

Ordination Paper

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It is a delight to be asked to share my faith, theology and spiritual journey with you in this paper. I work in the most exciting profession in the world—the ministry of spiritual direction and discernment. This work feels even more blessed by the warm reception I have experienced in the United Church of Christ. To be ordained to the ministry of spiritual direction in a denomination that proudly proclaims that “God is still speaking” would be a great honor indeed.

Part One

Theological Perspective

Without a doubt, theology *matters*. Having worked for over a decade as a spiritual director, helping people become more aware of the presence of the Holy in their lives, my theological perspective naturally leans more toward the practical rather than the systematic. Because God is Spirit and we engage the realm of unseen reality when we encounter God, I am more comfortable with ambiguity and mystery than with certainty and strict orthodoxy. Still there are tenets of faith that I am certain of:

In life and in death we belong to God.

God created us, loves us and covenants with us for the good of creation.

Jesus is one of us.

The Spirit renews and energizes us.

We belong to the source of life, the creator, the spirit that infuses us with creativity, love, joy and peace. Made in God's image, we are blessed by God to be stewards of God's creation. This God loves every one of us and all of creation with the kind of love that cannot let go. One could spend all their days trying to understand and be filled with this love and it would be a worthwhile pursuit. God seeks to know us and guide us in all our choices—individual and communal—so that our choices are in line with God's deepest desires. We encounter God in infinite ways—through prayer, nature, relationships with people, worship, creativity, art, music, dance, silence.

Jesus is God-with-us. His very name can be translated "God is salvation," and his life constantly pointed beyond himself to God. Jesus said "follow me." I am not called to live *his* life but to live the life God gave me to the fullest, as he did. Jesus distilled God's law into a simple (but not easy) command: Love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. I am a Christian because of the clarity and beauty of that Great Commandment.

The Holy Spirit is the creative force within all of us, drawing us toward the heart of God. Curiously, the Spirit is sometimes suspect in mainline Christianity. Somewhere along the way Spirit got associated only with Pentecostals and TV preachers. The Spirit is for all of us, and animates us in so many ways. One of my life's goals is to help progressive churches reclaim the Spirit and be filled with the Spirit. When we do, our bonds with

other Christians will be stronger and we will be closer to the day Jesus longs for, that “we all may be one.”

Salvation is healing and wholeness, which God desires for all of creation. The big question so many Christians focus on is “What must I do to be saved?” That question reveals a misplaced focus. God does the saving; it is not of our doing. A better way to put the question is “How shall I allow God’s salvation to transform my life?” To enjoy the fullness of this healing and wholeness, we need to be in relationship with the one who created us. And to do that we must interact with that One, just like we do if we want to be in relationship with a human person. Jesus provides for us a reference point of what it is like to be a human completely awake to God and in total reliance upon God.

Prayer connects us with the source of life. Through prayer, our lives become aligned with God’s desires and purposes. I pray for situations that concern me. I express gratitude for the joy in my life and in the world. But I also pray in silence, allowing God to say a word or lead me in a path according to God’s purposes. Sometimes my prayer is simply sitting in the presence of the Holy, doing nothing. When I cannot pray—when life is too troubling and I have no words---I sit quietly and ask the Spirit to pray in me. Because I believe in prayer so deeply, I teach others to pray, always according to their personal style in ways that work for them. I see it as my job to encourage and promote this life-giving practice.

The church is a special way Christ chooses to be known in the world. The church is ordinary people who “see through a veil darkly,” and as such we sometimes stumble like individual Christians do. Today’s churches are hurting. Very few are growing and many harbor deep anxiety about the future. As long as we strive to maintain Christianity as it looked in the mid-20th century this anxiety will increase. Unfortunately I have not (yet) been given a vision of what the living and vital church (universal) will look like in the future, but I am willing to pray, discern and follow the Spirit to that new place. The purpose of the church is to live out our salvation in love and service in the world, and to do this together. Jesus promises to be with us as we carry out this witness for justice and peace.

Part Two

Reflections on the History, Theologies and Polity of the United Church of Christ

My leap from the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination to the United Church of Christ (UCC), is in some ways not a particularly big one, however I find there are significant differences in the traditions and cultures, some of which I will explore here.

I heartily embrace the *many theologies* stance of the UCC, primarily because it is authentic and it fits our postmodern age. All churches of all denominations have members who question the prevailing theology and refuse to embrace the party line. The UCC is simply more honest about it.

Historical Highlights shaping today's UCC

Protestants, by definition, are Christians who define themselves over and against some great and powerful “other.” For Luther, Calvin and Zwingli it was the Catholic church. For the first Protestant settlers in the New World, many of whom were Congregationalist, the pilgrimage was about feeling victimized and discriminated against in England. Seeing themselves as Israelites escaping a new Pharaoh, they brought their faith to America and formed tight-knit congregations that were, for them, the center of the township.

The Great Awakening of the mid 18th Century, with its central figure of Congregationalist preacher Jonathan Edwards marked a new resurgence of spiritual and religious vitality in the United States. God, at work in the human soul through personal experience, was emphasized. Edwards’ *Treatise on the Religious Affections* and *Distinguishing Marks* still informs Christian spirituality today—especially his section on how to distinguish what is *not* a sign that God is at work in a person. Things such as “bodily effects” (the shaking and fainting associated with revival meetings) or imaginative experiences were suspect in Edwards’ view. What is a sign of God’s presence? According to Edwards, if your mind and heart is inclined toward Christ, if you lay aside attachments to things of the world, if you have a greater regard for scripture, and if your heart is inclined toward love—then a true and divine spirit is at work. The

notion that Christ draws us always toward love has been a driving force behind many of the bold stances the UCC has taken in favor of persons experiencing injustice.

The boldest move taken in the American history of what is now the UCC was probably Congregationalists' participation in the anti-slavery movement. The American Missionary Society, organized in 1846, called attention not only to the need for all slaves to be freed but also advocated education of the freed slaves so that a "caste system" did not remain in this country. Taking such a strong action against the status quo of that day set a precedent for forward and pro-active thinking about social justice by the UCC. Abolitionism is also part of the birthing of what is sometimes called "the social gospel" which refers to an understanding of the New Testament that demands action in the face of any social injustice in society. Regardless of how many different theologies the UCC finds under its tent, seeing the gospel as a call to fight social injustice is now non-negotiable for most UCC churches, and especially in the denominational arena.

Continuing with that theme, I find the stances the UCC took in the 60's and 70's to oppose the war in Vietnam and to affirm the God-given right of all persons to be ordained (thus including homosexuals) a further extension of the UCC following Christ by being "drawn toward love." If advocating for peace and equality for all persons is not the job of the church universal then I don't know what is.

What is most exciting about the 21st century Still Speaking campaign is that it incorporates the best of the history and tradition of the UCC. We are Protestants and as

such we will continue to define ourselves over and against, but in this case it is not the Catholic church or other denominations. We are over and against all that denies or squashes the life—including the spirit—of the human person. The Still Speaking campaign protests exclusivity wherever it exists. It protests deadness in churches. To put it in the positive, this campaign emphasizes spiritual vitality. I'm particularly drawn to it because, as a spiritual director, this campaign gives voice to what I do—help people discern what God is saying to them and how to follow that word into the world.

Theologies in the United Church of Christ

Some people erroneously believe the UCC is a denomination in which “anything goes.” This is usually because some individuals who are members of UCC churches have blended their Christianity with wisdom from a variety of other religious and spiritual traditions found in the culture, which is perfectly acceptable in most congregations. And while it is true that UCC churches ask for testimonies of faith rather than tests of faith, there are key themes found in most all theologies within the UCC—one of them being Jesus Christ as the sole head of the church. A member of my church once blanched at a printing of the Nicene Creed in the Still Speaking publicity. She thought it was “too Christian” for who we are. Our pastor gently reminded her that while we have no test of faith, we still are the United Church *of Christ* and that trusting in Jesus is what we do!

That story illustrates the ethos of the UCC today. In paragraph 18 of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, we read that each local church has the power to formulate its

own covenants and confessions of faith. So while this church member felt safe in expressing her discomfort with the Nicene Creed's Christo-centric view, the pastor also felt safe and obliged to remind her of the local church's tradition of faith. Both views are valid and acceptable in our congregation and denomination. There are no ultimate winners or losers in the theology department, however there may, at times, be some high-spirited dialogue. So when a UCC pastor asks new members some version of the question "Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?" the pastor usually has explained that how they understand that question is entirely up to them. It is conceivable that both a universalist and an evangelical particularist could answer "yes" to that question. We may have no fixed confessions or creeds that we hold as normative for believers in the UCC, but we do make elegant statements of faith about God and our relationship to God.

Who is this God we believe in? Broadly, the UCC statement of faith states that God is creator and eternal spirit. One who seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. From this comes the Still Speaking proclamation that we believe in a living and dynamic God of extravagant welcome and hospitality. In our various theologies we may disagree on whether God is all powerful or of self-limited power; and increasingly people waver on whether God is personal or an impersonal force (or both/and). But what we rarely disagree on is the mission God has for humans—to be of service to the whole human family, resist evil and share life with Christ.

Christology is perhaps where the most diversity within the UCC can be found. Yes, we name Jesus Christ as the sole head of the church, in keeping with our polity that places all

church power in the hands of the congregation. Each congregation then is supposed to report ultimately to Christ, not to any human representative of the denomination. As followers of Christ, we enter a covenant that will have us go to *our* cross much as Jesus walked to his cross. We give up trying to live up to any expectations other than those we discern from Christ our Lord and Savior. The church—local and universal—is the living embodiment of Christ on earth. We are called to live in covenant with God and one another, and to offer radical and unconditional welcome to all.

The Holy Spirit is an important part of UCC theology because it is the Spirit who binds us together in covenant and speaks God's word of love and challenge to us. The Still Speaking campaign gives us language to reclaim a life in the Spirit. If God is speaking to me then God will naturally do so in a way that is comprehensible to me. That may not be speaking in tongues or other ecstatic experiences. For me it happens as a result of prayer and discernment. I look back and see the hand of God and learn how the Spirit leads me. It has been exciting to be part of a church that talks openly about the spiritual life and embraces the gift of spiritual direction, which I bring. On the "What We Believe" page of the UCC website, I find the statement that provides the most spiritual hope for seekers:

We believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God, engendering love, strengthening faith, dissolving guilt and giving life purpose and direction.

The UCC stand on biblical authority is that we take the Bible seriously but not literally. Raised as a fundamentalist Baptist, I come with "issues" around the Bible. I know the

Bible very well, both from being a Baptist and from seminary biblical criticism. Yet knowing and understanding are not synonymous. The UCC stance on the authority of scriptures frees me. One of the first things my pastor said to me about becoming UCC is that we read the Bible as poetic, metaphoric language and we do not read it literally. Paying attention to scripture and what it has to offer us as we dynamically interact with it is important. But bible-idolatry is to be avoided at all costs. When we read the Bible literally and become judgmental toward others who see it differently, we are serving a much smaller god. So I appreciate the Constitution's wording that we "look to the Word of God in the Scriptures." Looking to scripture for dialogue and inspiration is our goal. We see scripture as the first word in a dialogue, never the last. This of course produces healthy and intense dialogue within the denomination.

Finally, all viable theology takes a believer out of the realm of the theoretical and into engagement in the world. The theologies of the UCC promote spiritual vitality and disciplines, working for social and economic justice and some form of evangelism or spreading the good news that God is alive and desiring relationship with humans. There may be some local congregations that lack in certain areas (the social justice church that is skeptical of spiritual practice; the liberal church that misunderstands what evangelism is or can be) but at some level all theology has its "orthopraxis" or right practice that takes us from our heads and hearts and puts us on our feet in the world.

The Polity of the United Church of Christ

One may accuse the UCC of having permeable theological boundaries but no one can accuse us of having an “anything goes” polity. Our polity is based on the biblical concept of covenant—those devoted promises made between people and with God. We thrive in partnerships, loyal and loving relationships. One of the first things our Mayflower Pilgrim ancestors did upon settling in the New World was to “bind ourselves in the presence of God and walk in all His ways” (Salem covenant 1629).

Clearly under the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, the basic unit of life and organization is the local church, and it is here that the majority of decisions are made. Each local church enjoys inherent autonomy. It has its own way of administration and by-laws; selects its pastor and leadership; owns its property (unless a special arrangement is made by the local church); determines how best to worship; and admits members in its own way. The constitution also makes clear that all members of all local churches are in ministry. Once you are a member of a UCC congregation, you are a member of the UCC denomination.

There are no denominational “levels,” only covenantal relationships. Local churches are related to geographical Associations, and the Associations grant ordination status to prospective ministers and are the bodies that accept local churches into the UCC if the churches vote to become part of the UCC. Pastors of local churches are both members of their congregation and of the Association. It is here that some power outside the local church resides, in that an Association is responsible for granting, transferring or terminating ministerial *standing*. Ordained ministers in the UCC are to uphold the

Ordained Minister's Code found in the Manual on Ministry, and one of the ethical points of the Code that the minister must assent to is, "I will not use my position, power or authority to exploit another person." Clergy who are abusive or exploitative can have their ordained ministerial status suspended or removed in a disciplinary action. This power to discipline the abusive clergy person needs to be out of the hands of the local congregation because sometimes congregations are simply too close to the pastor to be of any help in an abusive situation. And as we see in the news regularly, pastors—being persons generally trusted with our deepest emotions and most intimate thoughts—sometimes overstep their boundaries and take advantage of the personal power they have in a pastoral relationship. The Association's oversight of the ordination standing, done through a Committee on Church and Ministry, is the only concrete "check and balance" over the local congregation that exists in the UCC. However, that is not to say the Association or other related bodies are not influential. The constitution also states that the various expressions of the church relate to one another in a covenantal manner. Consultation and collaboration are the ideal manifestations of this covenant. What happens at the Association or Conference or General Synod gatherings matters for the local church---if the local church chooses to allow it to matter. For the local church, the relationship between it and the other expressions is a free and voluntary one—with the exception being, again, that the Association has ties to ordained clergy that cannot be ignored.

Associations are bodies within a Conference (regional body) and the Conference is a body within the General Synod. No power can be given to the Synod that will ever

obstruct the autonomy of the local church. The Synod exists primarily to do mission work on a grander scale than could be done locally or even by Conferences. It also serves a purpose not explicitly stated in the Constitution. For national media that focuses on denominations and their functions, the General Synod's Office of General Ministry with its President and Office of Communications, provides a "face" and an organizing principle of the UCC to the world.

It is important to clarify what ordination means in the UCC. "God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required by the church (Paragraph 18 of the Constitution)."

It goes on to say that an ordained minister is a member called by God and ordained to preach and teach the gospel, administer the sacraments and rites of the church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership. While at certain times in our history this has meant that clergy were those who upheld pure doctrine and teachings, it has come to mean one who *empowers* the congregation for service to God as well as one who *embodies* certain qualities that a church needs for leadership and faith development. As Barbara Brown Zikmund points out in *Theology and Identity*, these two understandings of ordained ministry—empowerment and embodiment—need not be mutually exclusive even though certain local churches and certain historical time periods may have emphasized one over the other. The church need not elevate ordination to an overly precious status.

Congregations that think of their ministers as models of empowerment use them as facilitators or enablers. But thinking of ordination as it applies to function alone can

downplay the role too much. Is there not a mystical quality to being called by God to serve as the key leader or resident theologian of a local congregation?

There are sometimes are people who clearly demonstrate what Zikmund calls a “presence for ministry.” These are the models of embodiment. It doesn’t make the ordained person more holy than others. It does, however hold the ordained person to a high standard of faithfulness to God. Certainly we need more ministers who take seriously their role as models of healthy self care and spiritual disciplines.

Zikmund recommends that we live with the tension that exists between both models.

“The church is lifting up someone who is quite ordinary to serve the community. The church is also recognizing someone who is extraordinary to serve God’s purposes. Both things need to happen (Zikmund 88).”

Giving a Committee on Church and Ministry the power of authorization and discipline is the UCC’s way of highlighting that clergy are ordained to the whole church of Jesus Christ as well as to one congregation. Periodic reviews and “check-ins” with ordained clergy by the Committee on Church and Ministry provide accountability and support for clergy. It is the nature of the autonomous local church to sometimes produce the maverick clergyperson who resists being accountable to a standard. That clergyperson—whether he or she recognizes it—needs the standard as a boundary. And the other nature of the autonomous congregation is that some clergypersons feel very isolated and alone in their work. That person needs the support and encouragement of the relationship that

comes from being accountable to a Committee on Church and Ministry. At their best, these committees, serving ministerial oversight functions, are not focusing primarily on the negative—who *not* to ordain or who to discipline---but are providing the kind of consultative and collaborative support for clergy and congregations that will help build healthy congregations and attract viable candidates for ordained ministry in the future.

I mentioned earlier my former Presbyterian association. That denomination is currently being shaken to the core by churches who want to leave it because of its stance on the ordination of gays and lesbians. Under its polity, persons seeking ordination must vow to uphold the *Book of Order* which states that a candidate must honor “celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage.” Since gay and lesbian persons are not legally able to marry, non-celibate homosexuals are barred from ordained office in that denomination. Churches who disagree with this part of the *Book of Order* and want to leave the denomination must forfeit their property to the governing body, the Presbytery which owns the property of each church in its jurisdiction.

With that controversy in my rear-view mirror, it is with gratitude that I look at the strict non-interventionist polity of the UCC, in which local congregations are free and autonomous. This freedom means that the General Synod of the UCC can take courageous stands toward social justice, even if congregations within the UCC disagree. Freedom has a way of creating space for change to occur. Influence has always been preferable to power for changing people’s attitudes. The influence the UCC has on its

congregations is important. However the influence the UCC holds in ecumenical circles may be even greater.

Denominations like the PC(USA) and the United Methodists look to the UCC to see where the next courageous stand will be taken. Many PC(USA) colleagues are envious of UCC polity because they know if their local congregation had the power to ordain gays and lesbians they could do it without feeling like outlaws. The UCC may have lost churches to some of our courageous stands, but our polity encourages us to trust God and know that “some will come and some will go” but we will continue to stand for what is important.

Part Three

Integrating Statement on my pilgrimage of faith and call to ministry

Born to Southern Baptist parents who were raised in Appalachia during the Depression, I have never known a time in life where I did not attend church or think seriously about God. My childhood experiences with church, however, were not largely positive. As a sensitive child, I found the many screaming red-faced fire-and-brimstone pastors pleading with us to accept Jesus as our personal savior and be saved from hell confusing and threatening. As a child, I experienced what I now can see were anxiety attacks over religious issues. My parents would name it “my religious fears.” I had taken their fundamentalist world view seriously and could not make sense of where God’s love fit into it.

As a young adult I sought therapy to counter these fears and that was the beginning of real salvation for me, which is why I am supportive of contemporary theology that takes into account psychological aspects of the human person. I learned that my God had been “too small” and I went in search of a Christianity that took God’s unconditional love seriously. This and the help of some compassionate and understanding spiritual directors who accompanied me later in life launched me into a self-study of progressive theology which led me to leave my first career (radio news) after almost 20 years for full-time seminary and ministry.

I entered seminary as a Presbyterian seeking ordination, however I doubted that I was called to be a local church pastor. My main interest was in working one-on-one with people in spiritual direction, so I obtained both a Master of Divinity and a Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction. My classes in spirituality taught me to trust God in prayer and discernment and to take better care of my sensitive body and spirit. They required me to practice discernment, and it was over the four years I spent in seminary that I came to understand fully that I was called to be a spiritual director and that ordination in the PC(USA) with its guidelines about what makes a job “ordainable” was not a fit for what I was called to do.

I stayed connected to local churches but struck out on my own to begin a freelance spiritual direction and consulting business, Blythe Spirit LLC, and to pursue my dream of writing books and articles on spirituality.

It has been now almost ten years since I graduated from seminary and for most of those years I had no thoughts at all about whether or not I should be ordained to the ministry of spiritual direction. My work was (and continues to be) incredibly fulfilling. I get to walk with individuals and groups as they ask life's ultimate questions and then listen for God's still, small voice in response. I get to assist people in learning how to pray. I am privileged to be able to share my wisdom around discernment with others who are in discernment.

My contemplation of ordination came out of a time of discomfort with the Presbyterian churches I was attending. I wanted worship that was alive and hopeful, and was not finding that in my denomination. While working at the Hesychia School of Spiritual Direction at the Redemptorist Renewal Center (a Catholic retreat center), I had many conversations with two UCC ministers who are also spiritual directors—Dr. Lou Kavar and Rev. Lee Milligan. On several occasions they would ask me about ordination and would usually end the conversation saying, “Well, if you ever want to be ordained in the UCC, we'd love to help you.” I met Rev. Briget Nicholson while searching for a room outside my home to offer spiritual direction in. She and First UCC offered to rent me a room that is now my office. She and I would have conversations about ordination and she also invited me to consider connecting in a deeper way with the UCC. I realized there was nothing holding me back. So I requested the opportunity to be under care, and was approved.

Taking this step has opened my work up in a new way. I realized just how pinched I had been feeling spiritually by the fact that the PC(USA) had voted time and time again to reject the full inclusion of gays and lesbians. Now that I am affiliated with the UCC, I have a vibrant ministry to LGBT persons and hope that I always have the privilege to work with LGBT persons. I continue to be excited about the reception I get among UCC people when I talk about spirituality and spiritual direction.

It has taken awhile but I have found a denominational home. In this loving space, I am able to shed my life-long fears about the wrath of God and breathe in the peace of Christ. I am able to live the challenge of taking up my cross and joyfully serve God daily.

I continue to feel called to the ministry of spiritual direction, and want to serve in this ministry as an ordained UCC clergy person. I see my call as walking alongside churches and individuals in discernment. Although I have a healthy spiritual direction practice working with about 20 individuals and two groups (Young Adult Volunteers in Mission for PCUSA and Hesychia School of Spiritual Direction) I feel my work in the next five years will expand into more facilitation of discernment processes for congregations who are at significant crossroads. I also plan to do more writing as a form of proclamation of the good news that God is alive and desires that we follow the path of life. I will look for opportunities to serve the denomination and the church universal in organizational spiritual direction and discernment coaching.

Ordination means I do this work under the care and accountability of the UCC; that I am a key leader for the churches and organizations I serve (including but not limited to the one with which I enter the four-way covenant); and that I am held to a high standard of faithfulness to God, to the denomination and to the church universal.

I feel ready. But this is not an individual discernment—it is one we share. I look forward to continuing this discernment in community with COCAM and the SW Conference.

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