

## Having A covenant amid conflict

"Every church needs a behavioural covenant which is based on shared values" (David Markham of the Pullman Memorial Universalist Church in Albion New York in his UU Way of Life blog, July 2009). Markham further suggests, "while a covenant of how we behave toward one another can be implicitly understood, ideally it is explicitly discussed, developed and agreed to. An explicit statement of values guiding behaviour is especially helpful when there is disagreement, conflict, and dissension in a group."

Many churches, Unitarian and others, have covenants or mission statements which express values that underlie the formation of the church. Examples include the Ten Commandments which underlie the faith of many Christian traditions and the seven Unitarian Universalist Principles (which have been outlined in previous columns) which are adopted by all UU congregations. Reverend Wendy McNiven, in her CUC sermon of the month, Oct., 2013, states "A covenant is an understanding wrapped in respect, trust and love. It is not a law."

**Behavioural** covenants suggest concrete actions and, as suggested by David Markham, should include: **respect** for each others ideas and feelings; **Empathy** --being curious and interested in where the other person is coming from; **Assertiveness** -- speaking directly to one another and not behind their back; **Accountability** - doing what we agree to and saying "no" when we are not able or willing to take on some responsibilities; **value diversity; integrity; and teamwork.**

The following selected items from a behavioural covenant of the Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler Arizona exemplify **behavioural** pledges:

As members and friends of this congregation with a common purpose to nurture each other in our religious community, we hereby covenant:

- To welcome everyone who comes to VUU on an honest and responsible spiritual quest or search for community
- To accept and respect the differences among us
- To listen actively and respectfully
- To focus our discussions on topics, ideas, and issues rather than

on people

- To speak directly to those with whom we disagree and work toward resolution
- To speak out with loving kindness when we witness inappropriate behaviour or disrespectful interactions
- To remember that building our beloved community requires active participation.

At the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara our mission statement, *"We covenant to support an empowering church that affirms the individual and celebrates history, science and mystery in a welcoming, joyous and evolving fellowship"* is under review and we do not have a behavioural covenant. In fact, some members don't believe it is necessary and some believe it would be undesirable to have one. These opinions are likely present in most churches and other groups. My own position is that the process of working on a behavioural covenant and seeking agreement may be more beneficial than the fact of having one. And, as well, having one would be beneficial in letting the community know (some of) what we stand for. In the spirit and tradition of diversity of beliefs, we'll see what evolves.