

Covenants of Leadership Behavior

by Gil Rendle

Efforts to lead change are often defeated or sabotaged, not by open and honest disagreement, but by inappropriate, unhelpful, or indirect behaviors. Board members who do not say what they think while sitting at the board table but who hold their opinions only to express them freely in the parking lot after the meeting sabotage what can be done to reach agreement. Leaders who understand their role as a responsibility to fight for their own personal preferences or for the preferences of a subgroup in the congregation force discernment of the future into a win/lose proposition. Leaders who openly share their disagreement with board decisions only after the decision has been made undermine any effective leadership toward change.

When working with congregations that have been experiencing such behavioral barriers to effective leadership and decision making, I often recommend the development of a “covenant of leadership” to uphold. It is not a set of rules that, if broken, will result in a hand slap for the offender. Rules make relationships rigid. They constrain. They limit. Covenants, on the other hand, offer us goals that are in keeping with the values and teaching of our faith. They give us a way to talk about the behavior and practices we adopt in our work together as leaders who wrestle with change and with differences.

When developing a covenant of leadership with a group of congregational leaders, I often begin with some of the problems the board has been experiencing and with some basic information about healthy conflict. The group then develops positive statements about healthy and appropriate behavior around which they are willing to covenant with one another. The list of covenant behaviors becomes a formal, written reminder to the people about the behaviors by which they are seeking to live. Below is an example of a covenant of leadership from one governing board.

A COVENANT OF LEADERSHIP

Our Promises to God

We promise to pray, alone and together, to thank God and to ask for God’s help in our lives and in our work for our church, and we promise to listen to God’s answer

to us.

Our Promises to Our Church Family

We promise to demonstrate our leadership and commitment to our church by our example.

We promise to support our church's pastors and staff, so their efforts can be most productive.

We promise to try to discover what is best for our church as a whole, not what might be best for us or for some small group in the church.

Our Promises to Each Other on [the Governing Board]

We promise to respect and care for each other.

We promise to treat our time on [the board] as an opportunity to make an important gift to our church.

We promise to listen with an open, nonjudgmental mind to the words and ideas of the others in our church and on [the board.]

We promise to discuss, debate, and disagree openly in [board] meetings, expressing ourselves as clearly and honestly as possible, so we are certain the [board] understands *our* point of view.

We promise to support the final decision of [the board], whether it reflects our view or not.

This group of leaders wrestled with the specific behaviors and attitudes that were causing them problems in working effectively in their congregation. Their covenantal promises came out of understanding themselves and choosing to practice values and behaviors of their faith that could change their life and work together. Other congregations that have developed covenants of leadership have necessarily developed different lists that speak to their own needs. Each leadership group needs to identify and address the issues and behaviors relevant for them.

The value of such covenants is not in the ability to *enforce* the behaviors. Like any tool of change, the value is in raising the appropriate issues and behaviors to a level of awareness and offering ways to have helpful and safe (nonblaming) conversations about them. Two ways that a tool such as a

covenant of leadership can be used for this purpose are:

1. Read the covenant in unison at the beginning of a board meeting to remind people of the covenant goals they have accepted for their working life together.
2. Spend five minutes in small group or full group discussion of the covenant at the end of a board meeting, asking for descriptive responses to questions such as, How are *you* doing with the covenant? or How do you think *we* as a board are doing with our covenant? or Which of our covenant promises do you think we are struggling with the most?

Covenantal behaviors can be offered to leaders and members alike, not as constraining prohibitions, but as spiritual disciplines of community. If faith communities such as congregations do not wish to default to cultural standards and practices, they will need to practice discipline. Although such disciplines of faith are a part of all our faith traditions, the people of our communities need, and often seek, clarity about which disciplines to follow and how to put them into practice.

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