

## Historical Overview

Welcome to our covenanting workshop! I'm Sue Magidson, one of nine members of the Covenanting Project Team at UUCB. The workshop we've created for you this afternoon starts in the 1600's and ends with practical tips for creating a covenant for your small group. In between, you'll get to meet most of the members of the covenanting team, you'll learn what covenants are (and aren't), you'll get to see a variety of covenants currently in use by groups at UUCB, and you'll get to hear from the folks who are using these covenants. We've designed this workshop to be largely interactive – you'll be moving around, talking to one another, and playing with ideas. We hope that by 2:30 you'll be so excited that you'll want to go back to your group and start covenanting immediately!

My job this afternoon is the non-interactive part of this workshop. I'm going to take about 10 minutes to give you a little history lesson. In the past few years, more and more UU churches have been developing covenants – church-wide covenants and small group covenants. Why are we doing this? Is this just the latest fad advocated by the Unitarian Universalist Association? Well, actually, as I have learned recently from reading a series of lectures written by UU Minister Alice Blair Wesley, covenants have been fundamental to American Unitarianism for nearly 400 years! My information comes from Rev. Wesley's lectures, which I strongly encourage you to read. They're posted on our church website. The address is on a handout that we'll give you at the end of this workshop (<http://www.uucb.org/about/auu.html>).

So, I'm going to begin by asking you to use your imagination.

Imagine being ordered by the government to go to church every Sunday. Imagine being required to attend the church in your neighborhood (and no other!). Imagine being forbidden from gathering to discuss religion anywhere except at your local church. This was the world of seventeenth century England – a hierarchy where kings and bishops ruled, where religion and government were intertwined. This is what motivated our religious forebears to get on rickety ships and travel across the Atlantic Ocean to an unknown land!

Once they got here, they faced the question: What were they going to do instead? What were they going to use in place of this hierarchical government-ordained structure? What was church going to look like in the New World?

They spent a lot of time talking about this. One group, in Dedham MA, met weekly for an entire year. They devised a structure for their meetings which encouraged deep listening and discouraged arguing, similar to Chalice Circles and Evensong Groups at UUCB. They listened to one another's stories, thoughts, and deepest beliefs. Their meetings were "peaceful, loving, and tender" and, as they put it, "not contradictory."

Eventually, these folks questioned whether they needed a church at all, or whether these gatherings were enough. What they decided was that these meetings were too casual for their goal to live in the "ways of deepest love" as they put it. They needed an institution. They wrote, "Others in the larger society need the example of love which a free church will publicly show forth."

In place of the hierarchy they had fled from, they chose a structure in which everyone had a voice (and a vote), a structure in which there was no external authority, like a king or a bishop. Each church was autonomous. Individual church members were ultimately responsible to their consciences and to each other. Sound familiar?

What's not so familiar is that these folks organized their churches around covenants – written documents about how they wanted to be together. Each church developed its own covenant of who they wanted to be as a community. Central to each covenant was the spirit of love, working in congregants' hearts and minds.

Bringing these covenants to life – living the ideals that they'd put on paper – was how these folks practiced religion. Their covenants were central to their spiritual practice which is not so surprising if you

think about any of the world's major religions -- they're not just about a person's relationship to god (if they are that at all), but are fundamentally concerned with how we interact with one another.

These covenantal churches called themselves "free churches." 200 years later, in the 1800s, 125 of these "free churches" of New England adopted the name Unitarian. And thus American Unitarianism was born.

This structure of individual churches in which every member has a voice and in which the church is beholden to no external authority is the structure of our modern UU church. It sounds so familiar, so reasonable, so obvious -- to us. It can be hard to remember that democratic autonomous churches were once so radical that participants risked being fined, jailed, exiled, whipped and even hanged.

Today, we are free to gather and worship as we choose, free to govern ourselves. We've kept the governing structure of those early churches, but, as Alice Blair Wesley argues, somehow we've lost the spiritual foundation beneath the structure -- the intention to walk together in love.

One reason that UU churches around the country are turning to covenants is an effort to return to this spiritual grounding. If our values are to be worth anything, we need to walk our talk -- here in our congregations as well as in the outside world. We need to practice what we preach. A covenant gives us a way to state our intentions, our highest ideals, and then to support one another as we try to uphold them. We won't always succeed, but the process of formally writing down our aspirations gives us a structure with which to do this important and challenging work of interacting intentionally and religiously.

In the last fifty years or so, Unitarian Universalism has come to be seen as a very individualistic religion -- You've all heard the claim, "UUs can believe whatever they want to." Those New Englanders came to this country seeking freedom of belief and they believed that religion needed community. They believed that living their deepest values needed to be done with other like-minded folks, that they couldn't practice their religion in a vacuum. Their covenants weren't about what they believed -- they were about who they wanted to be together.

Here at UUCB as many of you know, we're in the process of writing our first whole-church covenant. So, why a workshop on small group covenants? Well, those of us who've participated in small groups with covenants at UUCB have found that covenants have profoundly changed the tenor of our meetings and have also changed what we can accomplish as a group. We want to share those stories with you and we want to give you the tools to create covenants for your groups. Also, writing and using small group covenants has convinced us of the power of covenants and helped us to think about what a whole church covenant might look like. So we offer this workshop for three reasons:

- #1 To help small groups at UUCB function more effectively (through covenanting)
- #2 To continue to build a foundation for a whole-church covenant (not to replace the small group covenants, but to serve the community at large)
- #3 To help us to deepen and grow, both as individuals and as members of an intentional spiritual community, who strive to walk our talk.

And now, on with the rest of the workshop!