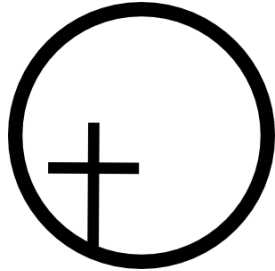


Covenant
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
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I grew up Unitarian Universalist in a very Catholic town, just outside of Boston. My congregation was historically Universalist, and displayed, next to the chalice on the altar, a 20th-century Universalist symbol, a circle with a cross it in, off to the side, known as the “off-center cross.” This symbol was designed by Universalists in 1946 to honor the Christian origin of Universalism while decentering that history and leaving space for other traditions, particularly Humanism, and other world religions.



“According to the developers, the cross was placed off-centered within a circle, a “symbol of infinity” to represent “the all inclusive faith of Universalism which shuts no one out.”¹ We also had a set of wall hangings, that matched those at the Universalist Charles Street Meetinghouse in Boston led by Kenneth Patton. Patton sought to develop a Universalism that sought knowledge from the world’s religions, and lifted up the symbols of many faiths around the building, an idea which traveled the few miles north to where I grew up.

While I was a kid, we repainted the sanctuary from 1960s gold to a more neutral grey, and the stained glass above the altar was refurbished and the wall painted to accent the glass. As I stared at the image in worship, I had a realization that it was not in fact a picture of an ancient shepherd, but of course Jesus. For all the symbols around us, my congregation didn’t usually talk about Jesus, God, or any kind of divinity or salvation, the theology was very Humanist, and I would hazard to say, uncomfortable with spiritual language, which was not uncommon at the time in many Unitarian Universalist congregations. My experience has been that UUs generally have grown better at engaging with language of reverence, to borrow from Rev. Bill Sinkford, our past UUA president. Here in our UUMSB congregation in particular, our community was built with thoughtful theological grounding, inviting folks to share from their experience, using *their* metaphors, but being sure to ground worship and the life of the congregation in theology, in reflecting the spiritual and philosophical questions with which we wrestle as we connect with our understanding of the transcendent and unknowable. But, back to my home congregation in the 1980s. To illustrate that people and communities are complicated, every Sunday we shared in the words of an old school Universalist covenant, of which there are many versions, but this was ours:

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest for truth is its sacrament
And service is its prayer
This is our covenant:
To dwell together in peace
To seek knowledge in freedom
To serve humanity in fellowship

¹ <http://www.uunewhaven.org/pages/symbols3.html>

To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine. This covenant still speaks to me. I love that it looks at the Christian ideas of doctrine, sacrament, and prayer, and offers ideals from a UU perspective - Love, quest for truth, and service. I appreciate that this covenant is clear in its purpose - this is our covenant - and the language of the covenant parallels what came before - peace, seek, serve. I remember as a kid, feeling it in the room when we said these words together. I meant it. And it was important to me to have language to describe what it was we did in our congregation and why. To the end that souls shall grow into harmony with the divine. I remember not quite knowing what to do with this last line, but coming to an understanding of what that meant for me, was foundational in building my own language for the transcendent, for meaning making.

Covenants are the promises we make to one another, and what we choose to lift up in them, is important to pay attention to. Today we shared in reading our covenant. It is not the most poetic of covenants, but it is a very worthy one. In it we promise to support each other in our emotional, spiritual and intellectual lives, to join in community activities, to welcome all people, and to uphold and share Unitarian Universalist principles. Our covenant asks us to build and support a community that is a spiritual home for us, and also for the people who have not yet walked through the door, and that is vital to reflect on in our choices in community, and in all we do. In covenanted community, it is all of us together that make meaning, change, and grow. We all work toward our mission to promote justice and compassion in the world. George K. Beach asserts, "People do not 'join' a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no 'it' without them and each time new folks join, the whole is literally reconstituted." It is also true that as we engage ourselves with a community and with a covenant, we are changed.

In Hebrew Scripture, the rainbow is given as the sign of the covenant between God and Noah. In Christian Scripture, the service of communion is a reminder of their covenant. What are the symbols of our covenant? How is it visible in our community life? One of our most important symbols in Unitarian Universalism is our flaming chalice. As you may remember, the chalice came to be during World War II, because the Unitarian Service Committee needed a symbol they could use on their documentation, as they worked in Europe to get folks to safety. It began as a symbol of a justice organization for relatively practical reasons, and it was thoughtfully designed by Hans Deutsch, an Austrian artist. A cup, a common Christian symbol related to communion, and also charity, with a flame of hope. To Deutsch, the image evoked sacrifice and love. Our covenant asks us to support one another, and to work together to build a truly welcoming and inclusive community. To not only uphold our UU principles, but to share them. Do you see our covenant in the chalice? Are there other symbols that embody that for you?

As we welcome new members in to covenant today, we have the opportunity to practice what we name in our promises to one another. And to remember that our community is made of people. We will change, our community will change, and we will help each other on the way.

May it be so. Amen.