

The 2010 Lenten Compact

What is a “Compact”?

A compact is a covenantal agreement among a group of people. Those who voluntarily enter a compact bind themselves to a set of guidelines and standards for the purpose of accomplishing personal and corporate goals.

A Communal Fast

Lent is often considered a personal time to fast, focus ourselves on God, and reflect on the idols that we have been told we cannot live without. Like last Lenten season, this Lent we are calling for a communal fast that focuses us not only on our relationship to God, but also on our relationship to health in our lives, our communities, our nation and our world. We are calling Kimball Avenue Church to a true fast – one that is not just the act of denying oneself of something – but a fast that creates justice and reconciliation, by breaking the yokes that bind us and the yokes that bind our neighbors.

In Isaiah 58, specifically verses 6-7, the Lord makes clear what a true fasting should accomplish:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

This Lent, we seek to recognize the ways that we are all individually and communally held in bondage by affliction. We seek to reflect on the forces of the world that create affliction individually and corporately. We fast to focus on our Christian responsibility to eradicate our own affliction and the affliction in others by identifying its root causes and embracing our call to be healers.

Why a “Compact for Healing?”

As children of Jehovah Rapha – God who heals – who envisions a day when no infant will die in its first days of life, old men will live out their years, and weeping and crying will be heard no more (Isaiah 65:17-25), we acknowledge that our imaginations have been captivated by the world. We have given in to a variety of false beliefs about affliction and healing. Through the Compact, we will remember that affliction is present, but God’s envisions a world where all people are healthy. We will recommit ourselves to healing, refusing to be apathetic about affliction in our lives or the lives of others.

As followers of Jesus, who calls us to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to perform healing (Luke 9:2), we understand that Christ has empowered us to heal so that the works of God will be done through us (John 9:1-4). Through the compact, we will acknowledge Christ’s healing work in us and will claim our identity in Christ as healers. We will live our faith more fully by embracing opportunities to alleviate the affliction of our neighbors through acts of mercy and justice. We will do so with humility, knowing that it is through God’s will and power, not our will and power, that healing happens.

As people who understand that by healing on the Sabbath, touching the untouchable and extending healing to the stranger, Christ exposed the limits of the healing system in place and freed those who were bound by their afflictions *and* the system that restricted their access to healing, we will think “outside the box” about healing. We will embrace holistic healing. By do so, we will illuminate the ways in which our current thinking about and practicing healing fall short of God’s ambitious agenda.

As people who know that affliction, in all its many forms, is both a consequence and a symptom of our lack of Shalom or justice and wholeness, we understand we have a part to play both in the perpetuation and healing of affliction in the world. Affliction is present when we are out of right relationship with God and one another. It is relational. Conversely, healing is present when we are in right relationship and is also relational. Through the Compact, we will be more aware of the root causes of affliction, transforming our relationships, communities, and society so that all people can live Shalom.

Why Focus on Stress?

The Bible identified many forms of affliction – individual, spiritual, emotional, mental, communal, social and structural. Biblically, much of these afflictions are the result of the forces of the world at work in people that distress, burden, torment or yoke them. Interestingly enough, that is almost exactly the definition of stress found in modern medical dictionaries. Stress is defined as forces from the outside world impinging on the individual. We all feel stress. Often, stress is helpful. The body releases a chemical—cortisol—into the bloodstream that heightens our awareness and sharpens our senses. Our brain kicks into high gear. However, if stress is not relieved, the chemical remains in our bodies and begins to do damage to our body systems and internal organs. Unabated stress will eventually make us sick. It is a yoke on us and on our neighbors.

When we consider the presence of prolonged or uninterrupted stress, it is just a symptom of larger problems, larger afflictions. Stress is an indicator that spiritually, emotionally, mentally, communally, socially or structurally something is out of whack or out of right relationship. Just as affliction has no place in God's Kingdom, its symptom—chronic, uninterrupted stress—also has no place in the Kingdom of God. Neither affliction nor chronic stress are healthy for our mind, body or spirit. Over the long term, stress takes a spiritual, emotional, mental, physical and neurological toll on us. The presence of stress is an indicator that justice and wholeness – Shalom – are not fully present.

Chronic stress in our society has been systematically individualized. We are told to manage our chronic stress through a variety of “strategies” without looking deeper at what affliction is truly at the root of the symptoms. When we stop at the individual strategy, we fail to see what it would truly take to eradicate the affliction and alleviate the chronic stress altogether. We also fail to see how widespread stress is due to widespread injustice. If chronic stress is a symptom of a larger form of bondage – a yoke – and a result of the larger ways we are out of right relationship with God and one another, our response cannot end at individual stress management. Our actions must go deeper to root out the causes of affliction.

Our own chronic stress is often the veil that keeps us preoccupied and disengaged from the larger work in our community and society. We are “stressed out” and, therefore, more likely to disengage from one another and the work we are called to do in the world. Certainly it is important for us to take care of ourselves, but we are called to go beyond ourselves to transform the lives of others. Psalm 41 says that for those who consider the helpless – the weak and the sick – God sustains them and heals *their* infirmity. It is by attending to the affliction of others that we are also healed because we will have transformed more than their circumstances – we will have transformed our own as well.

**STARTING WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2010, AND CONTINUING THROUGH EASTER,
WE ASK EVERYONE TO JOIN IN A COMPACT FOR HEALTH**

There is only one rule:

1. Address the stress.

Again, stress is a normal biological response. We feel it in “fight or flight” situations. However, constant stress is not normal and that is what we are asking you to focus on during Lent – the persistent stress, the nagging anxieties, etc. We know that the forces of the world that cause persistent stress are not easily controlled. BUT what if we met chronic stress head on, not simply managing it, but seeking to eradicate it from our lives and the lives of others? What if our charge for Lent is to root out the afflictions that cause chronic stress in our lives and to truly experience healing? The strategies below suggest we are undertaking just that –we are going to try to live a healing lifestyle where affliction is not tolerated and we are not resigned to it in our lives or the lives of others.

When you are experiencing stress that has been or is nagging, unabated, persistent, chronic or prolonged (which is a subjective call since we all experience stress differently):

1. Reclaim your health.

- a. *Rebuke the forces of the world and reflect, through prayer and Scripture, on God's healing vision for your life.*
- b. *Employ a stress management strategy in the short term (spend time with family, take a walk, make a meal, meet a friend)*
- c. *Seek counsel and support from others – remember healing happens in relationships*

2. Prayerfully contemplate what is really at the core of the stress you are feeling.

Ask yourself:

- a. *“What is really the affliction here?”*
- b. *“What am I really afraid of?”*
- c. *“What is the force of the world holding me captive?”*
- d. *“How am I experiencing injustice or a lack of wholeness?”*

3. Consider whether there is a system-level action to be taken.

- a. *How can I play a role in ensuring that others feeling this stress experience healing too?*
- b. *If there is injustice here, what would it take for there to be justice?*
- c. *What is the gap between the world and Kingdom of God?*

4. When others are experiencing stress they may seek your counsel or you may observe someone experiencing stress and offer yourself to them to help participate in their healing as they desire it. You might:

- a. *Practice the call to listen, comfort, strengthen and defend their cause.*
- b. *Pray for one another with confidence and humility and seek to meet their needs as they define them.*
- c. *Join in efforts to transform the forces that are holding them captive as an act of solidarity*

For more information about the relationship between stress and health, we recommend the documentary series “UnNatural Causes”. A copy of the documentary can be borrowed from the church.