A COVENANT OF CARE:
what does it mean to be in a covenentalal community?
(Version 3a)

A Sunday service led by the
Rev. Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on February 28, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Our ancestors of old circled around a flame,
Just as we light this flame that is the symbol
Of our community and our commitment:
To be... to be good... to be good to each other...
And to be good to ourselves.
Oh yes, we circle around this flame,
Letting the warmth of community and the
Light of shared wisdom warm us.
It is good to be together...
It is good to be...
It is good...

*May it ever be so and blessed be you all!*
OFFERING

Part of our covenant as a faith community is that we find ways to contribute to the health of the congregation and ensure that our message and programs reach those who need them. We do this through our gifts of time, talent and treasure.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is ____________________.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning’s offering will now be received.
A COVENANT OF CARE:
what does it mean to be in a covenantal community?
Reverend Michael Walker

What does it mean to be a covenantal community?
I need to unpack this concept for two reasons: the first is that many people will associate the word covenant with Judeo-Christian history; and the second is that some people might associate this word with a congregation’s Covenant of Right Relations. The second is the easier of the two to answer and set aside. Today, I will not be talking about UCH’s document with the word covenant in its title. Instead, we are going to take a broader view of the spiritual nature of being in a covenantal community, it’s history in Western culture, and why it matters to us today.

From the Latin for “come together,” a covenant is a formal agreement binding on each party involved. It is usually understood that a covenant implies more than a simple contract, but is also a gesture of goodwill and intention to act for the mutual benefit of others in the agreement, not just oneself. Many UUs might define covenant in this way: Covenants are a deep, abiding promise between equals to partner with each other and that which is bigger than ourselves, to work for a just and loving world.

Many of you have heard me use language like this before, and perhaps realize that the things I teach and preach about come from a larger wellspring of Unitarian
Universalist thought. Many will also realize that much of UU thought is derived from the cultural heritage of Western society. Although UUism is now often described as a post-Christian spiritual movement, it has its roots in Judeo-Christian heritage. Because I believe it’s helpful to understand the historical development of covenant, let’s take a brief foray into history, before we return to how covenants apply to us today.

The Abrahamic traditions, which are Judaism, Christianity, Islam and their various offshoots, have the concept of covenant deeply ingrained in their traditions. These traditions teach that the initial covenants were agreements between God or Allah and His chosen people. The earliest is believed to be the Mosaic Covenant, named for Moses, still in effect for Jewish adherents today; while Christians call it the Old Covenant, which they believe was superseded by the New Covenant, as described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in other early Christian writings. It should be noted that between the eras in which these covenants were formulated, there were a number of other covenants believed to be in effect between the chosen people and God. And Muhammad developed an even newer covenant for his Muslim followers.

The concept of covenant is the basis of Abrahamic theology, and is embedded in the cultural DNA of Western civilization. We learn from history that covenants bound people to what they understood to be God’s law, and God agreed to protect the people in
return. Even kings and lords were bound to God’s law, and from this derived *noblesse oblige*, an obligation to care for the commoners of their fiefdoms. As Western society continued to evolve, the concept of covenant did as well. This was particularly apparent in the events that led up to the formation — much more recently in history — of the new United States, which embraced federalism. The Latin root *foeder-* means *compact* or *covenant*, a theological concept that was later secularized by the founders and freethinkers of the USA, and is now in use by many nations of the world. The basis of being ‘united states’ comes from the covenants these states have with each other, which was perhaps more obvious during the Revolutionary period than it is now.

I see two branches of history for the concept of *covenant*, of which I just described the one religious-to-secular version. The other version remained religious in nature. It also began with the Mosaic covenant and continued to develop through several religious movements, and was to eventually lead to our own UU spiritual movement.

But before we get to that point in history, let’s go to the Middle Ages, in which Catholicism had developed a power structure that dominated Western civilization for many centuries. Perhaps it is true that power corrupts, as that may explain the *indulgences* – or forgiveness of sins in return for payment to the church – which was a major cause of Martin Luther’s anger that eventually led to the Protestant Reformation. Luther and other Protestant
leaders that came after him used the concept of covenant as the foundation upon which they built their religious practice. The covenant of grace expounded upon by Luther’s Protestant contemporaries, particularly Huldrich Zwingli and John Calvin, were to directly influence the Anglicans who formulated the Westminster Confession of Faith, during a period in English and Scottish history in which Puritans had a great deal of power. Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan followers had taken over the government, as well as the church. The Westminster Confession reformed the Church of England, and was to influence Anglican, Scottish Presbyterian, Puritan and other Protestant movements that arose from those roots.

When the Puritans fell out of favor in England, many of them retreated to Holland, and later to the New World, colonizing Massachusetts. One group of the Puritans were the famous Pilgrims, who wished to live in a covenantal community that they believed hearkened back to Jesus and his disciples, with his values of cooperation, charity, compassion, study & teaching, and being independent of any authority outside of the community. It was also — to be honest — a matter of survival, to cooperate and help each other, as they established themselves in a new land without an established infrastructure.

However, one might draw cautionary conclusions about the later history of Puritans in early America, taking their covenant too far. In the covenant, they not only made agreements between themselves and God, and agreements with each other about community life, but
also agreements to hold each other accountable. We know that the Salem Witch Trials were a later product of this covenant, taken way too far to the extreme.

The Pilgrims and other Puritans, and other Christian colonists in New England, eventually formulated two documents that were the basis for how we choose to be with each other as a church community, even now. One was the Winchester Confession of Faith (not to be confused with the earlier Westminster confession), regarding Christian doctrine. The second document they created was the Cambridge Platform, which codified the concept that came to be known as congregational polity and separated the congregational churches from the episcopal Church of England and the presbyterian Church of Scotland. The Cambridge Platform also stated that the congregational churches were to support each other, as they were in this congregational experiment in the New World together. That concept — congregational polity and communities being the final authority — was revolutionary at the time.

These two documents called religious communities into covenant, and described authority as residing in the congregation. There was no higher authority, and that decisions made by the congregation were binding on their members.

It is helpful to remember that at this time, the Massachusetts colony consisted of strictly religious communities, and there was no separation between township and parish – they were one and the same. The
old Standing Order in Massachusetts was not to be abolished until much later; and the American decision to separate church and state was inspired by people from other colonies. Fundamentalists like to point to this and proclaim that America was founded as a Christian nation, and I need to be clear that I am not saying that. I’m saying that the Massachusetts colony was established as a Christian colony, around 150 years before the Independence and union of 13 former colonies, not all of which had the same roots as the Puritan colony.

The covenant guaranteeing congregational polity was the basis of the Congregationalists (which is what the Puritans and Pilgrims became); and this was the direct predecessor of the Unitarians. UUs share congregational polity with our cousins, the United Church of Christ (a merger of Congregationalist and Reformed churches), all of the varied and sundry Baptist denominations, and the many non-denominational churches. Now that we know how covenants developed, I think that’s enough of history for now.

Although Unitarians long ago dropped the other Christian doctrines, we kept the concept of covenant, as well as the congregational polity that governs our churches and fellowships. One of my colleagues, the Rev. Anne Felton Hines, describes how the Cambridge Platform is still influential in modern American society.¹

In separating Congregationalist churches from Episcopal

and Presbyterian churches, she says they were basically saying, “You’re not the boss of me!” And, by establishing a covenant between congregational churches, she says that they proclaimed, “We’re in this together!”

She went on to describe how this plays out in Unitarian Universalism, and observes that the “you’re not the boss of me” feeling is still quite prevalent in all of our congregations. Americans in general, and UUs in particular, are well known for our “rugged individualism.” She and I would both counsel congregations to not get stuck there, as rigid individualism certainly prevents community building.

It is important to remember the second part of the Cambridge Platform, which Anne describes as “We’re in this together!” Well, I have to agree. This is the basis of our UU covenantal communities. We affirm each other’s individual spiritual journeys – a search for truth and meaning, we often say. And, we affirm our need to work together in common cause, to work for the benefit of something greater than ourselves.

This is the most important lesson I have to teach for the whole year or more that we will be together: **We do not exist to meet the needs of an individual – we exist to meet the needs of a community.** Being a covenantal community means that we seek to support others in their lives and on their spiritual journeys, even when we might disagree with them. Being a covenantal community means that we ascertain what the whole community needs, and collectively work to achieve that.
In this, individual needs may not always rise to the fore, and being responsible members of the covenantal community, we accept this. We don’t always get our own way. Sometimes, we work for the greater good. And, in the end, we are usually happy for it, because the greater good of the community has this almost-magical way of being good for us, too. It usually works out in the end. And, if it does not, as a covenantal community, we can collectively decide to change course. And, if we decide to do that, that’s okay.

Being in covenant is the basis of our being together as a congregation. It seems to me that you probably don’t come here just to listen to me babble on Sundays; and you didn’t join the church in order to sit in endless committee meetings. We are here to be in community, to work together as a community, to grow and learn as a community, and to act as a community. And it is by being in covenant with one another that we are able to be such a community.

Here is my personal definition of covenant:

A formal agreement binding on each party involved, it is usually understood that a covenant implies more than a simple contract, but is also a gesture of goodwill and intention to act for the mutual benefit of others in the agreement, not just oneself.

I believe this is what it means to be a congregation – that is, a covenantal community. Doing good not just for our own benefit, but also for the benefit of others. Caring about and helping each other. Hearing contrary views with an open heart and mind, and agreeing to still
be together as a community when it’s all said and done.

This is who we are, deep down in the depths of this, our covenantal community, and in my belief it is who we always want to be.

_May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

_Love will guide us... hope inside us will lead the way,

For that is the nature of covenantal community.

We are ever-growing, ever-changing, ever-loving...

_We break not the circle of enabling love!

We are finding ways to be the change we want to see,

Improving life for each other and also for ourselves.

Let’s take the spirit of community and family with us,

As we walk the path of life this week,

And pray that that path leads us all back here again.

_May it ever be so and blessed be you all!_