



A four-week series Covenant & commitment

by the Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship, Boise, Idaho

OVERVIEW

Week one: *Overview of covenant and commitment.* We will look at biblical covenants and commitments, as well as our view of commitment/covenant. We will ask everyone in the congregation to consider the questions: What have they committed their life to and what difference has that made? *Scriptures:* Genesis 17:1-10, 15-16 (God's third covenant renewal with Abraham and Sarah, changing of their names as a daily reminder to them); Jeremiah 31:33.

Week two: *Christian commitment in a world of pluralism.* We recognize that we live in a diverse world. As people of faith, we want to be committed to Christ yet still be people who are open and tolerant of those who view the world differently. This service will explore how we lean into this balance, attempting to be both people of passion and people who listen to and love those with whom we disagree. *Scriptures:* John 14:5-11 (I am the way, the truth . . .) and Matthew 7:1-5 (Do not judge), contrasting these two truths that we seek to live by.

Week three: *A time for everything; commitments that are broken.* We recognize that commitment is difficult and that covenants can bring us life's greatest joys as well as life's deepest pain. This service will attempt to name the reality and pain of broken commitments. *Scriptures:* Genesis 21:1-3, 8-20 (Hagar and Ishmael put out by Abraham).

Week four: *Anabaptist-Mennonite view of commitment.* What, if anything, is unique to the traditional Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective of commitment? This also may be your covenant-signing Sunday. *Scriptures:* Luke 14:25-33 (the cost of discipleship).

Leader is offering two worship resources that may be used by congregations at any time. These resources were created by Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship (Boise, Idaho) and Lombard Mennonite Church (Lombard, Ill.) and used in their own churches. Additional worship resources are available on www.leaderonline.org from other congregations. We appreciate all the responses we received to our request for worship resources for this issue of Leader.

INTRODUCTION

For groups that have an annual commitment renewal service, this series can build toward such a service, with the commitment renewal as the final, climatic service. This outline does not include a specific commitment ritual, but leaves the option open to each congregation to use whatever ritual fits best in your own context.

We used this particular series during September 2013 at Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship in Boise, Idaho. Our congregation is somewhat new to the act of annual covenant renewal, and so we built this service seeking to put some theological background to our ritual of renewal.

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VISUALS

Here are two options for images:

Option A: Create a simple banner one of two ways

- 1 Use a number of words that are synonyms for covenant (*promise, vow, pledge, etc.*). Place the word *covenant* in the middle of the banner; and then all around that word add words that help us understand this word. As *covenant* is not a word we commonly use in our day-to-day language, this simple visual can help congregants feel a bit more at ease with this somewhat strange and churchy word.
- 2 Another banner that could be used is similar, but allows for a congregational component. Again, this will be a banner of words with the central word being *covenant*. However, around it include words that symbolize different things we have committed our lives to (*marriage, family, job, etc.*). This serves the same purpose but allows us to think about our personal connection to this word.

If you use this banner idea, allow an opportunity for congregational additions to the banner. As a response to the first service, have a time when people can add to the banner. Make available pieces of paper or cloth, depending on your banner construction. On those pieces ask people to write down something to which they have committed their life. Children may also do this. If they would like, they could draw a picture of something they have committed to (or taken care of) or of a promise they have made.

A good time to do this could be during the offering. People could write on their pieces of fabric/paper at this time.

After the sermon (perhaps during a song of response) people could bring their papers/fabric forward. They could either tape their papers on the banner on their own, or this could be done during the week by the makers of the banner (depending on the look you want and the size of your congregation). If your congregation is large, you might need multiple banners/areas for people to add their pieces of cloth or fabric.

Option B: Altar table visuals

- 1 On our altar table we had a copy of *Martyrs Mirror* (Herald Press, 1938) as a symbol of the commitment of Christian and Anabaptist martyrs who are our spiritual ancestors.

- 2 Use a large bowl filled with water. If you have a bowl you use for baptism, this would be the perfect bowl. If not, then a large bowl filled with water as a symbol of the commitment of baptism. This bowl will be especially important for the first service.
- 3 A towel could be another symbol to go on the altar table as a symbol of baptism and also as symbol of service and footwashing.

RESPONSE ACTIONS

Artwork

In adding some depth to this series, you might want to include an artful response following the sermon. We found that the response after the sermon allowed an extended time of reflection and integration. Each week, ask a member of your congregation to offer an artful response to the particular area of focus (or on commitment/covenant in general). A response might be a poem someone has written, a reading, a painting or drawing, a song, or an interpretive dance.

To help individuals consider their response you might send them these questions as a starting point:

- What have your experiences been with commitment or covenant?
- What was the first commitment you can remember making (to a friend, a job, to take care of a pet, to babysit, to watch someone's home, to do chores at home . . .)?
- When were you unable to fulfill a commitment? What thoughts and feelings come to mind in reflecting on that time?
- Was there ever a time when a particular commitment or covenant was no longer life giving for you? How did you handle that? Were you able to shift things, or did that commitment need to end?
- Was a particular commitment ever hard for you to make? Did you ever not make a commitment because you were afraid? What did you learn from that? How has that shaped you?
- Did someone ever break a commitment made to you? What emotions does this memory evoke? How do you think about that time now? How did you move on from that time?
- What difference has commitment made in your life? What have you committed yourself to? What difference has that made?

- Is there a particular person you associate with the word *commitment*? Who taught you about commitment? Who was an example of commitment to you? How and why?
- How do you think about your own covenants and commitments when relating to people who have made different choices (i.e., different life choices, different financial commitments, different faith traditions and commitments)?
- Was there ever a time when two separate commitments seemed at odds with each other (i.e., family versus work or extended family versus immediate family)? How did you handle that? What thoughts and emotions does that memory stir?
- Have you ever been too committed to something? When did you realize that you were too zealous or eager in a particular commitment? How did that soften or change with time?

Anointing

As a response to the third week's service and to acknowledge the depth and reality of broken relationships, you may want to offer a time of anointing for any who might so desire.

This is not something we do often in most Mennonite congregations, and it may be a strange ritual for many. As the *Minister's Manual* (Herald Press, 1998) notes, we often associate anointing with physical healing; but in truth, anointing is not done as a guarantee of physical recovery but as a way of committing our healing process to God. Anointing is acknowledgment of our need for God in our healing process as we seek to be reconciled, forgiving, whole people. Historically, followers of Jesus have used anointing when there was a fracture in a relationship.

As this is the focus of this particular service, you may want to offer such anointing as a response. We will offer a form of anointing. But, of course, there may be ways and words that better fit your particular context.

MUSIC

THEME SONG OPTIONS

STJ 27 "God of the Bible"

HWB 389 "Take My Life"

SONG OPTIONS FOR THE SERIES

Sing the Story

- 10 "Come! Walk in the Light"
- 39 "Will You Come and Follow Me?"
- 54 "What Does the Lord Require of You?"
- 114 "God Has Chosen Me"
- 121 "Nothing Is Lost on the Breath of God"

Sing the Journey

- 2 "Come, Walk with Us"
- 27 "God of the Bible"
- 62 "Christ's Is the World"
- 78 "We Will Walk with God"
- 89 "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry"

Hymnal: A Worship Book

- 5 "There Is a Place of Quiet Rest"
- 6 "Here in This Place"
- 26 "Holy Spirit, Come with Power"
- 163 "Obey My Voice"
- 181 "My Soul Proclaims with Wonder"
- 596 "And I Will Raise You Up"
- 352 "Gentle Shepherd, Come and Lead Us"
- 367 "For the Healing of the Nations"
- 372 "O Healing River"
- 389 "Take My Life"
- 395 "Here I Am, Lord"
- 409 "What Does the Lord Require?"
- 411 "I Bind My Heart This Tide"
- 425 "Come, Come Ye Saints"
- 433 "Go, My Children"

PROPOSED ORDER OF WORSHIP

- Prelude
- Hymn
- Focus statement
- Hymn

Welcome
Call to worship
Prayer
Children's time (available at www.leaderonline.org)
Offering and offertory
Hymn (theme song, if using)
Scripture reading (available at www.leaderonline.org)
Sermon
Artful response
Song of response
Joys and concerns/Sharing time
Communal prayer
Sending song
Benediction
Postlude

CALL TO WORSHIP

We will use the same call to worship every Sunday of this series as a means of helping hold each service under the same umbrella.

Leader: Our God, we gather to worship you,
the One who creates all things.

People: **For the gift of creation, we give thanks.**

Leader: We gather to worship you, the One
committed to us through a love that
never ends.

People: **For the gift of reconciliation, we give thanks.**

Leader: We gather to worship you, the One
who continually seeks us by the Spirit.

People: **For the gift of your presence, we give thanks.**

Leader: We bring to you the offerings of our
commitment—thanks, praise, and awe
are our gifts of love.

ALL: *We gather to worship you, Trinity of
love: God above us, God beside us,
God beneath us; the Beginning, the
End, the Everlasting One. Amen.*

—Modified for the theme from *HWB* 670.



Week One

Covenant: *A living, breathing thing*



Focus Statement

Whatever we commit ourselves to in this life, there is a spiritual component to that commitment. It impacts us at the deepest levels, at a soul level.

Scriptures: Genesis 17:1-10, 15-16; Jeremiah 31:33

Song Suggestions (see songs for the series):

HWB 181 *My Soul Proclaims with Wonder*

HWB 596 *And I Will Raise You Up*

HWB 163 *Obey My Voice*

STS 10 *Come! Walk in the Light*

STJ 78 *Sizohamba naye (We Will Walk with God)*

Prelude

Hymn

Focus statement

Hymn

Welcome

Call to worship (see p. 24)

Prayer: HWB 676

Children's time

Offering

Hymn (theme song)

Scripture reading

Sermon starter

Covenant, as a term and concept, has largely fallen into disuse in our society. We use other words like *commitment, vow, promise, treaty, contract, agreement, responsibility, oath, allegiance, or care*, but we rarely use *covenant* anymore. A covenant is not like a contract, where there are clear indications of whether or not the contract has been fulfilled or broken. Rather, a covenant is much more messy, much more fluid, much more like life. This concept of covenant recognizes that commitment has a spiritual component. Covenant acknowledges that, whatever it is we commit ourselves to in this life, there is a spiritual component to that commitment; it impacts us at the deepest levels, at soul levels. No other word in our language holds this reality.

Why does God continue to appear to Abram and Sarai and renew the covenant to them? Does God forget? No, God continues to make this promise to Abram and Sarai because a covenant is a living, breathing thing. Every time that promise is said aloud, every time those words are uttered, the promise is renewed—more life is breathed into it. Every time we say, “I love you” to one another—as parents, or siblings, or spouses, or friends—

that promise is renewed. New life is breathed again into that covenant with those words. It's not because we forgot the promises we made, but that covenants are messy things that need constant attention and care. They require intention, time, and deliberate renewal.

On this third time that God appeared, God decided it was time to give them a daily reminder of their covenant. So God changed their names, just slightly, from Abram to Abraham, "father of many nations," and from Sarai to Sarah, "kings shall come from her."

It would have been a lot easier if God had just given us a contract to sign or a list of 600 rules to follow. But that is not what God did; instead we were given this living and breathing commitment to make with God and one another, a commitment that requires constant attention and must be uttered again and again. A covenant is not made complete with a signature or even with our being dipped in baptismal waters; a commitment is only made complete with our lives. It is certainly good that we have one another for such a commitment as this.

You may want to include a reading of HWB 777 at the end of your sermon or toward the end of the service. It will act as a reminder of the commitment we made with one another at the time of baptism.

Artful response

Song of response

Congregational sharing: joys and concerns

Communal prayer

Benediction

Before the service, find a few branches to place in your bowl of water. You will use these branches to sprinkle your congregants as they receive the benediction. As you recite this benediction, walk down the center aisle, gently sprinkling people with water—a reminder of their baptismal covenant. You may do this as you recite the final blessing, or have others do this, walking down the various aisles of your congregation (depending on the size).

Blessing

*And now, as you go from this place, remember the covenant that you made and renewed:
the covenant you have made with God; with yourself; with one another; and with all of creation.
Go in that memory. Go in peace. Amen.*

Week Two

Claiming Christ, loving all: Christian commitment in a pluralistic world



Focus Statement

"The truth we claim in our faith is not in tension with an open and respectful dialogue with others we see differently than ourselves. Rather, our truth affirms the dignity of each person, their culture, and their convictions. Christ's message of love can only be seen in us if we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable."
—John Howard Yoder

Scriptures: John 14:5-11 and Matthew 7:1-5

Song Suggestions (see songs for the series):

- STS 54 *What Does the Lord Require of You?*
- STJ 62 *Christ's Is the World*
- STJ 2 *Hamba nathi (Come, Walk with Us)*
- HWB 26 *Holy Spirit, Come with Power*
- HWB 6 *Here in This Place*

Prelude

Hymn

Focus statement

Hymn

Welcome

Call to worship (see p. 24)

Prayer: HWB 675

Children's time

Offering

Hymn (theme song)

Scripture reading

Sermon starter

We live in tension: the tension of claiming the utter uniqueness of Jesus Christ while at the same time wanting to be open and loving, not wanting to contribute to the hateful and fear-producing rhetoric as so many Christians before us have done. These two Scriptures have been selected as a way to illustrate the tension we feel. On one hand, we believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We believe that we come to understand God by understanding Jesus; we come to know God by knowing this person, Jesus. At the same time, we have been told not to stand in judgment of one another, to not be the religious elite who, to the detriment of their own faith development, point out the speck in their neighbor's eye. This Jesus whom we seek to follow instructs us to not relate to others with a spirit of judgment, to be a people slow to condemn.

This is the hard tension we live with. It is a real tension, and a tension not easily put to rest. I am not exactly sure how we resolve this tension, but an impactful sermon might explore how you (as pastor, as Christian) or how your congregation seeks to lean into this tension rather than how we resolve it for all time. How do you seek to lean into this tension in your community and as a follower of Christ?

Some themes to explore with regard to leaning into such a tension might include:

- *Using the metaphors of both journey and home.* In their introduction to the book *Youth Ministry at a Crossroads* (Herald Press), Andy Brubacher Kaethler and Bob Yoder recognize the need for both these metaphors in healthy faith development. We often use “faith journey” as a primary metaphor, but “home” is equally as vital. For children to develop in a healthy way, they need a sense of home—a safe place of belonging where they know they are loved and cared for. It is at home where we begin to understand and make sense of the world. Home provides us with boundaries, with limits that help us make meaning. From our spiritual home, we can safely begin to journey outward to explore other ways of knowing and being known.
- *Be who we are.* As we interact with people of other faiths, we must name things we hold in common as well as be honest about where we are different—how we see the world differently and how we

understand God differently. We must be honest about our differences, but in an open, respectful, and humble way, remembering that Christ frequently critiqued the pious religious leaders of his day.

- *Being a people of passion.* If we want our faith to be passed down, if we want our world to be transformed by the love of God, it will not happen by trying to shield our children from the teachings of Buddhists and Muslims and atheists. It will happen if we are a people of passion, a people who are continually trying to live out our commitment to God in Christ.

Artful response

Song of response

Congregational sharing: joys and concerns

Communal prayer

Sending song

Benediction

Now, may the God who created you with limitless potential go with you as you leave this place, filling you with love and passion that will flow through you into the world, that you might be part of the world's healing this day. Go in passion. Go in peace. Amen.

Week Three

Covenants that are broken: Broken commitment, vision renewed



Focus Statement

“To pray is to dream in league with God, to envision God’s holy visions.” —Abraham Joshua Heschel

Scriptures: Genesis 21:1-3, 8-20

Song Suggestions (see songs for the series):

- STS 121 *Nothing Is Lost on the Breath of God*
- STJ 89 *I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry*
- HWB 433 *Go, My Children*
- HWB 5 *There Is a Place of Quiet Rest*
- HWB 372 *O Healing River*
- HWB 367 *For the Healing of the Nations*
- HWB 352 *Gentle Shepherd, Come and Lead Us*

Prelude

Hymn

Focus statement

Hymn

Welcome

Call to worship (see p. 24)

Prayer: HWB 677

Children's time

Offering

Hymn (theme song)

Scripture reading

Sermon starter

This is a hard story to read, a troubling story. Abraham, the patriarch of our faith—this great follower of God—kicks his own child out of his camp. These were nomadic, desert people who moved from place to place as a large clan, and the clan protected them from all the other things that call the desert their home. It was in that clan unit that you had food, shelter, water, and safety. And Abraham sends Hagar out, away from their clan. He sends her away—the mother of his child, a woman he has been intimate with, a woman who has been under his protection for years—out of the protection of their clan. Hagar and Abraham's relationship has become broken; the relationship between father Abraham and his son Ishmael has all of a sudden changed dramatically, and they will never interact as father and son in the same way again.

We probably all have a family story like this of some sort, a story of a broken promise, of a parent favoring one child, or a father not fulfilling his duties. These are stories of broken commitments or relationships, or of a family member who suddenly becomes an outcast, creating a fractured family. This story of Hagar and Abraham, though it is difficult to hear, is one to which we can relate.

So Hagar wandered in the wilderness, not sure where to go or what to do. After her water ran out, she laid Ishmael under a bush, not being able to look at him as he died from dehydration in the desert. But as Ishmael's name tells us, "God hears our cries" of distress. God sends an angel to attend to her and give her two things. First, he meets her immediate need for water. Second, and most important, God gives Hagar a vision for life outside of Abraham's clan: God tells her, "I will make a great nation of Ishmael." He gives her a vision for the future, a vision for a new life.

Often a fractured relationship is one of the most difficult and painful things to bear. We are forced to envision life in a way we never expected. We have pictured our life in a particular way—a vision that has led us, a vision by which we have made our life decisions, a vision with a particular spouse or within a particular family unit, a vision of us working at a particular job, or living on a specific piece of land. Suddenly we are forced to picture an alternative reality: our lives without that foundational commitment or covenant relationship. Most of us are not prepared to picture our life in such a way, without husband or wife, without mother or father, without communication from a particular family member, without a particular career, without our land, without our house.

But "God hears." God enters the picture and issues a new covenant with Hagar. In doing so, God provides her with a vision for what life might look like outside of her relationship with Abraham: "I will make a great nation of Ishmael." I believe that this new vision for life empowers Hagar to find her way out of the desert. This vision allows her to slowly, gradually start living into a new promise of a different life. It's not a life she had ever wanted, not one she had ever pictured, but a vision from which someday she might be able to again live . . . even flourish.

Artful response

Song of response

Anointing

If anointing is not a common practice for your congregation, you may want to offer a brief bit of background.

You might transition with something like this: "Historically, one of the times that followers of Jesus have used anointing has been when there was a fracture in relationships. Because broken relationships has been

the focus of our service this morning, we will have a time to offer anointing now in recognition of broken relationships we have healed from, broken relationships and covenants that we are still grieving, and fracturing relationships that we need to continue to offer up to God's tender care."

Instructions

Give instructions on how this anointing will happen. You will probably want to ask someone ahead of time to play instrumental music or lead congregational singing as the anointing ritual is performed.

Let's begin by praying together:

O God of peace,

who continues to work for the reconciliation of all things—

the healing of the entire cosmos

and, at the same time, the healing of our individual lives—

we come before you now. By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, into your healing presence, that we may be still and know that you are God; that we may be still and feel a bit of your healing breath upon our neck.

In your loving name we pray. Amen.

Anointing prayer (adapted for this service from *The Minister's Manual*):

I anoint you with oil in the name of God our heavenly parent, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May God's healing Spirit continue to move in you, and through you, and with you—guiding you on your continued journey toward healing, wholeness, and reconciliation. This we ask of the God who, by the power that is at work within us, is able to do far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine. To this God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Congregational sharing: joys and concerns

Communal prayer

Sending song

Benediction

And now, as you go from this place, may the God who hears be ever-present to you, continuing to breathe a breath of hope into your broken places so that healing and hope might flow through you and into the world. Go in peace. Amen.

Week Four

The weight of discipleship: An Anabaptist-Mennonite look at commitment and covenant



Focus Statement

"The medium is Christ whom no one can truly know unless they follow him in their life, and no one may follow him unless they have first known him." —Hans Denck

Scriptures: Luke 14:25-33

Song Suggestions (see songs for the series):

- HWB 8 *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship*
- HWB 395 *Here I Am, Lord*
- HWB 409 *What Does the Lord Require?*
- HWB 411 *I Bind My Heart*
- HWB 425 *Come, Come Ye Saints*
- STS 39 *Will You Come and Follow Me?*
- STS 54 *What Does the Lord Require of You?*
- STS 114 *God Has Chosen Me*



Prelude

Hymn

Focus statement

Hymn

Welcome

Call to worship (see p. 24)

Prayer: HWB 672

Children's time

Offering

Hymn (theme song)

Scripture reading

Sermon starter

Here is a passage of importance to our theological ancestors, the early Anabaptists. While important, and even comforting, to them, it is a difficult passage for our modern ears. We are not sure what to make of it. When we read or hear these words about hating our family, we assume Jesus must be speaking figuratively or using hyperbole. Usually, our first impulse is to soften these strong words in some manner. In a country that often equates Christian faith with family values, we are pretty certain Jesus cannot be too serious here. And so, to this difficult passage, we may add some context to these words of Jesus. We can try to give a little nuance to this idea of “hating our family,” but it does not really soften the heart of message too much.

Commentators tell us that Jesus was using a type of figure of speech that we do not use anymore. In Jesus' day, the way you stated a preference was by pairing two things and saying that you loved one and hated the other. It did not have anything to do with an emotional feeling of actually hating something, but was rather a matter of stating priorities. So, this might help our ears feel a bit less offended. But still, the message is about making the kingdom of God a priority over our families—not a simple thing (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Cowley Press).

Commentators also tell us that these words would likely not have offended those who first read them. In fact, they probably would have been words of comfort. The author, Luke, is writing to a community of people who are likely already estranged from their biological families. “In Luke's time, it was the custom for whole households to adopt the faith of their heads. Everyone in the house was compelled to believe what that person at the top believed (most likely a male). So spouses, children, servants, donkeys—everyone—was to follow the beliefs and religious practices of the head of the household” (adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*).

So, if one person in the house—be it a child, a spouse, or even a slave—elected to become a follower of Christ, it was nothing short of mutiny; it was an act that separated a person from her or his family. To claim Jesus as Lord over Caesar was an act that could get the whole family in trouble. It would cast suspicion on the whole family. So, to many of these first Christians, these were words of comfort because they were separated from their families. Their choice to follow the life and teachings of Christ had separated them from their families.

Likely, reading these words of Jesus was comforting—normalizing—for them. It let them know that Jesus anticipated such a situation as theirs. Being cast out of their families was not their fault; rather it was something to be expected when making such a focused commitment.

This is also why this passage may have held such importance for many early Anabaptists who also were separated from their families by their choice to follow this new way of being. It spoke comfort to them and helped them renew their commitment to follow Jesus.

But still, while interesting, the plain truth that we don't want to hear is that Jesus is asking for a total commitment; a life lived with God's kingdom as our priority. Jesus is asking for us to call him "Lord," meaning that we swear our primary allegiance to the life and teachings of Jesus: not to proclaim Caesar as lord, or America as lord; not to proclaim capitalism or money as lord; not to claim being busy as our Lord; not even to proclaim our own mother or father, husband or wife, as our primary allegiance or focus in this life. This is not an easy thing Jesus is asking of his followers—of us. But still, he asks.

Rather than trying to gloss over such a passage, we probably should sit in the discomfort of it for a while. Allow that discomfort to shed some honest light onto our priorities; allow such a passage to help us reflect on those things that keep us from living a passionate life; to share our discomfort with others, to be honest with it; to listen to how some of these first followers of Christ have tried to live with the call to such a commitment.

Artful response

Song of response

Covenant or commitment ritual (if your congregation does this)

Congregational sharing: joys and concerns

Communal prayer

Sending song

Benediction

Now, as you go from this place, may both the discomfort and promise of these words of Jesus go with you. May they blow through your life, nudging you to release those things that hold you captive, so we might have new life and have it abundantly. Go in peace. Amen.