**Why have a Behavioral (Relational) Covenant?**

I’m often told that Christians don’t need written rules for how to behave because we have the Bible. A Behavioral Covenant sets out clearly what people can expect of each other – based on Biblical principles. Therefore, it makes explicit what people assume that they can expect of each other. Importantly, it holds people accountable for their actions.

Sometimes in the midst of deciding issues tempers flare, communication suffers, and people tend to make things too personal.  Even in the politest of groups, things can get out of hand and feelings can get hurt. This often happens when an important decision is on the line and the issue really matters. Yes, even in church! So, we need clear and agreed benchmarks for the way we behave with each other.

**What is a Behavioral Covenant?**

A Behavioral Covenant is a written agreement that guides how people will treat one another. It states clearly how people will behave with each other in the spirit of Christian love.  A Behavioral Covenant states what God is calling the group to do and how the group will conduct itself.  It outlines the expectations that members of the group can depend on from one another.  Basically, it details how the community will live out its faith in loving, respectful ways. Goal: To foster a culture of candor in a climate of trust that is Christ honoring (i.e. fostering compassionate candor).

**How do you create a Behavioral Covenant?**

The key leadership group is well placed to draft a Behavioral Covenant. They understand what is needed to support healthy communication and respect in a group / congregation.

While the drafting can be done by a few people, involve as many people as possible in identifying the content. A congregational meeting to explain Behavioral Covenants and why they’re important can get the process off to a good start.  Read passages of Scripture that guide our life together:  Matt. 5:9; 23-24, Luke 6:27-36, John 13:34, Romans 8:28-29 & 12:10, 1 Cor. 12, 2 Cor. 10:5, Ephesians 4:1-6, Gal. 5:19-26, 1 Cor. 11:1, Titus 2:7, Col. 3:12-17, Phil. 2:3-4, 1 Thes. 5:12-26, James 1:2-4, 19, etc. Specifically, I ask people how they want others to treat them and gather a list of those qualities.

The responses provide the content for a small writing group to develop into the draft Behavioral Covenant.  Once this is accomplished, it should be presented to the Church Council for support and revisions.  Arrange a time to present the final version to the church so people can ask questions and understand it.

**How do you make it work?**

People need to agree to the Behavioral Covenant.  Signing an official church copy and / or committing to it in the context of worship are ways of showing agreement.

Regularly remind members of the church of the content of the Behavioral Covenant and encourage them to abide by it. Include the Covenant in the induction process for Committee members. Membership classes and regular liturgical affirmation of the Behavioral Covenant are important ways to embed the values in a congregation.

Each member of the group has a role in the Covenant.  Mutuality is vital. It helps keep people accountable for their actions. When behavior turns disrespectful, a quiet reminder of your agreement is often enough to rein in improper behavior.

**Benefits**

There are many benefits of a Behavioral Covenant:

* forms community that is respectful and loving
* gives support to bearing one another’s burdens (Galatian 6:2)
* clarifies what you can expect from the group and what they can expect from you
* helps people discern and discuss difficult issues n a civil manner without a win/loose mentality
* keeps the well-being of the group primary (not a segment or small part of the congregation)
* makes each person responsible for the behavior of the group
* models how a Christian community should act

**What to include**

A Behavioral Covenant has 6 basic parts:

1. A sense of shared purpose based on your mission (name of church, location, and why the group exists).
2. Loving ways to treat one another.  This is based on your shared values and sense of identity as a Christian community.
3. Agreement to abide by the Covenant as members of the church.  Most churches make it a necessity to agree to the covenant in order to serve in a leadership position. Ideas to consider include:
   * to pray for one another
   * regularly attend worship and study
   * practice direct, open communication – not gossip
   * use ‘I’ statements to express yourself
   * listen respectfully, ask questions for clarification
   * seek to understand rather than judge
   * be honest
   * avoid stereotyping
   * speak the truth in love, gentleness and patience
   * recognize that other viewpoints and opinions may be valid
   * forgive one another
   * focus on common interests and not positions/opinions
   * trust one another
   * be hard on issues and soft on people
   * honor and support the decisions made by the group
   * electronic communication (phone calls, and email) should be treated the same as face-to-face conversation
   * what would you add?

4) Brief paragraph about your intent to honor this Behavioral Covenant and to live as a people of faith in witness to the world around us.

5) Set a date for evaluation and review of how the Covenant is working

6) Gather signatures and date.

Congregations find it helpful to keep the Behavioral Covenant before the congregation in a wide variety of ways so that their efforts are effective: Web page, Poster framed in the church, Bookmark, Bulletin insert, Sermon series, Bible Study, etc.  Use the Behavioral Covenant regularly in your leadership training. People are more likely to support something when they are clear about expectations for behavior.