

Authentic Dialogue on the Way to Right Relations:
The Why, When, and How of Making Covenants

Presented by Bob Deyle of the UU Church of Tallahassee
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They say you can tell an 'expert' by the fact that he comes from more 50 miles away, carries a briefcase, and wears shiny shoes. As you can see, I don't qualify. I am from more than 50 miles away, and I did facilitate a workshop on covenants of right relations at the Florida UUA District Assembly last spring, with Reverend Robin Gray, our settled minister at the Tallahassee UU Church. But I am not wearing shiny shoes - because they hurt my feet – and I am not carrying a brief case - because that's not my thing anymore.

I asked Becky to introduce me today "as a humble fellow traveler seeking the path to living our UU principles" because I wanted you to know that I am not an expert, and that I have not come with a sales pitch. Rather I am here only to share some thoughts about why, when, and how a congregation might chose to create a covenant of right relations based on my personal experience with the UU Church of Tallahassee.

Your minister, Reverend Mary Louise, was careful to make sure I understood that there is not complete agreement within your congregation about the need for a covenant of right relations at this time and that a previously planned workshop for developing a covenant has been cancelled. Good people often disagree on the wisest course of action, so I want to honor the differences at Nature Coast by offering today what I hope may be some additional insights that will inform any future deliberations on this question. Much of what I wish to share is about covenants of right relations, but I also want to speak to the discourse that takes place, both about whether or not a covenant is needed, and, if the time should come, about what your congregation would want a covenant of right relations to be.

So, I'm going to start with the basics and share with you my understanding of what a covenant of right relations is. Then I'll offer some thoughts on why a congregation might want to consider creating such a covenant, when the timing may be best for doing so, and finally a little bit about what to consider in deciding about how to go about forging one. Along the way, I'll share some of my experiences with the process at the UU Church of Tallahassee and elaborate on the idea of authentic dialogue, which I have highlighted as a theme of this talk.

I am not planning on describing our experience living with our covenant because there just wasn't time to squeeze those stories into this talk. However, I'll be happy to talk about that during the informal discussion after the service. I've also brought along one set of some of the materials from the workshop that Robin Gray and I did last March, plus copies of our UU Tallahassee covenant and the current covenant of our Executive Board. I've also brought along a CD with those materials in electronic format.

So, let's start with the most basic question: What is a covenant of right relations?

When I shared with a wise and thoughtful UUCT friend the fact that I was going to present this service, he stroked his chin and told me: "Well, the first experience I remember having with creating a covenant was a few years ago working with a youth group on a weekend camping trip: 30 or 40 young people experiencing community of a sort in the wilderness by a stream. We wanted the kids to create their own covenant so we asked them what sorts of agreements we ought to have to guide our living together that weekend. The first kid to raise his hand said, 'No peeing in the stream.'"

If you can take this story metaphorically, it may tell you everything you need to know. While not usually concerned with quite such specific mundane matters, a covenant of right relations is a mutually developed and agreed upon path for living in community.

Reverend Mary Louise, in her sermon on September 13, described "**right relations**" as living elements of the first three of the Unitarian Universalist Association's seven principles: (1) affirming the worth and dignity of each person, (2) accepting one another, and (3) having compassion in our relations.

In his keynote address at the 2006 UUA General Assembly, Jim Wind, President of the Alban Institute, described the product of practicing right relations as "healthy, life-giving, respectful, loving, and open relationships with one another."

So what is a "covenant of right relations"?

The term "**covenant of right relations**" seems to be especially prevalent in Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships.

- A recent Google search on "covenant of right relations" yielded 666 hits
- The first 46 were UU church web pages.
- The 47th hit was from a workshop presented by the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire at which one of the panelists was going to talk about covenants of right relations. The panelist was a member of a UU church.

The UUA's "Leadership Library" web page defines a **covenant** as a "solemn agreement" or "promise from the heart" regarding a course of action between parties (<http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/leaderslibrary/uufaithworks/24968.shtml>).

There are two key elements to this concept. The first is that it is an agreement between two or more people. It must, therefore, be the product of mutual understanding and commitment. Second, it concerns "a course of action" between the parties, that is, how they will behave or interact with each other in some relationship context.

So if we package these two terms together, what are we talking about? Here are some descriptions of a "covenant of right relations" beginning with some very simple ones:

- David Pyle from the UU Fellowship of Galveston Island, Texas, says simply, that a covenant of right relations describes "How we will treat each other."
- The description from the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship in Ontario, Canada, is a little more idealistic: "How we, at our best, want to be with one another."
- The Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation, in Seattle, Washington, describes their covenant of right relations in terms of the community they want to be: "A set of guidelines to create a welcoming, respectful, safe, and vibrant spiritual community."
- Reverend Lyn Plumb, who was our interim minister at the UU Church of Tallahassee in 2006-2007, when we undertook our initiative to create a covenant of right relations, described such a covenant both in terms of our individual and collective personal growth and in terms of specific dimensions of our behavior:

It is, she said, "The cornerstone of all we say and do as we attempt to evolve into more enlightened beings, ever more intentional and reverential:

- How we interact with each other through our differences, and
- How we endeavor to understand each other.

- When we fashioned our covenant of right relations at the UU Church of Tallahassee, we described the covenant in terms of the nature of the relationships we strive to nurture:

Our covenant is "[o]ur aspiration to create relationships for all in our congregation that are respectful, loving, caring, mutual, accepting, affirming, fulfilling, effective, and generative."

You can guess from the string of nine adjectives, that ours was the product of a bottom-up process involving many voices.

Regardless of how one describes it, the forging of a covenant of right relations is about **forming group norms** and **helping people** within a community **relate better** with each other (<http://76.12.38.165/comsight/behavioral%20covenant/deeper001.htm>).

Which brings us to the questions of "Why?" and "When?" – Why would a congregation want to take the time and energy to create a covenant of right relations? And if they did, when would be the best time to do so?

John Wenrich of The Evangelical Covenant Church maintains that the time to create a covenant is "When the sun is shining." He argues that if you "wait until the storms come . . . such a process will prove more difficult." (www.covchurch.org/blogs/vitality/recent-posts/the-covenant-behind-the-covenant).

Nonetheless, if you scrutinize right relations covenants that have been adopted by other UU congregations, and if you dig around on some of their web pages, you will see that in many instances, covenants of right relations are borne out of times of turmoil and strife. Some, in fact, read like a list of rules that appear to be the product of reaction to what were perceived to be specific behavioral problems.

This really should come as no surprise. Political scientists who study the why, when, and how of policy initiatives, talk in terms of what John Kingdon (1995) calls "policy windows," events that lead people to question the status quo and that present brief opportunities for significant change. Policy windows are rarely created when the sun is shining.

As Becky noted in her introduction, I am a planning academic. The conventional view of planning is a process of anticipating and preparing for the future. To plan requires the ability to step beyond the status quo, to think about what we want the world to be like, and to think about what we want to do differently to attain that desired future state.

Contemplating the future state of your congregation is what Reverend Mary Louise invited you to do in her guided meditation two weeks ago. As we saw a few minutes ago, several of the covenants of right relations developed by other UU congregations are characterized in aspirational terms that look forward to how the members want to be with each other and what they want their community to be like.

The initial impetus for a covenant of right relations at the UU Church of Tallahassee resulted from the inspiration gained by several of our members from the 2006 UUA General Assembly where "Toward Right Relations" was the principal theme. That was the context within which Jim Wind of the Alban Institute offered his keynote address from which I quoted a few moments ago.

In the summer of 2006 we were nearing the end of a first year of interim ministry following the February 2005 resignation of our settled minister of seven years. While I cannot know with certainty the reasons that lay behind our former minister's decision to resign, one likely reason was the persistent criticism she experienced from a relatively small group of members who said they did not like her sermons. Several of these folks had advocated against hiring a settled minister when we hired her. These folks preferred a fellowship with a completely lay-led ministry. A related reason was probably the feedback received from a survey administered by our Committee on the Ministry, in consultation with the minister, as part of a periodic congregational assessment that our Committee on the Ministry is charged to conduct. A number of the survey responses were blunt and a few were down right unkind.

Our minister's decision to resign was announced abruptly. I was a member of the Committee on the Ministry at the time, and we did not see it coming, although we were privy to the as-yet unpublished survey responses and knew that her relationships with some members of the congregation were not like "peas and carrots" as Forrest Gump would say. However, many members of our congregation were completely blind-sided.

As you can well imagine, the announcement was met with grief, confusion, angst, and anger. People were grieved that their minister was leaving, many were confused about why. People weren't sure what this meant for the future. Some questioned whether or not we deserved to have a minister. Many were angry. Some because our leadership had not prepared them for this wrenching event. Some because they knew about the malcontents, faulted them, and faulted the leadership for not dealing with them effectively. Others suspected a conspiracy on the part of various members of the leadership, including the Committee on the Ministry.

In the immediate aftermath of our minister's resignation, we dealt with the grief, anger, and angst by providing opportunities for people to speak from their hearts and to share their feelings. We also encouraged people to look ahead and envision what they wanted our congregation to be like in another year or two. When our first interim minister arrived the following August, he led us through a fairly conventional post-minister-resignation process of getting everything out on the table.

In between, in May 2005, we held a lengthy congregational meeting in which we debated whether or not to seek an interim minister and whether or not to ultimately search for a new settled minister. The discourse was not completely civil and respectful, but it was open and democratic and did, in the end, result in decisions that were viewed as legitimate products of congregational deliberation.

It was against this backdrop that several members returned from General Assembly in summer 2006 motivated to share the ideas of right relations. Our second interim minister, Reverend Lynn Plumb, began her tenure that September. She encouraged the exploration of right relations in an environment of "appreciative inquiry," that is searching for the best in each of us, in our church, and in our community.

It was in this positive atmosphere of strengthening what is good that we undertook the covenant process. The storm clouds were dissipating, and we could envision the sun rising on a stronger, healthier congregation. We went into the covenanting process knowing that we had room to grow, but not with a list of urgent problems that had to be fixed, and not with large numbers of grieving, anxious members of our congregation.

But why a covenant? Why a "solemn agreement" forged by an entire congregation that would set forth our aspirations for how we wanted to be with each other?

A number of folks argued that all we needed to do was to reassert our commitment to the seven UU principles, in particular the three highlighted by Reverend Mary Louise in her sermon two weeks ago: (1) affirming the worth and dignity of each person, (2) accepting one another, and (3) having compassion in our relations.

As a congregation, we found two responses to this point of view compelling: First, that for many people it can be challenging to translate relatively abstract moral principles into explicit judgments about how to behave, especially in circumstances influenced by emotions. Second, if one accepts the premise that there is value to thinking about how to

apply those principles to the challenges of everyday life, then there is merit to a free and open dialogue about how to do that in the context of our interactions as members of a congregation.

The merits of the first premise can be assessed by considering a few examples drawn from my experience at the UU Church of Tallahassee. If you are a member of the church board and a member of the congregation comes to you to complain about the minister's sermons in general, or what she said that morning, how do you apply the UU principles to that situation? Do you try to convince the disgruntled congregant that their criticisms are misplaced? Do you affirm their criticisms because you agree? Do you tell the minister about the complaint? Do you try to mediate between the minister and the complainant?

How do you apply the UU principles when someone volunteers to do something important for the church, and then fails to follow through? How do you apply them when you're the one who volunteered and you realize you can't do what you promised?

How do you apply the UU principles when someone pursues their personal wants or desires in a way that you think is not in the best interests of the congregation?

How do you apply the UU principles to someone who comes to church regularly, partakes of the congregation's activities, but never contributes any of their own time or money to support the work of the congregation?

And finally, what do you do when somebody says something hurtful that stimulates a rush of adrenalin and a "gut reaction" from you? Do you retaliate with tit for tat? Do you turn the criticism aside to avoid conflict, but then begin to nurse a grudge? Do you stop and say to yourself, "What would a good UU do?" How do I apply the first, second, and third principles to this situation?

If you posed these hypothetical situations to a handful of the members of your congregation, would everybody agree on the most appropriate responses?

I'll wager not and therefore examine **the second premise that there is merit to a free and open dialogue** about how to translate our UU principles to inform our interactions as members of a congregation. Which brings me back to the field of planning, the practice of consensus building, and our 5th principal, "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process."

Consensus building practice is grounded in the communicative rationality theory of German philosopher and political theorist Jurgen Habermas (1981, 1989). While this is not my primary academic domain, I have stuck my nose into this area a little and found some valuable ideas that have informed my practice as a lay leader in my congregation.

Foremost among these is the ideal of what Habermas called "authentischen Diskurs" or "authentic dialogue." If the conditions of authentic dialogue are met, Habermas argues

that citizens can attain "emancipatory knowledge" that transcends the "self-fulfilling rationalizations" that communities tend to develop (see Innes and Booher, 1999).

So what is this "authentic dialogue"? As explained by Judith Innes and David Booher in their 1999 article, "Consensus Building and Complex Adaptive Systems," it is discourse "that engages all those with differing interests around a task or problem." Discourse in which all participants are "equally informed, listened to, and respected, and [where] none can be accorded more power than others to speak or make decisions. . . . Participants must be able to challenge any assumptions, and they cannot be constrained from questioning the status quo. What participants say in communicatively rational discussions must be sincere, comprehensible, accurate, and must have . . . acceptable reasons for the claims they make."

You might sum this up, to paraphrase Alan Alda, as a dialogue in which each participant is honest and forthright and "willing to be changed by what other people say."

One of the principal implications of communicative rationality theory is that the process of planning and decision making can be just as important as the product. In other words, in a democratic society, we have much to gain from authentic dialogue itself. Authentic dialogue can produce new knowledge, creative ideas, and mutual learning in which participants not only gain new empirical insight from each other but also critically examine the personal values, goals, and attitudes that they bring to the discourse.

What has this got to do with covenants of right relations? I'd like to suggest two implications.

The first takes us back to the question of **when** should a congregation initiate development of a covenant of right relations. The answer, I would say, is "When it's ready," i.e. when, after a process of authentic dialogue, there is broad agreement that the process of crafting a covenant, as well as the covenant itself, will be in the best interests of the congregation. Broad agreement, if not true consensus, is essential to the legitimization of the covenant and to its success as a guide to congregational discourse and behavior. There is widespread agreement that a covenant of right relations must be an organic product of congregational reflection and deliberation rather than a covenant "from on high." Most UUs are not likely to be receptive to the directives of the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Colossians (3:12-14), to a covenant with God communicated by an Old Testament prophet, or to a covenant that a handful of congregational leaders cooks up and then tries to sell. Thus, I would argue that the congregation has to be ready before the process can be successfully initiated.

However, while consensus is the ideal, I'd venture to say, based on our experience at the UU Church of Tallahassee, it may be elusive. At the outset, we had some holdouts who didn't think a covenant was necessary or who didn't buy into all of the specific precepts of our covenant. We have found, however, that with broad agreement across the congregation and a concerted effort to invoke the covenant when relevant, we have

effectively educated some of the skeptics as to its value and quieted others who realize that this is the way we do things now.

The second implication of the ideals of authentic dialogue takes us to **the final topic this morning, that is "How?"** If your congregation were to decide to embark on a process of forging a covenant of right relations, how should they go about doing it?

John Wenrich of the Evangelical Covenant Church observes that ". . . people are *down* on what they are not *up* on," and that "A vision *imposed* is a vision *opposed*." He recommends finding ways to involve many people in the process through sermons, focus groups, etc.

To reiterate what I said a moment ago, there is widespread agreement that a covenant must be an organic product of congregational reflection and deliberation. More formally, we could say that we should strive to achieve the ideals of authentic dialogue in conducting those reflections and deliberations.

At the time we initiated development of our covenant of right relations, we did not have the benefit of this explicit wisdom, but we had a wise interim minister and a group of lay leaders who either intuitively, or from their own experience, realized that a bottom-up process was essential to forging a covenant that would truly be embraced as a solemn agreement among the members of the congregation.

The Committee on the Ministry began to lay the groundwork in the Fall of 2006, brainstorming with our interim minister and the folks who had attended GA that summer, and bouncing our ideas off the Board.

Right relations and developing the covenant were the dominant themes of most of what we did during the Spring of 2007:

- Our interim minister preached two sermons to sow the seeds for dialogue about a covenant:
- Two of the folks who attended GA presented an adult RE class on Practicing Right Relationship in January and February
 - Based on a book of the same title: *Practicing Right Relationship: Skills for Deepening Purpose, Finding Fulfillment, and Increasing Effectiveness in Your Congregation*, by Mary K. Sellon and Daniel P. Smith
- We convened a congregational workshop in which we developed a draft Covenant of Right Relations by working in small groups and then sharing our ideas together.
- A Task Force drawn from among the participants in the workshop then developed a draft covenant.
- We then convened a congregational discussion of the draft.
- And we placed a formal vote on adopting the covenant on the agenda for our annual meeting in May 2007.

We did not engage in congregation-wide authentic dialogue about initiating the process. This could have sunk the enterprise, but fortunately our church leadership had a pretty good sense of the congregation after more than a year of working through our feelings and our hopes after the resignation of our previous settled minister.

Approximately 45 people participated in the workshop. Nearly 80 joined in the festival. And the final covenant was adopted without dissent at the annual meeting in May. We have been living with our covenant ever since.

In closing I would like to raise up the question of what, ultimately a covenant of right relations should be – Should it be a set of rules to be enforced or should it be a set of aspirations?

Gilbert Rendle in his book, "Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences" characterizes behavioral covenants as being in the realm of "the domain of obedience to the unenforceable" (Rendle, 1998). He suggests that these behaviors are practiced because the group that has adopted the covenant recognizes them as "the right thing to do even though they are unenforceable."

The preamble of the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship's Covenant of Right Relations captures this spirit (<http://www.luf.ca/covenant.htm>):

This is our Covenant of Right Relations. It represents how we, at our best, want to be with one another.

These promises are phrased in the language of hopes and aspirations. Because we are human, our conduct will fall short of our ambitions from time to time. When that happens, we will start over again, in love. There are no penalties for bad behaviour here, only encouragements to good.

And finally I'd like to leave you with these thoughts to consider.

- People long for relationships; strong programs and lovely facilities are not enough.
- The way we treat each other reveals who and what we are as a congregation.
- Conflict is inevitable, and if properly managed, healthy; it can be a positive force for creativity and growth if we find appropriate ways to express and resolve any conflict or disagreement.
- Good relational skills need to be learned and honed across time.
- Making the choice to be open, authentic, caring, and curious with each other creates life-giving relationships.
- Love can be an intellectually affirmed thing, a 'why, of course!' value, or it can be a lived out core of being.

My wish for you, and for myself, is that we "go forth from this hour encouraged to strive toward faithfulness to the best in ourselves, in others, and in the whole creation" (Naylor, 2007).

Thank you for inviting me to share the path with you this morning.

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