

Naming, Comparing, and Contrasting Covenants for an Event and an Era

by Rev. Tandi Rogers, 2025

When we gather, whether for a single event or for an ongoing era of shared life, we are invited into covenant — a shared promise about how we will be with one another and with what is larger than us. Not all covenants are the same. Different kinds of covenant are needed in different circumstances, and knowing what kind of covenant we are making — and why — can keep us from confusion and disappointment when inevitable challenges arise.

Two useful categories of covenant are **behavioral** and **aspirational**.

Behavioral Covenant

A *behavioral covenant* is clear, concrete, and measurable. It describes specific actions, limits, and agreements that help create safety and trust. Behavioral covenants usually sound like:

- “We agree to start and end on time.”
- “We will raise our hands to speak and listen without interrupting.”
- “We will not gossip about what is shared in this room.”
- “We commit to asking for consent before taking photos.”

Behavioral covenants are especially useful in the context of **an event** — a retreat, a workshop, a meeting. For a finite time and a specific container, people can reasonably agree to limit or shape their behavior in concrete ways. Behavioral covenants help to reduce ambiguity and protect everyone’s dignity and psychological safety.

Aspirational Covenant

An *aspirational covenant* speaks to who we hope to become together, even when we know we will fall short. It names values, intentions, and commitments that are more directional than measurable — a horizon we keep walking toward. Aspirational covenants usually sound like:

- “We promise to treat each other with love and compassion.”
- “We commit to growing in our ability to confront injustice, even when it is uncomfortable.”
- “We will forgive each other and begin again when we break trust.”
- “We strive to bring our best selves and stay in relationship when it’s hard.”

Aspirational covenants are especially resonant for **an era** — a season of congregational life, a multi-year partnership, a social movement. Over time, people will inevitably fall short of these aspirations, but the covenant gives us a way to return, repair, and keep moving toward what we have named as holy and good.

Dimension	Behavioral Covenant	Aspirational Covenant
Scope	Specific behaviors & actions	Values, hopes, and intentions
Timeframe	Best suited for an event	Best suited for an era
Measurability	Concrete, observable, accountable	Fuzzy, directional, calls for grace
Strength	Creates immediate safety and clarity	Creates long-term belonging & growth
Response to Failure	Remind, adjust, or enforce agreements	Forgive, repair, recommit to the path

Of course, these are not mutually exclusive. A wise community often crafts **both** — a behavioral covenant to help us navigate this particular meeting or gathering with care, and an aspirational covenant that reminds us who we are striving to become over time. Both are holy. Both reflect a theology of interdependence and growth. Both acknowledge that we are human: capable of harm and capable of repair, capable of commitment and capable of renewal.

Naming the kind of covenant we are entering — and naming when we are shifting between event-based behaviors and era-based aspirations — helps to keep trust alive. It reminds us that even when we fall short of the horizon, we are still walking the path together.

Additional Elements/Types of Covenant

These types that follow often overlap and can be combined. For example, a liberatory covenant might also be aspirational and emergent; a behavioral covenant might also carry a sacred dimension if it is framed that way.

You could even invite a group to name which kinds of covenant they want to emphasize — and when — and give themselves permission to name others as needed.

1. Mutuality Covenant

This covenant explicitly names *what each party offers and receives*.

- Often used in mentoring relationships, partnerships, or collaborations where power, responsibilities, and benefits flow in both directions.
- Example: “*I will offer you honest feedback and support; you will bring openness and effort; together we grow.*”

Mutuality covenants emphasize reciprocity and balance, which are especially important in contexts where there’s risk of exploitation or burnout.

2. Contingency Covenant

This covenant prepares for what happens *when things go wrong*.

- “When trust is broken, here is how we will repair.”
- “If you need to step away, here is how you can leave and return in integrity.”
- Useful when working in conflict-prone or high-stakes environments.

This is sometimes called a *rupture-and-repair* covenant — it normalizes failure and names pathways back.

3. Boundary Covenant

Explicit agreements about *what we will not do*, what is *out of bounds*.

- More than behavioral, it is about protecting identity, role, or space.
- Examples: “*We will not make decisions about your identity without you.*”
- “*We will not contact each other outside of agreed hours.*”

Boundary covenants are crucial in situations with strong power dynamics or where personal/professional boundaries might blur.

4. Emergent or Iterative Covenant

A covenant that is *not fully formed at the beginning* but evolves as the relationship or work unfolds.

- Explicitly invites revision and reflection at regular intervals.
- Example: *“We agree to revisit and adjust our covenant as we learn more about each other and our needs.”*

This kind of covenant acknowledges that people and conditions change — it aligns well with adaptive leadership and creative processes.

5. Silent or Implicit Covenant

These are often unspoken but felt — shaped by culture, history, or assumptions.

- *“We will respect elders” or “We don’t name conflict in public.”*
- Useful to surface and name, so that they can be intentionally affirmed, adapted, or retired.

6. Sacred Covenant

One that explicitly names the presence of the holy, or a larger-than-human accountability.

- *“We covenant not only with one another but with the Spirit that holds us.”*
- Often found in worshipping communities, marriages, and justice movements where the divine or ancestors are invoked as witnesses and partners.

7. Liberatory Covenant

Focused on dismantling systems of oppression and centering marginalized voices.

- *“We commit to centering the most impacted, even when it costs us comfort or privilege.”*
- Especially resonant in movements for justice, equity, and inclusion.