

# Covenant Celebrations

with Evangelical United Church of Christ  
Theology, Expectations, Expenses, and Liturgy

## THEOLOGY - OUR UNDERSTANDING OF COVENANT

Evangelical United Church of Christ invites committed couples to share in covenanted relationships. Covenant is an ancient word that is powerfully relevant for people of faith in a new day. Defined by Miriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as a "formal, solemn and binding relationship", covenant is a biblical concept offering a depth of commitment that speaks to the hunger within our souls.

Evangelical United Church of Christ recognizes that our ability to be in covenant relationships with one another is made possible by God's covenant with us. We understand that creation itself is an offering of covenant, and that throughout scripture we read examples of God's covenant with us. We believe in the presence of God in our lives today, continually reaching out to us in love. God's covenant with us becomes a model for our relationships with one another.

Evangelical United Church of Christ offers a variety of rituals to support covenants. As an Open and Affirming (ONA) congregation we recognize the value of covenant commitments among both same and differently gendered couples. We understand our role to be one of sanctuary, providing a safe and healing place both for those who have experienced the church as a welcoming place and also for those who have experienced disenfranchisement from the church. We encourage couples to work with the pastoral leadership of this congregation to design covenant rituals that may be called by many names including 'weddings', 'blessing ceremonies', and 'covenant ceremonies'.

Evangelical United Church of Christ understands covenanted relationships to include not only the two persons speaking vows, but also to include both God and wider community. As couples make promises with each other, these promises involve God and the wider community. We understand, then, the importance of the community's witness and pledge of support. Given the communal nature of our understanding of covenant, *we ask that all people seeking to share in these rituals be active in this congregation.* For these reasons we encourage the pastoral leadership of this congregation be involved in your covenant ceremony.

Evangelical United Church of Christ values the inherent worth and equality of each party entering into covenant. The traditions of both our church and our culture reflect a variety of differing values. We ask couples to be critically aware of the values that they implicitly endorse during this important time. The pastoral leadership will assist couples in designing rituals that are reflective of the values that they share with one another and this community of faith.

Evangelical United Church of Christ believes that covenant ceremonies should embody our most faithful understandings of stewardship. Although we appreciate the importance of creating memorable experiences, we invite couples to consider the implications of the celebration's expense. We encourage couples to consider simpler options and will assist in that exploration.

Evangelical United Church of Christ is not a servant of the State of Missouri, but recognizes that the support to the wider culture is an important aspect of support for covenanted relationships. Therefore the pastoral leadership of Evangelical United Church of Christ may endorse Marriage Licenses and other legal contracts as they deem appropriate. These should be provided to the church office prior to the ceremony.

*(This statement approved by the Church Council in February 2002.)*

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## EXPECTATIONS

Before the week of the celebration:

1. Couples are expected:
  - to schedule consultations with the Pastor(s) of Evangelical UCC to discuss the theological understanding of covenant, the particular expectations of this covenant relationship, and the content of the worship service.
  - to be in regular communication with our Office Administrator.
  - to consult and work directly with our Music Director (telephone or email are most helpful).
2. If a Saturday ceremony is desired, please note that the sanctuary is unavailable between 4:00pm and 6:30pm. Friday evening and Sunday afternoon services may be considered.
3. Fees, defined below, are to be paid one week in advance of scheduled ceremony.
4. The Fellowship Hall may be available for receptions. Use of the Fellowship Hall can be arranged directly with the Office Administrator and additional fees may apply.

During the time of celebration:

5. While a visual record of the celebration is an important remembrance, too often we have allowed our 'recording' to interfere with the full worship experience. Pictures can be taken throughout the building and grounds both before and after the ceremony. *We ask that any photography during the ceremony be discreet and without the use of flash.* A stationary tripod for video taping may be positioned in the back of the sanctuary.
6. We are a *smoke free, rice free, and alcohol free* property. If you have questions, please ask.
7. The Pastor and Staff of Evangelical UCC will not presume to be invited guests to dinners or receptions without specific invitation.

## EXPENSES

Base expenses and services include:

- \$500 - supports the cost of the full time staff and the use of the facilities. *This fee is waived for supporting members and friends of EUCC.*
- \$150 - organist/musician (scheduled in consultation with EUCC Music Director)
- \$150 - facilities coordinator (onsite before, during and after rehearsal and ceremony)

Optional expenses and services include:

- custodial services for couples who prefer to have staff for set up and clean up. It is the responsibility of every couple not choosing this service to ensure that the facility is cleaned and ready for the next group.
- individual consultation with the Music Director (to preview music, attend rehearsal, other)
- additional musicians (instrumentalists and soloists)
- honorariums as appropriate

Please discuss any special concerns or considerations regarding expenses with the Pastor(s).

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## LITURGY

The following liturgy is adapted from the Book of Worship for the United Church of Christ. As this liturgy may be new for some, we ask couples to read this liturgy carefully. Couples are encouraged to engage in critical theological reflection with the pastor as they prepare for their covenanting ceremony. This liturgy is intended to be illustrative rather than definitive and couples are encouraged to tailor the liturgy to reflect their covenant commitment.

### Prelude

*Seating of honored guests (often parents and grandparents) prior to the Processional.*

### Processional

- \* Clergy begin the processional (center aisle),
  - \* followed by attending couples, children, and other celebrants.
  - \* The members celebrating covenant enter last, entering with families of origin (bride and father, groom and mother, bride and mother, etc). They may instead chose to enter together.
- Musical selections, chosen in consultation with the Music Director, might include: 'Trumpet Voluntary', 'Spring', 'Canon in D', and 'Ode to Joy'.

### Greeting

Love is a gift from God and all who love are children of God,  
Let us worship God together. (people are seated)  
Friends, we are gathered here today in the presence of God  
to witness the marriage/covenant of N. and N., to surround them with our prayers, and to share their joy.  
We have come as their family and their friends, we have come to share their joy and to celebrate with them.  
We have come more importantly as witnesses -  
witnesses to the vows which will unite N. and N. in a sacred covenant.  
Let us enter into this celebration confident that the Holy Spirit meets us in this place.

### Prayer

Gracious God, always faithful in your love for us we rejoice in your presence here today.  
You create love. You unite us as one human family. You offer your word and lead us in light.  
You open your loving arms and embrace us with strength. May the presence of Christ fill our hearts with new joy  
and make new the lives of your servants whose marriage/covenant we celebrate.  
Bless all creation through this sign of your love shown in the love of N. and N. for each other.  
May the power of the Holy Spirit sustain them and all of us in love that knows no end. Amen.

### Scripture Readings

One or more passages of scripture or other appropriate readings (such as poetry) may be read during the ceremony by the pastor or lay-persons (family or friends). Couples are encouraged to choose texts which reflect the covenant that they are making.

Some suggested passages follow.

Proverbs 3:3-6	A seal upon your heart
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12	A threefold cord
Matthew 7:21, 24-27	A house built upon a rock
Matthew 22:35-40	Love, the greatest commandment
Mark 10:42-45	True greatness
I Corinthians 13	The greatest of these is love
Philippians 4:4-9	Rejoice in the Lord
1 John 3:18-24	Love one another
1 John 4:7-16	God is love

### Charge

### Special Music

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## Declaration of Intention

Before God and this congregation I ask you to affirm your willingness to enter this covenant (of marriage) and to share all the joys and sorrows of this new relationship, whatever the future may hold.

N./N., will you have N./N. to be your wife/husband/partner  
and will you love her/him faithfully as long as you both shall live?

## Pledge of Support

Will the families of both N. and N. please stand in support of this couple. Do you offer your prayerful blessing and loving support of this marriage/covenant? And if so, say "I do".

Will the congregation please stand in support of this couple. Do you, as the people of God, pledge your support and encouragement to the covenant commitment that N. and N. are making? If so, please say "We do".

God of our mothers and fathers hear our pledges encouraging and supporting this union of N. and N..  
Bless us as we offer our prayerful and loving support to them. Bless them as they pledge their lives to one another.  
With faith in you and each other may this couple always bear witness to the reality of the love to which we witness this day. May their love continue to grow and may it be a true reflection of your love for us all. Amen.

## Vows of the Marriage/Covenant

N. and N., you have announced your intention, and you have witnessed the support of your community. Now you may speak your covenant vows to one another.

N./N., I give myself to you to be your wife/husband/partner.  
I promise to love and sustain you in this covenant of marriage,  
From this day forward, in sickness and in health,  
in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live.

## Exchange of Rings

By these symbols of covenant promise, Gracious God, remind N. and N. of your encircling love and unending faithfulness that in all their life together they may know joy and peace in one another. Amen.

(words shared as rings are placed)

N./N., I give you this ring as a sign of my love and faithfulness.

## Special Music and Other Symbols—Optional

### Announcement of Marriage/Covenant

(addressing couple)

N. and N., you are (wife and husband together)/(united as a one) with the blessing of Christ's church. Be merciful in all your ways, kind in heart and humble in mind. Accept life, and be most patient and tolerant with one another. Freely forgive, as God has forgiven you. And above all else, be truly loving. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts remembering that as members of one body you are called to live together in peace.

(addressing congregation)

By their promises made before us this day N. and N. have united themselves in a sacred covenant. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

## Blessing

The grace of Christ attend you; the love of God surround you;  
the Holy Spirit keep you that you may grow in holy love,  
find delight in each other always and remain faithful until your life's end. Amen.

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and our Lord's Prayer

Merciful God, we thank you for your love that calls us from loneliness into companionship. We thank you for all who have gone before us and taught us the ways of love. Bless N. and N. that they may have the grace to live the promises they have made. Defend them from all enemies of their love. Empower them to live into the justice of your kingdom. Lead them into all peace. Bless them in their work and in their companionship, in their sleeping

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and in their waking, in their joys and in their sorrows, in their lives and in their deaths. Nurture them in a community of your faithful people.

Hear us, Gracious God, as we prayer together:  
(Our Lord's Prayer – prayed in unison)

## Benediction

May God bless and keep you. May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.  
May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

## Presentation of the Couple

— Now it is my honor and joy to present to you,  
N. and N., (husband and wife) (a family in the eyes of God).

## Recessional

### ADDITIONAL VOWS

The vows are the heart of the service, and it is our hope that couples will consider carefully what promises they are making to one another. While the themes are somewhat consistent, a variety of sample vows follow. You may use any one of them, or modify them as most appropriate for you.

1. (Name), I give myself to you to be your (wife/husband/partner).  
I promise to love and sustain you (in this covenant of marriage),  
from this day forward, in sickness and in health,  
in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live. (United Church of Christ)
2. I take you, as a gift from God, to be my lifelong companion  
through tears and laughter, sickness and health, work and play.  
I will love you faithfully, constantly and prayerfully, now and forever. Amen. (Alternative)
3. I take you, (name), to be my (wife/husband/partner),  
and I promise before God and all who are present here  
to be your loving husband/wife/partner as long as we both shall live.  
I will serve you with tenderness and respect,  
and encourage you to develop God's gifts in you. (United Methodist)
4. I, (name), take you, (name), to be my wedded wife/husband/partner,  
to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,  
in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part,  
according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge you my faith. (Methodist)
5. I, (name), in the presence of God, take you, (name),  
to be my wife/husband/partner.  
All that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you.  
Whatever the future holds, I will love you and stand by you,  
as long as we both shall live. This is my solemn vow. (Australian)
6. I promise to be faithful to you, open and honest with you.  
I will respect, trust, help and care for you. I will share my life with you.  
I will forgive you as we have been forgiven.  
I will lead with you a simple, just, and peaceful life as Christ has called us to live.  
And with you I will work to further simplicity, justice, and peace in our world.  
I will love you and be thankful for the blessing of your love until death parts us. (Alternative)
7. (Name), I commit myself to be with you in joy and adversity,  
in wholeness and brokenness, in peace and in trouble,  
living with you in fidelity and love all our days. (United Church of Canada)