



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

UU churches have a long history of being in covenant—in short, making agreements among members that recognize either a common purpose or patterns of mutual respect—also known as Right Relations. In the very first UU covenant created by First Church in Boston in 1630, that congregation covenanted to “unite ourselves into one Congregation, or Church... to walk in all our ways according to the Rule of the Gospel...and in mutual love, and respect each to other...” Nearly 400 years later, the Berkeley UU church unanimously agreed in 2007 “to communicate directly, honestly, and compassionately, particularly when we are in conflict. When we hurt one another, we will try to forgive, make amends and reconnect in a spirit of love.”

We have been a covenanting church for a long time in different areas. Each of the RE classes and Chalice Circles creates a covenant at the start of each season. Every year, the Board renews a covenant between its members. And most recently, the Music Director Search Committee and our choir established covenants.

Why, then, do we not have a covenant for our whole church? I have heard different reasons for this, which I will soon explore. Meanwhile, I am pleased to report that your Board of Trustees, whom you elected, has discerned in the last year and half of my presidency just how valuable and important such a covenant would be, and how it would create the bedrock for a Right Relations committee that would be a resource to all church members. We are kicking off this process with this service, and will soon enlist a representative committee of church members to lead us in this process.

As I think of civility and Right Relations as fairly interchangeable, I contend that there have been times in our church's history when Right Relations between members was at risk. There have been two such times almost 20 years apart that I experienced directly. One of these is very recent. During the stressful last year and half where we had some monumental



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

transitions, Right Relations was not always in the forefront of people's minds. Our Senior Minister was still relatively new and had new ideas; we experienced transitions in leadership in our music program and in staffing; and we have experienced costly restrictions due to a CUP or conditional use permit required by the City of Pasadena—among other issues that concerned members. People come to me to air their concerns or grievances, and I see it as my duty to be as open and listening as possible. I was struck after receiving an email entirely in capital letters, a snide email, and a scathing one that perhaps we need as a church to revisit the way we communicate and hold each other dear. When I shared my concern with the Board, our outgoing Board member Lauren Worley indicated that a congregation-wide covenant could be a touchstone for all of us to consider when expressing our fears, anger, or sense of loss. As you might have discerned in the examples earlier, a covenant is not intended to impose censorship, or shame. Instead, in the words of our former Senior Minister Lee Barker, it encourages us to *speak the truth with love*.

That is no easy task! I must make it clear right away, I am not one at all to point fingers about civility or Right Relations. Early in my time at Neighborhood Church, I learned about Right Relations the hard and painful way. Almost twenty years ago, I was on the Board of Trustees and we received a Letter of Concern from a group of church members who charged that they were not being heard, by either the Board or our Senior Minister, Lee Barker.

In response to this Letter of Concern, the Board sponsored a series of town halls in which people shared their feelings. I was taken aback by the comments of one gentleman who I felt was verbally abusive to our Senior Minister, Lee. No one knew what to say in the moment, and I walked away from that session very angry. Several days later, the Board met to debrief on the town hall meeting. This gentleman and his remarks were referenced, and I suddenly found myself saying with absolutely no forethought or censor, "The next time that



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

guy makes statements like that about Lee, I'm going to pick him up by his collar and the seat of his pants and throw him out of the room."

I'm sure that everyone here has been on a ride at Disneyland when your car comes out of Space Mountain, for example, and stops suddenly, and you're bolt upright with a shocked look on your face. Imagine the other 23 Board members at that time all coming to that shocked position in unison—quite understandably. Someone finally broke the tension with a humorous remark, and I realized with terrible embarrassment how out of line I had been. As there was no hole in the floor of Room 21 I could crawl into, I had to sit for the rest of the meeting deeply regretting my words and learning a valuable lesson. However I was feeling, I needed as a member of the church and especially its leadership to find a better way to express my concern, and not match incivility with incivility.

It's possible that if our church had had a covenant in place about Right Relations that all members and friends were aware of, that gentleman at the town hall and I might have tempered our remarks. Let's accept the fact we're human, and we can get carried away. And even when a few people have been uncivil in communications with me, I've noted that they've always been sincere and they truly care about the church. But as well, I have seen firsthand how much farther we get in dialogue on difficult issues, when everyone has Right Relations in mind.

Charges I've heard about covenants are that they are simplistic or have no impact. I'd like to politely challenge those notions by describing the choir's process of creating a covenant last fall at the suggestion of our wonderful music director, Dr. Zanaida Robles. When the choir met between services for the covenant process, it was striking to hear the suggestions that people brought to the table and how easily they folded into a shared covenant. There were no empty commitments or mere verbiage; everyone had a voice; and we supported each other as contributions came forth. When we agreed upon a



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

statement of the spiritual nature of our work in the choir, I realized for the first time that singing with a group is a spiritual act. I felt more connected to the choir as a result of working with other people to identify common goals and acts of civil behavior, for example, being on time, practicing and learning the music in advance, and vocally blending versus showboating.

There is also the argument that we have Seven Principles as well as a mission and ends. *Enough already!* We don't need another layer. I would also like to challenge that politely. None of these very meaningful statements constitutes an *agreement* between all of us as to how we will communicate and live together in this beloved community. A covenant underlines how we value each other, and how we choose to get along amid varying viewpoints. A covenant created by all of us together would reflect both where we are, where we always hope to be, and what will deepen our connections here. Please consider the example I gave earlier about the choir's covenant and how it has truly deepened my experience in terms of spirit and community; the Board and I believe we can accomplish the same thing on a congregation-wide basis. I don't believe we can achieve that level of understanding and the bond that goes with it with the Seven Principles or our ends alone.

One of the most startling moments in the last year and a half for me was when our longtime member Irene Burkner awakened our congregation to the fact that a revered co-founder of our church, the first American scientist to win a Nobel Prize, had also supported eugenics and enforced sterilization, mainly targeting the poor and people of color. Additionally, he had been a board member of a eugenics organization called the Human Betterment Foundation that provided a model for ethnic cleansing in Nazi Germany. I'll never forget from the vantage of the choir seeing the faces of people sitting where you are sitting as this information unfolded—your outrage, your disbelief, and your resolve. Irene's remarkable act of truth and reconciliation has prompted the growth of a committee by that name that is exploring our church's, our denomination's, and community's collective past, to



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

understand from where we come, to appreciate where we are, and to suggest where we might go. For me, that kind of commitment to self-awareness and truth is the stuff of covenants. I believe it is no accident that these covenant and truth and reconciliation processes are happening concurrently, and as a white man with a few startling skeletons in my family closet, I find this effort exhilarating and hope it is reflected in the covenant that emerges. In short, a covenant can provide not only a compass for communication, but also a compass for equity.

At last, a congregation-wide covenant will allow our church to support a Right Relations committee that would be using the covenant as its guide and toolbox. Many of our fellow UU churches have Right Relations committees in place, and these act as a sounding board or place to be heard when interpersonal or community issues arise. I'll harken back again to the Letter of Concern about 20 years ago. What the Board finally decided to do was to create a Task Force, which I happened to co-chair. We met regularly with anyone who wanted to express their frustrations, fears, hopes, or ideas. What resulted from this process was that those authors of the Letter of Concern felt valued and heard in a way they had not before, and rather than suffering a terrible schism, our church became revitalized and moved on with more unity and intentional listening.

That Task Force briefly and truly did the work of a Right Relations committee. This doesn't mean the Board would check out on current church issues or any of your concerns, but would have additional time to focus on its primary purpose, which is policy governance, working with our Senior Minister to move our church forward on operational and financial issues, with an eye on sustainability.

A Right Relations dialogue is one in which we share the truths that are hard to tell, with those we are having a hard time saying them to. Difficult things can be surfaced, explored, and resolved. Goals can be set for clearer communication and respectful relationships.



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Being in covenant means we care enough about the inherent worth and dignity of each individual in this church to talk AND listen. It brings us into direct communication versus the rumors or passive aggressive behavior that we sometimes fall into when we are at odds or in conflict with someone or something.

At last, if you still feel a congregational covenant has no weight, then I ask you to think of it as an act of civil disobedience—a statement in defiance of our current national culture and leadership in Washington, where a lack of civility is celebrated, and racist, homophobic, and sexist sentiments have reached an alarming norm. I ask you also to consider the words of a woman I greatly admire who just happens to have written the number one best seller of 2018. In Michelle Obama's very memorable words, "When they go low, we go high."

Neighborhood Church, let's go high. A congregational covenant memorializes our spirit, our values, and our civil commitments to each other. A Right Relations committee based on that covenant enables all members of the church to feel heard and valued with regularity. Your Board of Trustees unanimously endorses a congregation-wide covenant and Right Relations committee. We will be enlisting a representative team from church membership to work on the covenant, soliciting input from all members, and we're aiming to present the final version at our annual meeting in May, if possible. We hope you will all participate in this process to give our interrelationships a meaningful intentionality. Thank you in advance for helping the committee-to-be find the words and values that deepen our relationships with each other, and thank you for the love and candor you have given the Board and me as president...even when it was delivered in all capital letters!