

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Covenants with God and each other



I'm still thinking about the topics I've written about here in the last few months—why we become Christian, why we choose the churches we're in, and why we stay in them or drop out. I'm thinking, too, about the unusually numerous responses I've gotten to recent issues of *Connections*. Impassioned responses to last month's issue about dropping out and staying in have reminded me how hard and painful the decision is for many Christians, to drop out in order to find ways of using their gifts and answering God's call, to drop out because staying would require supporting church policies that seem contrary to God's will, or to stay despite continual frustration.



A view that surprised me

I'm also thinking about what I've heard from United Methodists who are afraid the UMC may become more polarized or even split at this month's General Conference. From some UMC clergymen I heard one thing that surprised me—that the covenant we have with each other as UMC members gives us all a sacred obligation to stay together in the UMC.

Although I hope we'll stay together, when I heard that I thought, "What covenant? I've never entered such a covenant, and I'm not aware of other United Methodists who feel they have." I'm determined to stay, for reasons I've explained in recent *Connections*, but being in a covenant with other members has never occurred to me as a reason for staying.

Do you feel you're in a covenant that obliges you to stay connected with all other Christians, even those who disagree with you about what being a Christian means? If you're in a church denomination, do you feel you're in a covenant with its other members?



Baptism—our covenant?

Many Christians see baptism as a covenant that God initiates, making us part of the universal church. Baptism may also make us part of a particular congregation or denomination. In baptism, many Christians believe, we make (or our parents make on our behalf, if we're baptized as infants) a lifelong commitment and receive a call to ministry. This understanding of baptism as a step whose effect is permanent rules out being rebaptized. Some Christians who were baptized early in life, however, want to be rebaptized later, to acknowledge an understanding and experience of God that they didn't have when they were originally baptized.

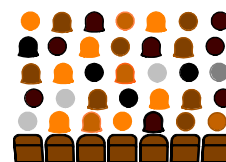


Could anyone get unbaptized upon recognizing that he or she was unwilling to carry out obligations that he or she had accepted unknowingly? Or does God hold us forever to this agreement even if we entered it without being aware of its meaning and obligations? Despite God's having our best interests at heart, wouldn't an agreement made under those circumstances deny the free will we believe God gives us?

These could be important questions to consider in thinking about the covenants we're in.

Going to General Conference?

I'm going to the United Methodist General Conference this month, and if you're going too, I'd like to meet you while we're there, or to see you if we already know each other. I'm the lowest-ranking alternate lay delegate from my Annual Conference (Central Texas) so I'll be mainly a spectator, but I'll be there. I hope our paths will cross.



Covenants in the Bible

One dictionary defines a covenant as an agreement that is usually formal, solemn, and intended as binding. Another says a covenant is a relationship between two parties, in which both parties voluntarily agree to certain conditions of the relationship and give their word to uphold it.

Early in the Old Testament we read about God making a covenant with Noah and placing a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the covenant.

Then we find God making a covenant with Abraham, with circumcision as its sign, to apply to all of Abraham's descendants. Through-

out the Old Testament we find people recalling this covenant and its obligations and benefits. This covenant doesn't really seem voluntary for both parties, however. Since God is portrayed as all-powerful, Abraham and his descendants don't



seem to have any real choice about whether or not to agree to the terms of the covenant. It seems more like a decree than an agreement.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you ... that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. ... This is the sign of the covenant ... I have set my bow in the clouds ..."
—Genesis 9:8-13

The new covenant of Christ

He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood ..."
—Luke 22:20

For this reason [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance ...
—Hebrews 9:15

In the New Testament we read that Jesus brings a new covenant based on the law of love. In the church we acknowledge this covenant in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Apparently the human parties to this new covenant have a real choice. They can

commit to the covenant or not, based on whether or not they choose to be followers of Jesus.



These covenants described in the Bible emphasize human beings' commitment to God, and God's commitment to them. Do these biblical covenants also tell us anything about human beings having a covenant with each other? Evidently so, because obeying the law of love means treating our neighbors in certain ways and not in other ways. Does this obligation relate only to how we treat other followers of Jesus? Surely not. The law of love defines the relationship God wants us to have with all other people. It goes even further. The law of love also implies how we are to treat the other parts of God's creation.

A covenant with church members?

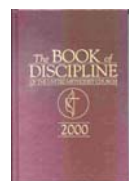


What I'm wondering is how we might get from these biblical covenants or from our baptismal commitment to the idea of having a covenant specifically with other members of a church denomination, obligating us to stay together no matter what.

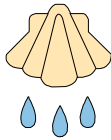
All mainline denominations are currently facing problems that arise when members disagree so strongly with each other that some want to oust others, or to break away and form a separate group. I'm most concerned about the United Methodist Church, however, because I'm part of it. Consequently, after the conversation in which I heard that UMC members had a covenant that obligated them to stay together, I wanted to find out about that. If you're in a different church, you may want to investigate whether any covenant obligates members of your denomination or congregation to stay together.

Covenants in the UMC

I investigated by looking in the UMC hymnal, which contains official texts for baptism, and in the *Book of Discipline*, which contains all the official rules and doctrines of the UMC. In the hymnal, services of baptism are labeled "The Baptismal Covenant." The *Discipline* says, "The Baptismal Covenant is God's word to us, proclaiming our adoption by grace, and our word to God



promising our response of faith and love.” I’m sure UMC pastors are aware of baptism being called a covenant in the UMC, and some lay members undoubtedly are aware of that too, though I don’t remember noticing it before. Still, baptism can’t be a covenant UMC members have made with each other, because many were baptized in some other denomination.



United Methodists make their only specific commitment to the UMC when they join a United Methodist congregation, whether by baptism, profession of faith, or transfer from another congregation or another Christian denomination. That step requires answering yes to the question, “Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church and uphold it with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?” I suppose that could be interpreted as a



promise to stay in the UMC forever, no matter what its official statements of doctrine and policy might turn out to be in the future, but I don’t see many United Methodists attributing that meaning to that promise.

The UMC *Book of Discipline* uses the word “covenant” for all sorts of agreements about how church groups must relate to each other, but it doesn’t say that all UMC members have made any covenant to stay in the UMC forever. Instead, what the *Discipline* says must stay permanently attached to the UMC is church property. It must be held in trust for the UMC, so no group of members can leave and take ownership of their church’s property with them.

What the *Discipline* says about church membership is this. “When persons unite with a local United Methodist Church they covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep

the vows which are a part of the order of confirmation and reception into the church.” The *Discipline* then lists vows made at baptism—renouncing the spiritual forces of wickedness, confessing Jesus Christ as Savior, and so on, in addition to promising to be loyal to the UMC, to strengthen it, and to participate in its ministries through prayer, presence, gifts, and service.

Elsewhere the *Discipline* defines our mutual responsibility as UMC members, and here it specifically says we have a covenant, presumably with each other. “A member is bound in sacred covenant to shoulder the burdens, share the risks, and celebrate the joys of fellow members.” However, I doubt that very many UMC members have ever read or heard these explanations and knowingly accepted these responsibilities. Besides, they seem to pertain only to what we do while we’re in the UMC, not to how long we must stay in it.



In contrast, the *Discipline* says that UMC clergy “are bound in special covenant” with all the other clergy of the Annual Conference (regional division). It seems to me that unlike most lay members, UMC clergy are quite aware of that covenant and attribute great importance to it. Even for clergy, however, the statement about being bound in a covenant refers only to the clergy within an Annual Conference, not to all other UMC clergy or to lay members.

Separating won’t help

Many church members apparently feel that in wanting their church to adopt whatever doctrinal statements they agree with, they are being loyal to the truth as revealed in the Bible, and to God’s will

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I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers voluntarily make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

as revealed there. According to this view, members who have a different understanding shouldn't be part of the church. This position seems inappropriate,



however, if we're in a covenant with God and with each other as Christians. Surely we can all be Christians and yet have different understandings about what some Bible passages mean and what God wants us to do about the difficult issues that confront today's church and world.

Despite being in a covenant with other Christians, I don't see that I've ever entered any covenant that obligates me to stay in the UMC forever. However, I

feel sure that for any of us UMC members to try to drive other members out or to take our marbles and go home wouldn't help the church to accomplish what God is calling it to do. Consequently I hope we'll all stay in the game instead.



I hope that during and after General Conference, all of us who are UMC members will keep searching together for the greater understanding and maturity that God apparently wants us all to reach.

Barbara



Connections

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April 2004

Connections readers respond to "Dropping out, staying in"

"When I joined the UMC I felt it was truly connected to the world and addressed the major issues of the day, but since then, we've had one pastor after another who has failed to stretch or feed me. It is just plain boring. All of these pastors have been nice people and I've felt badly about dropping out. However, I'm now searching for some place where I can feel an active *challenge*. It's not easy. I don't want to drop out completely. I need the community, but I don't need to leave church on Sunday feeling depressed and bored."



"I'm a lifelong United Methodist. The church I'd been attending for over 20 years changed over that time, to a narrowing theology and lack of acceptance of other views. Finally I've made the move to another UMC, farther away, a Reconciling Congregation. I feel such freedom each time I worship there, and I've found several ways to use my gifts. Driving an extra half-hour each way is a small price to pay for the loss of stress."



"I am another insider—a UMC pastor—who finds staying in the church a constant struggle. For me it's not a small thing to remain in the church. And yet I feel called to be here, and I take heart that we don't always see the fruit of the good we do. Along with the bigotry, ignorance, and intolerance being sold as Christian, there are also new signs of hope arising in the worldwide progressive Christian community. We minority voices are few, but determined to be as faithful as we can, and let God take care of the rest."