

RE-COVENANTING 2019

As Unitarian Universalists we are part of a Covenantal Community. We have no creed, doctrine, nor dogma to which we all subscribe. Instead we make covenants, promises or agreements with each other in our small groups, congregations, and throughout this movement. I know some people don't like the term 'Covenant,' probably because it sounds too churchy or archaic, but it really is the better term for the promises and agreements we make. We sometimes have to reclaim terms that we have let Christians take as their own, and this is one that is especially important to our form of church governance, our Congregational Polity.

In the Bible, particularly in the books of the Torah, God often makes Covenants with the Chosen People Israel and her leaders. Some of these Covenants, such as the one made with Noah after the Flood to never again destroy all the peoples of the world, seem strangely focused on restraining the Angry God of parts of the Old Testament. Over against those Covenants, the revelation of Jesus as the Divine Son, Suffering Servant, or Sacrificial Lamb are seen as the New Covenant in which God's Son dies for the people. The New Testament portrays a very different kind of Covenant between God and all people. For good or ill, Covenants describe the most important agreements.

There are also Covenants used in real estate law and community laws, codes and practices to describe serious agreements made between various parties, especially in Homeowner Associations, some of which can be quite annoying but serve to establish certain uniform practices within communities.

The overall purpose of Covenants is to make clear the expectations of those within the community, so UU Covenants usually include descriptions of how we intend to behave with each other. Some groups have gone further to describe consequences of being Out Of Covenant, but often just reminding others that they are Out Of Covenant is sufficient to correct problematic behavior. For people to fully share in the Covenant, we usually use some form of democratic process to approve and re-affirm our Covenant.

We currently have two covenantal statements that describe how we function. One is the 7 Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the other is the Affirmation we usually share each week. The Principles were approved by the UUA General Assemblies in 1984 and '85 and are actually part of the By-laws of the UUA. I am not sure about how long the current affirmation has been used, though it is adapted from earlier statements of which 2 versions are included in the hymnal. Both of our current statements are aspirational and somewhat general. The Committee on Ministry has been working for several years on an additional statement which is more specific about how we intend to practice our faith with each other in this community. More about that shortly.

As I was working on ideas about Re-Covenanting, my thoughts went to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his thoughts about the Beloved Community, which is considered by many to be central to his philosophy. I have come to believe that it is also central to our existence as a religious community, both in this congregation and throughout our UU Movement. Within our congregations we practice a Congregational Polity in which all members have a voice and a vote in all that we do. From the choosing of Ministers to the acquisition and disposition of properties, and from the election of board members to the creation of statements about our practices and beliefs, we function as a direct democracy, only allowing representatives on the board certain functions to allow manageable operation. Each member of this congregation has one vote, no matter how wealthy or influential and without regard for the color of skin or genderal orientation or particular beliefs. Within this community, we decide together about what is acceptable behavior and what we each expect of the other. It is our commitment to this community that allows this church to exist and continue. It is our common support of those things that we choose to stand for that bring unity and strength.

In this time of national disunity, I came upon some of King's thoughts in an article published in the *Christian Century* in 1974, entitled:

Martin Luther King's Vision of the Beloved Community

by **Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr.**

Dr. Smith is on the faculty at Colgate Rochester/Bexley Hall/Crozer in Rochester, New York. Dr. Zepp is dean of the chapel and assistant professor of religion at Western Maryland College. This article is adapted from their book Search for the Beloved community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Copyright © 1974 by Judson Press, Valley forge, Pennsylvania.) This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, April 3, 1974, pp. 361-363.

(I found this section particularly critical for our time) Alleviating Economic Inequity
King's views on this entire question grew out of his early championship of an egalitarian, socialistic approach to wealth and property. "A life," he wrote, "is sacred. Property is intended to serve life, and no matter how much we surround it with rights and respect, it has no personal being. It is part of the earth man walks on; it is not man." He repeatedly condemned the United States' economic system for withholding the necessities of life from the masses while heaping luxuries on the few. One of our major goals, he declared, should be to bridge the gap between abject poverty and inordinate wealth. To this end he began, during the latter part of his life, to advocate a variety of economic programs, including the creation of jobs by government and the institution of a guaranteed annual minimal income. He was impatient with phrases like "human dignity" and "brotherhood of man" when they did not find concrete expression in the structures of society.

The point is that King believed it was God's intention that everyone should have the physical and spiritual necessities of life. He could not envision the Beloved Community apart from the alleviation of economic inequity and the achievement of economic justice. Harvey Cox has aptly pointed out that King combined with this emphasis two traditional biblical themes: the "holiness of the poor" and the "blessed community." In the movement King led, blacks were the embodiment of "the poor" and integration represented the vision of "the holy community."

As we have watched the disparity between wealth and poverty grow in the decades since MLK was assassinated, it is striking how little has been accomplished to bridge that still widening chasm. In all my years I have been fortunate to not experience serious long-term insecurity around food or housing, but 20% of my compensation goes to health insurance and the amount rises to 25% or more if counting all medical and dental costs. I can fully understand why the working poor cannot afford food, housing, and healthcare in this supposedly richest of nations. I helped a woman get one last night in a hotel this past week before she took her teenage son to another state in hopes of finding a better work and living situation.

Our community response to such situations within and outside of this congregation is among matters we discuss and decide upon within the Covenant of our Beloved Community. We may have various views but we seek to find beliefs and practices that we can all live with. When we take stands as a Congregation, we vote upon them. When we take actions or make commitments we vote upon them. Many of us are excited about the Family Promise program in which at least 13 host congregations agree to host families in need up to 4 weeks a year while these families get back on their feet.

We will likely vote on our support for that program as we will on a new Covenantal Statement and on many other matters at future congregational meetings. Our use of the Democratic Process is part of the Covenant that we share as a UU Congregation. Like any other UU Congregation, we make our own decisions, for good or ill. The path we take as a Congregation is largely in our own hands. The Covenant that we have with each other within this Beloved Community is the highest expression of our Congregational Polity. This Re-Covenanting Service is intended to remind us each of our Covenant with each other, all those ways that we seek to live out our UU Principles and that Affirmation that we make each week within the Purpose and Mission of our Congregation and based in the Sources of our Living Tradition which inspire us to beliefs and actions of faith.

Our Covenant with each other has sometimes been a little bit loose in regard to the way we treat each other and in regard to things like gossip and parking lot grumbling. Based in our UU Principles and our Affirmation, the Committee on Ministry has been working for several years on a more explicit statement of how we intend to live out our Covenant for the Beloved Community. Jan will share a few thoughts about that process in a moment.

I want to close by thanking you for your commitment to this community and to the values that bring us together. As I remind us each week, I know that we come from many different places, with a variety of beliefs, and we each decide to be a part of this community that strives to welcome all people of good will without regard for socio-economic status, shade of skin, sexual orientation, or even political history. May we continue to engage in and support this congregation as we seek to uphold our Covenant with each other!

May it always be so! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!