



First Congregational Church  
of West Tisbury

# BELOVED COMMUNITY COVENANT

As disciples of Christ,  
we covenant  
to embody our mission.

“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way  
into him who is the head, into Christ ...” – Ephesians 4:15

# About Our Covenant

Throughout Scripture and in our faith tradition, covenants play a powerful role in how we understand relationships. They establish norms and boundaries; they help us understand how we should act, what we can expect from others, and how to prioritize values. Covenants can create a web of loving relationships, so that how we treat each other becomes a living expression of our faith.

In 2011 our congregation created a Behavioral Covenant which is the foundation for this new covenant. It has served us well, but we believe it can be strengthened by what we have learned in the last ten years.

In 2015, our congregation identified a set of core values which begins with extending an "extravagant welcome" to all. Our welcome seeks to reflect Jesus' commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself." That same year, we were recognized as an Open and Affirming Congregation as we adopted the following covenant: We welcome and embrace with

affirmation, all persons of every age, race, culture, marital status and family structure, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, political affiliation, physical and mental ability, economic and social status, and religious background, including non-believers and seekers.

In 2020, the congregation elected to elevate the Racial Justice Team to full status as a Board of our church as a sign of our commitment to make racial justice a central concern in all aspects of our congregational life.

We strive to be kind and compassionate and to honor the diversity within our congregation, recognizing that any lack of respect for one another can undermine our pursuit of beloved community. In the last few years, white supremacy, racial discrimination, systemic racism, and unconscious bias have been at the forefront



Jeanna Shepard for  
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of our attention. They can and do weaken our sense of community. There are also other causes of disagreements and conflicts such as differing cultures and traditions, family dynamics, and personalities that can cause conflicts.

In 2022, this new Covenant recognizes these differences and dynamics and expresses our intention to be accountable to each other in the work of creating and sustaining Beloved Community. We confess that we err and often fall short of our aspirations. But we believe we are held together by grace, and uphold the faith that together we can build and rebuild a beloved community today and for years to come.

# Beloved Community Covenant

## Truth

We are present in the moment and extend an extravagant welcome to all.

- We preserve the dignity of all concerned using respectful and kind words, tone, and actions in person, in written communications, and in online interactions.
- We seek the truth as it is understood by others, by opening our hearts and minds to the truth of each person's story, and by striving to: stay grounded in facts, ask questions to clarify, and be ready to hear some truths we may not want to hear.
- We speak for ourselves only, taking ownership for the content and impact of our words. We avoid the use of statements that assign blame, generalizations, and triangulation. These statements undermine accountability, clear communication, and the building of trust.

## Time

We prioritize and treasure time spent getting to know one another. As we do so we:

- Focus on listening carefully to make the most of everyone's time.
- Pay attention to how much time and space we take up in each interaction, making sure that everyone involved has a chance to speak.
- Make time to practice better communication skills, aiming for unity through understanding and respect, not uniformity.
- Make time immediately to respond when a conflict or grievance is identified and follow the processes set out for resolution and transformation to the extent needed.



## Trust

We welcome new ideas and perspectives with genuine curiosity and open minds. We honor the insights of those whose lives have unfolded in ways unlike our own, and so we:

- Acknowledge the experiences of those who have been marginalized, oppressed or neglected by majority groups in our nation.
- Look back with honest self-inventory to identify any ways in which race and gender privilege, economic status and power, and bias have affected our lives and perpetuated "othering" and exclusion.
- Strive to communicate with care, choosing words that are inclusive and respectful of the various life experiences represented in our congregation.
- Use language to build up not to break down, and respond with compassion and empathy if we cause harm.

## Transformation

We commit to building a Beloved Community. In doing so we:

- Draw all members into the life of the church and encourage everyone to discern the faithful use of their talents, interests and energy.
- Support one another, respecting those in leadership positions, valuing volunteer leaders, and working as a team.
- Choose the path of repair and forgiveness, personally and collectively.
- Lovingly encourage all parties to participate in the conflict transformation process of our church – identifying, communicating and resolving grievances and covenant violations.
- Rejoice that God is present in our conversations; remember to listen for the still-speaking voice, and seek God's presence and guidance in all that we do.

# The Role of Grace, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation

This new covenant (June, 2022) has been written for our times, but is grounded in scriptural understanding, the wisdom of our faith tradition, and a framework of Truth-Time-Trust-Transformation recently explored by our Racial Justice Board. One critical aspect of building a beloved community which was absent from our earlier covenant was a clear path toward how we would deal with disagreements, dignity violations, grievances, and conflicts. Our new covenant proposes to implement the following conflict transformation process to accompany the new Beloved Community Covenant:

We encourage the parties to a disagreement to speak directly to one another if appropriate and safe. The goal is to address a grievance or conflict in a timely manner. When the complexity or intensity of the conflict makes direct contact difficult, we will turn to the appropriate conflict transformation process.

When a Congregant, Deacon or lay leader, staff or contractor, or the

called Minister becomes aware of a persistent or significant conflict or broken trust within the community, that person will report the situation to the Church Council Chair, Vice-Chair, or the called Minister. Together, the Church Council Chair, Vice Chair and the called Minister, (unless a party to the conflict) will meet as soon as possible, to determine the nature, severity, and urgency of the conflict, what further steps may be needed, and who will facilitate the conflict transformation process.

We recognize that this Conflict Transformation process will evolve over time as we evaluate its effectiveness and respond to opportunities or limitations as they become evident.

## Who Will Facilitate A Particular Conflict?

- Between Congregants, the matter will be facilitated by the Deacons and a trained Conflict Transformation facilitator.
  - Between Congregants and staff or contractors, the matter will be facilitated by the HR committee and a trained Conflict Transformation facilitator. (A Congregant who is also a staff person or a contractor is held to be a staff person or contractor, to recognize an implied position of power.)
  - Between Church staff, the matter will be facilitated by the HR committee and the called Minister through performance discussions.
- Between the called Minister and any party to this Covenant, the matter will be facilitated by the Church Council and a trained Conflict Transformation facilitator.

Once the first steps have been taken, of identifying the issues, speaking with the parties, and determining who will serve as facilitator, the process will unfold in a variety of ways. The next steps will necessarily be determined by the choices made by the parties involved under the guidance of the facilitator. The goal will always be to work with honesty, kindness, and compassion toward better understanding, forgiveness, healing, and transformation.

We are committed to developing skills in Conflict Transformation practices and have already begun exploring a variety of workshops and training programs. Training opportunities will begin in Fall 2022, with funding in place through the Thriving Congregations project of the Lilly Foundation. Our goal is to have a team of trained congregants, lay leaders, and ministers available to facilitate conflict resolution and transformation. Our church's called Minister(s) will be required and lay leaders are invited to be trained in facilitating covenant violations. Depending on the situation of each incidence, the called Minister may or may not be the primary facilitator or participate in the process.

Embracing God's gift of Jesus' life as our example, and the Holy Spirit as our guide, our mission is to be a church that attracts, welcomes, serves and supports all ages and all people, to live in harmony and joy with greater faith, hope, and love.



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