ON COVENANT

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As Unitarian Universalists we choose to come together not because we are commanded but because we are called, and because we answer that call. This call and its answer are so powerful that they transcend an incredibly diverse spectrum of belief about the shape and even existence of the Caller. Such is the power of covenant in Unitarian Universalism.[1]

Our people have worked theological miracles. As Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, we have allowed our fundamental beliefs to change over the centuries according to conscience and science and revelation. Our people have integrated the rationalism of science, the intuition of transcendentalism, and the ethics of humanism. We have managed to stay together even as the core Christian story receded as one among many wisdom stories. Covenant – the collective commitment to and practices of religious community – is how we have stayed, and will continue to stay, together.

And yet we are a people of competing commitments. The freedom of belief that has helped us remain flexible in light of new revelation and experience also weakens our binding ties. We value interconnection but are cautious about asking much of each other. As individuals and groups we want to belong but are reluctant to be claimed. This tension between freedom and connection is our birthright as religious liberals.

But we have lost our way. Our collective anxiety about this tension and the resulting deification of individual conscience have squashed the rich dimensionality of covenant until it has become synonymous with a vague and even ambivalent sense of commitment to each other. We have abstractified covenant into spiritual cohabitation, the big tent under which we eat at separate tables. Covenant lives on as a vestigial metaphor for interconnection in our movement, but it is a bird grounded with a broken wing. The call to covenant might be a theological imperative, but our collective covenant isn't worth the paper it isn't written on, for there is no covenant.

As congregations we "covenant to affirm and promote" the Principles. Affirming and promoting shared values is important, but it puts tepid commitment at our collective center, asks virtually nothing of us, and offers virtually nothing. This is not covenanting. It is parallel play.

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[1] I have authored this piece but the ideas here emerged from countless conversations with colleagues, students, and friends. Special thanks to my remarkable colleagues in the New England Region of our UUA, students in my Unitarian Universalist polity class at Harvard Divinity School, my brilliant co-instructor Rev. Parisa Parsa, and scholars Alice Blair Wesley and Conrad Wright. This is a revised version of the paper dated May 2015.

Covenant may be a predominant metaphor in our movement, but as a practice it is almost nonexistent in associational Unitarian Universalism. The call to covenant is there at the heart of our faith, an echo from our collective past. We sense that interconnection, we preach it, and we rely on it. But covenant is more than impulse and echo. It must be activated intentionally for the full power of liberal religion to be revealed. I believe the future of associational Unitarian Universalism is at stake.

If Unitarian Universalism is to survive even the current century, we must actively counter forces of individual isolation and institutional dissolution even as we morph into new forms. We must revitalize that which connects us as individuals and religious communities. We must reanimate covenant.

COVENANT IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

For many congregations, the meaning of covenant has flattened into the means by which people share expectations and exercise a degree of control over individual behavior. Behavioral covenants are the only way most of our congregations experience covenant, and there's no mistaking the function – to control unhealthy individual behavior. Our people have inadvertently learned that covenants are about getting other people to stop behaving badly.

We come by this honestly. The Cambridge Platform – the founding agreement of our "congregational way" – is full of stipulations governing individual behavior.[2] Anyone who has ever tried to live in religious community knows how important it is to have clear expectations about how we will try to be with one another. For our Puritan ancestors, though, the motivation for governing individual behavior wasn't copacetic community life but deep awareness that people who practice loving each other are best able to serve God. Absent the Cambridge Platform's abiding focus on faithful relationship to the Holy, most modern covenants are hobbled to roam only in the realm of interpersonal relationships.

For centuries, being a member of a congregation was a meaningful symbol of a person's faith commitments. This is increasingly untrue, especially for GenXers and Millennials, yet institutional membership remains the primary manifestation of formal commitment in Unitarian Universalism.

[2] Perhaps best characterized by the assertion that attendees at church meetings must not "oppose or contradict the judgment… of the elders without sufficient and weighty cause, because such practices are manifestly contrary unto order and government, and inlets of disturbance, and tend to confusion" (Cambridge Platform, Chapter X.8). Many congregational board presidents would agree!

But joining and covenanting are different in the same way that a wedding is different from a marriage. Although a person's sense of connection may well deepen once they "sign the book", the act of explicit commitment is over the moment their pen lifts the page. "Joining" happens only once. Even though they add their name to a long list of other names, there is no reaching back. Nothing mutual happens in that moment, thus flattening a multi-dimensional religious world into a single act by a single individual. A community that accepts an isolated individual act to mark entry implicitly creates a community of isolated individuals.

In some of Unitarian Universalism's strongest congregations and covenanting communities, people enter and are welcomed into covenant instead of "signing the book." Imagine how purpose and connection might be inspired among our people if this became the norm rather than the exception. Folks coming in to covenant would clearly understand and commit to whatever shared promises live at the center of that congregation or community. Current covenant partners would renew their commitment to serve that purpose and practice being in faithful community. Mutual covenanting would replace both joining as the act of commitment and membership as its means.

The forces of dissolution and disconnection are so strong. Our people come to Unitarian Universalism to help navigate and withstand all that alienates us from meaning and connection. Putting covenant back at the center would give us a powerful way to claim and be claimed by community and by all that is holy.

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COVENANT IN OUR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

Though the language of our Principles and Purposes changed several times between consolidation in 1961 and the current 1995 version, the introductory sentence "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote…" has not, nor has the collective promise enshrined in our UUA bylaws, where member congregations promise "one another our mutual trust and support." For all but our newest congregations, the commitment to covenant with the association of congregations happened last in 1995, and then only by individual delegates.

There is a deep corollary here to our practice of individual membership within congregations. A single act by a few representatives at a single moment in time is expected to hold all the weight of covenantal connection among our 1100 congregations.

The weakness of our collective covenantal bonds has been a challenge throughout Unitarian and Universalist history. Signs of weak associational identity and commitment are everywhere.

Among them:

- widespread failure of congregations to be in meaningful relationship
  with the community of congregations
- the conflation of congregational polity with congregational autonomy
- belief that our association is the institution of "the UUA" rather than the community of congregations
- low and deteriorating rates of congregational giving to districts/regions
  and to our Association
- distrust and suspicion of "the UUA"

Meanwhile, new patterns of connection are emerging in our wider culture, most notably social networks and the resulting networked networks. Our congregations and denomination have been flat-footed as we try to understand and adapt to the changes happening to and around us.

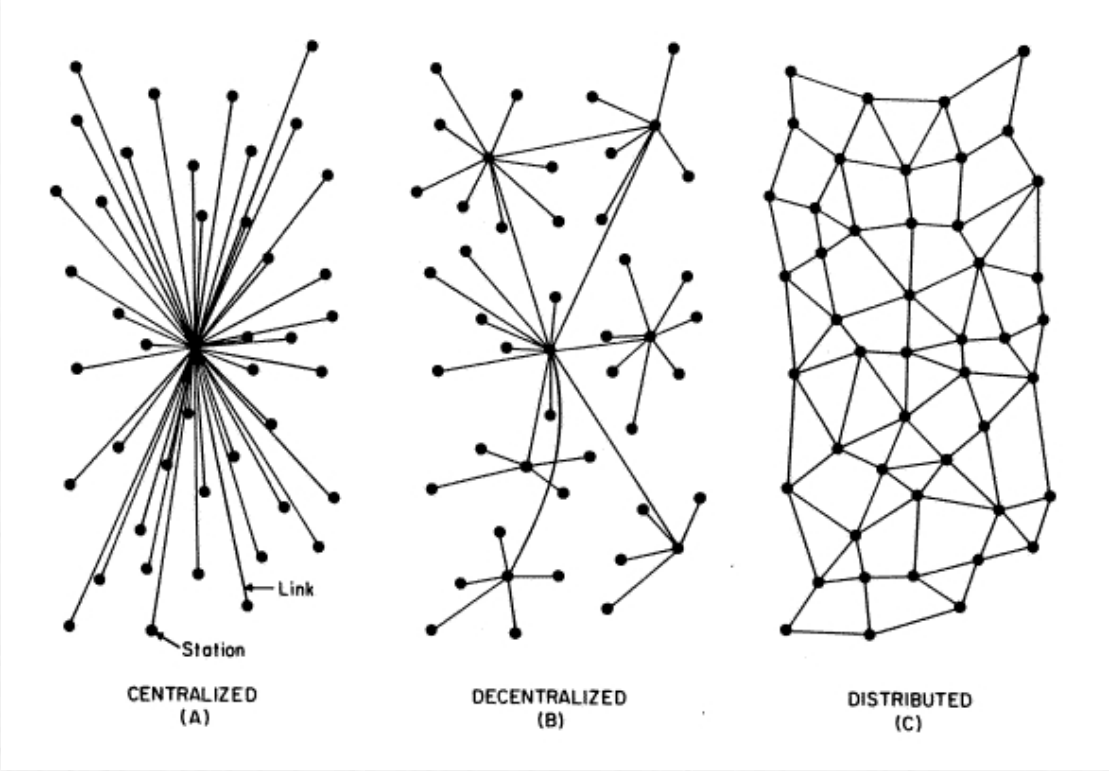

Illustration by Paul Baran, "On Distributed Communications: Memorandum RM-3420-PR," August 1964, the Rand Corporation (available online at: http://www.rand.org/publications/RM/RM3420/)

EMERGING FORMS OF CONNECTION

Our UUA is comprised of member congregations in which members relate to each other through the associational center to accomplish together they cannot accomplish alone – creating religious education curricula and hymnals, supporting ministerial credentialing, searching for and settling ministers, and representing the community of congregations in social action and witness. Connection between and among congregations is expressed via shared membership in the associational core. The Association provides the support congregations promise to one another and congregations come together at the General Assembly to do the business of the Association.

This way of organizing is a centralized network with a hub in the middle where members connect to each other through the hub. Many congregations organize the same way, where members join the core and are connected to each other by virtue of common membership.

The tie that binds member congregations is a promise to "affirm and promote" Unitarian Universalist Principles and to provide each other "mutual trust and support." While individual congregations affirm and promote the Principles according to their judgment and practices, the Association is the primary means through which congregations support one another. I call this association by proxy, where the core is charged with enacting the commitments of the members. Most membership organizations work this way. It is a time-honored means of sharing resources to achieve common ends.

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Meanwhile, the hub-and-spoke model of centralized networks is becoming obsolete. Institutions simply aren't necessary any more for people to get and stay connected. A huge number of people, especially GenXers and Millennials, engage others directly, often through social media, and in turn loose groups connect to other loose groups in an array of social networks that is usually completely independent from institutions. The affinities that connect people – common interests, identities, and values – are multidimensional, and the resulting web of affiliations in decentralized and distributed networks is complex, constantly changing, and completely self-organizing.

TOWARD NEW PRACTICES OF COVENANT

People and groups need a way to get and sometimes stay connected, to probe for and express affiliation. In its richest expression, covenanting is a prophetic and tradition-tested way to re-imagine and re-engage the ties that bind liberal religious people. Covenanting could cross the flat individual-group dimension in a way that "membership" never could, providing a single unifying vision of connection among Unitarian Universalist individuals, groups, communities, and congregations. Intentional participation in a network of covenants rather than membership in one of the network hubs could become both the conveyance and currency of covenant. Participating in mutual covenants could become the spiritual lifeline connecting free-range UUs to those who live far from brick and mortar congregations, to imprisoned UUs, young adults living on college campuses, UU folks who can't find an appealing church, and extending to those who regularly attend churches.

Congregations, worshipping communities, meet-up groups, and individual people could all participate, thus breaking down at last the wall between congregations and the vast beyond. Individuals, groups, communities and congregations could connect directly in networks of covenants, thus eroding the unhelpful dichotomy between individual membership in a congregation and congregational membership in the Association. Our Association could still have a central covenant – clarified and revived from its current torpor – and be comprised of covenanting partners rather than "members".

In the same way that social media links networks of networked people, Unitarian Universalists could connect to each other, to communities and congregations, and to our Association through networks of covenants. Covenant could become the platform through which different communities interpret and manifest their collective discernment. The collective practice of covenanting rather than the contents of covenants could define our larger community of faith.

Covenant is both a noun and a verb – it must be both a valuable thing unto itself and contain a process for its constant becoming. Thus, living covenants must do three things. They must convey clear commitments, they must be open to new interpretation, and – most importantly – they must be intentionally renewed.

Our covenants must convey clear commitments. Faithful covenants would be specific enough to be used as discernment tools and aspirational enough to chart a course for faith formation. They would help individuals and communities understand mutual commitments and collective aspirations, and help covenant partners know when they are in covenant and how to get back in when they become estranged from it.

Our covenants must be open to new interpretation and must be intentionally renewed. Faithful covenants would be a means and an end. An ongoing covenanting process would strengthen our mutual promises through reinterpretation as new wisdom is revealed, provide continuous welcoming of newcomers, and ritualize regular re-covenanting.

Congregations will continue to be the center of our faith, but Unitarian Universalism doesn't live in congregations. Our faith lives in the hearts of faithful people who carry love and seek justice in the wider world whether or not they belong to a congregation. Covenant could connect these hearts. It could transmute spirituality into religion, and spiritual people into Unitarian Universalists.

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A NEW ROLE FOR OUR ASSOCIATION

The forces keeping congregations isolated from one another mire our Unitarian Universalist Association in a strange paradox. On the one hand, our UUA is deeply concerned with the vitality of individual congregations. On the other, our UUA serves as a proxy for the mutual commitments of congregations. What our UUA hasn't done very well is provide a platform for congregational interconnection. Not to be the platform, but to create and sustain it.

If covenant were at the center of Unitarian Universalism, our core work as an Association would shift to supporting collective call, purpose, and commitment. We would support individuals, congregations, and communities as they engage in collective discernment, generate and live into covenants, fail and restart, and come together across distances of geography and generation to join in the larger associational covenant. If this role shifted, stewardship to our Association could justifiably be recast as stewardship of the community of congregations, allowing us to appeal with integrity to congregational commitments to one another rather than to the Association for the institution's sake.

The movement away from independent UUA districts to regions and the elimination of district representatives on our UUA

board are the latest signs that our congregational polity begs for reinterpretation for the 21st century. Covenanting suggests a dramatic new role for local clusters, districts, and regions as covenanting bodies re-orient toward strengthening association and covenantal connection.

If General Assembly is any indication, the practice of democracy has somehow supplanted the practice of covenant at our associational center. Democracy and covenant are certainly not mutually exclusive, but the collective work of GA has become undeniably oriented toward argumentation, parliamentary procedure, and voting. Our people need ways to make decisions, and we are committed to democratic governance, but governance simply should not be our primary practice when we gather as a religious people. If we accept voting as the primary means of clarifying our associational ends, every issue we contend with must have two sides and by definition one of them must lose. But no issue that is truly worthy of our collective attention should be reduced to a yes or no question, and no decision-making process should end with many of us feeling as though we lost an argument. We can and must do better. We are called to higher purposes, and more faithful practices.

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LOOKING FORWARD

Institutional membership and identity are fading as motivations for and reflections of faith. This reality is dangerous to congregations oriented around recruiting people for membership and institutional maintenance. These congregations will continue to disappear over the next century, just as they have over the past one. Congregations and communities will thrive when they motivate purpose in their people, when they nurture experiences of personal discovery, and help people discern and articulate their personal callings while staying connected to others. Congregations will thrive who encourage their people not to belong but to be changed.

The same is true of our Association as an institution and our General Assembly as its primary practice. The community of congregations will thrive when we reorient toward helping covenant partners discern and practice the ministries they are uniquely called to manifest in their local communities. Our Association will thrive when we embrace this paradox – that the most powerful collective practices are all about supporting locally-rooted manifestations of love, generosity, justice and compassion.

Regardless of the shape an emergent network of covenants takes until it morphs again, we can and must strengthen covenant among current congregations and communities. Modern Unitarian Universalism has never asked our people to covenant deeply with one another. We have not yet shared a vision of covenant that invites our people into manifest relationship.

It's time to change that. Our collective capacity to evolve – together – is at risk. If we do not find a way to spiritually tether our divergent parts, if we fail to revive the practices that make us us, Unitarian Universalism will likely retreat into isolated islands and dissolve into spiritual but not religious oblivion.

We must choose another path. We must make covenant the architecture of our interdependence, and trust that this glorious gift in our religious DNA will continue to nurture ever-evolving forms and practices, that together we might continue to increase the sum of love and justice in this bruised and hurting world.

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