

In 1637 a group of about 30 Puritan families had moved to the newly-chartered settlement of Dedham, Massachusetts.

Unlike the Pilgrim settlers in Plymouth or the earlier Puritan settlement in Salem, this faithful group did not know one another before forming their new community.

They came from different parts of Great Britain, and some had previously settled in other areas of this then-new world of North America.

Their first order of business was to quickly establish how they were to fairly divide the land so that they could plant their crops, build their homes and fence their pastures.

Once they had taken care of their food and shelter needs, they were able to turn their attention to forming the *religious* part of their community.

120 years earlier, Martin Luther had put the Catholic Church “on notice” by nailing a list of 95 complaints on the cathedral door in his town of Wittenberg, Germany. In his heresy trial 4 years later, he claimed that the authority of scripture and the clear reasoning of his own conscience were to be trusted over the pope or councils of bishops, who had often been in error or had contradicted themselves.

The 17th Century Puritans in our story, using their own consciences and Biblical scripture, were looking to live in the world in a way that they believed put them in right relationship with God. They had the opinion that the bishops in the Church of England didn’t act all that differently from the Catholic hierarchy and they intended to live in a way that resisted such corruption.

So the good people of Dedham
looked to form their religious community
on a model that was introduced 50 years earlier
by an English Separatist named Robert Browne
and adopted by the earlier Pilgrims and Puritans.

This congregational model was based on Luther's claim
that each individual's reason and conscience
cannot be excluded from their religious understanding.

At the same time, Browne and his followers understood that—
just like the bishops—
each individual is susceptible to error and contradiction,
but, as a group, the faithful could together
discern their religious truths through communal study,
reflections and discourse.

This idea of the truth being discerned
by a thoughtful group of people was not new –
it had been around for centuries in the form of juries used in
discerning the truth in legal matters.

Alice Blair Wesley, expands on this story in the Minns Lectures she gave over a decade ago, a story that I will briefly share:

The members of the fledgling Dedham community approached their communal religious life with seriousness and intention.

They scheduled a series of meetings over the course of a year, held every Thursday evening, taking turns in the homes of various families, with all of the townspeople invited to participate.

As part of their intentionality, they adopted a few simple rules:

Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week.

That way people were more apt to share *considered* thoughts.

Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed-upon question.

Then everyone else could speak by turns.

Rule 3: Each one could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question and speak to that,

or state any objections or doubts

concerning what any others had said,

"so it were humbly & with a teachable hart

not with any mind of caviling or contradicting."

In other words, Rule 3 was: Here we speak our own

understandings or doubts. No arguing. (or nit-picking)

The record reports that all their "reasonings" were "very peaceable, loving, & tender, much to edification."¹ (or learning together)

¹ *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures: The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of our Covenant* by Alice Blair Wesley

This is not all that different than the process
that our congregations use today
in small group ministry
such as Covenant Groups or Chalice Circles.

What I find really fascinating, and instructive for us today,
are the kinds of questions that they started with.
The questions weren't about the Bible or what they believed.
They were about what kind of society they wished to create.
What were their highest values?
How did they wish to be together?
Did they even need to create a church?
Couldn't they just live those values as friends and neighbors?
For the seventeenth century these were radical questions.
Even these weekly house meetings could have gotten them
arrested or even executed back in England.

After a year of careful discernment they decided that the society they wanted to create was going to reflect their understanding of creating the Kingdom of God on Earth, what we might call the Beloved Community, a society that promoted justice and peace through reasonable laws.

Their highest value was Love (as in Agape).

In order to create this kind of community, the casual bonds of neighborliness would not be enough.

They believed that if they wanted to live their doctrine of Love, they would need deep commitments and accountability to the lived practice of Love.

They expressed this in their covenant, which is printed on the cover of your order of service.

Love is the doctrine of this church,

The quest of truth is its sacrament,

And service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace,

To seek knowledge in freedom,

To serve human need,

To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony

with the Divine -

Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

Covenant of the church of Dedham, MA 1638

I share this story of the church in Dedham

because it exemplifies the free church tradition

that we Unitarian Universalists so proudly claim.

Being a free church does not mean

that we believe whatever we want.

It means that we come together in a way
that creates a space and an intention
that calls forth that which is worthy of our ultimate commitment
and then helps us hold each other accountable
to that commitment.

The container that holds the free church,
that keeps it faithful, is covenant.

Our covenants remind us that as a religious people,
we have a commitment to something that is greater
than any one of us, greater even than the whole of us.

The Dedham covenant called that something God.

We might call it our vow with the universe.

Our covenants also remind us that we seek answers together.

Our discussions must be grounded in listening, in curiosity,
in sharing doubts as well as sharing insights.

We trust and invite one another to notice and name our failings (such as the metaphorical limp in our reading),² not so that we see ourselves as sinful or broken, but to enable us to see our blind spots.

We make space for disagreements, mistakes and inconsistencies and use them as learning experiences.

It takes courage and humility to be in relationship in a way that invites this kind of vulnerability.

There seems to be a yearning for it in the wider world, both secular and religious.

Brene Brown had a TED Talk on “The Power of Vulnerability” with over 20 million views.

² Though I'd had several knee surgeries, I was unprepared for total knee replacement: intense rehab, painkillers, and three days using a walker. Among the many unexpected gifts of the surgery are the friendships I've developed with the physical therapists in rehab. (I joke with them that it is "Stockholm syndrome," wherein prisoners befriend their captors.)

During one session they retaught me how to walk and pointed out how off kilter my gait was as a result of years of compensating for a bad knee. Without knowing it, I had developed a limp. I worked hard that day to correct it, but as I was headed out the door, I had already reverted to limping out of habit. "Hey, walk right!" the trainer yelled.

I wondered if anyone else had noticed my impaired stride before the surgery, so I asked a few friends. They all said I'd been walking that way for years. Amazed that I had so little sense of my weaknesses, I asked my friends to let me know of any other "limps" they saw in my life.

It was a little frightening to trust them to reveal my broken places, but I knew they had my best interests in mind.

A few weeks later one of those friends took me up on the request: I had shared something with him in confidence, and he called and said he felt that my need to keep the issue quiet was a sort of limp.

I knew what he said was true. Pride and ego were my reasons for silence.

I have since asked other friends, my wife, and even my children to say, "Walk right," to me if they notice a bad habit. I'm looking forward to working out a few more limps.

-Stu Graff Phoenix, Arizona From Readers Write "Paying Attention" The Sun, Aug 2011

Generation X Leadership guru Patrick Lencioni claims that the best and most effective leadership teams are grounded in vulnerability-based trust.

MIT professor C. Otto Scharmer offers a process of opening and deepening with vulnerability and trust called Theory U.

Parker Palmer, founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal, has brought the Quaker practice of Clearness Committees to educators, healthcare provider and other leaders.

Such conversations can happen only in a safe container.

Vulnerability can only happen in a relationship grounded in trust.

I believe that our faith communities

can and should provide safe containers

for such deep conversations in our covenanted small groups.

I'm not talking about book discussion groups or Tapestry of Faith programs, both of which have their place. Instead I'm talking about programs that go deep, like Wellsprings or Soul Matters that include spiritual direction and provide an opportunity to practice contemplative awareness.

It seems odd that the ancient spiritual practice of contemplative awareness seems to have been abandoned by modern religions and taken up by MIT.

Maybe that's why mainline churches are declining.

Many UU congregations do not have a culture that invites us into these relationships of trust. Such relationships should be our birthright as part of our covenant with one another.

Instead, we are often burdened with
other inherited cultural features that don't serve us:

The Voice of Judgment,
the Voice of Cynicism

and the Voice of Fear.

Judgment warns us that we might not be good enough.

Cynicism taunts us, making us question our efforts
in making the world a better place.

Fear freezes us, lest we lose what little we have.

Our congregations are organisms, organizational systems
where these voices can permeate and perpetuate
bad relational habits.

These turn into “limps” that are invisible to the congregation,
but quite noticeable to visitors.

With bold action, clear direction and defined boundaries,
we can challenge and soften those bad habits
by being intentional about change,
and then it becomes contagious – but in a good way.
You are already doing this work,
and we made progress on it this weekend.

But you do not need to do this work alone.
This is where I come to our wider covenants
as Unitarian Universalists.

In 1648, A decade after our friends in Dedham
established their covenanted church,
the free churches in New England were under pressure
from England to come into alignment
with the theology and ecclesiology
of the Presbyterian church in Great Britain.

The new world churches were agreeable to the theology,
but they held fast to their congregational polity.

They were willing to be held accountable,
but within the ethos of covenant,
not to an external authority
that a distant group of elders might impose.

These free churches drafted the Cambridge Platform,
a document that described a relationship among congregations
and encouraged communion and accountability.

This included:

1. taking thought for each other's welfare
2. consulting on any topic of cause where another church has more familiarity or information about a topic
3. admonishing another church, even to the point of convening a synod of neighboring churches and ceasing communion with the offending church
4. allowing members of one church to fully participate and receive communion in another church
5. sending letters of recommendation when a member goes to a new church, due to a seasonal or permanent relocation
6. financial support for poor churches

This tension between the autonomy of the local congregation and the accountability to other congregations has played out over the next 350 years of our history into today.

This brings us back to covenant.

I stand here as a representative of your sister congregations, and the wider Unitarian Universalist movement.

I hold you in the light of love, of covenantal love.

I want you to flourish.

I want you to be vital and vibrant and awesome.

It may be tempting to paint those in my role as a kind of bishop, but I really am more of a partner in ministry.

We are walking together, learning together.

We all have wisdom, we all have more to learn.

We all make mistakes, and sometimes we don't notice them.

So part of our covenant should also involve

being able to point out one another's limps

but with gentleness and without that Voice of Judgment.

But I encourage you also to embrace
your covenantal relationship with nearby congregations.

Maumee, and even smaller congregations
like Lyons and Findley.

Perhaps you can cross the border where
scarlet and gray meets blue and gold
and create connections with the congregations
in the greater Detroit area.

You all have wisdom to share and things to learn.

Toledo needs the voice of liberal religion.

You have a major university with graduates
who will have a significant impact on the world.

You have the opportunity to have a significant impact on them,
and on other young adults

to offer them meaning and depth steeped in liberal religion,

to offer a way of being in the world that

nurtures our interconnectedness and

encourages us to bend the arc of the universe toward justice.

As I close, I wish to offer this prayer:

Spirit of Life and love, Spirit of Creativity and Justice,

Work through us and between us as we work to create the beloved community, here in Lucas County and beyond.

Help each of us to live out of our authentic center, to find our individual call and to serve the greater good. May those who enter these doors discover that they are not alone, that everyone makes mistakes, and that we are on their side. May our ministry be an invitation to the next generation and a blessing to the world. Amen, and Blessed Be.