A few years ago I was meeting with a couple at whose wedding I was going to officiate. This was not the first marriage for either of them; nor were they youngsters. The groom was close to my age, and his bride just a few years younger.

We were in the midst of crafting the ceremony itself, and had reached the part where they would be declaring their vows to one another. I explained that they could use the traditional vows, or choose something from samples I’d given them. They could search the Internet for more samples, or – my preferred option – they could write their own.

The important thing, I told them, was that these words not be taken lightly; that they be their promises to one another – their “covenant,” I said, as husband and wife.

The bride suddenly became very quiet. When I asked her about this, she said, “I’m just not sure I want to enter into a covenant with Jerry!” Her soon-to-be husband looked stricken and bewildered. “But I thought that’s what this is all about!” he exclaimed.

I must admit that I was a bit bewildered myself – not to mention panicked! I’d never experienced a bride or groom questioning the Vows before, and the ceremony was only a couple of weeks away! But as we talked about it, it became clear that the bride’s only understanding of the concept of Covenants was through her long-ago experiences as a child of the Jewish and Christian biblical stories.

In the Book of Genesis she had learned of the “covenants” God made with “His people” – first with Adam and Eve, and later with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. She remembered the story of Adam and Eve breaking the covenant with God, and being banished from Paradise forever – taking all of humanity with them for eternity.

She remembered the stories of God’s covenants with Abraham, first Patriarch of the Jewish faith, promising that he would make of Abraham “a great nation,” and give to him and his descendents all the land of their “sojournings.”

Later, God – Yahweh – would make similar covenants with Abraham’s son Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob – promising them and all who followed them abundance and the blessings of Creation.
When Moses came along and led the Israelites out of slavery, God again made a Covenant with them. But by now He must have learned how fickle and easily tempted human beings could be, for He gave them a list of 613 laws they were to follow as their part of the Covenant! And story after story tells of God’s wrath and judgments upon those who broke their vows.

The Christian story goes even further, as God makes a covenant with humanity by sending his only son, Jesus, to be brutally sacrificed for our sins. One might want to suggest to God that we’d rather not enter any covenant that requires such a tragic ending for someone as innocent as Jesus! But God’s covenants were generally non-negotiable.

So I could understand why the woman about to be married was uncomfortable with the thought of entering into a “covenant” with her husband. The only ones she’d known about were with God, who alone decided the parameters of the covenants, with terms that seemed pretty lopsided!

I assured her that what I was asking of them both was to state the promises to one another that they were going to try to live as best they could. It would not mean that if, sometime during their marriage, one of them fell short of their promise, the marriage would be null and void; that’s where repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation comes in. But it would mean beginning their marriage with promises that were sacred – that came from the deepest part of their hearts.

As a Unitarian Universalist community, we, too, make promises that are sacred. Ours is often described as a “covenental” religion rather than “creedal;” yet one of my colleagues has suggested that we UUs tend to spend more time celebrating the “non-creedal” part of our faith than we do the presence of our “covenant.”

Nevertheless, here at Emerson (and in most UU congregations), we recite every Sunday morning words we call a “covenant” – a promise “to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, and to serve humanity in fellowship; thus do we covenant,” we say.

Hopefully we are guided, both in our personal lives and as a congregation, by our denomination’s seven Principles, which begin with the words: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...,” and then the Principles are listed.

And in Emerson’s Small Group Ministries, during the fourth session each year, each group creates a Covenant that serves as a reminder throughout the year of how they have promised to be with one another.

All three of these covenants contain promises as to how we will treat one another, and how we will live our lives as spiritually open and engaged people; the first two also imply how we will treat other human beings and the earth. As the Rev. Jan Christian says, “At the heart of covenant is commitment to a way
of being rather than to a statement of belief....With our freedoms come responsibilities.” Indeed, even the Affirmation the children lead each Sunday, and our Statement of Ministry on the back of the Order of Service, could be considered covenants.

UU minister Brent Smith points out that “our covenants aren’t handed down from either an ecclesiastical hierarchy or divine authority; they come from the hearts and minds of the people.” We affirm these covenants during our worship together, he says, because they are what binds us to one another as a congregation; not our Bylaws, or our governance structure, or the policies passed by the leadership here, but the promises we affirm at various times.

This past Friday evening, seven people signed our Membership Book, and an 8th person had signed it in June; we will recognize and welcome them into membership next Sunday. By signing that book – accompanied by a pledge of financial support – they were entering into the various covenants that we’ve developed as a congregation – the one recited every Sunday, plus our Statement of Ministry, as well as the broader Unitarian Universalist covenant that is our seven UU Principles. Some of these new members had only been attending Emerson a couple of months, and some had been involved here for several years. But all had decided that this was the time they could enter a “covenantal relationship” with Emerson.

The UU church in Ventura, where Rev. Christian serves as minister, takes it a step further. Their members are also invited to sign what’s called a “Great Expectations Covenant” as part of that congregation’s “effort to create a general culture of commitment and to nurture individual members who want to make a deeper commitment.” It is not a requirement of membership, nor does one even need to be a member in order to sign it. But those who do, covenant to the following:

...to make participation in their communal worship a high priority in their lives;

...to deepen their understanding of our UU tradition and their connection to the larger movement;

...to grow their spiritual maturity;

...to contribute time to their congregation and to a congregational service project;

...to give five to ten percent of their income to the church (or to adopt a plan for achieving that level of giving as soon as possible);

...and to invite others to church and to find ways to connect those who might benefit from their message and their church community.

Making such promises is a big commitment, and I don’t know how many in that congregation have signed the Covenant; I do know that a fair number
have. And I find it an intriguing and exciting concept – one to which I hope we might open ourselves here at Emerson some time in the near future.

A friend pointed out to me recently that the word “covenant” evolved from the word “coven” – the gathering of witches or those following the Wicca traditions in both ancient and modern times. My friend said that for him, the word conjured up an image of people sitting in a circle, creating something new together – something that carried both risk and potency.

That’s what I see us doing here, at this church – especially this year as we embark on the journey of finding and committing ourselves to a community service project. We will be entering a new “covenant” in that process – both with one another, and with whatever people our project will be serving. That will be important to remember.

Discerning what covenants we are willing to enter and with whom requires us to address the question posed at a retreat of UU ministers a couple of weeks ago: “Whose are we?” we were asked; “Who and what do we serve? Where does our loyalty lie?”

Some of us answered with words like “joy, love, God, passion, justice, the wider movement.” When I had to answer those questions later with another colleague, I said in part: “family, close friends, my congregation, colleagues, my music, my self, Unitarian Universalism.” I also included something about belonging to or being loyal to those in the world who need my voice, who need my power to witness for them because of their lack of power. And isn’t that part of what we covenant to be here at Emerson, when we say that we “serve humanity in fellowship?”

I was reminded powerfully of that the other day as I watched some videos on YouTube of bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender individuals speaking to teens who are being bullied or mocked or simply misunderstood because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They’re part of a project called “It Gets Better,” in response to the recent suicides of six gay teens after being bullied.

The first video was of New Hampshire’s Episcopal Bishop, the Reverend Gene Robinson, an openly gay man who had to wear a bullet-proof vest after being nominated for the position because he’d received so many death threats. Bishop Robinson implored young BGLT people who are feeling despondent to not lose hope. “God loves you more than you can imagine,” he said into the camera; “God wants you to live.”

I was profoundly moved by his words. But as I listened to him and others, I began to wonder what might have been different had those six boys been part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, where they’d be welcomed for who they were? And what might happen still for all those BGLT youth who are losing hope – who believe the taunts and the hatred thrown at them – if they found a church like Emerson? I don’t know if there’s a god who loves them, but I do know that there’s a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Canoga Park.
(and more throughout the country) who would say to them, “We love you more than you can imagine; we want you to live!”

It is too late to tell Tyler Clementi, Seth Walsh, Justin Aaberg, Raymond Chase, Asher Brown, and Billy Lucas that they are loved; but it’s not too late to tell other BGLT youth that crucial message. This Wednesday, October 20th, has been designated as “Spirit Day,” and we are asked to wear purple in honor of the six boys just named. But the message also goes out to all BGLT youth – to keep their spirits up, to not lose hope, to know that “it gets better” some day; and that there are thousands of people who do not hate them – who want them to live.

Whose are we? The answers will be different for each of us. But let us agree today to be in covenant with all youth who face the fear and hatred of others because of who they are. Whether they be bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender; whether physically or developmentally challenged; Muslim, atheist, Jewish, or Pagan; immigrant or person of color – for whatever reason they may be feeling alienated and unlovable, let us promise them that they are loved – profoundly and joyfully – by their God, and by more people than they can imagine.

May we continue to be in covenant with one another. And may we extend that covenant to all those beyond these walls who need the witness of a faith such as ours. May what we do as a religious community move us ever closer to a world with more love, more peace, more joy for all people.

Amen.