

Our Sacred Covenant

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This church has had some interesting adventures over the past couple of years. We've engaged in establishing priorities, in deciding what's important. We surveyed our building and facilities, analyzed their strengths and weaknesses, decided what needed to be done and conducted a successful capital campaign to pay for the repairs and improvements.

We've also engaged in establishing priorities and deciding what values are most important to us as a congregational community. Last year we participated in congregational workshops to discern our core values, values we hold in common as central to our life together as a beloved community. We then circulated the results to all the committees and groups in the congregation to further refine the process, to give everyone a chance to discuss their values. And the results were remarkably clear: We are a compassionate community that nurtures personal growth and works for justice. Our core values are compassion, nurture, and justice.

Moving forward with these values, people began wondering what it would mean to embody them; people began asking each other what it would mean to practice these values in our daily life together. This led to another round of discernment. This time, instead of asking what our values were, we asked one another how we could embody them – asking what we would do rather than just what we believe.

We used the same type of process as last year, but this time we had an additional congregational workshop session to ensure even broader participation. We processed what we learned at those workshops and sent out draft versions of the covenant for further comment. And did we ever get comments! Good ones,

too. We took them into consideration and refined the processes to reflect the wisdom and understanding of our community.

At the end of all this we ended up with our proposed congregational covenant, a set of guidelines for creating the kind of compassionate, nurturing and just community we want to be. This is included in our order of service this morning.

There are five basic categories that our covenant is built upon.

- We welcome and accept all who enter.
- We communicate with kindness and respect.
- We participate in our church community with generosity and good humor.
- We work together to resolve conflicts.
- We support each other in times of happiness and sorrow.

Shepherding this covenant process was an interesting adventure in itself. At one step in the revision process it was suggested that it needed some sort of preamble, so we wrote one and sent it around. It generated a great deal of comment. For some, it was just right; for others, it was absolutely unacceptable. This produced a sensitive discussion about what our covenant was really based on. We looked closely at the values of compassion, nurture and justice and realized that they were all relational. We hold our relationships to be of the highest value. After much discussion and struggle, we realized that there was a traditional word for describing our highest value: sacred.

This is why our preamble states that “In holding our relationships sacred, we the people of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley make promises about how we treat each other as we pursue our religious journey together.”

Although it was as plain as the nose on my face, it wasn't until I began work on this sermon that I realized what we'd done. In affirming that we hold our relationships sacred we had produced a theological statement of belief! I know that this isn't exactly what we set out to do, but here we are. We went through a

rigorous process of congregational discernment and produced a statement of what it is we hold sacred. Now isn't that just like a church?

But let's unpack what we've done here. I know we stand in opposition to creeds, statements of beliefs handed down to us by some external authorities as prerequisites for membership. We are people of an open fellowship; we each find our way as we support one another in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. But we engaged in just such a free and responsible search this year and, together, we actually found some truth and meaning! What could be better than that?

Let's take a look at what we've said when we call something "sacred." Many of the definitions I've found make reference worship or veneration of a god or deity, and this is one way that "sacred" is commonly understood. But next to those usages are the broader ones, such as "highly valued" and "entitled to reverence or respect."

In his book, *The Sacred and the Profane*, religious historian Mircea Eliade draws some additional distinctions as to the nature of the sacred in the way it derives its meaning from what is not sacred – the profane.

Eliade says that, "The abyss that divides the two modalities of experience – sacred and profane – will be apparent when we come to describe sacred space and the ritual building of the human habitation, or the varieties of the religious experience of time, or the relations of religious [humans] to nature and the world of tools, or the consecration of human life itself, the sacrality with which [our] vital functions (food, sex, work and so on) can be charged. Simply calling to mind what the city or the house, nature, tools, or work have become for modern and nonreligious [people] will show with the utmost vividness all that distinguishes such a [person] from a [one] belonging to any archaic society, or even from a peasant of Christian Europe. For modern consciousness, a physiological act of eating, sex, and so on – is in sum only an organic phenomenon, however much it may still be encumbered by tabus (imposing, for example, particular rules for "eating properly" or forbidding some sexual behavior disapproved by social

morality). But for the primitive, such an act is never simply physiological; it is, or can become, a sacrament, that is, a communion with the sacred.

It continues, “The reader will very soon realize that sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by [humans] in the course of [their] history. These modes of being in the world are not of concern only to the history of religions or to sociology; they are not the object only of historical, sociological, or ethnological study. In the last analysis, the sacred and profane modes of being depend upon the different positions that [humans have] conquered in the cosmos; hence they are of concern both to the philosopher and to anyone seeking to discover the possible dimensions of human existence.”

Eliade’s distinction of two distinctly different modes of being, the sacred and the profane, help to clarify some of the confusion surrounding another word often used in this context: “worship.”

In its broadest sense, worship can be either sacred or profane. Since “worship” means to hold something as important and to direct our energies toward making it manifest, worship can also include a dedication to making money or acquiring possessions, activities that can be described by the profane term “materialism.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson understood the dual nature of worship, that it could be either sacred or profane, when he wrote: “A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

In contrast to the profane, the sacred describes our relationship with something greater than ourselves, something that calls us to become greater than we have been before. The sacred is that mystery which, although it is beyond us, is also part of us. As we worship the sacred, we grow in the values we hold dear: compassion, nurture, and justice.

The profane describes our relationship with things that are not greater than ourselves, things we wish to acquire or control, use or enjoy. The profane contains no mystery, only allure. And worship of the profane, over time, makes us less than we were: as we acquire security and comfort, possessions and success, we tend to lose the depth and richness of experience into which we could have blossomed.

As Emerson said, we can worship either the profane or the sacred, “it behoove us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.”

What do we want to become? We want to become compassionate, nurturing, and just. How do we accomplish this? We worship compassion, nurture, and justice as sacred. They are lofty spiritual values that engage us in the challenging work of growing our souls to meet our ideals.

And if we feel a need to describe our sacred values further, they are values found and expressed in human relationship, the kind of values that comprise a humanistic theology. It’s no surprise that this congregation would agree on a theology of humanism – that’s the theology of choice in most Unitarian Universalist congregational surveys.

In this, we’re really only about 2,000 years behind the times. Covenants have been around for a long time. Religious covenants, too. I can recall one long ago describing a relationship between Israelites and their God. It had about 10 rules to our five. If the people agreed to follow the rules, their God agreed to keep them prosperous and safe. It was a bit heavy-handed and authoritarian, but seemed to work for folks back then.

And then there was the reformer, Jesus of Nazareth. He called for a new covenant, one based more on good relationships with one another rather than a distant deity. Its essence was to love one’s neighbor as much as you love yourself. He said that obedience to the rules of religious law were not nearly as important as taking care of one another. May I be so bold as to point out that in asserting the revolutionary values of compassion, nurture, and justice, Jesus was a

humanist. I think he would have approved of our covenant, but so many people have already claimed his approval for their agendas that I won't push the point.

Our covenant is with each other. It points to authentic, caring relationships as the path to unfolding our highest potential. It is a sacred covenant about our sacred relationships.

There are some interesting precedents for this. In fourth century Egypt, there was a very popular Christian movement where men would go into the desert to live and fast and pray and grow closer to God. There was a problem, though, in that most of them had no training or experience, or even really a clue. So there were these big desert communities of grumpy, stinky men all trying to pray their way into something holy. They tended to annoy one another, quarrel, and even fight.

The leader of one of these communities was a man called Dorotheos of Gaza. Exasperated by the constant bickering and quarreling over matters small and great, he called his charges together in hopes of providing useful guidance. He said that, since none of them really knew what God was, it was difficult to know the goal of their journey of the spirit. He said that God was like the hub of a great wheel and humans were like its spokes, running from hub to rim. The spokes can't see the hub, so it's hard to know how close one has come on one's journey toward the source. But there was one thing of which they could be sure: the closer they got to the hub, the nearer they would also be to the other spokes. He told them not to measure their progress by how close they were to God, but by how close they were to each other; to measure the quality of their journey by the quality of their relationships with each other.

Our covenant gives us the kind of guidance Dorotheos of Gaza would have given. It is a guide and a yardstick for improving the quality of our relationships with each other. It calls us to care: care for each other, care about each other, and care with each other. Its simple guidance will nurture us on our path toward unfolding our unrealized potential as we travel our sacred spiritual journeys together, in community.

As I said before, the major categories in our covenant are the ones in bold. The subheads, or bulleted items, are words and phrases directly from our congregation as to how we might embody those principles. So, here it is:

UUCLV CONGREGATIONAL COVENANT [PROPOSED]

In holding our relationships sacred, we the people of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley make promises about how we treat each other as we pursue our religious journey together. In this spirit, we affirm and covenant that –

We welcome and accept all who enter.

- Greet all warmly
- Treat our differences as opportunities for greater understanding

We communicate with kindness and respect.

- Assume all have good intentions
- Listen with an open mind
- Honor boundaries
- Disagree without criticism or judgment

We participate in our church community with generosity and good humor.

- Freely share our time, talent, treasure and energy
- Welcome others to join in our activities while honoring their right to decline
- Honor all levels of service to the church

We work together to resolve conflicts.

- Give people the benefit of the doubt

- Stay engaged even in the midst of difficult issues
- Assume responsibility for our own feelings and actions
- Be slow to anger and quick to forgive
- Gently call each other to account for hurtful behavior

We support each other in times of happiness and sorrow.

- Recognize talents and nurture spiritual and personal growth
- Be open to accept help and give help when needed
- Practice gratitude and appreciation
- Celebrate the joy of being together

And promise-making creatures are also promise-breaking creatures, so we close with:

Acknowledging that this covenant represents lofty goals toward which we strive, we empower one another to remind us when our actions fall short of our ideals.

This covenant is meant to be a living document. This is not “one and done.” This is one step on our journey together. We hope that it will be approved and we can spend the coming year living this covenant, experimenting with it, trying it, finding what works, what doesn’t work, what’s unclear, what needs to be said, how it needs to be improved as we move forward. Perhaps we’ll have a revised version next year and the year after and the year after. Because in order to be a living document, a covenant needs to breathe. It needs to take in our experience and exhale our wisdom. So, as a group, as a congregation, moving forward together, may we inhale our experience together and may we exhale wisdom. May we breathe in peace; may we breathe out love.

May it be so.