

Westminster UMC Leadership Covenant
November 17, 2013

Genesis 17:1-8, Jeremiah 31:31-34
Luke 1:67-75, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray. ... *Come, Holy Spirit ...*

The purpose of my sermon today is to present our recently approved Westminster United Methodist Church Leader's Covenant. This document was approved by our church council on September 24th, 2013 and describes how we expect all church leaders, official and unofficial, to be in relationship with each other and with God. I think this is a fantastic document, and I am so proud of our church council for taking this to heart, adapting it, and approving it. It is a roadmap for how we are to live and serve with one another in the days ahead. I pray that it will be a great blessing for our church and for us all.

Before I get into our specific church covenant, however, let me set the stage by talking about the place of covenant in the Scripture.

Covenant is a key concept that appears throughout the Bible and the history of God's people. You've just heard four different Scripture lessons describing God's covenant with humanity. This is to give you a flavor of the importance of covenant in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. We could read more, but to cover them all I would have to refer to all 407 uses of the word *covenant* in the Bible (NRSV). (And then I might talk too long, which is not always a good thing!)

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church describes "covenant" as "a bond entered into voluntarily by two parties by which each pledges [oneself] to do something for the other. The idea of the covenant between the God of Israel and [God's] people is fundamental to the religion of the Old Testament." Basically, in a covenant, God promises to do something for the people, and the people, in turn, promise to do something for God. There are often consequences listed along with the covenant, stating what will happen to either of the parties if they fail to keep their commitments.

However, it is worth noting that in the first few covenants God makes with the people, God is the one doing all the promising – and accepting all the consequences. After the great flood, God makes a rainbow in the sky and promises never again to destroy the world by flood. Nothing is required in return. In one of God's first meetings with Abram, described in vivid detail in Genesis 15, God gives Abram a dramatic sign that God will keep God's promises. God has Abram prepare a sacrifice of a number of animals, the largest of which Abram cuts in two and places on both sides of a path. God then puts Abram into a deep sleep and shows Abram a smoking fire pot and a burning torch moving between the pieces. The implication to Abram and others in the ancient world is clear: they hear God say that if God doesn't keep his promises, then God, God's self, will be cut in two and sacrificed just like these animals.

Nothing is required from the people in some of these first few covenants. God acts first, God acts unilaterally, and God accepts the consequences.

We see the same self-giving, self-sacrificing love in Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus gives up his life, not because we deserve it, but because self-giving love is in the nature of Jesus, God in the flesh. It is God's sacrificial gift that inspires John to sing, "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

God acts first in the covenant tradition. Now, in later covenants, the people are expected to do certain things in order to receive God's continuing blessing. But even then, the people's good behavior does not make God love them first: God has already loved all of them first. God has already loved all of us first. Our obedience to God's requirements in later covenants begins by recognizing that God has taken the first step, completely, unilaterally, "We love, because He first loved us."

Covenants involve good behavior, on both sides. But what undergirds good behavior is love. We behave, we follow the rules, because God loved us first. We trust that God gives us rules because God cares about us, because God cares about other people, and because God cares about the created universe. Our obedience doesn't buy God's love; it is a response to God's love.

Covenants also describe the kind of relationships Christians have with each other. Bishop Yeakel used to refer to the United Methodist Book of Discipline as our Book of Covenant. The Book of Discipline describes how we are to live with and work with each other as a church, and it presupposes that we love each other enough to make such a covenant.

It is in this spirit of mutual love that our church leaders have agreed to make a covenant describing the way we plan to work together with each other. I have found such covenants to be extremely useful gifts to churches throughout my ministry, and I am grateful that our church council has chosen to adapt and embrace this covenant.

So, without further ado, I'd like to introduce to you the Westminster UMC Church Leader's Covenant. Although this covenant is specifically for church leaders, I would like all of us to read each line aloud to better appreciate how your church leaders have agreed to live and work with each other. I'll make a few brief comments after each line. Let's begin with "as a leader":

Westminster United Methodist Church Church Leaders Covenant

As a leader at Westminster United Methodist Church (officially or unofficially), [and] recognizing that I am a sinner, I pledge that I will strive to faithfully and humbly follow these stated leadership principles:

1. To make worship of God, both private and public, a top priority.

Worship is first. Worship is primary. We don't do what we do because of how great, kind, or smart we are, we love because God loved us first. It is important that we be in worship as much

as possible. We recognize, of course, that there are times when some of us are simply unable to worship together because of health, the nature of our work, or family responsibilities. However, because it is so important, we still need to make a concerted effort to be together worshipping God. And when one of us can't, we encourage you to worship by using personal or family devotional materials and/or picking up one of our church worship service CDs.

2. To treat all persons within and without this church as children of God, deserving of God's grace, mercy, and love.

God loved us first. God created all things and all people and called them good. We need to treat others with the love God has for each of us.

3. To make excellence a goal in every ministry I undertake, being accountable for what I say I will do, holding others accountable in love, and seeking to glorify God in all things.

Sometimes people think that volunteer work in the church isn't as important as the work we are paid to do. Just because we work for free doesn't mean that our work should be cheap. Nothing but the best is good enough for God. Will we always meet that high mark? Of course not. But we can't use God's grace and God's forgiveness as an excuse not to do our best work for the Kingdom of God.

4. To support other church leaders as a team player and morale builder, not allowing anyone to divide us. I will not allow conflict to go underground but deal with it in a Christ-honoring way (see Matthew 18:15-20).

Conflict most often happens when people care the most. There is nothing wrong with disagreeing, but Jesus teaches about how people who love each other ought to disagree. The referenced Scripture says: ¹⁵ 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.

This is basic respect for people we care about. We don't have to agree on all things, but we have to be respectful in how we disagree. Jesus says that if we are upset by someone, please do them the courtesy to take them aside and talk to them in private first. If that doesn't work, then do it in a small group. If you still can't work it out, then and only then should you bring it to a larger group, staying within the bounds of the church's rules and procedures.

5. To seek to talk face-to-face with others and avoid group e-mails or social media on sensitive subjects or personnel matters.

Again, this comes down to basic respect, with the assumption that, in the church, we love one another. Email with lots of carbon copies can be a means of triangulation and can quickly get out of hand. Better to speak to someone in person and avoid the misunderstandings that can come

from mass emails or posting on Facebook. Let's pledge to use mass email to communicate important information, not to criticize or attack. Remember Matthew 18.

6. To refrain from condemning, gossiping, or speaking disrespectfully of anyone in God's service. Instead, I will affirm, encourage, and support other persons who provide service, even when we don't agree in all matters.

Again, this is basic respect, treating those who serve the Lord in the same way we would like to be treated.

7. To put God first in my life, and then to afford God's gift of my family high priority, not allowing my ministry to the congregation to keep me from attending to the needs of my family.

God is first, but if God has given us the gifts of marriage and family, then we need to recognize that serving our family is one of the best ways we can serve God. Church work is important and valuable, but not when it chomps away at the fabric of our families.

8. To be open to constructive criticism, given in love, and to "speak the truth in love" to others as I would like to hear it myself.

Unless you know you're perfect, please listen constructively to constructive criticism. Don't get defensive, but use it as a gift to help improve yourself. And, indeed, give constructive criticism sparingly, amid lots of praise, in the way you would want to receive it.

9. To model moral integrity, rejecting all forms of immorality, dishonesty, or relational abusiveness.

We don't have to be perfect, but we do need to live to a higher standard if we are a leader or a representative of the church. Little eyes are watching, so we have to be careful what we show them!

10. To maintain strict confidentiality regarding private issues, with the exception of cases of abuse, neglect, or potential harm to self or others.

Confidentiality is a true gift we can give to one another. It is important to be able to share our hearts in safety. However, confidentiality is not an excuse to allow harm to anyone.

11. To model stewardship and financial integrity through my consistent and sacrificial financial support of our church, vowing to support our church with my prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.

If we expect all church members to support the church, then certainly we leaders need to model support of the church ourselves.

12. To remember that there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, and to actively work toward this principle: “In essentials, unity; in all things, charity.”

There is one God: not my god, and not your god: one God. Church is not about me, nor is it about you. Church is about the one, living God. In all we do in the church, we need to consider what is most important and not let ourselves be divided by nonessentials. The full quote is from St. Augustine, often quoted by John Wesley: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

Thanks be to God for this gift of the Leadership Covenant. May it guide us all as we strive to be more like Christ, and more like the Church Christ called us to be. To God be the glory!

--Mark Smiley

Sources for the Leadership Covenant:

The Westminster UMC Leadership Covenant is adapted from a Staff Covenant originally used by the Damascus Road Community Church, then subsequently modified and adapted by the church councils of Mays Chapel, Hiss, and Westminster United Methodist Churches. Thanks to all who have had a hand in shaping this document!