

2010 Annual Meeting of the Unitarian Universalist District of Metropolitan New York

Workshop for Congregation Presidents and Parish Ministers and Members of the District Board by the Rev. Burton D. Carley, First Unitarian Church of Memphis, TN

“A covenant is an agreement we make so that we can be in right relationship with each other. Many of our congregations have covenants and, of course, all of our UU congregations have in covenant with each other through the UUA bylaws. But how are we, as District and congregational leaders, to be in covenant with one another? What are the benefits and challenges of such a covenant?”

Primary resource: “Who Owns Your Congregation?” by Dan Hotchkiss of the Alban Institute, UU World, spring 2010.

I. What is leadership?

1. Leaders frame the interpretation of things.
2. Leaders move beyond self to build relationships.
3. Leaders ask, “What is it we can do together we cannot do alone?”

II. What is spiritual leadership?

1. The primary function of ministers, presidents and board members.
2. Gives permission to go deep so the inner life shapes outer functions.
3. Uses as a model servant leadership concerned with the spiritual growth of others.
4. Is fiduciary in nature serving the mission of the congregation or district rather than pleasing others or promoting personal preference.
5. Mission answers in context: “Whose lives do we intend to change and in what way?”

III. What does covenant have to do with it?

1. Covenant is how we are organized in right relationship and defines the church.
2. The church is not a place but a people who by their presence create an open and inclusive environment where the sacred or holy might be encountered.
3. The horizontal dimension of covenant creates right relationship through partnership without dominance or submission.
4. The vertical dimension of covenant responds to the reality and experience of the sacred/holy and what it requires of us in our particular situation.
5. Where the horizontal and vertical meet in covenant is the center of the church.

**AN EXAMPLE OF LEADERSHIP:** When contemplating how I wanted to frame my spiritual purpose among you it was not a simple matter of giving you information or dispensing knowledge. I came to articulate the exercise of my leadership in this way: “I would be the tip of the plow turning up the fallow soil so that something new might be seeded and spring forth.”

**MORE ON THE NATURE OF COVENANT:** Covenant is not based on the idea of two individuals, otherwise unconnected, pursuing personal advantage. Covenant is not Robert Rules of Order for creating a club. Covenant is not a list of temporary guidelines defining appropriate conduct for a workshop, meeting or seminar. A covenant is a bond of trust freely entered into for a spiritual purpose. Covenants are

about the “we” that creates the identity for the “I.” Our faith tends to focus on the “I.” To be in right relationship we must honor the “I” but not at the exclusion of the “we.” We are especially not in right relationship when we used third person discourse. The Association and its Districts are a community of congregations. No individual is a member of the Association. The primary covenant is the member in a local congregation. The congregation is in covenant with other congregations. There is no “them.” The only way to move to a genuine regard for the second person—whether that is a member in a congregation, or another congregation, or a district, or the larger Association, or a colleague—is through a recovery of the integrity of the first person in mutual relationship. It has been stated in this way: first person responsibility leaves third-person complacency for the sake of second-person community. The “we” created through covenant is not just a mutually satisfying relationship, but asks of each party to care for the spiritual health and growth of the other even to the point of inconvenience and sacrifice. Another name for this might be love.

Here are some central features of covenant that order our right relationships. It affirms the dignity of difference and recognizes dependence. Members of a congregation and the association of congregations cannot alone sustain themselves, let alone establish a framework of collaborative action and collective grace. Covenants exist because we are different and seek to preserve that difference, even as we come together to bring our several gifts to the common good. Covenants are also inherently pluralistic. In our commune there are a number of covenants: members with one another in a congregation (the cornerstone relationship); members to minister; minister to colleagues; and congregations to each other in association and that includes regional bodies or districts. One relationship does not exclude the other, and there are inherent tensions in this pluralism. Finally, covenants are intergenerational in that they connect past, present and future. It is a partnership between those who have come before us in our tradition, those who now guard, nurture, expand and pass on that tradition, and those who will inherit that tradition by choice or birth.

So let me count the generic ways of not being in right relationship. When we don’t recognize and value difference right relationship is broken. When there is not “we” we break right relationship. When we deny our dependence right relationship is broken. When we are unable to bring our unique gifts for the common good we are not in right relationship. When we use covenant for our own purpose we are not in right relationship. When turn away from the vertical dimension of covenant we are not in right relationship. When are living exclusively in one relationship, out of one covenant to the exclusion of others, we are in wrong relationship. And when we are not mindful of being stewards of the past and the present for the sake of the future, we are not in right relationship.

To be Unitarian Universalist leaders is to understand the spiritual quality of leadership and the various dimensions of the bond of trust that unite us together through the promises we make in covenant. My hope is that through our time together seeds have been planted that will bear fruition in the work you do for our faith and for the growing of your own soul. -- Rev. Burton D. Carley