

**Promises, Promises: The Importance of Covenant**  
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Reverend Ellen spoke about the theological basis for covenants and covenantal relationships. Indeed, a covenant differs from a contract. In a contract, “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” are spelled out in detail. Oftentimes, “shalt” when thou “shalt not” and “not shalt” when thou “shalt” are grounds for voiding the contract and severing the relationship. Compared to contracts, covenants have fewer details in terms of commands and prohibitions. Covenantal relationships call for all parties to exercise judgment, not simply to follow rules. Covenantal relationships are relationships where people talk with each other to jointly determine the best course of action.

There is a surprising assumption built into the deep structure of a covenant. The assumption is not that we will be perfect in living the covenantal relationship but rather that we are likely to fail, at least some of the time. Built into the deep structure of a covenant is the understanding that our behavior does not always match our aspirations and ideals. However (and this is the critical point), the failure of any of us to live up to our ideals does not give us permission to walk away from the relationship. The issue in a covenantal relationship is not breach of contract. The key issue in a covenantal relationship is this: When (not if) things go awry, what do I have to do to repair and strengthen the relationship?

It has become a trend in the last five to 10 years for a newly settled minister and a minister emeritus or emerita to craft a covenant outlining how they will relate to each other, sharing the covenant with the congregation. Why has this become a trend? About seven years ago, the Rev. Margaret Keip, minister emerita of the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Monterey, said this to a group of ministers: “We – the big collective clergy WE of us – have not yet mastered . . . how to navigate . . . leaving [a position as the settled minister in a congregation]. And [many] of our Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Guidelines have been written from all the mistakes we made. Nor is it just us. [Such] problems . . . are endemic across denominations and [are] a prime cause of congregational conflict.”<sup>1</sup> To avoid potential congregational conflict and to promote the wellbeing of the congregation, Rev. Ellen and I put together the covenant which is included as an insert in the Order of Service. We encourage you to save it and reflect upon it, for it will shape congregational life at Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation for years to come. Here are some of the key elements of the covenant:

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Margaret Keip was responding to the Berry Street Lecture by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed in 2000, entitled “After You Run through the Thistles, the Hard Part Begins” (<http://www.uuma.org/berrystreet/Essays/BSE2000.htm>).

“I recognize the continuing value of Rev. Ellen’s presence in the congregation, and I welcome Rev. Ellen’s presence. In consultation with appropriate members of the congregation, I covenant to invite Rev. Ellen to participate in memorial services and other public events in the congregation and in the broader community, when so doing would enhance the meaning of the service or event for participants.

Rev. Ellen covenants to honor the priority of my call to the ministry of the congregation and to be of service to me in ways that may be mutually agreeable, such as serving as counsel, sounding board, or in ways as yet unknown. Rev. Ellen will not offer solicited or unsolicited advice regarding congregational life to the members of the congregation.

Rev. Ellen and I also recognize that some members of the congregation will remain emotionally committed to Rev. Ellen. Rev. Ellen acknowledges this fact and urges members of the congregation to recognize an altered relationship. Rev. Ellen is no longer the settled minister and will not assume ministerial roles unless requested by me. Rev. Ellen also recognizes the sanctity of the relationship she has had with the members of the congregation and will continue to honor the confidentialities that members have shared with her . . . [Finally], as Unitarian Universalists, we covenant to be mindful in our actions and to speak the truth to each other in love so that Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation may continue to thrive.”

In a typical scenario (to the extent that there is such a thing regarding ministerial transitions) a minister emerita might not become involved in congregational life for a year or two after the new settled minister begins serving the congregation. This period gives the congregation a chance to bond with the new minister and gives the new minister a chance to bond with the congregation. That is not how things unfolded here. Last year, Rev. Paul, your most recent interim minister, invited Rev. Ellen to become involved in the life of the congregation. While the timing was a bit unusual, unusual in this case is good.

Why do I say that, when search committee members have told me that some ministers “in search” last year who considered this congregation seemed somewhat skittish about this? I will answer by way of a story, a true story, a Halloween story. On Halloween, when the trick or treaters approached my door, little did they know that I was on my knees behind the closed door. When they rang the doorbell, I opened the door just a crack. Then [gesture and growl] these skeleton hands lurched toward them as I growled.

Up to the house came a trio of young girls. Ding dong. The door opens a crack. Then [gesture and growl]. “Aaaaaaaeeeeeeeeiiiiiii!” shrieked the girl closest to the door, the one dressed as a Japanese geisha. Then, laughter. As I scooped candy into their bags, one of her companions asked the geisha, “How scared were you?” Trying to save face though her shriek was still echoing in the air, the geisha hesitated, then said “I’m an easy scare.” It is good to know what kind of a “scare” we are – easy to scare, difficult to scare, or somewhere in between? One of the interesting things about the ministerial search process is that with a successful match, the congregation and the newly settled minister are likely to be similar in terms of how readily they scare.

I am difficult to scare regarding complex relationships. I suspect that the same thing might be true regarding Rev. Ellen and regarding this congregation. If I wanted or needed simple relationships, I would have lived a different life, and I would have turned into a different person. I find that complex relationships offer potential for growth unmatched by simple relationships. In his book *Exploring Unitarian Universalist Identity*, Peter Tufts Richardson writes that “Spiritual growth is not a dabbling in this or that ‘practice,’ now this, now that, but rather is a growth in ability to enter into living at more degrees of complexity, to be able to function with poise and effectiveness . . .”<sup>2</sup> I move into the future with confidence, grateful for the opportunity to serve this congregation and grateful for Rev. Ellen’s presence here. I trust the capacity of all of us to thrive because of (not in spite of) complex relationships. In the years to come, all of us will relate imperfectly, thank goodness! Let us welcome the ups and downs of congregational life as opportunities to deepen our commitment to our covenantal relationship. May it be so!

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<sup>2</sup> *Exploring Unitarian Universalist Identity* by Peter Tufts Richardson, Red Barn Publishing, Rockland, Maine, 2006, p. 100.