observed, “Churches that proclaim ‘our strength is our diversity’ will see the vast majority of first-time visitors pass them by, seeking a church with greater clarity.”⁶ Our congregations need to be something more than workshops for creating and practicing a personal religion.

Personal religion, so useful for the spiritual development of a person, lacks the ability to maintain covenantal relationships. The spiritual life is larger than an inward process of self-discovery and self-enlightenment. It requires an outlet. It needs to be engaged with others. It needs a commitment to a community of faith, faithful to being called out from the self to right relationship and service. Personal religion by itself is disconnected to how an individual exists in history. Because human existence is social in nature and religious identity is not merely a private affair, personal religion must be related to an understanding of history and the place of the individual in institutions.

This is the primary claim of covenantal religion: that the locus of reality, of being itself, of Spirit, of God, of the Holy, is in history and the

⁶ Lyle Schaller, *Small Congregations, Big Potential* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 97

social incarnations of love and justice. Covenantal religion bears witness to this reality that is revealed in right relationships. It proclaims faith in that sustaining and creative power that delivers people from slavery of all kinds and urges them toward love and compassion and justice.

The purpose of the church, then, is to turn people toward that reality, to the experience of the Holy, to be in relationship to that sacred power and to know what it requires of them. Thus the covenant is not just between people of a congregation but also with the transforming power in reality, what is most real and worthy of our love and devotion. There is both a horizontal and a vertical dimension to covenant. The church is at the intersection of the covenant where the sacred and the human meet, where the eternal and the temporal make contact. In that crossing place the people turn aside and respond to the call of the Holy. There are many names for that reality that calls us into relationship, and many practices or paths to it. This source that is greater than us and not of our making, this gift and power that makes possible covenant, can be called universal love, the Spirit of Life, the Oversoul, God, ultimate reality, the Holy, the ground of being, Goddess, creative power, Mystery.

What Adams cautions against is the abandonment of the vertical dimension of covenant that both grounds with roots and elevates with a language of reverence. The irony is that the attempt to liberate ourselves from a tradition of faith diminishes our humanity because when the transcendent link is severed so is the human capacity for self-transcendence. It is the Mystery that challenges the expanding boundaries of the human ego. Without the otherness of the Spirit, without the judging power of Right Relationship, without the point of view of the Holy or the Ground of Being,

humanity turns in on itself and breaks apart upon the shallow shoals of the self.⁷

To join in covenant with that sacred power and each other is a voluntary act. The function of freedom is not license. The reason we institutionalize religious freedom is because it creates the conditions that bring people into relationship with what is holy and by that experience to be more whole and loving people. This is something much more profound than advocating tolerance as personal preference. The free mind, the sacredness of conscience, the power of persuasion rather than coercion, the voluntary agreement that creates covenant are important to religious freedom because the purpose of belonging in covenanted relationships is to grow in love—in the love of each other and in the love of neighbor and in the love of the Holy. The integrity of loving relationships can never be compelled. Religious freedom is necessary to being in right relationship. Love will forfeit personal preference when it is required for the sake of the other.

All these dynamics that swirl around the formation of religious identity, how we belong together in a covenant with two dimensions, and how we inhabit a tradition together shape the history of the Principles and Purposes of our Association. That history begins with the consolidation of two distinct religious bodies, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America.

The dance toward merger began decades before its accomplishment in 1961. Both traditions were engaged in new formulations of their collective identities. At the 1943 Universalist General Assembly the General Superintendent, Robert Cummins, challenged his listeners with these words:

⁷ Beach, *Transforming Liberalism*, p. 251

“Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism is universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that *all* are welcome.... A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.”⁸

Many in the audience were not ready to give up their liberal Christian identity. Yet Cummins expressed the emerging impulse to claim for Universalism the widest possible affiliation. Un-tethered Universalism that aspired to become something like a world religion of its own expressed the generous urge toward an all-inclusive faith but it was more successful as an ideal than finding an institutionally grounded form.

The Unitarians were also struggling with their collective identity. The Humanist Manifesto in 1933 called for a liberal religion free of theistic concerns and centered in the natural world with science as the basis of its knowledge. In 1943 the prominent Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies offered the five principles of modern Unitarianism for the purpose of a new program of expansion by the AUA. They were: “individual freedom of belief; discipleship to advancing truth; the democratic process in human relations; universal brotherhood, undivided by nation, race, or creed; and allegiance to the cause of a united world community.”⁹ These principles avoided theological language and any connection to a tradition of faith. They spoke of a method without content. The principles were so popular that they were adapted in the Statement of Purpose of the new Unitarian

⁸ David E. Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000), p. 178

⁹ David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 167

Universalist Association in 1961. Their echo can still be found in the current Principles and Purposes.

With religious identity at issue in both the Unitarian and Universalist communities, the discussion for merger focused more on organization than on theology. The one exception was, of course, about the relationship of the new Association with its religious roots. At the joint conference in 1959 there was debate over one portion of a statement of Purposes and Objectives. In question was the statement: “To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in their essence as love to God and love to man.” A new proposal amended the statement in this way: “To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by Jesus and the other great teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, and prophetically expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition as love to God and love to man.” After more discussion yet another version was offered that took out the reference to Jesus and changed the last phrase to read: “immemorially summarized in our Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and to man.” When the Unitarians suggested that the word *the* replace *our*, a consensus was reached.¹⁰

By the late 1970's the original Principles came under increasing criticism. A feminist lens especially found them lacking. There was also concern about the section that garnered the teachers and prophets “in every age and tradition” under the umbrella of the Jewish and Christian heritage. In addition there was a growing awareness of how the Principles did not address environmental concerns. In response the conferences of women in 1979 and 1980 brought forth a proposed revision and placed it on the agenda of the 1981 General Assembly in Philadelphia. The amendments took into

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 174

consideration the language problems and added a section that called member congregations to “acknowledge our responsibility to cherish the earth and its resources.”

The most polarizing revision removed the phrase that characterized the great religious teachings as “immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to humankind.” It was replaced with the statement that the UUA shall “Recognize our Judeo-Christian heritage as well as other traditions and seek lasting values and new insights....” While introducing once again *our* in the recognition of historical roots, *God* was ushered out. When strong opposition was voiced a compromise was reached in which the proposed bylaw amendments were referred to a committee to be appointed by the UUA Board. The committee was charged with developing a process by which the entire Association could take part in recommendations for a new or revised bylaw, Purposes and Principles.¹¹

Walter Royal Jones gave his capable leadership in guiding that process over the next three years. The current architecture of the Principles and Purposes was presented to the 1983 General Assembly in Vancouver. The interesting thing was the cover letter for the bylaws that offered an explanation for the lack of theological substance in the amendments. It emphasized that the recommendations were not statements of common religious belief because the wide diversity of theological positions in the Association made that impossible. That pluralism hampered the ability to craft a language that represented a “common denominator” of the various

¹¹ Edward A. Frost, ed., *With Purpose and Principle* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), pp. 13-17

points of view. What could be expressed was a sense of common ethical principle.¹²

The final version of the Principles and Purposes was adopted in 1985 after a lengthy democratic process. The “Jewish and Christian traditions” are listed as one of the many sources that “the living tradition” draws from. Eleven years later a sixth source was added that recognized “Earth-centered traditions,” and with the Principles and Purposes currently under review as the bylaws require every 15 years we can imagine the possibility of other sources.

Reading the seven principles and the six sources it is impossible to recover a history or a tradition of faith. There is a hint however. In the beginning is the statement that the congregations of the Association “covenant to affirm and promote” and then the principles are listed followed by the sources. After the six sources is this statement: “As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.” *Covenant*, such a slender and precious root, is the lone word that frames the list of principles and sources. Those principles and sources do offer the kind of shared values and ethical principles that a democratic process can provide. But as Walter Jones once commented, would you want the Principles and Purposes read for solace and support during a time of great grief or crises?

Though the statement of our Principles and Purposes are symbolic of the center of gravity in our movement for some people, one cannot fail to notice that they possess the quality of being contingent. They describe in a general and collective way something about us but they are not prescriptive in the sense of being the authority for defining our faith. One does not swear

¹² Ibid, p. 18-19

allegiance to them nor are they a substitute for the experience of the Holy. They do not insist on uniformity of thought or conformity of behavior. One is not required to submit to them because: “Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such is used as a creedal test.” So says Section C-24 under Article II of our Principles and Purposes.

What do the Purposes indicate is the mission of our Association? There is nothing unique there. The Association is dedicated to religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. Its primary purpose is to serve its member congregations, organize new congregations, strengthen our institutions and implement its principles. There is no covenantal language for the mission of our Association. After all it is not a church.

The Principles represent the ethical vision of our Association and are civic in attitude. They are fine as far as they go, and there is nothing distinctly Unitarian or Universalist about them. The Sources work hard not to present anything distinctive outside of the variety of them. Do they make us Unitarian Universalist?

Where then is the covenant if not found in Purposes or Principles or Sources? It is the promise of free congregations to give “our mutual trust and support.” To walk in the ways of love together is our covenant. Adams would say that our covenant is to be faithful to that divine and human love that will not let us go, that ground of mutuality that is the source of reality, the location of the Holy. It is faith in a connection that runs deeper than having to agree on what is theologically or politically correct. It is a promise to uphold the spiritual freedom and integrity of each other not for the

purpose of being alone or believing in fairies because love will not leave you to walk through the valley of the shadows alone and love will not abide delusional fantasies that remove you from reality. We covenant for the purpose of walking together in right relationship, in community, to share what we have experienced of the Holy and to seek to meet the Holy again to learn what is required of us. We covenant not to coerce but to persuade, not to forsake our conscience but to test it in the fierce love of others who will not let us go until we have been blessed by what it is that we must wrestle with. And I for one would happily leave the temporal Principles and Sources for something that aspires for the eternal, something like the “I call that church free” declarations of Adams in *The Church That Is Free* (1975).

But even that does not matter. What matters is our promise to walk together despite our differences about the Principles and Sources. What matters is that I can see with what amazingly inspired creativity some of us interpret the Principles and Purposes. It is that spirit that awes me even when the text does not. It is the integrity of the Spirit that is expressed through the individual experience and thought of a person, the Spirit drawn down to spirit, refined in a particular way and born anew, that captures me and bonds me. Fidelity to that spirit divine though human attracts me to the life of a congregation and its larger associations. It drives me to be its priest and lover.

It is the covenantal spirit of love that sustains us in our diversity, judges us, challenges us, and calls us out from ourselves to be in right relationship. To that Spirit that holds us all, that inspires us to hold each other in covenant and to walk together in its ways known and to be known, I have promised myself. It is what I hope and pray binds you to me—our promise to turn toward the Holy, to show it to each other when one of us is

blind, to walk together by its wisdom and light, one in devotion if not always in thought, willing to go where the Spirit calls, sisters and brothers of one another, freely given, salted and shaken, and then bound by something greater than our words, individual yet one, sworn by heart and mind to what shall live after us. So may it be. Amen.

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