Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Hard Conversations for our Beloved Community

Ted Zorn © 31 May 2026

Introduction

I suspect I'm not alone in this, but I often choose a topic for these talks because it intrigues me and not because I have a clear set of answers. That is certainly true today.

The reading I just read gives us a helpful way into today's topic.

It reminds us that Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith, not a creedal one. Neither of those words — covenantal or creedal — was part of my vocabulary before joining this church. But the idea is simple enough: we are not held together by a shared doctrine about God, salvation, scripture, or the afterlife. We are held together by a ***covenant*** — promises about how we will seek truth together, how we will treat one another, how we will repair harm, and how we will hold one another accountable.

That sounds like what I signed up for.

But as Timothy Ellis points out, covenant can easily become something we talk about more than something we live. It can become a set of nice words, recited occasionally, but not truly integrated into the life of the congregation.

So today I want to ask what it means to honour covenant in practice. What does it mean to have a living covenant — one that reaches into the difficult places where we disagree, where we may hurt one another, where our values collide, or where we are not sure what belonging requires of us?

In February, I led a service called *Listening into the Difficult Places* and explored a hard lesson: honest sharing and deep listening are powerful, but they are not

magic. Sometimes we understand one another and still disagree. Sometimes the difference is not a misunderstanding. It is a difference in values.

After that service, one of our members gave me a friendly challenge. He was complimentary, but he asked, “Now, how do we do that as a congregation?” As we talked more, we talked about examples of churches that made some people unwelcome because of their beliefs. I understood his challenge to mean: how does a congregation talk to itself across serious differences in values or beliefs?

I have thought about that question a lot.

I should say at the outset that I’m not raising this because I see some brewing crisis in our congregation. Nor do I think that’s what the person who raised the question meant. I don’t have a secret grievance I’m harbouring or a troubling practice I’m trying to change. But I do think this is real work for any congregation that aspires to be a beloved community.

Beloved Community

We use that phrase “Beloved Community” from time to time, both as an aspiration and a description. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. popularised and developed the term, which was first used by philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce in the early twentieth century.

King’s vision was of a community transformed by love: a global, inclusive society based on justice, equal opportunity, and unconditional love, where conflicts are resolved peacefully rather than through violence. Clay did a great talk on beloved community back in 2017 if you want to know more about its history and development.

My interest today is on one aspect of Beloved Community, specifically asking what gets in the way — and how we move forward when that happens.

Beloved community is not shown only by how warmly we treat one another when things are easy, but perhaps especially by how we treat one another when things are hard.

Across Unitarian and other liberal religious communities, we have seen glimpses of tensions that can fracture. Some communities have implied, or even said openly, that supporters of certain political leaders are not welcome.

What would it feel like to be a Trump supporter here? Or a Luxon or Winston Peters supporter? Or, heaven forbid, a David Seymour supporter?

During the COVID years, many communities — including our own — wrestled with painful decisions about who could gather physically and under what conditions. We had to make decisions about what was safe for the congregation, and not everyone agreed.

These were moments where values collided: inclusion versus safety, freedom versus responsibility, individual conscience versus collective care, and differing views about which authorities to trust.

As Unitarians, we cherish freedom of belief. We do not demand uniformity of thought. We expect — and often celebrate — diversity of perspective. That is one of our greatest strengths.

But it creates a tension we cannot avoid. If we welcome people with very different beliefs, are there beliefs or behaviours that fall outside the circle of acceptability?

And if so, how do we decide that without becoming a community that is exclusive rather than inclusive?

These are not comfortable questions. But beloved community is not built by avoiding discomfort.

The Way Forward

Perhaps as a starting point, a simple but helpful distinction is between beliefs and behaviours.

In a healthy pluralistic community, we make generous room for belief. People can hold different religious views. They can support different political parties or philosophies. They can hold minority views about public policy. They can choose to trust or distrust institutions. They can interpret the world through very different moral lenses.

If we require agreement at the level of belief, we will quickly become a very small and fragile community.

But behaviours – including speech -- are different, because behaviours have impact. Beloved community is not only about what we believe in the privacy of our minds. It is about what it feels like to be in the room together.

So the possible starting point is this: we can make generous room for belief, but we must be more discerning about behaviour.

I suspect we would all agree that we should not tolerate the following:

- speech that demeans or dehumanises groups of people,
- harassment or intimidation,
- behaviours that make participation feel unsafe, like shouting or silencing others.

Those commitments are not about policing private belief. They are about protecting the conditions that make shared community possible. They are not about ideological purity. They are about relational safety, dignity, and care.

But even this is not simple. What counts as demeaning? When does strongly expressed disagreement cross a line? When does the certainty with which a position is stated leave no room for disagreement? When does a political position become incompatible with our stated values? And how do we decide these things in a way that is fair, transparent, and grounded in covenant rather than anger or anxiety?

If we draw the circle too tightly, we become brittle, self-righteous, and unable to engage real difference. If we draw it too loosely, we become unsafe, especially for those who are already vulnerable or marginalised. Beloved community lives in the tension between those risks.

This is where Ellis's idea of a living covenant becomes useful.

A living covenant is not just a statement on paper or something we read in a service. It asks: what have we promised one another, and how do we behave when those promises are strained?

Some of you will know that I asked yesterday in the WhatsApp chat what is said in our church's new member ceremony, because I had forgotten and had no record of what I'd committed to. With Rachel's help, I can now tell you that

new members say something like: “We enter this faith with hope and possibility in our hearts, **pledging to participate in and support the ministries of this church**. **We covenant to remain true to the spirit of love** that flows through this church and guides us.”

And the worship leader pledges on behalf of the congregation: “As members of this church **we pledge to be guardians of each other’s spirits, to respect the ultimate privacy of each one’s human struggle, and to believe in each one’s inherent dignity.**”

That is beautiful language. And I happily made that pledge myself. And it contains important promises we make to each other.

But the test of covenant is what happens when those promises are strained.

In our new member ceremonies, the worship leader also states: “We will not always live up to our ideals. And, when we fall short we invite you to stay in relationship with us and help us more fully bring alive the spirit of love.”

Those statements matter because they tell us that covenant is not perfection. Covenant assumes the possibility of failure. It assumes we will misunderstand, disappoint, offend, and sometimes hurt one another.

Ellis quotes Susan Smith, who demystifies the repair of covenant beautifully: “The path back into covenant is actually well known because we walk it so often. We make apologies and we accept them. We describe boundaries and expectations and either freely accept them or intentionally reject them.”

That way is very different from the extremes. It is different from saying, “Anything goes.” And it is different from saying, “One mistake and you are out.”

Covenant gives us a third way: accountability with love.

Ellis cites an interesting example, the Rogue Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Oregon, which had gone through a period of divisiveness and in response had developed a detailed “Covenant of Right Relations” and an agreed set of conflict management practices. Their response was reacting to a crisis, but it led me to think about how to be proactive before a crisis occurs.

A few years ago, I wrote an article for the *Herald* about talking across deep disagreement on hot button issues like abortion. I was interested in whether dialogue was still possible on an issue where people often hold profoundly different values.

What I found then still seems relevant here.

There are initiatives around the world that bring people with divergent views together to build trust, identify shared concerns, and sometimes even find ways to act together.

The point of bringing them together is not always agreement. Often it is something more modest, but still deeply important: reducing contempt, increasing understanding, and finding enough common ground to remain in relationship.

These approaches rely on evidence-based communication practices, and they are practices a congregation can use.

First, we invite rather than demand. We cannot force genuine dialogue. We can only create the conditions in which people may choose to enter it. A sincere invitation might sound like: “I’d really like to understand how you see this,” or “Could we talk about what this issue means to each of us?”

Second, we practise *conversational receptiveness*. That means showing, in our language and posture, that we are actually trying to understand, not dismiss or rebut. We do this through exploring, showing curiosity about their views and empathy for the experiences that led to those views.

Third, we hold our own views with humility. That does not mean abandoning conviction. It means resisting the temptation to speak as if our perspective is the only possible moral one. There is a difference between saying, “This is how I understand the issue,” and saying, “No decent person could see this differently.”

Fourth, we look for common ground. Sometimes the common ground is small. Sometimes it is only the recognition that we both care about safety, dignity, children, or the future, even if we disagree deeply about what those values require.

Finally, we try to explain the other's view fully and respectfully enough that the other person can say, "Yes, that is what I mean." That is a high bar. It means listening to understand, not listening to reload.

Those practices don't guarantee resolution. That was the point of my talk in February. Even very good dialogue may not resolve fundamental differences.

But importantly, it may help us avoid *caricature*. It may help us distinguish between a belief we dislike and a behaviour we cannot accept. It may help us build enough trust to make hard decisions together. It may help us remain a community, even when we cannot become a community of one mind.

But of course, covenant asks something more of us. It asks us to make decisions, name boundaries, clarify expectations, and hold each other accountable. It asks not only, "What do I believe?" but "What have I promised?"

So perhaps the deeper covenantal questions are these:

What kind of community have we promised to be? What must we protect so that people can show up fully human? How do we make room for real difference without making room for dehumanisation? How do we repair harm without pretending harm does not matter? And how do we integrate covenant into the real life of this congregation, so that it is not merely a set of words we recite, but a practice we know how to live?

I don't think we need quick answers.

But I do think we need to build habits ***before we need them***: habits of honest invitation, careful listening, humility, apology and repair, clear boundaries, and returning when return is possible.

Are we doing things already that build such habits? I think we are.

Having a policy of open pulpit is one thing we do. although we naturally seek speakers who are likely to agree with us, sometimes we have speakers who challenge us.

The discussions we have at the end of our services and the Table Talks we have had are other ways we build such habits. In those discussions, we have the

opportunity to share and to listen to each other. That conversation is important, because even when we find ourselves disagreeing, we continue to listen respectfully and stay in connection.

The opportunity for all to serve on MC, to show up and ask questions at AGM are still other good habits.

Could we do more? Almost certainly yes.

Do we need a “covenant of right behaviour”? Should we organise respectful dialogues on hot button issues?

Those are things for us to decide, and something I’d like us to consider in the small group discussion after the service today.

This is delicate work. It requires courage. It requires humility. It requires us to resist both easy exclusion and avoiding hard boundaries.

May we honour covenant not as a slogan, but as a practice.

May ours be a living covenant — one that can hold disagreement, name harm, invite repair, and protect dignity.

And may we keep integrating that covenant into the real life of this congregation: into our services, our meetings, our conversations, our conflicts, our decisions, and the quiet moments when we choose again how to be with one another.

May we be generous where generosity is called for, clear where clarity is needed, and always grounded in the deep commitment to the worth and dignity of every person.

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

- What helps make it easier to have hard conversations within our congregation?
- What more might we do?