

Congregational Covenants: The Basics

A Brief Guide to Developing
Congregational Covenants with
Consideration to Dialectical Behaviour
Therapy

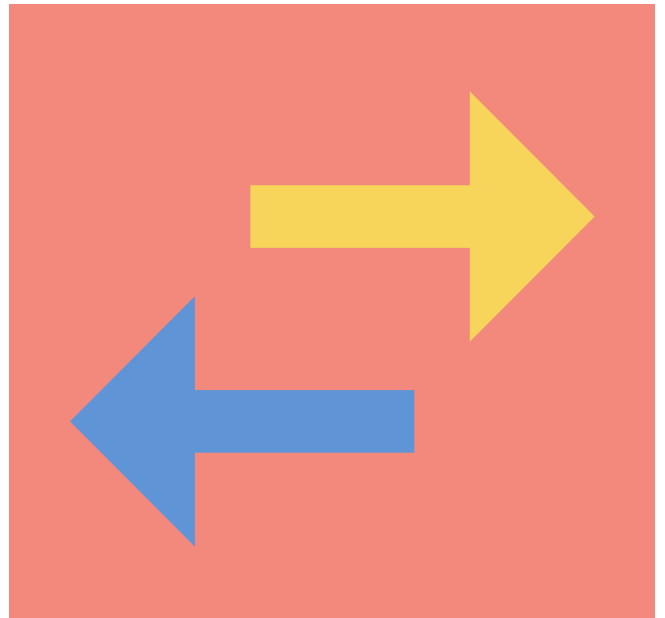
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What is Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and How Can It Help?

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (or 'DBT') is a therapy that was developed to help those who experience intense emotions. 'Dialectical thinking' means understanding that two seemingly opposite things can be true at the same time, for example loving and hating something at the same time.



DBT skills can be useful for members of congregations that are experiencing conflict and relationship difficulties, as it can help us come to a 'middle ground', consider different perspectives, and even manage our own emotions when disagreements happen.

The Shift From Individual to Group; Considering Others on the Journey



In the modern world we're more comfortable than ever with the idea of being individuals. When we're the only ones whose comfort matters on the journey, we can forget that other people are individuals too, and want *their* comfort!

When we're travelling together, it can get a bit uncomfortable if everyone is focusing only on their own needs!



Which is why we need to realise that whilst we're individuals and can meet our preferences when we're alone, in our own spaces, when we're in a group we need to shift our mentality, and be willing to compromise (within reasons) for the comfort of the majority. This doesn't mean letting go of your wants/stance, just considering things from a different perspective.

We can describe this compromise by using a theory...

In his book *Behavioural Covenants in Congregations* (1998) Rendle describes a theory that was developed by an English Judge named Lord Moulton. He called this 'middle ground' where we compromise the "Law of Manners".

On the one side we have enforceable laws, on the other side we have free choice, and in between these two lies the above domain. It looks like this:



The 'Law of Manners' is where our actions aren't enforced by law, but we also don't (or shouldn't!) have complete freedom of choice. This is the space in which we consider the perspective of those around us, even though technically, as long as we're not doing something illegal, we don't actually have to! Yet without this unwritten law, sharing a space with other people would be really challenging!

What Does DBT Say?...

DBT is all about balance and emphasis is put on finding a state between 'emotional mind' and 'rational mind' to come to a place called 'wise mind'. To parallel Lord Moulton's theory, 'rational mind' could be likened to 'enforceable laws', 'emotional mind' could be likened to 'free choice' and 'law of manners' could be likened to 'wise mind'.

Rational mind is more factual and logical (as enforceable laws are), Emotional mind is less constrained (and can get us in to trouble if we don't reign it in, as 'free choice' can), whilst 'wise mind', when we combine the two and avoid extremes, brings about a balanced way to proceed, just as the 'law of manners' can allow us to proceed in our congregations, when sharing space.



How We Can Use This in Our Congregations...

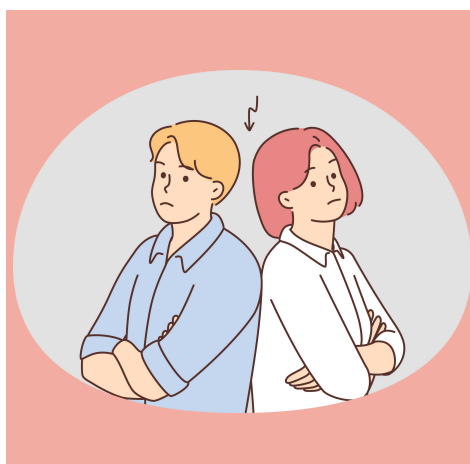
We can use Lord Moulton's theory to develop a general 'way of being' within our congregation by replacing 'Enforceable Laws' with 'Shared Beliefs', Whilst Christian congregations may base these on the bible, for example 'love your neighbour as yourself', 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' and so on, this can be a little more tricky when it comes to Unitarians as our beliefs are so diverse!

A potential place to start is with the object of the General Assembly of Unitarians & Free Christian Churches:

To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

If we understand that we have a duty, as part of our faith, to uphold this, this gives us a framework to exist together within. There are several questions we can now ask ourselves when 'being' within our congregations:

1. Am I allowing and encouraging free thought and exploration of religious/spiritual matters? (No suppressing other's exploration)
2. Are my actions celebrating/showing gratitude for God (whatever/whoever that may be for you as an individual)?
3. Are my actions celebrating life, or focusing on the negative of life?
4. Are my actions serving and helping others and the greater good?
5. Am I respecting the people, animals, and environment around me?
6. Am I supporting a liberal stance?



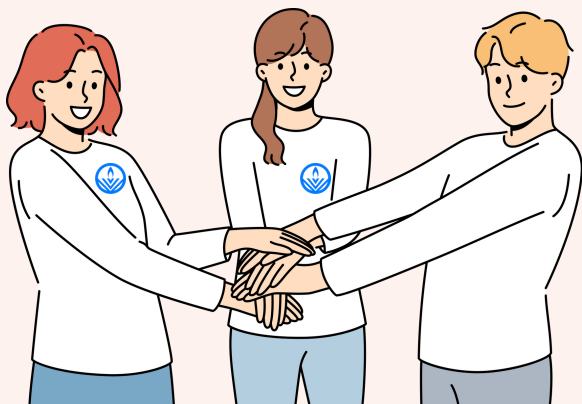
“All too often arguments are accompanied by behaviours and attitudes that clearly do not reflect the values and practices of the faith”
RENDLE (P.XVI)



*As ascertained from analysis of 2023 questionnaires

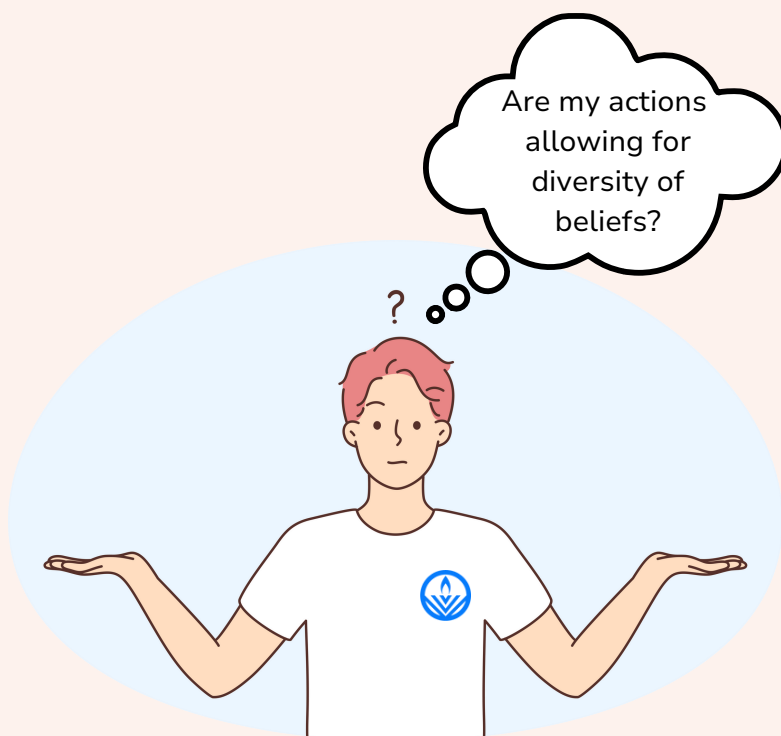
If there are other beliefs shared by everyone in a congregation, these can be considered too. For example, 'Unity' and the idea of everyone/thing being connected is important to many Unitarians. This could lead us to consider whether our actions are promoting unity, or division.

Putting It All Together



Congregational Covenants are a promise we make to one another, which are designed to keep our congregations at peace, working towards our shared goals within a shared framework. When issues arise within a congregation, the Covenant can be referred to to offer some behavioural guidance. However, if a situation arises between members that provokes intense emotions, it's best to re-balance before acting, so we can approach things from a 'wise mind'.

Once we're feeling calmer, we can refer to the Congregation Covenant, and ask ourselves whether our actions (or intended actions) are in line with the promises we've made to each other, based on our shared beliefs. Usually, communication is key when navigating congregational life. The 'THINK CLEAR' resource in the 'Resources' section of the Cardiff Unitarians website can help with this.



Sample Congregational Covenants

Below are two potential Congregational Covenants based on:

- The object of the General Assembly
- The two themes identified as important to all Cardiff Unitarians
- Positive ways of being as described in DBT

1.

“In our desire for religious and spiritual freedom, we celebrate our diversity and individuality, whilst also striving for unity. We celebrate divinity, our community, and seek to uphold our liberal tradition. We promise one another to approach congregational life with inquiring and wise minds, considering the impact of our actions on all around us. We promise to face adversity with awareness and compassion, affirming our respect for one another, and all of creation. This we promise to one another, and the wider Unitarian and Free Christian community”.

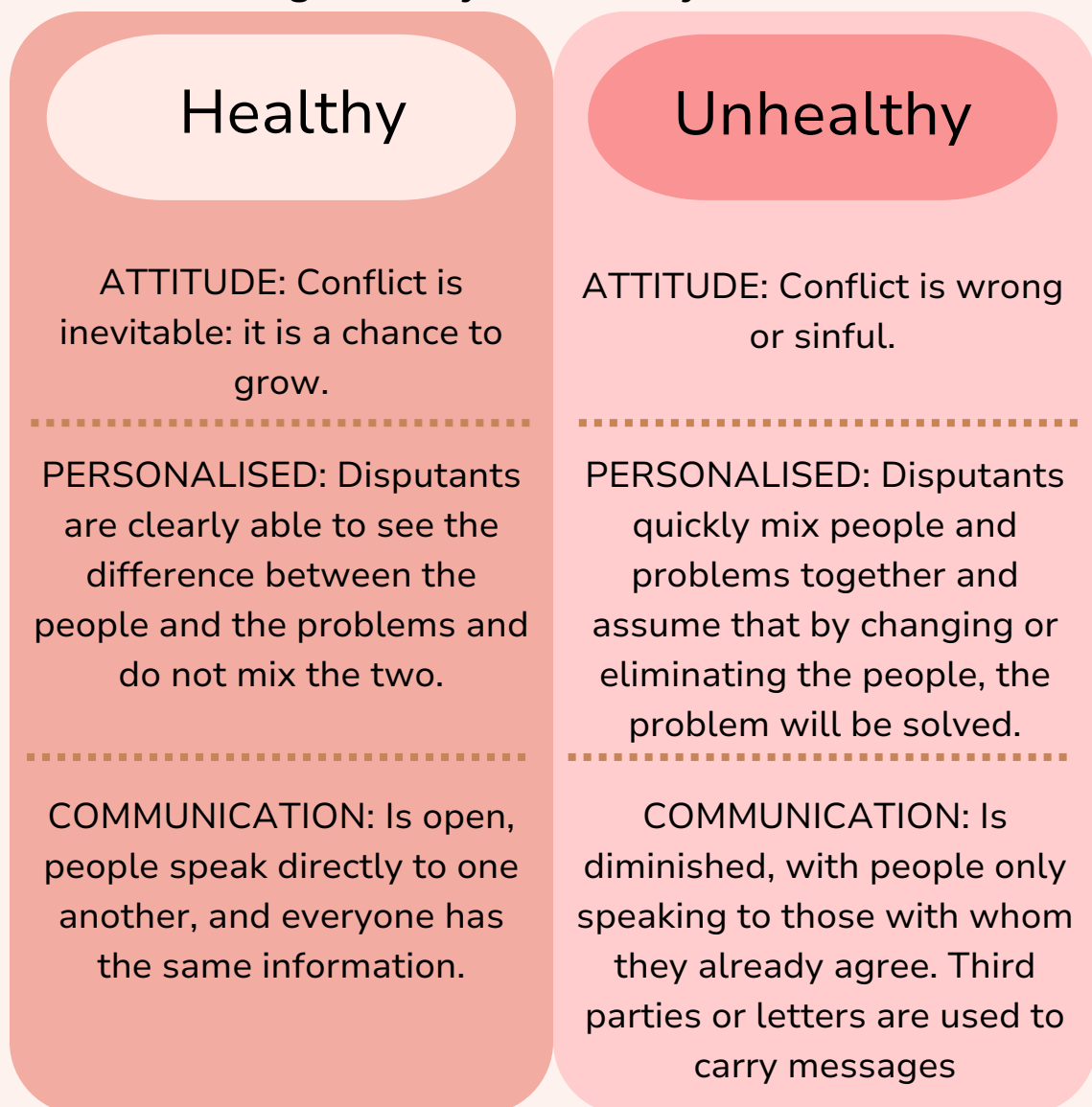
2.

We base our congregation on a foundation of community; vowing before one another to celebrate our diversity,
To encourage free thought,
To acknowledge divinity,
To pay mind to our liberal roots,
To face adversity together,
To strive for unity,
And to do all of this with wise but open minds.
This we promise one another.

Putting Covenants Into Action...

Although Covenants, when followed perfectly can create a more harmonious environment within a congregation, we're all human, and disagreements are inevitable! In his book, Rendle lists healthy VS unhealthy conflict. It looks something like this:

Fig.1 Healthy V Unhealthy Conflict



Note: Adapted from *Behavioural Covenants in Congregations* (p.120-21) by Rendle, G., 1998, the Alban Institute. Copyright 1999 the Alban Institute.

Healthy

THE BALANCE SHEET: Is short. The principals address the issue at hand, not what happened 3 months ago.

THE CHURCH IS INTERACTIVE: There is give and take, an exchange of ideas, and a spirit of cooperation and openness. There is careful listening and thought-out statements.

ACCEPTANCE: Disputants acknowledge the existence of a problem and the need to solve it.

TIMELINESS: Resolution takes as much time as needed. The parties take the time to go through the journey together, experience the pain, and to come out together on the other side.

Unhealthy

THE BALANCE SHEET: is long. The list of grievances grows and examples are collected . People recall not only what they think was done to them but what was said and done to theirs friends as well.

THE CHURCH IS REACTIVE: It cannot be 'touched' without exploding. I write a memo to you and you immediately fire back a nasty letter to me.

DENIAL: Disputants tend to ignore the real problems and deny what's going on.

LACK OF TIME: There is a strong need to solve the problems too quickly. People are very solution-oriented and seek to avoid the pain of conflict by saying "let's get it over with".

Task

1. Read the list of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' behaviours/attitudes on pages 9/10
2. Highlight any of the 'healthy' behaviours/attitudes you think your congregation is particularly good at using
3. Recognise any 'unhealthy' behaviours/attitudes that crop up during times of conflict/difficulty
4. Choose one of the Covenants on page 8 and consider areas of this that are relevant to the 'unhealthy' behaviours/attitudes that you've picked up on



“Congregations are places and opportunities for people to practice other behaviours that are more caring and more creative”

RENDLE (P.50)

“Practicing the discipline described by the behavioural covenant is an action of faith, since practicing such helpful and healthy behaviours is an acting out of one’s stated beliefs and values”

RENDLE (P.50)

This exercise can help us recognise where we’re doing well and where we maybe need to consider our responses/attitudes. If we make a Covenant together, we’ve made a promise to one another to comply and embrace the words within it. This may mean re-evaluating and redirecting our approach to something. If you’re struggling with this exercise, see the example on the next page.

Unhealthy

ATTITUDE: Conflict is wrong or sinful.

“We promise to **face** adversity with awareness and compassion”

PERSONALISED: Disputants quickly mix people and problems together and assume that by changing or eliminating the people, the problem will be solved.

“we celebrate our diversity and individuality, whilst also striving for unity” / “affirming our respect for one another”

COMMUNICATION: Is diminished, with people only speaking to those with whom they already agree. Third parties or letters are used to carry messages

“affirming our respect for one another” / “We promise one another to approach congregational life with inquiring and wise minds”

“In our desire for religious and spiritual freedom, we celebrate our diversity and individuality, whilst also striving for unity. We celebrate divinity, our community, and seek to uphold our liberal tradition. We promise one another to approach congregational life with inquiring and wise minds, considering the impact of our actions on all around us, We promise to face adversity with awareness and compassion, affirming our respect for one another, and all of creation. This we promise to one another, and the wider Unitarian and Free Christian community”.

Recap & Further Reading

Behavioural Congregational Covenants can be developed from:

- Shared beliefs
- Shared values
- Common goals
- Areas of attitude/behaviour needing maintenance

You can read more about Congregational Covenants here:

A Comprehensive Guide to Congregational Covenants by the Unitarian Universalist Association:

<https://www.uua.org/leaderlab/congregational-covenants>

Forming A Covenant by Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley:

<https://uucb.org/forming-a-covenant/>



References

Rendle, G. (1998) *Behavioural Covenants in Congregations*.
Alban Books

The Unitarians (2024) *How We Work*. Available at:
<https://www.unitarian.org.uk/how-we-work/>