



Celebrating 150 Years in Mission



Covenants and Rainbows: Sisterhood of Grace Covenant Reminders for Engagement

<The covenant is also a guideline for engagement in *United Methodist Women's Program Book programs*.>

OBJECTIVE—To deepen our commitment to healthier and more sustainable communities within United Methodist Women's Sisterhood of Grace by reviewing the Sisterhood of Grace Covenant and other biblical covenants.

PREPARATION

Materials

Sisterhood of Grace	Music to play during prayer/welcome
Printed litanies	Talking piece (symbolic object used to encourage fluid discussion without interruption)
Bibles	Materials for center

Participants

Ask participants to reflect on wisdom that guides their interactions with other people: What's a good bit of wisdom that you've carried with you over time? Maybe it's a phrase like "when we have guests, everyone eats and everyone cleans up afterward." Or maybe something like "don't show up empty-handed to a dinner." Think on this wisdom and bring it to the group.

Before the meeting, ask women to help with the following roles:

Welcoming people as they come in.

Leading prayers during the opening and closing.

Leading the reflection or other activities.

Centering

Setup is flexible. You can meet anywhere—a local coffee shop, in the church fellowship hall, in a garden, in someone's home. To set the stage for this conversation, the most important part is that you create a setup where everyone can see each other. Arrange the chairs in a circle. In the center of the circle you can place a plant, a few books, a colorful scarf, or any other thing that makes the center bright and cheery.

PROGRAM

Singing

"Blessed Assurance," hymn 369, *The United Methodist Hymnal*

"I'm Gonna Sing When the Spirit Says Sing," hymn 333, *The United Methodist Hymnal*

Turning to the Bible

Introduction

What are some principles that guide your interactions with other people? Where did you learn them? Are they always useful?

One principle that guides some families is “everybody eats and everybody cleans up.” In other communities, it’s considered taboo to show up without some sort of gift for the host family. Of course, these standards can vary from house to house, even occasion to occasion. No one wants to offend another, so what happens when our individual expectations come together and conflict? How do we encourage people to be bold in who they are? How do we also recognize that pre-existing power dynamics may not allow everyone to feel free to do so? We may find the beginning of an answer in covenants.

Let’s turn to a biblical example of a covenant and explore more about this concept.

Reading

Genesis 9: 8–17 (NRSV)

Take turns reading the passage one verse at a time around the room until the passage is complete.

What are some initial reactions to this text?

(Pull out these verses for emphasis.)

¹² God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:

¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

Why does God create this covenant with Noah? What image do we have of God here? What character traits do you see in this text? Why does God need a reminder symbol? What kind of action is God modeling here?

Reflection

We all know the story of Noah’s Ark. God was so frustrated with God’s people that God decided to wash the entire earth away. God chose Noah and his family to carry out the task of saving creatures for the refreshed earth.

As the story goes, the world was covered in water. People died. Entire neighborhoods were swallowed up. Birds and animals of the land were overwhelmed by the flood. It was horrific.

At the end of this disaster, God creates an agreement with Noah called a covenant. A covenant is an agreement between two parties. It is solidified by promises on each part of the agreement. In this instance, God promises 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.” The rainbow was a reminder of God’s love and care for creation.

Of course, we know today that while there has not been a flood that has covered the entire earth, since then there have been individual floods. There have been monsoons, hurricanes, floods and all manner of natural disasters that have had devastating impact on fragile ecosystems.

We may find ourselves asking God, “I thought you promised never to leave such a mess. Wasn’t the rainbow a reminder to us *and* to you that we would never experience such horrors?” Reminding God of God’s promises is indeed a faithful response. Job (in Job 6) and the unnamed Syrophenician woman (in Matthew 15) are among a few biblical characters who are bold enough to point back to the promises of God. When we are enduring great oppression, it is sometimes all we can do to hold on. We point to established promises as a method of survival.

Sometimes a covenant can inform other communities outside of the one it was written for. For example, in the late nineteenth century, formerly enslaved Callie House petitioned the U.S. government for other formerly enslaved persons. She used the promise of pensions to argue that formerly enslaved people deserved pay for previously unpaid work. She, and many others, created the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association. She stands in a long tradition of historically marginalized people who have pushed for rights using the covenants (or constitutions) that have often excluded them. Sometimes covenants can be a strategic way of demanding respect when you have been dehumanized.

And this approach to life isn’t just for our justice work. In fact, we encourage this approach in our own relationships. It’s nearly impossible to do good work in the world without strong interpersonal relationships. You’ll notice that United Methodist Women relies on a covenant called “the Sisterhood of Grace.” In it, we are reminded to respect each other’s personal space, be mindful of body language, expect surprises and so much more.

Why do we as a community commit to these as our centering norms? Because we know that when people feel safe in our presence, they are more likely to take risks, share their gifts and ask questions.

But when those norms are violated, we don’t get a chance to live into God’s desire for us. When a boundary is crossed, we cut off opportunity for community. For example, if we touch people in ways they don’t want to be touched, we are asserting our power and ignoring other people’s safety. Or if we use racist or sexist language. Or if we ignore the mood of the room. Or if we make negative comments about people’s bodies.

Sometimes a symbolic reminder, like a rainbow covenant or a set of community norms, helps us hold community members accountable. *It reminds us of who we are and who we can be.* In the moments that we feel like our rights, boundaries or desires are being held, we can point to a covenant. The beauty of this story is also what makes it challenging. God, in this story, needs a reminder. We can remind God of God's promises to us, and we can remind each other how we need to be treated.

Covenants are not just "rules." They're the foundation of healthy relationships and communities. They help us guide our thoughts and actions. They also keep us mindful that other people have other priorities. We do not exist in a vacuum. Whenever we gather together in a room, a host of cultures, experiences, communities, histories and stories enter as well. We should be good stewards of the beautiful mosaic of God's creation by creating and respecting a shared community standard.

Activity

Take a moment to review the Sisterhood of Grace covenant. What do these guidelines sound like and look like in your own context? Sometimes we rush past the Sisterhood of Grace as a guiding document. But as it is with all covenants, we must take these principles contextually. What do these principles mean to you in your own life?

With a partner, focus on one line of the covenant. You two can decide on the line. Out of respect to all involved, avoid naming names when you share examples.

Is there a time when you felt a community or friend exemplified this principle? Was there a time when a community or friend violated this principle? What happened? Was it ever addressed? How do you feel about that encounter now? Based on that experience, how are you likely to welcome other people?

When you come back to the whole group, share some key insights from your discussion.

Prayer

Dear God,

You have given us so much to be thankful for. We thank you today for community and the promise of building strong bonds together. We are women organized for mission on behalf of women, children and youth. The load sometimes gets heavy, God, but we thank you for sending dear friends on the journey. As we journey towards a better world for our most vulnerable, we ask for your special guidance and care upon us. Hold us in the palm of your hand. We shall always remember the beauty of your creation. We ask that you remember us, too. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Closing Litany (adapted from Ecclesiastes 3)

One: To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

All: A time to break down, and a time to build up.

One: The call of Christian community is towards a more loving, beautiful, sustainable, justice-filled world.

All: To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

One: Some moments require a loud, bold speaking up and others require reflective silence.

All: To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

One: Some moments call for a hug with the consent of the other party, and some moments call for a smile and a wave.

All: To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

One: The only way we will discern the time is through community and covenant.

All together: To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

Thanks be to God for the space to discern, to ask permission and to create living covenants. We commit to a safer community where we honor each other's boundaries. Be with us on our journey together, dear God. May we do so with courage, gentleness and kindness. Amen.

For another biblical story about the challenge of coming together, check out 2 Kings 4:38–41. It's a story of a community pot of stew that was not edible. Read more to see how the prophet Elisha modifies it so it can be edible for all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Candace Simpson serves on a team of faith and justice educators at United Methodist Women.

She is a teacher, preacher and writer. Her favorite book is Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. In her spare time, Candace enjoys exploring her hometown of Brooklyn, New York.