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Wrestling with Covenant in Unitarian Universalism:
Building a Congregational Culture of Covenant

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I sat in a musty church basement with four middle schoolers staring blankly at me. We were in our first session of their two year confirmation/coming of age class and I in my fourth week serving the church. I'd just introduced the idea of a class covenant and asked them "how we want to be with each other this year". I was trying to be tender and to connect with them and their feelings. I'd hoped that they'd be excited to share what they wanted and we could all build a harmonious, deep, and meaningful classroom culture together. I waited with markers and poster board in hand.

They looked at me and slowly I realized these four kids had no idea what I was talking about. I tried to give examples of what might go on the covenant. I asked leading questions. There was no response. Eventually one of them went and grabbed the classroom rules sign from the other side of the room. This was a sign that I had consciously avoided, feeling that it was too strict and formal. The student handed it to me saying, "these are the rules". Covenants did not seem to have a place here.

I was shocked that these youth had no understanding of covenants when it came to Unitarian Universalist religious education classes. My childhood and adolescence as a raised UU had been full of covenants. But if I were to be truly honest, even those were little more than classroom rules that had nicer words with the hope that the power dynamic of teacher and student would be slightly less obvious. We would say the few things we knew the teacher wanted and maybe add a few lines about something that was an issue last year. The teacher would try to get us to phrase them in positive statements – "speak with indoor voices" instead of "no yelling". Rarely would a student volunteer an actual learning need. Rarely would there be new points year to year. Rarely would this feel like more than making a list of rules at school. Then we would all

sign the covenant, saying that we agreed to be held responsible to it, and move onto the next activity. It usually would be posted in the classroom. Maybe it would be mentioned that someone was breaking the covenant if a student got a little too loud or disruptive.

This was my introduction to and understanding of covenant for most of my life, a list of rules dressed up in fancy language. There was no conversation about religious meaning or depth and never any mention of repair or how to come back into covenant with one another. At best the teacher might say “Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith and so we make a covenant as a class instead of having classroom rules”. I knew that covenant was supposed to mean something, but it was never quite clear what that was.

The consequences of these half hearted attempts to talk about covenant matter. One of the key definitions of Unitarian Universalism is that it is a covenantal, not a creedal, faith. However, aside from an aspirational liturgical covenant that might be recited in worship, taking or teaching children’s religious education is one of the only places congregants engage with covenants. Covenants are not integrated into the life of a congregation. This key, defining aspect of our tradition is getting lost when it is pigeonholed into the first few sessions of a religious education class.

Recently, there have been public calls for a return to the idea of covenant within Unitarian Universalism, in response to racism and white supremacy within the denomination. Over the past five years, the Unitarian Universalist Association, UU congregations, and UU individuals have engaged again into an attempt to address racism, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression in our denomination, our communities, and ourselves. This most recent reengagement with racism and white

supremacy in the denomination came after a 2017 hiring decision and public conversation around the decision that highlighted racist hiring practices within the Unitarian Universalist Association.¹ Following public outcry around that hiring decision and a poor response from the Association leadership, several members of the UUA and UUA Board resigned including the UUA President Peter Morales.² A provisional group of three co-presidents was installed until the June General Assembly where a new president would be elected.³ One of the first moves that these co-presidents, Rev. Sofia Betancourt, Rev. William Sinkford, and Dr. Leon Spencer, and the UUA Board made was appointing a Commission on Institutional Change⁴. This Commission was charged to “[conduct] an external audit of white privilege and the structure of power within Unitarian Universalism, to analyze structural racism and white supremacy within the UUA ... with the goal of long-term cultural and institutional change that redeems the essential promise and ideals of Unitarian Universalism”.⁵

The final report, *Widening the Circle of Concern*, was presented to the UUA Board and UUA General Assembly in June 2020.^{6,7} One commitment of the Commission was to “ground its work in theological reflection”⁸. The final report itself brings Unitarian

¹ Elaine McArdle, “Critics see white supremacy in UUA hiring practices”, *UUWorld*, 27 March 2017, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/critics-challenge-uua-hiring-practices>.

² Christopher Walton, “Further updates to UUA resignations and controversy over hiring practices”, *UUWorld*, 8 April 2017, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/developments-2017-04-07>.

³ Elaine McArdle, “Three co-presidents to lead UUA until General Assembly 2017”, *UUWorld*, 11 April 2017, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/board-names-three-copresidents>.

⁴ Elaine McArdle, “Board appoints six to two-year Commission on Institutional Change”, *UUWorld*, 22 June 2017, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/commission-institutional-change>.

⁵ UUA Board, “Proposal to Appoint a Commission on Institutional Change”, 21 June 2017, https://www.uuworld.org/sites/default/files/proposal_to_appoint_a_commission_on_institutional_change_v3.pdf.

⁶ “The Commission on Institutional Change”, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed Feb 3, 2022, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic>.

⁷ The Widening the Circle of Concern report is published online as a series of webpages with no PDF available.

⁸ Commission on Institutional Change, “Introduction” in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, (Boston: UUA Board), June 2020, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening/introduction>.

Universalism's congregationalist theology to every chapter. As a result, many of the recommendations are around theology, theologically motivated, or reference theology. Covenants, framed within a Unitarian Universalist understanding, feature heavily in this theological work. One of the key theological recommendations is for "Education About the Covenantal Nature of Our Faith".⁹ The report states,

"Returning to the practice of honoring covenant is essential in the world in which we find ourselves. The divisions between generations, between economic levels, and between people of different races, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientations, and gender identities are unprecedented. If we remember that we are a covenantal faith, we have a better chance of surviving the changing perceptions and attitudes about religion and faith in our nation."¹⁰

From there, recommendations include publicizing promising practices to address microaggressions and targeting marginalized people as well as training in how to directly deal with conflict.

The *Widening the Circle of Concern* report is only one in a long line of "racism audits" within the Unitarian Universalist Association. In 1983, the Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal published *Empowerment: One Denomination's Quest for Racial Justice, 1967-1982*. This report examined the UU Black Empowerment Controversy of 1967-69 and also provided a racism audit of the UUA at that time.¹¹ Two years after the report was published, the "Black Concerns Working Group [was] given

⁹ Commission on Institutional Change, "Theology" in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, (Boston, UUA Board), June 2020, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening/theology>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal, *Empowerment: One Denomination's Quest for Racial Justice 1967-1982*, (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1983).

the charge of ‘ending racism with \$5,000’”.¹² In 1990 the UUA Board requested “a feasibility plan for racial and cultural diversity” with recommended changes to achieve diversity in ten years.¹³

Currently, only two years after its publication, *Widening the Circle of Concern* risks becoming yet another set of alarm bells and empty promises. Integration of the findings and action items must be initiated on the Association and congregational level if this report, and the deep harm that sparked its creation, is to have lasting impact.

While many changes are recommended, rebuilding a deep foundation of covenant within Unitarian Universalism is one of the key theological suggestions. This foundation of covenant must grow to a lived theology. While covenant has many aspects, such as a behavioral covenant made in a religious education class or a liturgical covenant recited in worship, we must focus on an integrated understanding of covenant.

To successfully respond to racism, white supremacy, and other oppressions within Unitarian Universalism, we must return to the idea of covenant and build a culture of covenant. This culture of covenant must be rooted in congregational life to make change in the broader denomination. A culture of covenant includes engaging with covenants in theology, polity, relationships, and ritual. A base level of connection and agreement around covenants in each of these four areas will provide a grounding and theological base from which we will be more successful in addressing racism and oppression in our own communities and in the denomination as a whole.

¹² Leslie Takahashi, “Why Look at Racism in the UUA?”, power point presentation, 10 Nov 2017, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/coic_talk_race_uua_112017.pdf.

¹³ Ibid.

As a denomination we've moved away from a central idea of covenant. This means we've moved away from a solid grounding in our core respect for and responsibility to one another. As a result, we have underdeveloped trust and a history of prioritizing the status quo to avoid the messiness of conflict.¹⁴ Covenants build a mutually agreed sense of accountability. They ground and support the idea that this is a community of love and care, a community where we can have conflict and work through it. Instead of an avoidance of conflict through silence, we can guide each other back into covenant after a rupture. Covenants provide a basis for us to recommit and reengage.

In order to have a conversation about covenant, we need to be able to define a covenant. The Widening the Circle of Concern report never actually defines covenant or attempts to give character to any full meaning of the term. This is despite citing covenant as a key piece in how to move forward with challenging white supremacy and racism in six of their ten areas of recommendation.¹⁵ Defining covenants is difficult because it refers to more than a specific set of words. Liturgical covenants recited in worship are one common form that will be addressed later. Behavioral covenants are similar to the classroom rules that were mentioned above, although they could be expanded to include an entire congregation.

However, in this paper, covenant must be defined beyond the idea of agreed upon language. Building a culture of covenant, one that draws a spirit of covenant into every part of church life, is essential to reach any sort of transformation that could be powered by covenant. This culture of covenant, necessarily, must be defined by how it

¹⁴ Commission on Institutional Change, "Trends" in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, (Boston: UUA Board), June 2020, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening/trends>.

¹⁵ Commission on Institutional Change, *Widening the Circle of Concern*, (Boston: UUA Board), June 2020, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening>

moves and what shape it takes within people's lives. Ideally this understanding and embodiment of covenant stretches beyond what might be articulated in liturgy or policy and our definition must embrace that.

In his essay "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern", the Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, provides a definition of covenant that most closely matches what is needed for a culture of covenant.¹⁶ His definition is far reaching, historically and scripturally grounded, and best embodies the lived and felt experience of covenant. While Adams bases his ideas and understanding squarely within the Hebrew Bible, his definition is meant to be understood as largely applicable to most Western understandings of the word.¹⁷ Given that he was Unitarian, his definition of covenant fits the unique way in which the idea of covenant is articulated and can manifest in modern Unitarian Universalist communities. I will add additional interpretation of his definition when necessary to fully adapt it to a UU context.

Adams bases his definition in a history of covenant that starts as treaties between a sovereign power and smaller nearby jurisdictions dating from the fourth millennium BCE. This predates the Israelites fleeing Egypt and religious understandings of covenant.¹⁸ These political covenants were then replicated in format in Hebrew scripture. He summarizes these covenants as "maintaining an agreement that provides order and continuity in the society"¹⁹, an idea which will take on expanded meaning in his modern definition.

¹⁶ George Kimmich Beach, *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), 232.

¹⁷ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 230.

¹⁸ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 231.

¹⁹ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 232.

Adams then turns his attention to a full definition of covenant which shows how this idea of covenant has grown and matured to be understood today. While his definition is in eight parts, each part is useful for understanding the multi-layered way in which covenant can grow and expand within an individual's life and within the life of a community. He begins with describing collective agreements as the way in which humans and cultures grow. Making, maintaining and deepening promises are essential to human nature and to the development of culture and societies²⁰. Within these covenants or agreements among groups of people, all people within the agreement become responsible for the society and the character of the society. Belonging to a collective means that you are responsible not only for the results of your own actions, but also for the results of the collective's actions.²¹ In congregational life this means we are responsible when the congregation as a whole causes harm or engages in institutional racism and oppression, even if our own actions were not an active part of that harm. The third part is that covenants also must hold concern and care for those without power, for those who are vulnerable. The character of the society and collective must promote justice.²² This piece can be a site for conflict in a congregation. Members in a congregation may feel that they have done and changed enough for justice or want to rest on the laurels of their previous actions.²³ This must be challenged.

At this point, Adams turns more to the theological in his definition. He describes an individual spiritual deepening in being a part of covenanted religious community.

Spiritual depth forms in upholding commitments to others and seeing yourself as

²⁰ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 232.

²¹ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 232-233.

²² Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 233.

²³ Commission on Institutional Change, "White Counter Narrative Avatar" in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, (UUA Board, June 2020), <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening/innovations/white-counter-narrative-avatar>

responsible and connected to something bigger. However, the individual's spiritual depth is never separated from the community. The interior prayerful life of the community is a collective responsibility.²⁴ In UU communities this shows up in our fourth principle with “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”.²⁵ We have a responsibility to ourselves and our community to engage in spiritual practice together.

In exploring the biblical idea of “covenant of being”, covenants are not just understood as agreements between humans. They are agreements between humans within the context of what Adams calls “reality”.²⁶ Reality, for Adams, means what is real but also how humans reckon with what is real, as well as “the creative, sustaining, commanding, judging, transforming Power”.²⁷ Reality, here, means the meaning making universe that humans are a part of including the presence and force of the divine within that universe. It is grounded in the present human reality, but also continuously engaged with what Adams thinks of as a sense of God. This could also be understood as the power of connection and transformation in human relationship that transcends a moment with something more, beyond just the two individuals.

Adams continues, stating a covenant is also law. It contains a sense of what is right and wrong as a key part of social control or community cohesion. “It recognizes that meaningful, collective existence involves a consensus and a commitment with regard to what is right.”²⁸ While today this does not mean literal law, congregations' behavioral covenants are agreements about how to participate, engage in conflict, and reach resolution. The Unitarian Universalist principles are also guides to behavior and

²⁴ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 233.

²⁵ “The Seven Principles”, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>.

²⁶ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 233.

²⁷ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 234.

²⁸ Ibid.

life in community. Later, Adams identifies that this is only true if these covenants and principles are grounded in an effort of justice.²⁹ Agreements that are upholding oppression would not count as covenants.

This law is agreed to because it is based on a community of trust and affection. Love between people and within the community are the reason why people commit to the covenant.³⁰ Their sense of responsibility and accountability are motivated by this love. To leave or break the covenant means breaking from this network of care and mutuality. It would be a violation of the trust and affection that formed the covenant.³¹ For Adams, this is the second part in which God lives. For him, this community love is also God's love and a manifestation of God's grace. It can also be understood as the love and mutual care of a community.

Finally, in line with the Puritan Separatists as Unitarian forebears and Adams' study of the Israelites, covenanted communities exist outside of dominant power structures.³² The agreements made to form deep, connected communities are separate from state power and the communities may be defined as against that state power.³³ These communities and their covenants require the freedom to challenge or criticize those powers in the name of justice. A covenant is only a covenant if it holds a questioning lens, one that requires accountability to others and a sense of care for all.

In summary, Adams' covenants are agreements with people, but they are ultimately concerned with what type of people we are trying to be. A covenanted community is a group to hold us accountable. That accountability is with and under love

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 235.

and inspiration, which may also include God. This accountability and love from the community empowers and encourages us to act and strive within the values of what type of people we want to be. Finally, covenants are inherently skeptical, always seeking to understand further, seek justice more deeply, and commit to community over power.

In her essay “In the Beginning”, Alice Blair Wesley writes on Unitarian Universalist covenant specifically.³⁴ “The center of the free church, the heart of the whole thing, is a promise of fidelity, a covenant, which each member freely makes upon joining.”³⁵ Wesley defines the covenant made as a promise to seek truth together and support one another.³⁶ She writes that “the free church is held together by, .. the spirit of this promise”, to support each other in the search for truth and the difficulty of doubt, to accompany one another.³⁷ Wesley goes on to discuss what “spirit” specifically means to her. She describes it as the whole of one’s engagement and understanding of the world, the interior life, as well as human connections and the powerful energy created by those connections.³⁸ It is a joy and passion, as well as a deep and abiding love.

While she identifies written and articulated covenants to be deeply meaningful, “it doesn’t really matter whether it is verbalized. It matters whether it is faithfully meant”.³⁹ Wesley is writing about a committed and spiritual connection with a deep draw to and responsibility for the community as a whole. Her exploration of “spirit”, her way of describing the something more from Adams’ context, beyond humans and love of the

³⁴ Alice Blair Wesley, “In the Beginning,” in *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant*, ed. Walter P. Herz, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), 2

³⁵ Wesley, “In the Beginning”, 3.

³⁶ Wesley, “In the Beginning”, 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 3

community, is a vibrant and wide ranging treatise on what it means to explore truth and understanding in community. While she frames this spirit as a force of its own, Wesley is clear that this spirit is only created and maintained through an active covenant. She describes the soul of the church as living only in this bond of connection and covenant, this promise to journey together in the good times and the bad. Covenant, here, isn't a set of words or written out commitments. It's a rushing force of love to meet another person in their struggle.

Wesley's definition is the matching but opposite puzzle piece to Adams'. She brings a jumbled passion of what it feels like to live within covenant. Her definition matches Adams' eight points, yet it is an attempt to explain the something more, the reality or context that Adams struggles to define, in words of lived experience. While difficult to summarize or articulate, Wesley's account and definition bring the fire and conviction that are necessary to see the idea of covenants as worth recentering a denomination around. Her promise and hope for the transformative power within covenant is what will fuel any future change.

These definitions of what covenant means, what it feels like, and how it looks are complex because this idea of covenant is lived out within a community that is endlessly multifaceted. It is complex because creating and sustaining a culture built on a covenant is complex. It is also a venture with deep historical and cultural roots in Unitarian Universalism which holds the possibility for transformation.

If we are to take this call for a return to a deeper understanding of covenant seriously, we must fully engage with it on a congregational level. The Unitarian Universalist Association is an association of congregations. Our polity puts the power of

the denomination in the body of the congregations. While this can get lost in the power of the UUA itself, any deep and lasting change must happen on the level of congregations. It is the people, the communities, that make up the force, culture, and heart of a denomination.

To engage with covenant in parish ministry, we need to build an integrated understanding of the multiple levels upon which covenants operate. The idea of covenant has multiple forms in parish ministry, each accompanied by the work of many scholars. However, change in parish ministry requires an integrated understanding. We have to be aware of all of the different levels of covenant and also understand how they interact. These different understandings come together to build a definition of covenant and form a life source for a community. Parish ministry, the congregational level, is where a denomination is built. It's where a faith tradition is lived out. To rise to the challenge of this charge, to respond to a call for a culture of covenant and a hope for transformation, the power and responsibility rests with individual ministers, lay leaders, and congregations. Covenant is about a lived connection and commitment. It is a tie and a responsibility to a community and also a gift from that community. While interventions on the denominational scale are still needed, these personal connections at the congregational level are what will facilitate the integration of a culture of covenant.

There are four areas of congregational life where a spirit of covenant must be enacted in order to build a culture of covenant within the community. These areas are theology, polity, relationship, and ritual. All four build on each other to create a grounded and connected sense of community and purpose through covenant. Theology creates the base for the community. These are the foundational beliefs and values, the driving

force that cannot be compromised. Theology is the ground that will be referred back to in giving power and purpose to the other three areas. Polity gives the structure for a congregation as well as a denomination. The running of the church must be incorporated with the spirit and commitments of the church. Theological grounding of decisions and practices can help to create a community that enacts its values.

Relationships are the defining reality of congregational life. Membership in a church means being a part of a community and engaging in relationship with others. However, conflicts arise in human relationships and without a foundation of trust and mutual agreement, these relationships can crumble. Covenants can be a way through conflict that grounds in trust and values. Finally, worship is one of the primary ways people engage with a congregation. Ritual and worship must be engaged with covenant, creating common experiences and reminding participants of foundational beliefs and values. Experiencing ritual is a foundational way for members to gain an understanding of covenant.

Modern Unitarian Universalist theology comes from its parent denominations of Unitarianism and Universalism. Both denominations eventually emerged carrying the spirit of the Protestant Reformation. The understanding of the priesthood of all believers, that all people could connect with the Divine without an intermediary, fueled both the Calvinists, eventually to become Unitarians, and the anti-Calvinists, eventually to become Universalists.⁴⁰

New England Puritan theology and polity grew into congregationalism, a polity and theology that is rooted in equal access to God. Each person has the power for

⁴⁰ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 108.

connection and revelation with the Divine within themselves.⁴¹ In modern Unitarian Universalism, this idea now means that every person has a sense of divinity within them. This is articulated in the first principle, the idea that every person has inherent worth and dignity.⁴² Each person has power and agency within the congregation and their experience of the Divine, or the universe, is welcomed and held collectively.

The Universalist side brings the idea of Universal Salvation. All people will be reconciled with God. While there were differing opinions on the way in which this would happen, the foundational belief is that, at their core, all people are redeemable and worthy.⁴³ All people have worth and value. This is a fierce commitment to justice and, for the Universalists, God's power of love as an enactor of justice. The Universalists also brought an idea of working to eradicate hell on earth.⁴⁴ Given that all people will be eventually redeemed and reconciled with God, the true hell is what is happening here on earth. Hell is the misery and oppression that humans enact on each other. For these Universalists, slavery was defined as part of this hell. Today all forms of institutional oppression, and racism in particular, would be included. This Universalist theology fuels a deep sense that we are committed to all people in all matters of justice.

While modern Unitarian Universalism has grown and developed since the merger of the two denominations, the idea of honoring each person's value and truth and holding all people as having inherent worth has remained foundational. When it comes to a theology of covenant, James Luther Adams identified the force of divinity in covenants as the context and force added beyond simply a human agreement and the

⁴¹ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 112.

⁴² "1st Principle: The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person", Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/1st>.

⁴³ Forrest Church, "Universalism: a Theology for the 21st Century", *UUWorld*, 5 Nov 2001, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/universalism-theology-21st-ce>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

spirit of love and connection within which the covenant is made.⁴⁵ Today we see that as the deep value, the worthiness and spark, within each person making a commitment. The piece of themselves that they bring to build and connect in community is what helps to give force to the larger something more and to the love moving in the community. The love in the community and the connection driven by the strength of covenant also helps to hold and value the divinity or dignity within each person. Our Universalist history tells us that each person is worthy. Each person matters and all people are redeemable. No one is to be discarded, written off, or condemned. All people are worthy and able to enter into a covenant.⁴⁶

This theology is our foundation. It holds the grounding of our principles as well as our history. The other three aspects of covenant will connect to the theology as they all grow from it. Our polity is formed within the context of connection and commitment. Ritual must be relevant to the theology it reflects. Relationships are the core of strong covenants and must be cared for and held accountable accordingly. This grounding theological foundation is at the core of our tradition. It is where the sense of authority comes from. It must be connected to the implementation of all parts of congregational life.

Unitarian Universalist communities and worship can bring with it questions about a sense of common theology. If we do not agree on God or the afterlife, how do we worship together? These questions miss the core premise of a covenantal faith, a covenantal theology. Questions about the exact nature of God are creedal questions. Covenantal questions center on who we are and what we are committed to. Covenantal

⁴⁵ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 233-234.

⁴⁶ Susan Frederick-Gray, *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2019), 6.

theology focuses on values and principles. It holds the questions of how we are together and builds a framework of polity to support those relationships. Unitarian Universalism has a strong theology. The disconnect is that it is simply covenantal instead of creedal.

In the calls for a return to a focus on covenant and covenantal theology within Unitarian Universalism, we also must attend to how our covenant theology helps us to handle conflict. Covenant is the way we call each other back into community and the way we hold each other accountable. Each person is endowed with their own dignity and divinity. Each person is always worthy and redeemable. However, each person needs to attend to the bounds and accountability of the covenant. Following Adams' call for covenants to be on the side of justice for all people, covenants need careful attention to ensure that they are being upheld with a focus on ensuring the dignity of all people instead of prioritizing harmony despite fractures in the covenant.

Within Unitarian Universalism, our congregational polity begins first with an understanding of covenant. While our definition of covenant from Adams is focused on the Hebrew Bible, the historical elements of our polity came from Puritan practices and theology. In seeking to purify the Church of England from its earlier Roman Catholic remnants, Separatist Puritans (later called Pilgrims)⁴⁷ began to form their own churches while still in England. In his 1973 text, *Puritan Spirituality*, Irvonwy Morgan explains the beginnings of "Covenant Theology".⁴⁸ He notes Richard Rogers, an early Puritan leader, used the idea of covenant to mean a "gathered Church, separating the covenant group from the natural brotherhood of a parish".⁴⁹ Covenant was used to define a group of

⁴⁷ Dave Roos, "What's the Difference Between Puritans and Pilgrims?", History.com, last modified 16 March 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/pilgrims-puritans-differences>.

⁴⁸ Irvonwy Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality*, (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 36.

⁴⁹ Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality*, 36.

people, meeting as a church, in a country where church had previously meant all people living in a geographical area who are subjected to a state enforced religion. John Preston, another early Puritan described covenant as “produc[ing] an artificial brotherhood where the natural brotherhood of a parish or nation did not now provide adequate incentive for a course of action”.⁵⁰ After their migration to North America, the Puritans articulated their polity and understanding of covenant in *A Platform of Church Discipline* (1648), or the Cambridge Platform.⁵¹ This document reaffirmed the responsibility church members have to each other as well as defining a responsibility to other congregations.⁵² It defined a larger community of accountability.

The Puritans were creating churches of free association, with members making a choice to join and outside of the control of a state religion. Covenants were a way of describing the body of people and the commitment made by the members, to make the choice to join the community. Covenants spoke to a sense of connection that previously would have been represented by location, nationality, or ethnicity. This new type of association, this new type of congregation, inspired a polity that prioritizes the voices of the congregation. The connections of the members and the community itself were paramount.⁵³

Today polity is understood as how congregations and denominations govern and share power. It seeks to answer the questions of who is in charge and where their authority comes from. When our values and principles as Unitarian Universalists are prioritized and enacted, congregational polity means that we live into the democratic

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Conrad Wright, “Congregational Polity and the Covenant” in *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant*, ed. Walter P. Herz, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), 37.

⁵² Erik K. Holt III, “The Wise Weakness of the Congregational Way” in *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant*, ed. Walter P. Herz, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), 29.

⁵³ Wright, “Congregational Polity”, 37.

process and the centering of the power base in the congregation through our annual meetings. We communicate with transparency. Members vote on church finances, leadership, and priorities. We value the voice of dissent when it is brought in good faith and on productive terms.

However, in my experience, the boards and board members of congregations are not consistently held to be accountable to and responsible for the covenant of the community. The broader feeling of the community and the congregation's theological grounding can be relegated to Sunday mornings in an attempt to prioritize the fiduciary and business responsibilities of the board. Board meetings become outside of the scope of the relationships and spirituality of the church. I've seen board members drift into the sense that the church should function like any other non-religious nonprofit organization. Board meetings become overly focused on budget projections and measuring staff productivity. A sense grows that a church is a nonprofit with a few idiosyncrasies.

This is not true. A congregational church is a responsible community, responsive to justice and committed to spiritual growth. It has different goals, aims, and functions than a nonprofit. While finances can be a huge pressure on church boards and staff supervision is complicated in congregations, losing the spirit and connection of the community is much more costly.

A deep understanding of covenant is a way to remind board members that they belong to a community. They are responsible to the spiritual and communal life of the church, not simply to a fiduciary responsibility. For a board to feel connected to the idea of covenant, it essentially means that they feel connected to the community they serve as well as responsible to the community for their decisions. Board members are a part

of the congregation. Their work on the board is only within the context of serving that congregation. Therefore, board members and board meetings need to be grounded within the congregation. Covenants provide this connection and focus, prioritizing connection and accountability beyond the bureaucratic.

Boards can build better connections with the purpose of the community they serve and with that community's covenant. Education for the board could explore the differences between liturgical, behavioral, theological, and unspoken covenants. This could happen at annual board retreats and with orientation for new board members. Instead of creating a mission or vision statement for the church, a board could spend time giving words to the unspoken covenant they are bound by. This wouldn't need to grow into an official covenant for the congregation, but instead could be an attempt to articulate the ways the board is bound to the congregation and the responsibilities they have. In difficult issues or with future facing decisions, one or two members of the board could reflect beforehand and share how they feel covenant plays a role in this issue. This would help to bring the responsibility of community and a focus on justice into the room as decisions are made. Finally, board meetings could start with a question asking how each of the board members notice the spirit of covenant in their life this month. Answers might focus on mutual support given and received between members, the trust endowed in leadership, or justice issues present in the congregation. A regular interaction with the idea of covenants and identifying the ways that a covenant is alive and present in the work of the church helps to foster a focus on the values and purpose of the congregation in deep connection with the people who are served.

In order to build a sustainable covenantal community, interpersonal relationships and addressing conflict must be a priority. James Luther Adams identified that the boundaries and agreements of covenants are formed within the love of a community.⁵⁴ That love is what motivates the shared commitments and pulls people into the community. This shared grounding of love is also the context where covenants are broken. With enough attention, perspective, and commitment to the values and purpose of the covenant, people come back into the community in the context of this love as well.

In her essay “Open the Door and There are the People”, Lisa Jennings notes, “[church] is the place where I sort out my relationships with others and my relationship to the world”.⁵⁵ Jennings picks up where Alice Blair Wesley left off, explaining that covenants are a motivating, soulful source. Covenants provide a driving energy. As Adams mentioned, these collective agreements grow the spiritual depth of individuals and communities.

Jennings walks the narrow line of explaining that church is where she goes to practice covenantal relationships, but the lessons she learns there and the values and theology she hones grows into the wider world. This is the dual dynamic between “my relationships with others and my relationship with the world”. Covenants provide us with a blueprint for how to build and maintain a community. The Unitarian Universalist principles and the broader theology behind them describe the ways we as UUs are trying to live in all areas of our lives. We are in direct relationship with members of the

⁵⁴ Beach, *The Essential JLA*, 233.

⁵⁵ Lisa Jennings, “Open the Door and There are the People”, in *Not for Ourselves Alone: Theological Essays on Relationship* ed. Burton D. Carley and Laurel Hallman, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2014), 62.

church community, but our commitment to the dignity and value of all people does not end at the church walls. Jennings describes this saying, “Social justice work is necessarily bound together with covenant as it helps people respect and hear each other. Being in covenant calls us to listen with intention, communicate honestly in love, and to reflect.”⁵⁶

A living covenant within a community needs to bring accountability along with aspiration. A focus on how to reenter a covenantal community will be essential to work through the difficult conflicts in community life. This accountability and idea of reentering a covenant after fracture are a key piece of what the religious education classroom covenants were missing. It is also what liturgical covenants are missing. Even our principles, aside from the eighth, focus on aspiration and intention rather than accountability. Above, I mentioned that solid theological grounding is necessary for people to return to covenant. This is the time to draw on that authority. Assuming that the spirit and practice of a covenant are incorporated within congregational leadership, covenantal polity comes into play here as well. Holding clear values and responding with accountability when those values are crossed allows conversations around conflict and harmful behavior to stay centered on the core issues, rather than drifting into the specifics of the content.

Holding community members and the community as a whole accountable is difficult work. Unfortunately, accountability with a theological grounding is not our current common practice. The Preface of the *Widening the Circle of Concern* report states “We still too often confuse social customs among us with theology.”⁵⁷ The avoidance of

⁵⁶ Jennings, “Open the Door”, 63.

⁵⁷ Commission on Institutional Change, “Preface” in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, (UUA Board, June 2020), <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening/preface>.

conflict, particularly harm directed at marginalized people, takes priority over a commitment to living out our values of covenant.

Rev. Erica Baron describes her earlier experiences of covenant as similar to the ones I've shared.⁵⁸ A list of rules were created, often sincerely meant, but with no clear focus on what happens if they are broken. She describes different, ineffective ways people might try to revise or call upon this covenant in the event of conflict. Ultimately Baron concludes that the underlying hope in creating these covenants was if a covenant is created, all conflict will be prevented. The covenants did not have a deep way to deal with conflict because the creation of them was supposed to avoid all conflict. Furthermore, when conflict arose, the covenant was seen as fully broken and thus having little authority as it had failed its primary job, to inoculate against all conflict in the first place.

Baron continues, highlighting that the underlying covenant of a community still exists for all parties even when an explicit behavioral covenant is broken. The context of Adams' love of a community still exists. This love is what can be drawn upon to ground efforts for addressing conflict. In her essay "The Center Must Be Deep", Susan Smith demystifies the repair of a covenant. "[T]he path back into covenant is actually well known because we walk it so often, We make apologies and we accept them. We describe boundaries and expectations and either freely accept them or intentionally reject them."⁵⁹ Unfortunately all members of a community may not be practiced in these efforts of reconciliation. Congregational level, behavioral, covenants can be useful here.

⁵⁸ Erica Baron, "Covenant and Conflict .. At the same time?", Unitarian Universalist Association, last modified 23 June 2021, <https://www.uua.org/new-england/blog/covenant-and-conflict>.

⁵⁹ Susan Smith, "The Center Must Be Deep" in *Not for Ourselves Alone: Theological Essays on Relationship* ed. Burton D. Carley and Laurel Hallman, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2014), 70.

Throughout this paper, the focus has been on unspoken, felt, theological covenants. In order to live and be useful in a congregation, an explicit behavioral covenant is often necessary. Behavioral covenants are clear guidelines of what sort of behavior is welcome in a community and what is harmful and unacceptable. The behavioral covenant may have been created by the board or a committee, but it is usually voted on by the congregation and congregants agree to it as a part of their membership.

The Rogue Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship has a very clear “Covenant of Right Relations”.⁶⁰ The covenant is grounded in theology, identifying each of the seven principles and the way they are lived out in congregational life. It also includes Conflict Resolution Guidelines that spell out how to participate in conflict directly and in the spirit of the congregation’s covenant. Not all members will understand how to participate in conflict and take responsibility when they cause harm. However, an explicit behavioral covenant, guidelines for how to engage, and a theological grounding holding that member in congregational love develops a common language and structure for conflict.

The final element to build a culture of covenant is ritual. Sunday morning worship is a fundamental opportunity to build a greater understanding of covenants and how they show up within church life. Worship has many different opportunities to demonstrate forms of covenant. It also is a chance to directly engage and explain underlying theology. As mentioned above, liturgical covenants may play a role in this. Liturgical covenants are meant to be read aloud in worship as a part of the liturgy. They

⁶⁰ “Covenant of Right Relations”, Rogue Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, accessed 25 April 2022, <https://rvuuf.org/about/covenant-of-right-relations/>.

are relatively short and often express a theological framing or a broader grounding for the connection and purpose of the community.

However, liturgical covenants are not the only way to bring explicit understandings of covenant into worship. Susan Smith calls for “liturgies that acknowledge our intention to renew our bonds of community, and also those that restore and reinforce our relationship with whatever we call Sacred and lift our hearts and vision a bit higher”.⁶¹ Here, ritual can be a moment to uplift the difficulty and beauty in coming back into relationship rather than sweeping a history of conflict under the rug. In *Worship That Works*, Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz call for more opportunities for congregants to directly share their understandings and experiences of covenant.⁶²

The practices and theology of covenant can be communicated implicitly in worship as well. Communal singing and readings help create a common body of congregants, rather than a room of individuals. Opportunities to show care and commitment to each other is another way to live covenant in worship. The sharing of Joys and Concerns during the service provides a time for the action of care. Congregants listen and grow to know each other more deeply. They practice showing up and meeting each other’s needs physically, with actions after the service, and spiritually, holding each other in a spirit of love and prayer.

Finally, in Unitarian Universalist congregations, rites of passage and other life cycle events have an element of mutual promise and commitment. In new member services, a member commits themselves to the church and the congregation responds with

⁶¹ Smith, “The Center”, 70.

⁶² Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship that Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2017), 24.

a commitment to support the member. In marriages and baby dedications, individuals make promises to each other in the presence of a congregation and the congregation pledges to support them in carrying out those promises. Taking a moment to highlight these parts of the service as moments of the active creation of a covenant identifies the many ways covenants function in worship and in congregational life. Services that address covenant, directly or indirectly, make it easier to reference later in times of conflict. They build a common understanding and scaffold our covenantal theology.

In our definition of covenant, Adams spoke about the presence of something more. Covenants are agreements made between two or more people, but those agreements are made in the context of something beyond the two individuals. Worship helps to identify this context. It can give voice to that additional energy. We can bring words to the sense of something more.

The Universalist minister and theological school professor, Angus MacLean, preached that the “method is the message”.^{63,64} He explains that “the effective method of teaching values is itself the living exercise of such values”.⁶⁵ In the post-WW II landscape MacLean taught in, both Unitarianism and Universalism were growing and stretching. Both denominations were increasingly taking on the explicitly non-creedal foundation we see today. In that growth, adventure, and instability, MacLean focused on what could be called the covenantal center. He believed demonstrating to children, and adults, how to live, how to ask big questions and how to be in community together was

⁶³ Charles Howe, “Angus MacLean”, Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography, 31 March 2011, <https://uudb.org/articles/angusmaclean.html>.

⁶⁴ Angus MacLean, “The Method is the Message”, Pacific Unitarian Universalist, accessed 23 April 2022, http://www.pacificuu.org/publ/univ/education/maclean_method_message.html.

⁶⁵ Ibid

a more meaningful and effective way of communicating our values and theology than teaching direct content.

Living, practicing, failing, and recommitting to covenants is the only way to learn and grow within them. A developed culture of covenant grounds a community in trust and accountability. Our belief in the dignity and divinity of each person, no matter what, grounds a willingness to engage with each other. That trust allows for difficult conversations. Our understanding of covenants as committed to justice and our belief that each person is entitled to the same respect and kindness spurs on a willingness to confront racism and other oppressions in our congregation. The commitment to justice and to each other can help us to overcome an avoidance of conflict and reluctance to act. A theology of covenant must be integrated fully into congregational life. Living our values, focusing on the method, the how, is the only way to grow into a robust congregational theology.

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