

Preparing the Covenant – Background

Living Skies Regional Council

Background

The Comprehensive Review Task Group (2012-2015) had proposed to GC42 (2015) that there be a written covenant between regional councils and communities of faith, and had developed a draft covenant. GC42 authorized a remit which anticipated having written covenants and, with the authorization of the remits by GC43 (2018), a covenant is now a regular part of the relationship between a regional council and a community of faith. Although authorized by GC43 to represent the changing structure of the United Church of Canada, covenants between communities of faith (congregations) and the wider church (presbyteries) have been in place since the Basis of Union articulating an understanding of mutual accountability and support. Communities of faith and regional councils share ministry in mutual respect as part of The United Church of Canada. Together they celebrate God's presence, seek justice, and love and serve others. A covenantal relationship, intentionally and willingly entered into by parties, is an important symbol of this commitment.

The Manual (2019)

B.1.3 Covenantal Relationship

B.1.3.1 Terms of Covenant

A community of faith is recognized by the regional council through a covenantal relationship with the regional council. The community of faith and the regional council have the flexibility to negotiate and create a covenant that is responsive to the contextual reality of the community of faith and its unique needs and challenges.

The terms of the covenant include:

- a) the governance requirements for the community of faith in these bylaws;
- b) any applicable policies set by the General Council; and
- c) any other terms that the community of faith and the regional council may agree to include within denominational policies.

B.1.3.2 Changes to the Covenant

The terms of the covenant may be changed from time to time within denominational policies with the agreement of the community of faith and the regional council.

C.2.4 Purpose of the Regional Council

The regional council is responsible for encouraging and engaging in:

- a) joining our collective hearts, voices, and resources to witness to the gospel and vision of Jesus for a compassionate and just society, both in Canada and around the world;
- b) local, regional, national, and global initiatives and partnerships (community, ecumenical, and interfaith) for ministry, mission, and justice work;
- c) ministry with children, youth, and young adults;
- d) honouring and living into intercultural mission and ministry; and

e) living in covenant with Mother Earth and All My Relations in the Earth community.

Reflecting on covenants

“Covenant” language is used in a variety of ways in the church. Quite often it focuses of the relationship between a minister and the church, as in *Manual* Section I.1:

A “covenant” is between God, the ministry personnel, the community of faith or other ministry, and the wider United Church as represented by the regional council. The covenant may include other parties, [such as community organizations], that are integral to living out the gospel in community as God calls us.

But covenant is not limited to pastoral relationships.

“Covenant” is a term with deep roots in the Christian tradition. The term is used in various ways in both Testaments. However, the most important motif is relationship.

The covenant made at Sinai signified both a relationship with God based on gratitude for God’s activity on our behalf and the creation of a new people who would live according to certain principles. The covenant was the foundation for how the people would serve God and live with one another. The Ten Commandments reflect both these dimensions, the earlier ones speaking about how the people would relate to God and the later ones offering guidance for how they would live together in community, following a particular set of values and principles.

Similarly, the covenant we associate with Jesus’ actions in the upper room is based on thanks for what God has done and will do and includes a key guiding principle (“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” John 13:34) for the creation of a new [Christian] community going forward.

Characteristic of both these covenants was the formation of a community with a system of values different from the surrounding society (see, for example, Galatians 3:28), a community where members cared for one another, where promises and commitments were kept, where fairness and integrity were assumed.

When the covenant was between people or different groups (e.g., the covenant between Jacob and Laban), the covenant was understood to be made in the presence of God, often with God as a type of arbiter if either party violated the covenant. We understand the covenants we make in the church to be made in the presence of God.

Some significant parallels exist between the Biblical concept of “covenant” and some Indigenous understandings of the term “treaty.” Treaties, whether among Indigenous people themselves or (from the Indigenous perspective) what they understood themselves to be doing when entering into treaties with settlers, saw Mother Earth as a gift from the Creator. The Earth, and all its creatures, were to be treated with respect. Relationship with one another, with the Creator, and with Mother Earth was key. There was not to be dominance, one of another, but, rather, respect for one another and a set of values designed to enable people to live peaceably with one another and to share the gifts Creator has given us.