

**First Unitarian Church of Portland's
Congregational Covenant Development Process
FAQs by the Covenant Committee of the Board of Trustees**

March 2008

1. What is a covenant?

According to the UUA, "a covenant is a statement of how members of a congregation will interact with one another, as well as what is promised, or vowed, by one member to another and to the congregation as a whole." Other terms used are "behavioral covenant" and "covenant of right relations."

At the most fundamental level, a covenant is a promise or pledge to see things through together, just like the Pilgrims at Plymouth who promised to "be together in good times and in bad." The Covenant Committee is working with the congregation of First Unitarian Church of Portland to develop a covenant statement that will be a positive statement of how we, the members and friends of First Church, intend to interact and communicate with one another.

2. Don't we already have a church-wide covenant?

The mission statement on the back of our order of service says that we "covenant together" to accomplish several important purposes or goals. This use of the word "*covenant*" leads some to see this statement as a congregational covenant. However, it is clearly a mission statement about what we intend to do, not a description of how we promise to work together to accomplish those goals. Similarly, the UU principles printed on the order of service specify our shared values, but do not suggest how we will act on these principles. The Ends statements on the first page of our church's governing policies, which you can find at <http://www.firstunitarianportland.org/church-info/board-and-governance>* (click on "First Unitarian Governing Policies") describe our vision of what we want our church to become. Our shared mission, values and visions of a desired future will certainly shape our covenant, but by themselves they are not covenant statements.

A number of church groups already have written covenants, including the Board of Trustees, the Social Justice Council, the Chamber Choir, and the Lay Ministry. In addition, 'covenant groups' that meet regularly make promises to one another about how they will foster one another's spiritual growth. However, there is not an overarching covenant statement that speaks for our congregation as a whole.

3. Why do we need a covenant?

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal faith tradition based in covenant rather than creed. In other words, we say how we want to be in community with one another, not what our members and friends should believe about spiritual or theological matters. A covenant serves as a roadmap, providing guidance for a faith community's journey together through both uplifting and difficult circumstances.

A written covenant will strengthen our congregation by helping us:

- Deepen our connections with one another,
- Express our shared values,
- Honor our differences and diversity of views,
- Support our spiritual and practical work together,
- Describe to prospective members our behavioral expectations, and
- Demonstrate to the larger world how we choose to be in community with one another.

4. Whose idea was it to develop a congregational covenant?

Members and friends of the congregation have consistently indicated to ministers, staff and our elected Board of Trustees that they would like to ensure that differences are honored and that honest disagreements do not escalate to unproductive conflict. The Board recognized that covenant statements can provide a framework within which differences are embraced, healthy communications are encouraged, and problems are seen as opportunities for creative thinking rather than as roadblocks. So, in the spring of 2007, the Board took the proactive step of appointing a Covenant Committee (comprised of one Board member and five other congregants) to engage the whole congregation in developing a written covenant statement.

5. Do other UU churches have covenants?

Yes, many UU congregations have covenants. You can go to the internet and google "Unitarian covenant of right relations" to see several hundred web pages that are either congregational covenants or discussions about covenants. Congregation-wide covenant statements vary quite a bit across congregations in their format and length, but all provide a point of reference to help sustain healthy communications and working relationships among congregants.

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) web site has a sample Covenant of Right Relations at <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/leaderslibrary/uufaithworks/24968.shtml> *
The UUA publication *Congregational Life Dynamics and Conflict Management* says "The immune system of a congregation is stronger to the extent that there are clear and widely publicized understandings of how members will relate to one another and to individuals who work on the congregation's behalf. These understandings include [among others] the so-called covenants of right relations." (page 14) This publication is available on the web at http://www.uua.org/documents/congservices/dynamics_conflict.pdf *

6. Will the congregational covenant replace existing small group/committee covenants?

No, the congregational covenant will be an overarching document that will serve as a reference point for all of us. It will support, not supplant, small group covenant statements developed prior to and after adoption of the church-wide covenant.

7. Will every committee or church group be required to have a covenant of its own?

No! This is something that every committee or church group may decide for itself. For some groups, unwritten ground rules or norms provide sufficient guidance for their work together. Other groups may choose to develop written covenants in order to enhance their capacity to navigate the rough waters that can arise when members of good will express strongly differing views. Groups also may find that a written covenant is an effective way to inform new members about how group members are expected to work together to achieve group goals. If your group or committee would like some help exploring ideas for your own covenant, please contact anyone on the Covenant Committee (see question 13 for contact information).

8. How will the congregation be engaged in developing the covenant?

We have already met with nearly all existing church groups and committees, and in January we invited all congregants to participate in a café conversation about covenanting. We are planning a group discussion forum for Sunday April 27 2008, and will soon be posting items on the church website, including these FAQs as well as a summary of the information we have gathered from inside and outside of our congregation. We are also publishing a brief update about the covenant process in the May/June Front Steps. Our Committee has an e-mail address so that you can send questions or comments directly to us: covenantcomments@hotmail.com In the fall of 2008, we will be providing other opportunities for discussion and deliberation that will be publicized well in advance.

9. What themes or topics are typically included in a covenant?

As noted previously, covenant statements vary in format and length, but most indicate:

- How members of a group promise to behave toward each other,
- Group members' expectations regarding how they will communicate with each other as they work to achieve their goals, and
- A commitment to continuous reflection and self-examination by group members to ensure that the covenant remains viable and actively used.

10. How long will our covenant statement be?

We hope to develop a one-page (or shorter) document that can be posted in prominent places throughout the church, handed out at membership ceremonies, and perhaps included in other church publications. We may also develop a more detailed description of our promises to one another that would provide more specific behavioral definitions of the ways we intend to be in community together. Whatever is the final covenant format, it will serve as a touchstone for congregants in our interactions with one another, and through its use we expect to learn and grow. Just as with our mission and ends statements, the wording of the covenant may change over time as our congregation evolves.

11. What is the timeline for completing our covenant?

Developing a written covenant is an important event in the life of a congregation, and so we have been proceeding deliberately, allowing sufficient time for us to educate ourselves and to share what we are learning, and to engage as many congregants as possible in developing the covenant. Our Committee has been working together since spring 2007, and we anticipate that the process will conclude by spring 2009.

12. How will the final covenant statement be adopted by the congregation?

The Board of Trustees is considering how the final covenant statement can best be approved by the congregation.

13. How can I get in touch with the Covenant Committee?

The Covenant Committee is chaired by Board member Teri Martin, and its other members are Ameena Amdahl-Mason, Kathryn Estey, Linda Fitzgerald, Kevin Lawson and John Thompson. The best way to reach us is through our committee e-mail address: covenantcomments@hotmail.com If you would like to communicate with us individually or if you don't have access to e-mail, feel free to find us during the social hour after church services, or leave a message for any of us with the church office so that we can contact you.

*If you don't have access to a computer, you may ask the church office to print copies of referenced documents from our website.