

# Connecting

*Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship*

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines  
a Unitarian Universalist Church  
1800 Bell Ave  
Des Moines, IA 50315  
www.ucdsm.org / 515-244-8603



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## Covenant

### Chalice Lighting

Words of Susan Frederick-Gray: "It is covenant that brings us out of isolation, covenant that brings us out of selfish concerns, out of individualism, to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love.

### Check In

### Defining Moment

**covenant** (n) c. 1300, from Old French *covenant* "agreement," originally present participle of *covenir* "agree, meet," from Latin *convenire* "come together" (hence, *convene*). Applied in Scripture to God's arrangements with humankind as a translation of Latin *testamentum*, Greek *diatheke*, both rendering Hebrew *berith*. (Online Etymology Dictionary)

**Synonyms:** promise, commitment, trust; bond, pact, pledge, agreement

## Covenant: Bearing Witness, Companionship, Saving

Rev. Peggy Clarke (adapted)

In the film “Shall We Dance,” (2004), Susan Sarandon, talking about marriage, says:

*We need a witness to our lives. There [are billions] of people on the planet... I mean, what does any one life really mean? But in a marriage, you're promising to care about everything. The good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things... all of it, all of the time, every day. You're saying 'Your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go un-witnessed because I will be your witness'.*

This may be true of marriage, but it's also true of membership in a UU congregation. We are a covenanted people, bearing witness to each other's lives, companionship each other. This is our great promise, our Great Work – the work of transformation and healing and community building. This is our salvation. We are saved from American isolation, from social alienation, from growing old alone, from the loneliness of early parenthood, from the shallowness of consumer culture, from the distance from our roots. We have a shared willingness to become a balm for the world and for each other.

## Covenant Convenes

Rev. Meredith Garmon

I love that “covenant” comes from “convene”! Our covenant is what brings us together. It's the power that convenes us.

In a Jewish and Christian context, “covenant” refers to God's agreements with humanity: the **Noahic** covenant (God's promise to “every living creature” and the earth in general to never again use a flood to destroy the earth, a promise sealed with the sign of the rainbow), the **Abrahamic** covenant (God's promise to then-Abram that he would be made a great nation and shown to a land, and that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”), the **Mosaic** covenant (God tells Moses that if the Israelites “obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples”), the **Davidic** covenant (God makes a Royal Grant covenant to David and his descendants that his house will rule over Israel forever). There is also a **New** covenant, promised to the prophet Jeremiah, which Christians hold was fulfilled in Jesus: the promise that God will forgive sin and restore fellowship with those whose hearts are turned toward Him. Since “covenant” is a translation of the Latin “testament,” we can think of the Bible as consisting of the “Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant.”

Do these two senses of “covenant” – “convene” and the religious sense – connect with each other? Yes, particularly in our Unitarian tradition. The great Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams (1901-1994) thought of God as “the love that has laid hold upon us, and will not let us go.” Adams thus defined “God” simply as “the community-forming power.” Just this is “sacred and sovereign, and at work in history, and worthy of our devotion.” That is, the power that convenes us, that brings us together into a community, is what people invoking “God” have always been trying to point to, even in the midst of all the unnecessary supernatural associations that have historically attached to that word. And that power that convenes us, that community-forming power, resides in our capacity to promise to walk together.

Let's clear away one use of “covenant” that is **not** what we're talking about here. In the legal sense, a covenant is “a type of contract in which the covenantor makes a promise to a covenantee to do or not do some action.” This sense especially occurs in real estate law to refer to conditions tied to the use of land. While we might say that, metaphorically, covenant does relate to how we use the

ground on which we come together, in general, it's best not to confuse this legal sense of covenant as a type of contract with the sort of covenant relevant to us as a faith community.

A covenant – what convenes us – is the ground of agreement on which we meet, the agreement that makes meeting possible. Unlike a contract, a covenant doesn't generally stipulate conditions that could be objectively determined to be violated. And if it were to be “violated,” the only recourse is recommitment to the promise. The function of a covenant is to remind us of our shared aspiration for how we'd like to be together. Covenants express the sort of general principles that we honor and uphold yet also sometimes fail to honor or uphold. The content of the covenant that convenes Unitarian Universalists has been articulated in various ways through the centuries. In the mid-1980s, we articulated it in the words of our seven principles:

*We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of democratic process; the goal of world community with peace liberty, and justice for all; respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.*

Unitarian Universalists are now engaged in deliberation about whether to adopt new language to express our covenant.

*As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. **Love** is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these shared values are: **Interdependence.** We honor the interdependent web of all existence. We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships. **Pluralism.** We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect. **Justice.** We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions. **Transformation.** We adapt to the changing world. We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect. **Generosity.** We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope. We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality. **Equity.** We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.*

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines is also convened by our agreement that we gather on behalf of our mission to:

*grow spiritually and ethically, serve justly, love radically.*

The shared agreement to embody these words convenes the congregation – it is part of how the covenant is articulated.

Unlike a contract, breaking a covenant doesn't trigger specified consequences after which it is then null. Rather, each breaking of the promise is the occasion of recommitting to the covenant's ideals.

*Though you've broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come. (Rumi)*

## What Does It Mean to be a Community of Covenant?

Rev. Gretchen Haley, adapted

Covenant is one of those words that can initially sound kind of stuffy, academic and out-of-date. But when you unpack its meaning and its practices, covenant holds a whole vision for how to live in this complicated, beautiful and broken world. It is a vision that says we are most human when we bind ourselves in relationship. But not just any relationship – relationships of trust, mutual accountability and continual return.

This is not what our culture teaches us. Our culture emphasized being self-defined, self-determined, separate even. But our UU covenantal theology affirms the role of the commitments we make to and with each other – the relationships we keep. Our flourishing lies in the promises we make to and with each other.

And even more than that: covenantal theology doesn't just say that our flourishing consists in and through our promising, but also when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again – when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other, even when we think the other isn't doing enough, even when the other is annoying us, or isn't listening well, or isn't doing things the way we want them done – even then. When we realize right then, that we are still connected, and we can't give up – and so we return, and begin again. This beginning again, says our faith, is when our lives meet the holy.

Let me tell you right now, some time in the next year, maybe in the next few minutes, the people you most believe in and care about are going to disappoint you. Your church is going to disappoint you. This world is surely going to disappoint you. Like, all the time. We all are walking wounded and weary from the way this world can – and does – break our hearts.

And what our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other, keep on opening our hearts with greater love. And, right then, our covenantal faith says, we are most whole and most at home.

## Out of a Great Need

Hafiz

Out of a great need  
we are all holding hands and climbing.  
Not loving is a letting go.  
Listen, the terrain around here  
Is far too dangerous  
for that.

## How Covenants Make Us

David Brooks<sup>1</sup>

The weakening of the social fabric has created a range of problems. Alienated young men join ISIS so they can have a sense of belonging. Isolated teenagers shoot up schools. Many people grow up in fragmented, disorganized neighborhoods. Political polarization grows because people often don't interact with those on the other side. Racial animosity stubbornly persists.

Odder still, people are often plagued by a sense of powerlessness, a loss of efficacy. The liberation of the individual was supposed to lead to mass empowerment. But it turns out that people can effectively pursue their goals only when they know who they are — when they have firm identities.

Strong identities can come only when people are embedded in a rich social fabric: when we have defined social roles and when we are seen and admired by our neighbors and loved ones in a certain way. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it,

*Other men are lenses through which we read our own minds.*

Absent a rich social fabric, people are uncertain about who they are. It's hard to live daringly when your very foundation is fluid and at risk.

Marcia Pally's book, *Commonwealth and Covenant*, offers a clarifying concept: "separability amid situatedness." We want to go off and create and explore and experiment with new ways of thinking and living. But we also want to be situated — embedded in loving families and enveloping communities, thriving within a healthy cultural infrastructure that provides us with values and goals.

When we go out and do a deal, we make a contract. When we are situated within something it is because we have made a covenant. A contract protects interests, but a covenant protects relationships. A covenant exists between people who understand they are part of one another. It involves a vow to serve the relationship that is sealed by love. People in a contract provide one another services, but people in a covenant delight in offering gifts.

These days the social fabric will be repaired by hundreds of millions of people making local covenants — widening their circles of attachment across income, social and racial divides. Our new story will transcend the old narrative and offer an updated love of America.

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<sup>1</sup> adapted & abridged from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/how-covenants-make-us.html>

## Called To Live in the Plural

Rev. Victoria Safford<sup>2</sup>

We are bound by covenant, each to each and each to all, by what theologian Rebecca Parker calls “freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence.” The central question for us is not, “What do we believe?” but more, “What do we believe in? To what larger love, to what people, principles, values, and dreams shall we be committed? To whom, to what, are we accountable?” In a tradition so deeply steeped in individualism, it becomes a spiritual practice for each of us to ask, not once and for all, but again and again, even over ninety years of life: How do I decide which beautiful, clumsy, and imperfect institutions will carry and hold (in the words of one congregation’s bond of union) my “name, hand, and heart”? The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural.

Seeing ourselves as bound in covenant is an old practice among us. In 1630, John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of Massachusetts, spoke to a soggy, stalwart band of fellow Puritans, sailing with high and pious hopes aboard the *Arabella* toward a new life in New England:

*Now the only way to avoid . . . shipwreck, and to provide for our poster-ity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. . . . [W]e must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must up-hold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.*

It was an extraordinary declaration of interdependence. Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other’s burdens as their own, to subvert their separate, private interests, their “superfluities,” for the public good of all. Humbly, gently, patiently, they would serve a vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. Those who heard John Winthrop speak would surely have grasped the metaphor of danger: they would have been afraid not only of foundering, literally, on New England’s rocky shore, but of failing in their errand to establish this commonwealth, their “city on a hill.” The only way to avoid shipwreck, spiritual or otherwise, was to “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace”—to make and keep a sacred covenant together.

The organizing statements of the early Universalist and Unitarian congregations in New England echoed this Puritan ideal. The theology changed—Unitarian beliefs about the nature of God, Universalist beliefs about the nature of human beings—but the essential premises of covenanted community, the foundation of their polity, did not. What the Lord required, and what the people needed from each other, was willingness to meet their struggles in the plural voice.

Someone said to me not long ago, “Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all other living things.” When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community, when we celebrate the love of beaming couples, when we ordain new ministers, we speak not in the binding language of contract, but in the life-sustaining fluency of covenant, from *covenir*, to travel together. We will walk together with you, child; we will walk together with you, friend; we will walk together with each other toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, joy, and gratitude. Covenant is the work of intimate justice.

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<sup>2</sup>Excerpts from “Bound in Covenant”

## **Covenant**

Rev. Rebecca Parker

Let us covenant with one another  
to keep faith with the source of life  
knowing that we are not our own,  
earth made us.

Let us covenant with one another  
to keep faith with the community of resistance never to forget that life can be saved  
from that which threatens it  
by even small bands of people  
choosing to put into practice  
an alternative way of life.

And, let us covenant with one another  
to seek for an ever deeper awareness  
of that which springs up inwardly in us.

Even when our hearts are broken  
by our own failure or the failure of others cutting into our lives,  
Even when we have done all we can and life is still broken, there is a Universal Love that has never  
broken faith with us and never will.

This is the ground of our hope, and the reason we can be bold in seeking to fulfill the promise.

## Covenant Quotations

To seek the truth in love means that even when we stumble, we continue to love. Even when we flail, we stay in relationship. To seek the truth in love means that we talk about the hard things rather than denying that things can be hard. This is a very difficult task. It is not something that I have found easy to do, but it is something that I continue to try to be brave enough to do. ~ Rev. Anne Mason

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change. It claims: I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming. ~ Lisa Ward

The ancient question, "Who am I?" inevitably leads to a deeper one: "Whose am I?" – because there is no identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask "Whose am I?" is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways? ~ Douglas Steer

Sometimes it's as simple as this: Our society tells us to ask "What do I want?" Our religion invites us to ask "Whose am I?" Two very different questions that lead to two very different lives. Which question will we invite to lead us? Every single sacred text says our choice is literally a matter of life and death. ~ Rev. Scott Tayler

A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a matter of love. A contract speaks this way: if you do this, and only if you do this, then I will do that. It is hedged, cautious, risk-averse. Its most basic principle is "no surprises." A covenant speaks this way: you and I will do whatever is needed to achieve our shared purpose. We will remember that our covenantal relationship is more important than any particular action we take or fail to take to serve its purpose. ~ Rev. Preston Moore

A covenant is not a contract. It is not made and signed and sealed once and for all, sent to the attorneys for safekeeping. A covenant is not a static artifact and it is not a sworn oath: Whereas, whereas, whereas, Therefore, I will do this, or I'll die, so help me God. A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can't be enforced by consequences but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and by grace, when we stumble, when we forget, when we mess up. ~ Rev. Victoria Safford

Everything you do is connected to who you are as a person and, in turn, creates the person you are becoming. Everything you do affects those you love. All of life is covenant. Imbedded in the idea of prayer is a richly textured view of the world where all of life is organized around invisible bonds or covenants that knit us together. ~ Paul E. Miller

Any one of us could practice religious freedom at home on Sunday mornings. We could practice religious freedom all day long, every day, and never come into community. It is covenant that brings us out of isolation, covenant that brings us out of selfish concerns, out of individualism, to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world. ~ Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

We can join one another only by joining the unknown. [The union] is going where the two of you—and marriage, time, life, history, and the world—will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way. ~ Wendell Berry

Hope is key to every covenant. Our forbearers were wise in putting aside creedal questions -- "What do we all believe in common?" -- in favor of the more covenantal questions: "What spiritual hopes do we share? What shall we promise to one another and to God as we try to live together toward our hopes? How shall we then try to treat one another?" But sometimes I worry that in taking pride in their non-creedal freedom they can easily forget the deep responsibility that their freedom – if it is truly covenantal freedom – necessarily entails. ~ Rev. John Buehrens

Mother Earth needs us to keep our covenant. We will do this in courts, we will do this on our radio station, and we will commit to our descendants to work hard to protect this land and water for them. Whether you have feet, wings, fins, or roots, we are all in it together. ~ Winona LaDuke

A group is as healthy as its 'social contract' is clear; a congregation as faithful as its covenant is mutually understood; a pastor as effective as the pastor's and people's commitment to trust and integrity is honored, guarded, and fulfilled. ~ David Augsburg

To every people the land is given on condition. Perceived or not, there is a Covenant, beyond the constitution, beyond sovereign guarantee, beyond the nation's sweetest dreams of itself. ~ Leonard Cohen

The Israelites frequently forsook God, and he as frequently forsook them. But when they repented and returned to him, he remembered his covenant and delivered them from their distresses. ~ Adoniram Judson

In contemporary Western society the marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships that historically were covenantal, including marriage. This has also been called "commodification," a process by which social relationships are reduced to economic exchange relationships, and so the very idea of "covenant" is disappearing in our culture. Covenant is therefore a concept increasingly foreign to us. ~ Timothy Keller



## Questions

*Which of these questions “hooks” you most?*

1. What promises have you made to those who have gone before?
2. What promises have you made to those who will come after?
3. Have you kept your promises to yourself?
4. Have you made a covenant with the holy? What promises have you made to Life itself? To God? To your inner voice?
5. What is the most life-giving promise you’ve made?
6. Many congregations recite these lines for their chalice lighting: This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another. How might you adapt this to your own relationship with yourself or with the universe? Perhaps you might finish this sentence: “This is my great covenant: ...”
7. Has society ever broken its promise to you? How have you responded when you’ve witnessed society breaking its promises to others?
8. Some of us preempt heartbreak by leaving relationships before others have a chance to break their promises and our hearts. What is keeping you from the risk and pain of covenant?
9. Covenant calls us to work on repairing relationship and sticking in there even when it is hard. But sometimes one’s covenant with self requires us to put up boundaries and know when to leave a relationship. How do you know when it’s time to put your covenant with yourself first?
10. If you’re a member of 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Church of Des Moines, what promise did you make when you joined? You probably had a sense of what you’d get, but were you clear about what you promised to give?
11. Theologian James Luther Adams names the foundational covenantal nature of the universe as “the love that will not let us go.” How do you experience this love? Has it kept its promise to you? How? Have you kept your promises to it?
12. What’s your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what the theme is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

## Spiritual Exercise

### Option A: Whose Am I?

Whose are you? What promises, and to whom, are central to who you are? In particular:

- What is your promise to those who have gone before you?
- What is your promise to those who come after you?
- What is your promise to those central to your life right now?
- What is your promise to yourself?

Delve into these question by selecting four photographs -- one to represent each of the above four questions. Select one picture of a person that represents your promises to those that have gone before you, one picture of a person that represents your promises to those who will come after you, one picture of a person that represents your promises to someone central to your life right now, and one picture of yourself. You'll need a hardcopy of these pictures, so print them out if necessary.

Put these four pictures in a place you will see every day for a month. Perhaps tape them to your bathroom mirror or stick them in your wallet. Maybe frame them and place them on your desk or stick them with magnets on your fridge. Make a conscious effort to reflect on them every day and do at least one thing to further or honor your promise to one of these people. Come to your Journey Group prepared to share what the experience was like.

### Option B: Return & Repair

Is there a relationship of heartbreak in your life? Is there someone that you are out of covenant with - a family member, friend, neighbor, co-worker? Maybe an institution, like your government or faith congregation?

Rev. Gretchen Haley wrote in the column above: "What our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other." Can you return to that relationship of heartbreak in your life and "keep on being in relationship, doing what [you] can to repair the world and each other?"

Whoever it is with whom you have found yourself out of covenant, make time this month to return to that relationship and work on repair. Simply ask yourself "Where have I withdrawn, been betrayed or broken something myself?" Your heart will know the answer. Listen to what it says. Then open your heart one more time and lean into relationship once again. Do what you can to repair what you can.

### **Option C: Map Your Web of Covenant**

For this exercise, get out a big sheet of paper and write “ME” in the middle of it. Then start adding the people, principles, values, and dreams you’re committed to. Draw lines of connection, creating a mind map of the network of covenant you live in.

When you’re done, set it aside for a few days. Then come back to it and notice what stands out for you and, also, what is missing in your web. What covenantal relationships do you have in your life? How might you more intentionally live in the plural? Bring your mind map and your insights to your small group.

### **Check Out**

From everything we’ve shared during this time together, what overall message stands out for you?

### **Chalice Extinguishing**

Words from Rev. Anne Mason: “To seek the truth in love means that even when we stumble, we continue to love. Even when we flail, we stay in relationship. To seek the truth in love means that we talk about the hard things rather than denying that things can be hard. This is a very difficult task. It is not something that I have found easy to do, but it is something that I continue to try to be brave enough to do.”