United Methodist clergy are called to be in committed relationships to God, The United Methodist Church and one another.

Acknowledging where we are is not where we want to be, this report is a challenge to risk living together in new ways.

We are called to hear Jesus’ prayerful invitation that we might all be one, and we rejoice in the grace of God that offers healing and restoration of relationships.

Our Christian, denominational and collegial relationships sometimes suffer. They can be healed through intentional action. It will require energy and commitment for all who desire to see such relationship restored.

A key challenge before us: Do we clergy wish to strengthen and deepen our covenant? Our experience as the Clergy Covenant Team suggests if there is a will, resources in our tradition can point the way.

This document is prepared by the Wisconsin Clergy Covenant Team, established by the Annual Conference in June 2012 and reporting to the Annual Conference clergy session in June 2013.
Clergy in Covenant

Forward

The Wisconsin Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church in 2012 commissioned a group of a dozen clergy to establish a clearer understanding of our clergy covenant.

The team’s work stemmed from a directive in the 2011 church trial of the Rev. Amy DeLong, a clergy member of the Wisconsin Annual Conference.

The trial court asked Rev. DeLong, in consultation with other church leaders in the Wisconsin Annual Conference, to discern how clergy might live together in supportive, mutual relationship and commitment to ministry, despite issues that could harm the clergy covenant, create an adversarial spirit or lead to clergy trials. 1

The Clergy Covenant Team was established to initiate this task. The team, which eventually became eight members when four members left, has spent more than 70 hours together over the past 11 months.

Team members have lived the challenge to find new ways to live together. With this report, we extend the challenge to all clergy of the Wisconsin Conference.

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1 See “Clergy Covenant: An Invitation,” presented to the clergy session of the 2012 Wisconsin Annual Conference.

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Covenant Team directives

1. Recognize that conflict is not to be avoided but worked through with grace and honesty.

2. Create a definition – not for everyone, always – but for us, now.


4. Confront imbalances of power and avoid the perils of majority rule.

5. Seek protection of and equality for the vulnerable/minority by ending participation in discrimination (specifically against LGBT people).

6. Engage external assistance for an internal work of covenant defining.

– Adopted by the 2012 Wisconsin Annual Conference
Clergy in Covenant

Key points

• As clergy, we are in covenant. Covenant is a gift from God, not something of our own creation or defining. However, because of mistrust, animus and busyness, we often resist living in vulnerability with one another.

• We respect and value *The Book of Discipline*. We are bound by more than the Discipline. We believe our driving principle is that we are called to obey Jesus’ command to love. We are called into a community that is guided by the commandment to love. Period. No categorical exclusions.

• How do we love each other?
  1. We remember we enter into ministry on our knees, emptied out, waiting for the Holy Spirit. When we categorically exclude participation in ministry, we limit God.
  2. We recognize that God continues to call all kinds of people into all kinds into ministries.
  3. We end discrimination by no longer categorically excluding people.
  4. We trust, without fear of reprisal from colleagues.
  5. We celebrate, not tolerate, our differences.

• We are an intentional, covenantal community ordered for the mission of God in Wisconsin.

“...When I realize how gracious God has been to me, I cannot deny God’s grace and love to others. As an ethnic minority person, I have experienced the pain of discrimination, being rejected and not accepted because of people’s biases. God has extended his amazing grace to all. Who am I to say, you are not welcome? The Bible teaches us to love others just as God has loved us. It does not ask us to love only the ones we accept and like. God has opened a door through which every one of us can enter into God’s realm.

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Maribel Celiz
Clergy in Covenant

Recommendations

1. Utilize the Order of Deacons, Order of Elders and Fellowship of Local Pastors and Associate Members as a means of covenant building. The Clergy Covenant Team offers a litany adapted from ¶307 of *The Book of Discipline* as a call to action and affirmation of covenant. [See Page 6]

2. Recognizing these structures exist for covenantal support, commit at least four years of intentional and concerted effort to invigorate the Orders and Fellowship as covenant communities for the mutual support of their members. [See Page 8]

3. In consultation with the episcopal office, convene a meeting to include the Board of Ordained Ministry, the Cabinet, chairs of the Orders and Fellowship, the chair of the Retired Clergy Association and the Clergy Covenant Team for the purpose of implementing this report regarding the importance of clergy covenant.

4. In consultation with the episcopal office, convene an additional clergy day apart in 2013 and/or 2014 for conversation regarding renewal of the Orders and Fellowship for the purpose of being covenant communities. If we do not meet together in some intentional way, we are only nominally in covenant. The Clergy Covenant Team, in cooperation with the chairs of the Orders and Fellowships, the chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry and the chair of the Retired Clergy Association, will plan and implement the day apart.

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5. Following the clergy covenant day apart, the Clergy Covenant Team will turn over covenant-building and covenant-keeping responsibilities to the Orders and Fellowships and will be disbanded.

6. The Wisconsin Annual Conference will no longer participate in the categorical discrimination of people. Understanding that sexual orientation and partnered status create no barrier to effective and faithful leadership, those whose gifts and call are otherwise affirmed shall not be denied candidacy, ordination or appointment based on sexual orientation, gender identity or partnered status. [See Page 11]
Rationale | Recommendation #1

A Litany for Covenant

Adapted from ¶307 of the Book of Discipline:

Bishop: In covenant with God and each other, remember Jesus’ prayer that we might be one.

Clergy: Understanding that unity does not mean uniformity, we affirm our unity. We celebrate the diversity through which this body is made whole.

Order of Elders Chair: In covenant with God and each other, the Orders and Fellowship will provide regular gatherings to continue our formation as Clergy grounded in Christ.

Clergy: With willing and open spirits, we will attend such gathering in order to more fully explore the Bible, wrestle with church and society intersections, and deepen our vocational identity and leadership skills.

Order of Deacons Chair: In covenant with God and each other, the Orders and Fellowship will assist in plans for individual study and retreat experiences.

Clergy: With willing and open spirits, we commit ourselves to continued learning by participating in study and retreat.

Fellowship of Local Pastors and Associate Members Chair: In covenant with God and each other, the Orders and Fellowship will develop a bond of unity and common commitment to the mission and ministry of the Wisconsin Annual Conference and the worldwide United Methodist Church.

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When I think about our ‘clergy covenant,’ I think about practicing an inclusive, loving acceptance of my clergy brothers and sisters no matter what their ideological and theological stance. I have learned and experienced over my career that building safe walls around myself kept me in a place of artificial ‘comfort,’ which ultimately produced within me a sense of isolation and fear, especially of those people who were different than I. I have finally learned that love must have no conditions. I am challenged by God to love others, period.

Bill McBride
Clergy: With willing and open spirits, we will participate in God’s mission as partners in ministry.

Retired Clergy Chair: In covenant with God and each other, the Orders and Fellowships will enable the creation of relationships that allow mutual support and trust.

Clergy: With willing and open spirits, we will spend the time, energy, and resources needed to develop such relationships for the sake of future generations. In the midst of temptations to respond to immediate congregational pressures, we will be mindful of the long-term benefit of strong clergy-with-clergy connections.

Board of Ordained Ministries Chair: In covenant with God and each other, the Orders and Fellowship, in cooperation with the Board of Ordained Ministry, shall hold all clergy accountable in fulfilling these noble endeavors.

Clergy: With willing and open spirits, we will be accountable to one another.

Bishop: The mission and ministry of the Church is incomplete without the clergy living in covenant with God and one another. Will you be in covenant with each other?

Clergy: We know our covenant with one another has been weak. We know our covenant with God cannot mature without strengthening our covenant with one another. For the sake of the Church Universal, The United Methodist Church, the Wisconsin Annual Conference, and the laity we serve, we commit to living in covenant with God and each other.

Steve Scott

Our Covenant Team experience has convinced me there is no substitute for being actually present in relationship. Because of our experience together, it is written on my soul that I don’t necessarily have to agree with my clergy colleagues to be in covenant with you, as long as we are committed to a common mission. I wouldn’t have necessarily felt that way before our process. I feel the same about my colleagues in the Provisional Residency program, which I just completed. Those deepened relationships will make all the difference going forward.
Rationale | Recommendation #2

Restoring the Orders and Fellowship as a means of covenant building

The creation of Orders has the potential of recovering the function of the early conferences in Methodism, when the traveling preachers came together for discipline, fraternity and revival. Russell Richey uses the word order when he describes Wesley’s conference as “a family of preachers . . . a monastic-like order held together by affection, by common rules, by a shared mission and by watchfulness of each member over one another; it functioned as a [fellowship] of religious aspiration and song.” 2

We encourage the Wisconsin Annual Conference to follow our Book of Discipline regarding Orders of Deacons and Elders (¶¶306-309) and a Fellowship of Local Pastors and Associate Members (¶323). Additionally, we urge the Board of Ordained Ministry to further engage its responsibility to hold clergy accountable and eligible for annual appointment in the areas of continuing education and formation (¶334.2).

Participation in the Orders and Fellowship is not optional, as this representative statement says — “As members of the Order of Elder, all elders are in covenant with all other elders in the annual conference and shall participate in the life of their order.” [¶332]

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2 The Orders of Ministry in The United Methodist Church by John Harnish (2000)
By not following the covenantal guidelines of our *Discipline*, we have both fallen into and learned how to live lives and vocational roles separated from one another. The attendant result of a lack of covenant between the clergy is an increased adversarial spirit, which carries the threat of continued trials.

There is no escaping a prophetic judgment that we are reaping the consequences of decades and generations of using the *Discipline’s* ¶333 as a cudgel as we wage our theological or ideological battles rather than as an appeal to our higher calling and an inspiration for deeper relationships.

¶333:

“Elders in full connection with an annual conference by virtue of their election and ordination are bound in special covenant with all the ordained elders of the annual conference. In the keeping of this covenant they perform the ministerial duties and maintain the ministerial standards established by those in the covenant. They offer themselves without reserve to be appointed and to serve, after consultations, as the appointive authority may determine. They live with all other ordained ministers in mutual trust and concern and seek with them the sanctification of the fellowship. By entering into the covenant, they accept and subject themselves to the process of clergy discipline, including serving on committees on investigation, trial courts, or appellate committees. Only those shall be elected to full membership who are of unquestionable moral character and genuine piety, sound in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, and faithful in the discharge of their duties.”

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Admittedly our Book of Discipline is not as clear about the implementation of the three Orders/Fellowship designated — Order of Deacons, Order of Elders, and Fellowship of Local Pastors and Associate Members. In addition to the clergy component of orders, adequate funding for them will rest on the vision of the laity for the importance of covenant and relationship-building by the clergy. If moving toward a robust engagement with orders is to be effective, it will take full cooperation of both laity and clergy.

“Discriminating against one human identity after another reminds us how close we are to desiring a new Tower of Babel (if only we can dismiss one “identity group” or another, we can yet reach heaven). Intentionally seeking a creation-wide Covenant opens a new opportunity for the wonder of Pentecost to overcome our artificial and always graceless outlawing of human differences.

Wesley White
Rationale | Recommendation #6

Protecting the vulnerable: Non-cooperation with discrimination

The Wisconsin Annual Conference will no longer participate in the Book of Discipline’s categorical discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. Sexual orientation and partnered status create no barrier to effective and faithful leadership. The Wisconsin Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church professes that any person whose gifts and call are otherwise affirmed will be welcomed into candidacy, ordination and appointment.

GLBT persons already ordained will now be free to live un-closeted and truthful lives, without threats of retributive action.

Additionally, United Methodist clergy in the Wisconsin Annual Conference will be free from complaint, punishment, prosecution or trial if he/she conducts same-gender Holy Union ceremonies. The question of course then becomes, “What is the resident bishop to do when the inevitable complaints against Wisconsin clergy are filed?”

For decades people of good faith have broken the discriminatory laws of The United Methodist Church. Many complaints have been filed, but few of these have led to judicial charges and subsequent trials. It has been the standard operating procedure of bishops to dismiss these complaints through administrative channels. This is often done, not out of animus, but out of sense of compassion.

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Resources

The Book of Discipline on clergy covenant: an annotated index

During the 2012 Clergy Session, when the proposal for a Clergy Covenant Team was introduced, a question was raised about the possibility of “covenant” being a gift United Methodism brings to the whole Church.

The trial court decision that ultimately led to the Clergy Covenant Team asked that the Book of Discipline be consulted regarding clergy covenant and interrelationships to see what resources it offers to establish new relationships among the clergy and the reduction of church trials.

The Clergy Covenant Team has taken an extended journey through the Discipline to identify related insights of our denomination.

It may be found online at the Clergy Covenant Web site: ClergyCovenant.org
However, secretly dismissing complaints shields the broader church from the financial and human costs of exclusion and creates an environment of silence and shame which hinders education, openness and change. Continuing this course of action does not serve the interest of mercy or justice.

Knowing the vast majority of United Methodist bishops are in disagreement with the exclusionary policies of the church, it is incumbent upon each of them individually to gather moral courage and couple her/his quiet ways of encouragement with a public refusal to participate in discrimination. Such is the high calling for all who understand the danger of codifying injustice and prejudice. As leaders in the church, we have both the theological acumen to recognize laws which violate the gospel mandate to love and include, and the religious freedom and authority to stand in opposition to such laws.

Resources

The United Methodist Handbook on Ministry Interpretation, 2013-2016 quadrennium

The Clergy Covenant Team recommends the section on Orders and Fellowship, pages 19-28.

Available online at: http://goo.gl/RGUDk
Other voices

Excerpts from John Wesley

“If there [is] a difference of opinion, where is our religion, if we cannot think and let think?”

From “The Lord Our Righteousness,” preached at the Chapel in West-Street, Seven Dials, Nov. 24, 1765.

“... that orthodoxy, or right opinion, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all; that neither does religion consist in negatives, in bare harmlessness of any kind; nor merely in externals, in doing good, or using the means of grace, in works of piety (so called) or of charity; that it is nothing short of, or different from, ‘the mind that was in Christ;’ the image of God stamped upon the heart; inward righteousness, attended with the peace of God; and ‘joy in the Holy Ghost.’ ”


“Are you persuaded that you see more clearly than me? It is not unlikely that you may. Then treat me as you would desire to be treated yourself upon a change of circumstances. Point out to me a better way than I have yet known. Show me it is so, by plain proof of Scripture. And if I linger in the path I have accustomed to tread, and am therefore unwilling to leave it, labour with me a little; take me by the hand, and lead me as I am able to bear. But be not displeased if I entreat you not to beat me down in order to quicken my pace: I can go but feebly and slowly at best; then, I should not be able to go at all. May I not request of you, further, not to give me hard names in order to bring me into the right way. Suppose I were ever so much in the wrong, I doubt this would not set me right. Rather, it would make me run so much the farther from you, and so get more and more out of the way.

“Nay, perhaps, if you are angry, so shall I be too; and then there will be small hopes of finding the truth. If once anger arises, [aute kapnos] (as Homer somewhere expresses it), this smoke will so dim the eyes of my soul, that I shall be able to see nothing clearly. For God’s sake, if it be possible to avoid it, let us

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not provoke one another to wrath. Let us not kindle in each other this fire of hell; much less blow it up into a flame. If we could discern truth by that dreadful light, would it not be a loss rather than gain? For, how far is love, even with many wrong opinions, to be preferred before truth itself without love! We may die without the knowledge of many truths, and yet be carried into Abraham’s bosom. But if we die without love, what will knowledge avail? Just as much as it avails the devil and his angels!

“The God of love forbid that we should ever make the trial. May he prepare us for the knowledge of all truth, by filling our hearts with all his love, and with all joy and peace in believing!”

— From the “Preface” to Sermons On Several Occasions, 1872 Reprint of the 1771 edition of the Sermons, Dennis Bratcher, © 2011

Excerpt from Peter Block

(Paraphrased)

The vehicles that carry our ongoing conversation are always breaking down as we attempt to claim one bit more than our neighbor. We will cover up our breakdowns with a variety of appeals that confirm our rightness and their wrongness, with false humor and straw-men that will dismiss others and keep us from seeing, reflecting on, and improving our common lot. Without knowing how to shift our conversations with one another, we keep repeating and substituting gossip for relationship.

It is difficult for us to talk about what is important to us. We have experienced belittling and betrayal if we expose too much of ourselves. It becomes more important to hold on the little we have than to risk for an abundance far beyond our wildest imagination.

This is why we need not just proximity to one another but a method by which we can ask “How is it with your soul?” and reveal how it is with our soul. To covenant is to commit to the nearly impossible task of Good News worthy of the telling – This is how everyone will know that we are Jesus’ disciples, when we love each other.

When the news gets out, a covenant made and lived will shine, rebalance systems, and accurately portray our heart’s best intentions.

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Covenant is a United Methodist reality that reveals the core of Scripture, the best of our tradition, the clearness of our thinking, and the joy of our experience. It is our path to partnership and accountability.

Stories can be changed. We sorrow over how far we have strayed from our early story of preemptive, justifying, and sanctifying grace for the least, the lost, the lone in ourselves and others. We rejoice a choice can yet be made to shift our attention back to our connection together for better revealing a hope for and in others, a trust in G*D regardless of our position, and a covenant that transforms both neighbors and even enemies into partners. We can become unstuck and covenant will have an important role to play in freeing grace to re-imagine a purposeful connexion.

– Peter Block is an author and speaker in the areas of community and organizational development who addressed the 2012 Wisconsin Annual Conference
About the Clergy Covenant Team

MARIBEL CELIZ is a rapper, record producer and lead vocalist for the hottest Tex-Mex jazz fusion band in southern Wisconsin. She yearns to one day own a chain of coffee shops and write poetry in her free time.

AMY E. DELONG has pseudonymously authored a dozen best-selling novels about life on the Alaskan frontier.

DAWN HELTON-ANISHINAABEOWA hopes to keep intact her record of 27 consecutive years of not watching one minute of the Super Bowl.

BILL McBRIDE gave up on his childhood dream of documenting glacial melt in the Arctic Circle with an old Leica camera he discovered in the dumpster outside his childhood home.

STEVE SCOTT aspires to spend a summer driving cross-country in a VW microbus, listening to Neil Diamond cassette tapes and eating hot dogs at every major league ballpark.

FORREST WELLS hopes one day to attend an Annual Conference on every continent. He recently returned from South Korea, where he delivered box loads of leftover 1996 Green Bay Packers T-shirts to elementary school students.

DAVE WERNER has contemplated becoming a licensed preacher in a combined Lutheran-Presbyterian congregation, thus continuing his odyssey through all of the mainline Protestant denominations.

WESLEY WHITE supplements his retirement income by selling slightly worn baseball caps on eBay and serving as a consultant for every non-profit organization in La Crosse County.

See the Clergy Covenant Team Web site at ClergyCovenant.org