

THUS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER— AND GOD?

August 12, 2012

Alice Blair Wesley, now retired, is a Unitarian Universalist minister who was chosen by the trustees of the annual Minns Lectureship to deliver the year 2000-2001 series of six lectures on a topic of religious interest. The trustees had a pretty good idea of what they would get—a passionate analysis of the role of covenant in our history, and how the actions of a relatively few immigrants to Massachusetts still affects our churches.

Rev. Wesley's scholarship, advocacy and accessible style were well known. The Q E32321 trustees had faith that she would do a good job. They were not disappointed. I know of no other series of Minns lectures that has engendered as much rethinking as Alice Blair Wesley's *The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: the Spirit and Promise of our Covenant*.

The series of six lectures is available on the web. All you need do is consult Madam Google at *Alice Blair Wesley covenant* and you can read the entire series. My hope for today is to tickle your historical fancy, and connect the actions of our spiritual ancestors to our lives as Unitarian Universalists in the U.S. of A., Michigan and Mount Pleasant.

When telling the story of beginnings, and their effect on our history, one must go back in time. In this case we go back to 1637, when a group of immigrants from England decided their new town, Dedham, Massachusetts, needed a church. However, before the church was built, or the land prepared, or even chosen, the people took counsel with each other about the **kind** of church they wanted. This was so important to them that they took a year of weekly meetings to discuss in depth, and with **love**, all the ways that they would interact with each other, and care for each other.

These people, who we now call Puritans, were not that interested in theology. The reason we know this, and much more about them, is that they had a very good recorder/secretary. Other churches followed a similar path, but only in Dedham are the records complete and available. Let us pause and give thanks for good secretaries.

Not based so much on theology, (now quoting from Wesley's first lecture)

*Rather, said they, authentic churches are constituted by their members' entry into a **covenant** - or promise - faithfully to walk together **in the spirit of mutual love**. They said, members of any **local** church, gathered in heartfelt union with the holy spirit of love, can discern together whither the spirit leads. Therefore, the most authentic church has **no head but the holy spirit of love, or Christ**. Their radical doctrine **re-located***

religious authority to the lived spirit among covenanted members. Thus they denied authority to **all** forms of hierarchical government or ecclesiastical control of churches. In “the liberty of the gospel” members would obey **in the church**, not king or bishop but **only** the direction of the holy spirit working in their own hearts and minds.

Let us note two things: first, there is no mention, in these words of the Puritans, of hell or heaven and there is no judging God. Instead, there is an emphasis on love, mutual love. And second, there is no hierarchy. That’s what these folks traveled for months across a dangerous ocean to escape. There is no hierarchal government, whether secular or ecclesiastical. Only the *holy spirit*, envisioned by our ancestors as Christ, had authority. **This vision of how a church should be organized is the source of our radical congregationalism.**

There were other churches organized in the 1630’s and later which followed much the same organizing process. They were called *free churches*, because they had no built in hierarchy.

When they discerned that, among their members, there was a young man who possessed the gift of speaking well, they **called** him out of their midst, sent him to Harvard (which was founded to teach ministers) and he returned to lead them in worship.

Unitarianism arose when the new teachings that called into question the doctrine of the trinity brought controversy into the communities of faith. The members of each church discussed among themselves whether to follow the new ideas or remain within the *standing order*. The churches that adopted the new ideas became Unitarian in theology, but they carried with them their habits of organizing.

Thus, we are the direct descendants of those brave and talkative folks who migrated to these shores and founded their churches based on lay leadership and the habit of talking together to decide major issues.

Alice emphasizes that the most important thing about this organizing is the **spirit of love** in which it was done. In her words:

*For I say - whether you ever heard, directly, of this little event in Dedham or not - to understand in any depth our liberal free church tradition, or to make much sense of deeply rooted everyday realities of Unitarian Universalist churches now, today, you must understand in your bones the historical importance of **the spirit of love** manifest in the doctrine of covenantal organization, as this little group of people in Dedham understood it in New England, in 1637.*

The covenant into which these free church folk entered did not spring full-blown from the mind of a particular leader; nor did they hold a brainstorming session.

No, after they had their new settlement in order, crops in, the 30 families in homes, pens for their cattle built, and so forth, they had time to think about what they wanted their faith community to be.

*They set up a series of weekly neighborhood meetings, “lovingly to discourse and consult together. . . and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society, * * * [gap in the record] that we might be further acquainted with the (spiritual) tempers and gifts of one an other.” Meetings were held every Thursday “at several houses in order,” in rotation. Anybody in town who wanted was welcome to attend.*

They did this for a full year. THEN they crafted the covenant: *Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest of truth 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.*

Covenants are promises we make with each other, about how we will treat each other. They are aspirational, not prescriptive. Built into the larger framework of our ecclesial ancestors was recognition that not all the *saints* would be 100% effective in the living out of the covenant. So, they decided they should have a method of calling each other to best behavior. They agreed to have councils composed of the democratically elected leaders of neighboring churches to whom they could bring questions and challenges. They set up such a system, and it was in place for centuries. It eventually grew into denominational or, for Unitarian Universalism, associational meetings.

How effective was this system of ecclesiastical governance? The Dedham church was founded in 1638, and it is still a thriving church—the location of Alice Blair Wesley’s first lecture. Throughout New England these early churches are still in existence. Not all of them are thriving, but many are.

Let us now examine the covenants under which we govern ourselves today. Our national organization is gathered through a covenant among congregations. We know it as the *Purposes and Principles*, and it is printed at the front of our hymnal. It was approved at two succeeding meetings of the General Assembly by our delegates, and thus became our organizing principle. It calls upon the congregations to *affirm and promote* the seven principles. Then it digresses into the sources of our tradition, and it closes with these words: *as free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.*

The process of crafting this covenant also included weekly meetings of members. A committee of the General Assembly, our elected body, designed a process that included

input from any congregation willing to spend the time to meet. In Jackson, Mississippi, a group of 10 – 12 people met for an hour before church for about six weeks.

I was part of that group. We had two draft covenants with which to wrestle, and the questions we addressed were based on them. We sent in the results of our weekly meetings to the committee, along with other churches. The final draft is what you see in the hymn book, minus the seventh principle, which was proposed on the floor of the General Assembly and unanimously adopted as an amendment.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan also has a covenant. I think far less time for thought, reflection, and discernment was invested into its crafting. It is a lovely covenant, printed on the back of your order of service. I wonder if the members of the fellowship might be more aware of and committed to its values if they had invested more into its making.

In the Dedham covenant, the first line is *Love is the spirit of this church*.

In the UUFCM covenant, we talk of the *spirit of caring*. If this is true, what then, are we called to do? Rev. Wesley emphasizes the importance of love in the Dedham covenant.

In these pages there is much use of these words: reason, reasons, reasoned, reasoning, deliberation, make trial of, clearing, cleared up, encouragement, advice, advise, counsel, agree, agreed, agreement, approbation, liberty, liberties and promising. There is also repeated use of the words: sweet, comfort, help and brotherly. But by far the most commonly used words in this written history are: affection, affections, affectionately, embrace and love, loving, lovingly. In the first 24 pages I counted 32 uses of the words affection and love. Why? Because then and now and for as long as human history lasts - when all is said and done, done and said some more - the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local members.

The laypeople who founded First Church, Dedham knew so and clearly said so, and that is why we still say together, so often in our churches now, "Love is the doctrine of this church. . .

Rev. Wesley calls us, I call you, your covenant calls you to build a lively, loving faith community that cares for each person—and spreads this love and caring into the wider world. A healthy, thriving liberal church can influence the community. We have an excellent example before us. After we adopted the *Welcoming Congregation*, members were so inspired they led an interfaith effort to persuade the city council to adopt inclusive language in their hiring practices—and were successful. This should inspire us to continue reaching out into the larger community. This is our calling: to bring mutual love, respect and caring into the world. And if we do so, justice will follow.

The covenant is not just words, it's words to guide us. And, what **about** that one at the end, *God*?

The meanings of words change over the years. I deliberately used the word *saints* a few minutes ago, and watched your faces as I said it. I wanted to see if anyone flinched. In Dedham, in the year 1637, saints merely referred to good people. We might use the word *super*, to refer to someone who was a really good president of the board. He or she was a *super* president. Or, maybe *cool*. I try that one sometimes when I want to prove I'm not totally deaf to current slang. I think, though, I may have to move on to *rad*. Grace is going to be a really *rad* president.

God is the same way. The meaning has changed. I can't define just what it meant to the 30 families in Dedham who walked and talked their way into a vital church that has lasted over 350 years.

In today's liberal churches, which includes more than we Unitarian Universalists, *God* is the metaphor that stands for that which we most value and honor, that which is both beyond our understanding, and present (sometimes) in our hearts. Be ye not disturbed by its occasional use. And join in the understanding that "Love is doctrine of this church."

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and Amen.