



let it shine

The Covenant We Live In

“We covenant with the Lord and one with another; and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.” So wrote

our Puritan forebears of the Salem, Massachusetts church in 1629.

Since our earliest days in New England, covenant has been the bond, the spiritual glue that has informed and sustained our congregational life. With thematic roots anchored and nurtured in Hebrew and Christian scripture – from the rainbow symbolic of God’s everlasting faithfulness to Noah and all of creation, to Jeremiah’s proclamation of an internal covenant written upon our hearts, to Jesus’ offering of the cup of a new covenant – the notion of covenant remains central to our self-understanding as individual members and parishes of the United Church of Christ.

But what is a covenant? And why is it an essential part of our identity?

A covenant has been defined as a “faithful, mutual, trustworthy agreement.” In the Bible, God always initiates covenant. God calls us into relationship with God and with one another. To live in covenant with one another is to be, as John Winthrop preached, “knit together as one” in a community of mutual care, love and support.

Yet within this covenantal community we are encouraged to deepen our individual relationship with God and Christ and to be seekers and inquirers of the “light and truth that breaks forth from God’s Holy Word,” as John Robinson said. Relying on God’s grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, covenant gives us the strength and allows us the breathing space to respect individual differences of opinion. As it has evolved in our tradition, covenant means we may discern God’s will together, sing hymns together, interpret God’s word together, work for justice and peace together, serve Christ together, without demanding of one another theological or hermeneutical conformity. Covenant is essential to our identity because it is the loving arena within which freedom, responsibility, communal support and accountability may flourish.

Our UCC Polity—How our Church Works

Whether as individual members of a local church, or as local congregations of our denomination, mutual care and liberty of conscience are the hallmarks of our covenant and the basis of our unity in the United Church of Christ. And as theologian Douglas John Hall observes, such a covenant is ordained of God to be “inclusive in the extreme.”

With a common faith in Jesus Christ as the sole Head of the church, we “walk together” in all God’s ways, hand in hand, sometimes agreeing, sometimes agreeing to disagree, toward the vision of a healed creation.

Reflection:

- What do your congregation’s bylaws or promises of membership say about covenant? How is your understanding of covenant communicated to new members?
- In your experience, how does our UCC polity balance liberty of conscience and mutual care... within your congregation?... as a member church of our denomination?
- How does our understanding of covenant resonate with the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ?

Resources:

- John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism 1620-1957*
- Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*
- Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith*
- “A Field Guide to Covenant,” Northern California Nevada Conference, UCC, www.ncnucucc.org, see Documents and Resources.

“The Covenant We Live In” was written by the Rev. Dr. Dean C. Ahlberg, Senior Minister of the First Church of Christ, Congregational (UCC) in Redding Center, Connecticut.

The Connecticut Conference
**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**
125 Sherman Street, Hartford, CT 06105
www.ctucc.org 866.367.2822

