ORDINATION PAPER

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CALL NARRATIVE

Midway through my first semester of college, a friend of mine caught me one evening while on her way to Bible study and asked if I would like to come. I went, and I left feeling intrigued and surprised. So, I went back again, and again. Through the way we explored familiar Bible stories, I was learning a new way of engaging my own faith. This faith could be dynamic, practical, and certainly humbling. It was also important to me that I could be in it together with a small group of others in inhabiting the Word. Not only did we learn from each other, but it also made a huge difference to me that we consistently showed up for each other as people. We were more than just a reading group that met once a week; we were a community who developed real relationships based in our faith.

Late in the school year, one of my Bible study leaders asked if I would be interested in leading my own group next year. I jumped at the opportunity. There was a questionnaire to fill out for the Intervarsity staff person in charge of these Bible study groups, which I did, with one exception — that packet also included a statement of faith to be signed by all new leaders. I read it over and there were a few things that did not sit right with me, such as endorsing a literal interpretation of Scripture and "eternal damnation." Furthermore, I was struggling with the fact that 18-year-old me was being required to nail down my faith right then and there. Growing up in the UCC, I had internalized the idea that God is "Still Speaking." I would be compromising my integrity if I agreed to cut myself off from new revelations, or to exclude those who did not conform to the party line. I earnestly explained all this to the Intervarsity staffer, who told me that it was her way or the highway and declined to have me continue as a member of the community.

On top of this, more changes happened by the end of that year. The Intervarsity Christian Fellowship's student leaders made the decision to prohibit queer students from holding leadership

positions in the group. But a group of the rejected queer leaders, plus straight students like me who were also hurt by a group leadership so disconnected from what we saw as the point of Christian community, all sat down together. We founded what would become a new campus Christian fellowship. We decided to have no staff, no national ties, no money, no hierarchy, no signatures, no statements of faith. We would reflect who we were and be progressive and ecumenical. To me, our core commitment to inclusiveness and welcome s the gospel.

My home church had always practiced an open table and I was taught that the kingdom of God has room for all people. The good news of the gospel is too good for one in-group to keep all to themselves, and Christ made that clear during his ministry by inviting sinners, tax collectors, Gentiles, peasants, and literal lepers to sit at his table. I look back on that episode from college as the most formative faith experience of my life. Throughout the rest of my college career, I was a leader with this new campus ministry. I led Bible studies, service projects, and even ended up singing on our worship team. This ecumenical community was a huge part of my formation, so much so that when I was asked midway through my second year what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, "I think I want to be a pastor." More than anything else, I wanted to work in communities that nurtured spiritual growth and made a home for those who needed one.

As I have continued in education and ministry, my call has developed in this vein. I feel called into spaces with anxious and hurting people to witness to them and remind them of God's love and God's continued presence in their lives. As a chaplain, I have had a family's new matriarch called me a "tower of strength" as I stood vigil all night with her family, while her own mother breathed her last. Ever since my very first sermon, ministers and congregants alike have told me how my preaching has personally inspired and uplifted them. The best praise I have received in my current ministry was that "it doesn't matter your religion, Quinn talks to all our

patients when they're having a bad day; he makes them feel better," which was something that a nurse told a patient on our ICU. This is in the open language of chaplaincy, but I understand it as a Christian calling because Jesus also told his friends: do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Jesus reminded people that God was still with them no matter where they were in life, even in the depths of pain and oppression. I have experienced my call as coming as much from without as from within.

PART ONE

What has been your faith pilgrimage?

My faith continues to grow and change each season after my first sense of call to ordained ministry. My time spent studying for my M.Div. at the University of Chicago was intense and varied. I shadowed chaplains at Jackson Park Hospital and ministered in the depths of Cook County Jail. I also did my first unit of CPE the summer after my first year at Divinity School, spending long hours as a chaplain both in a small hospital and a retirement community. My second year of Divinity School I got the chance to put my new skills to the test in an internship working part-time as a student pastor at Church of the Three Crosses, a UCC/Methodist congregation located on the North side of Chicago. I preached once a month and participated in all aspects of the church's programming, including service projects, Bible studies, pastoral care visits, and even organized new church events of my own. It was in the many, small actions the community undertook as they lived out their mission to be the body of Christ that I felt most connected to God and involved in God's work in Chicago. In this type of ministerial role, the responsibilities of the pastor are flexible and wide-ranging, and Rev. John Hobbes modeled that balance for me very well.

In the third year of my M.Div., I accepted a part-time position as Director of Youth

Ministry at my home church, St. Matthew UCC in Wheaton, IL. I enjoyed my time spent with the

young people in the congregation. As I tried to guide them in the faith foundation that I had received growing up as a part of this same youth group, I quickly learned the value of their innocence and open-mindedness in exploring our understandings of faith and how our faith influences the way we move throughout the world. Their faithful seeking and earnest questions reminded me of the way that good questions asked in a caring community have drawn me closer to God throughout my life, indeed in my own call to ministry. I was blessed with an exceptional group of kids. Spending time with them each week became my refuge as I worked to graduate from Divinity School and moved into a CPE residency at Rush University Medical Center.

I learned a lot about myself in a year as an ICU chaplain. I found out how to confront the suffering of others and myself, to use what theological resources I could to help people who needed it, and to not shoulder their burdens for them. I learned how to leave some room for the Holy Spirit to guide me in encounters. I now know my role and my purpose as a chaplain, and I know the trust I have in the God that goes with me. After the end of my CPE residency, I moved to central Missouri to join my partner, who had just been promoted as the chaplain of a small liberal arts college there. I was hired as a Staff Chaplain at Missouri University Hospital. I have spent much of this year integrating into the medical team to provide high quality holistic care to patients on the Neurosciences ICU, joining the ethics committee, and visiting patients all throughout the hospital when I am on call. Most days, I feel very confident in my call, that it indeed comes from God, and is affirmed in the ministry that I am doing.

As far as spiritual practices, prayer is most important to me. Not only do I hold all of my patients in prayer every evening, but I also take this time to check in with God about my worries and gratitudes of each day. It is my practice to reflect on at least one thing from both categories

every time. Also, my time in spiritual direction affirmed for me that short prayers repeated

throughout the day help me maintain my felt connection to God. In addition, to counter my hectic daily work schedule, I do my best to seek out quiet moments, either alone or maybe with one other person, where I can reconnect with the presence of God in my own life. Often this is outdoors, but it can be anywhere when I put my own human worries and failings aside and just feel joy that I am a beloved child of God living in this particular created world. For example, during the traumatic summer of 2020, the act that most recharged me spiritually was submerging myself daily in the tiny pool at our apartment complex after I got home from work. There, underwater in the quiet, I was grateful for God's creation, withdrawing for a time of contemplation much like Jesus himself did in the Gospels, and felt the Holy Spirit's sustaining presence, as a human being trying to muddle through a difficult season of life and following God's call in the work of chaplaincy.

What are your understandings of ordination, church, mission, and ministry? I understand ordination to be an exercise of being set apart. While I follow Luther in endorsing a "priesthood of all believers," I do think that an ordained minister is set apart by gaining two qualities: authority and responsibility. An ordained minister has authority over interpretation, of both the Bible and church tradition, and authority over resource allocations and interactions with outside entities. As a leader, an ordained minister makes decisions that affect others and bears responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. A minister also takes some appropriate responsibility for the theological direction and health of their congregation. While no one individual fully controls all that goes on in a congregation, an ordained minister takes special responsibility for maintaining the sacred rituals of the church and preaching prophetically. The Church is a group of Christians who have organized themselves around a shared set of beliefs

and practices. All members of a church set aside their time to gather in a sacred space, for both worship and fellowship. A church also needs to be invested enough in its own persistence and

flourishing to have some organization and structure, allocating time and resources to ensure that their time spent together bears fruit in terms of the values spelled out in their creed. Mission is the work of the church that happens outside the congregation and beyond the church's walls. This activity often takes the form of outreach, as the church engages with the larger community in which it resides, forming relationships with other groups and exposing its members to the wider world and different ideas. Ministry is the act of trying to witness to and work alongside Christ to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. It can be done on a large scale, as in civil disobedience, or a small one, visiting someone in the hospital. One need not be ordained in order to minister to someone else; ordained ministers are the leaders of communities who carry out ministry together. *What is the challenge and vision you have for your ministry?*

I have always seen my ministry as one focused on building community. I first became motivated to do ministry because I wanted to create with others what I had received: communities of faith where I felt valued, cared for, and empowered in growing my faith. If I can walk with others toward that feeling of belonging while rejoicing in being blessed children of God, then I am serving God in the best way I know how. I found my place in hospital chaplaincy quite providentially, but it has long been a dream and challenge of mine to become a senior pastor. Therefore, in five years, I pray that I will be working in a local church, hopefully in a leadership role, as my primary context for ordained UCC ministry.

How do you see your gifts for ministry being used in the type of ministry to which you have been called or to which you are seeking a call?

I have spent most of my time in ministry in hospital chaplaincy. I do feel called to aspects

of this ministry, as I have grown very comfortable in soothing the anxieties of vulnerable patients as well as navigating healthcare systems in a way that benefits those patients. However, when I have served in congregational ministries, I have also felt the pull of the Holy Spirit and my own

spirit towards congregational leadership. One of my first loves in ministry was preaching, and I still feel my heart sing when I can bring scripture and my own experience together to deliver a message that meets the life circumstances of a congregation I know well. I also feel called to teaching, community building, and to youth work, as in positions I have held briefly before.

How do you understand yourself as an ordained minister of the UCC?

An ordained minister of the UCC is a Christian minister who considers the values that their denomination stands for in everything they do. While they may not always be willing to agree fully with everything the UCC has ever done, they must hold the denomination's ideals and goals in the highest regard as they do their work. I believe I am called to help to people navigate their daily lives, with all the joy and suffering that entails, grounded in a shared spiritual connection to that which transcends our lives. An ordained minister shows up for people in both mundane and profound moments of life. To me, this is the most important mark of a ministry that bears fruit. While I can do this as a chaplain, I find the fullest expression in congregational contexts.

What are your commitments to the UCC and the Church Ecumenical?

Congregational polity is the foundation of the UCC, and I imagine this will factor greatly in my ministry. While I will of course uphold the ideals of the denomination and respect denominational authority, the autonomy given to local churches means I will have the freedom to lead a congregation in many different directions depending on where we feel called. I am committed to holding together both the rich progressive history of the UCC and the needs of my

own congregation for flourishing, which I trust will give my ministry a strong foundation.

What are those aspects of the history, tradition, polity, and practice of the UCC that are most valued by you, and how will these shape the way you engage in the tasks of ordained ministry?

The support for progressive social and theological movements in the UCC's past, present, and future will certainly shape my ministry going forward. One of my highest goals in ministry is

creating beloved communities and the UCC's stance of radical welcome and an open table will be a huge part of that. I will encourage any church I lead to at least explore the Open and Affirming initiative, for example, and I would find an analog for it in non-congregational ministry. Social justice and concern for the least of these would be at the core of my ministry, and I will know that the resources, prayers, and theological foundation of the denomination are with me.

PART TWO

(6) *Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.*

This part of the Constitution is integral to the way the United Church of Christ functions. I understand the "expressions of the church" to mean both different parts of the denominational hierarchy, such as the local church, the association, regional and denomination-wide leadership, as well as ministries that take place outside of local churches. The denomination's legacy as a relatively young church that was constituted by a merging of two other denominations that were already self-sufficient, and its stated intention of being a "united and uniting" church, is evident in the stipulation that the disparate parts that make up the UCC should fit together in an intentional way. It is certainly clear from my own experience that different expressions of the church have

much to offer each other and can be effective complementary influences. For example, I was given a foundation for my faith in a local church and am still supported by that congregation even as I seek ordination with the blessing, aid, and mentorship of the COM of the Fox Valley Association. I have also developed very different skills in the many arts of ministry as I have worked as both a hospital chaplain and in a congregation as a Director of Youth Ministry.

(9) *The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church.* This paragraph is another of the founding theses of the denomination. This is the fundamental definition of a congregational polity. There are other expressions of the church, but the denomination is made of congregations. Each is unique, with its own ministries, leadership, demographics, and geographical distinctions. They should be treated as unique entities with their own needs for organization and for flourishing.

(16) *An Association or a Conference of the United Church of Christ may, under such provisions as it deems wise, admit, or continue to fellowship with, any Congregational Christian Local Church which is not part of the United Church of Christ. The names and statistics of such churches shall be kept separately; their members shall not be counted in determining the number of delegates which the Conference is entitled to send to the General Synod or hold elective office in that body, except that no ordained minister who has full standing or ordained ministerial partner standing in the United Church of Christ shall be ineligible to be a delegate to the General Synod or to hold elective office in that body. No direct or indirect participation by any such Local Church in, or support of, the work of the United Church of Christ, or of any of its Covenanted Ministries, The Pension Boards—United Church of Christ, United Church Funds, or of any Conference or Association, shall be construed as making it a church of the United Church of Christ.*

As a "united and uniting" church, it is incumbent upon the UCC to cultivate relationships not only between its own various expressions but also with congregations currently outside the denomination. We recognize one baptism into the Church universal and ought to remain true to the value of Christian unity, that they may all be one.

(17) *The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ*

has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the wellbeing and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the basic units, local churches and the larger denominational structure. Working together, local churches can accomplish more than they could if left to their own devices. Membership in the denomination also carries responsibility to other congregations outside the local church and to the denomination as a whole. For example, if

denominational leadership undertakes a new ministry or theological position that challenges the prevailing opinions present in some local churches, such action should be taken in a way that encourages learning and growth within such congregations, but not such that local churches are compelled to contravene their own wellbeing. In a similar vein, ministries of local churches should be created with a thought as to how they fit into the identity of the larger denomination.

(18) *The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it; nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs, which affairs include, but are not limited to, the right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education; to retain or secure its own charter and name; to adopt its own constitution and bylaws; to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way and to provide for their discipline or dismissal; to call or dismiss its pastor or pastors by such procedure as it shall determine; to acquire, own, manage and dispose of property and funds; to control its own benevolences; and to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it.*

This is the most uniquely congregationalist facet of UCC polity. Namely, each local church maintains full autonomy despite being a member of a denomination with a hierarchy of leadership. Each congregation can have completely unique rules, worship styles, and theological commitments, not to mention full control over the disposition of funds, which was a sticking

point for some churches when the denomination was founded. In practice, this polity makes sense because all local churches are made up of people, and people are different, even if their denominational affiliation is the same. Our denomination values this difference and takes steps to preserve and encourage it, even as its ancestors were united with the goal to continue "uniting." As a minister, I want to be a part of a local church and a denomination that is diverse and united, and the UCC is the best way that I can accomplish such a goal.

PART THREE
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United Church of Christ Statement of Faith (Original Version)

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify: He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.

God is our Creator, the one who made everything in our world, and most importantly, created each of us humans in painstaking detail. I believe that there is something of God in all of us. God is also the one who has revealed the truth to prophets throughout history, inspiring the scriptures that are the foundation of our religious tradition. Scripture says that we are created in God's image. To me (and many other theologians) this means that our minds, which already set us apart from other living things in the created world, work somewhat like God's. We have the ability to reason, to love, to change our world for better or for worse.

My ministry as a chaplain has involved journeying with others in the way of life, even life after death. Once, after one of my patients had started to roll downhill medically, I was called to a "goals of care" meeting with this patient's family. The medical team had already exhausted all treatment options. During the conversation that I had with her family after the meeting, they were quick to frame their decision as deference to God's will. Removing the patient from the ventilator constituted faithfully putting the situation fully "in God's hands." I encouraged their framing by

emphasizing that they were not deciding whether the patient lived or died, but merely directing her medical care, as only God has ultimate power over life and death. The next morning, we shared hugs and prayers in the patient's room before I accompanied her aunts on the long walk through the hospital to inpatient hospice. The most important role of a minister is to journey with others every step of the way, just as God is always present with all of God's children in life and in death.

Caring for acute stroke patients in my current role gives me a unique opportunity to communicate God's presence even in the liminal space in between life and death. I often meet

people who are left without hope after their loved ones have suffered sudden and devastating brain injuries. These patients are still alive, and yet, their family members are told that they may never recover enough to be the same person they used to be, and are faced with the nearly impossible choice of when it is time to let them go. I have learned to help others hold both the hope for God's providence and healing, and the hope that comes only after we draw our last breath. This is the hope that I witness to, of a resurrection of all God's people, by God's grace freely given. In these situations, I am called to witness that while death is something to grieve, it is not something to fear. I believe it is part of my ministry to speak the truth in love, no matter how difficult or painful. *He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.*

Honoring each person as a child of God comes with a responsibility to treat them with the same love that God has for each of us. My personal definition of sin is that which causes harm or disrespect, through action or inaction, to what has been created by God. We need God to show us what love is and how we are to act towards ourselves and others. Salvation is God's gift to us, a gift of everlasting mercy and love. One important component of Christian salvation is the promise that we will enjoy the glory of God forever after we die. However, I also believe that we can be

active participants in our salvation, the secure knowledge of God's gift of mercy and love to us, by living our lives in service to Christ and following the example put forth by Jesus during his ministry. Nothing separates us from the love of God. (Romans 8:28)

Thus, my beliefs about salvation are twofold: salvation from our sinfulness in this world and salvation understood eschatologically. First, we need to be saved from our basest human instincts, or our aimlessness and sin. The way of the world, if human beings are left to their own devices, is greed, xenophobia, violence, oppression, and kyriarchy. The crucifixion of Jesus showed that God incarnate was willing to take on not only human mortality but even the worst of

human pain and suffering, demonstrating that God is willing to literally suffer alongside us. Jesus saves us from our individual and collective sins of devaluing and harming one another by showing us the way to love each other in the way that God created us to be. Christ's resurrection is the most miraculous sign of God's love, the source of our salvation. When we follow Christ's example, when we proclaim the gospel of love with our words and actions, we reexperience our own salvation from the fallen brokenness in ourselves and our world. It is in trying to follow Jesus that we continue to experience our salvation, again and again, and we can join in the work of saving the created world in the here and now.

The second way that I think about salvation is in the eschatological sense. Mortality and physical frailty are also the way of the world in the sense that they are inevitable parts of the human condition. Jesus gives us the promise and the hope of eternal life. As I find myself saying multiple times a day at the hospital, death is not the end. Salvation also awaits us after we draw our last breath, and our belief that there is still hope, even after death, helps us experience that salvation. That hope brings freedom. It means you can take risks to create the beloved community, to follow Jesus, because we believe this is what God calls us to do. In my current

ministry, I find when people come to the liminal space between life and death, God's presence is at its most palpable for me. It is my belief that there will be no pain or suffering and that we enjoy the presence of God for all eternity. It is a belief as salvific for those who remain as for those making their ultimate journey. *He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.*

To quote Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "justice is love in action." Pursuing social justice and ministry to the poor and oppressed are expressions of my faith that I cannot compromise on. I am called to preach prophetically, to preach release to the captives, in true keeping with Christ's teaching about bringing about the year of the Lord's favor, and in striving to bring about the

Kingdom of God. All Christians, and certainly those who consider themselves ministers, must be willing to speak with a prophetic voice, speak truth to power, and speak the truth in love. We must always call out societal evil, and ministers all have a responsibility to teach and preach about things in our world that run contrary to God's will.

During this past year, which has seen me constantly struggling to adapt to life in a community that is different not only in geography to any other that I had made a home in before, but in politics, culture, and worldview, multiple Black Americans were again killed in very public and gruesome ways by police. The protests in which I participated in central Missouri following these events were very different than those from my own past that took place in Chicago. These protests might have looked tame and toothless to those outside my current community, but I recognized a need to start somewhere in the process of bringing just peace to those who have lived without it for so long in this part of the world, and I will always be ready and willing to be a part of that, even if I recognize that it is the least I can do.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared

our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

I learned at an early age from my youth pastor that the center of every church or other Christian ministry must be the person of Jesus. Jesus is the son of God. God chose not only to take on human form but to submit Godself to torture and death to show us not only that God's love is always present with us, even in the most painful parts of human life, but that love is more powerful than death. I imagine the crucifixion as the natural result of Jesus' life. Jesus showed that people are not merely cogs to be used in brutal economic or political systems. Rather they are sacred beings, who have the potential to come together and form a Kingdom not of this world, but in which all show love to one another as God loves them. Jesus' ministry embodied this worldview – a worldview that runs so counter to what is practiced by earthly powers, and what our basest

human instincts tell us to do, that torture and death from the powers that be was the inevitable end to Jesus' life.

On one occasion, I was called to minister to the family of a man younger than me, who had shot himself in the head as police sought to arrest him for a violent crime. The man's brother asked to speak to me alone and said: "I'm sorry you have to be here; I know he won't get into heaven because he committed suicide." The first word out of my mouth was no. No, I do not believe that this man, who had already suffered so much in this life, will be condemned to yet more punishment. I believe in a loving and powerful God who can save anyone from any sin, who neither causes nor spares us from worldly pain but who suffers alongside us and shows us love through the gift of grace which is freely given to us all. Wherever I am called, I speak about God's unconditional and immutable love shown to us in Christ and God's ultimate authority over life and death. I speak about the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, that death is not the final

word, and that eternal life is the hope of all who call upon His name. This is where Christ feels most powerfully present to me in my ministry, through the togetherness we share, and the grace and love displayed by the people I serve even in some of the most painful moments of life.

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

The Holy Spirit enables us to make deep sacred connections even in the most unlikely of situations. As I have grown in my call to ministry and in my confidence, I have been able to lean into the presence and disposition of the Holy Spirit more and more. The Holy Spirit is our sustainer. For me, the Holy Spirit is the felt sense of God. She brings the presence of God close to us when we need to feel God's power and love in the here and now, to feel that we are not alone, to feel cared for. The Holy Spirit moves among us when we gather in God's name and can help us communicate using the word of God more so than our own imperfect human reasoning. As

sustainer, the Spirit gives us energy to continue walking with Christ when it would be easier and less painful to just accept the world as it is or give up.

I can think of one example of a large family with whom I visited late one night. A mother of four young children was comatose, dying of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Her young daughter was sitting beside her bed and asked the room if her mother could feel her holding her hand. A doctor gave a well-intentioned response that essentially amounted to: probably not, but you never know. I sat down next to the girl and told her that the "Spirit of God is present with her mother in this place and that the Holy Spirit, who intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words, can get through to anyone, no matter what their medical state. Your mother knows you're here with her, she knows how much you love her, just like you know she loves you." That's why we

need the Holy Spirit. She lifts us up at the lowest times of our lives and helps us to overcome our human shortcomings to love one another.

It is important that the three persons of the Trinity are all expressions of one and the same God. The God who created us is the same Christ who took on flesh and lived, died, and was raised again to show us the way to salvation. The Christ who suffered and died on our behalf and showed us victory over death is the same Spirit of life who gives us the breath in our lungs to preach the sacred word. We need all of these three expressions to fully know and understand God's love, any one or even two would be inadequate to describe how God is, the source of inspiration for why I strive to live the Christian life.

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of men, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory. He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.
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Discipleship means that, in a life modeled after Christ, our highest purpose is service to others. There are so many in our world who need so many different kinds of help, and Jesus said in the gospels that wherever we provide that help, he will also be there in some mystical way. I believe that it is important to be there for people during the good and bad, mundane and significant, all parts of life. When I cook dinner from scratch for a Bible study night, or when I attend a youth hockey game to watch someone who comes to my youth group play, I am not being prophetic or making grand meaning, but these acts of everyday ministry are just as sacred as visiting with someone in the hospital or officiating a wedding or funeral. God is truly with us all the time, and I feel called to a ministry that reflects this unconditional presence and love.

My personal understanding and beliefs about Communion are informed both by my own lived and felt experience of God as well as the rich church tradition of Eucharistic theology from

current and historical forms of the UCC and other denominations. The significance of the sacrament of Communion is connected to Jesus' death and resurrection. The gathering and partaking of the elements point to transcendent meaning much greater than the rather mundane act of the Communion meal. Jesus said to his friends: "this do in remembrance of me." When we come to the Communion table, we are coming together as the church. As Paul wrote in First Corinthians, there is more to the Lord's Supper than the simple act of partaking of the bread and the wine. It is an occasion for Christians to come together and a symbol of our equality in the eyes of God.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus partook of this meal with his chosen family, his closest friends who were committed along with him to spreading the gospel. Communion in the UCC has always been significant for me as an act of coming together for the congregation. In the congregation I was raised in, I always found it significant that even the Pastor who consecrates the elements did not serve communion to herself, but rather the bread and the cup must always be

passed, given to you by another member of your family. Communion for me is primarily a communal act, an act of being God's church together.

The second main idea that informs my understanding of the meaning of Communion is that put forth by John Calvin during the Protestant reformation. Calvin rejected the doctrine of the Catholic Church that held that Jesus was physically present in the elements, the bread and the wine. Calvin held instead that the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper was a spiritual presence or a mystical presence, one that is not physical but rather unexplainable by the logical or literal parts of our brains. Christ is somehow there in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine.

We understand that the sacred element of the bread, of which we partake during the Communion meal, is Jesus' Body. The other metaphor that adds meaning for me in understanding Christ's presence during the Lord's supper is the body of Christ not as one of the elements but as the Church itself, in a Pauline sense. The Church is the body of Christ. Christ is present in both locations, both in the bread and in the Church which comes together around the table to partake of the bread.

The Communion elements themselves have yet more metaphorical significance. Bread is the basic unit of sustenance, a linguistic and historical reality often alluded to in both the Old and the New Testaments. But as Jesus says, "man cannot live on bread alone." When Jesus gives us the bread of life through Communion, I think of it as faith, the gospel. We need bread to survive, and we also need Christ within us to live abundantly. The bread of life is what gives us the sustenance we need, not just to get us through the workday, but the slings and arrows of mortal life, the pain and suffering inherent to the human condition. Luther cited the psalmist: wine makes the heart glad, when he himself was theologizing on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The good

news of Jesus Christ, of the promises of God, of never-ending hope, of the eternal presence of God and eternal life itself, is the purest form of joy that human hearts can feel. It also matters greatly to me that we practice an open table. I realize that the concept of the open table is a relatively novel one, but I was raised on it and have found it deeply meaningful since childhood. It was the first thing I took away about what Communion meant. All are welcome at the table. It instantly resonated with me. How could we say that all are welcome in our church without welcoming everyone to fully participate in our most sacred ritual? Do we really mean that "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here?" I understand those

who would object to the practice of an open table on the grounds that those who do not understand and appreciate deep meaning of the sacrament, such as children and non-church members, detract from the sacred character of the Lord's Supper. Yet I do not believe that welcoming everyone to participate is the same as encouraging people to take the sacrament lightly. If a church makes the important decision to invite children to the table, because as Jesus said, let the children come to me, it is even more important for that congregation to undergo the hard work of creating a robust education for those children, such that even they can appreciate the mystical presence of Christ which they can receive.

I have an innate sense that the practice of an open table is right, that it is what it means to be a beloved community. In practicing the open table, we are recreating the unconditional welcome that Jesus extended. I believe that Communion is not something that is meant to exclude people, that only certain types of Christians can enjoy, a mark that separates us from others, but rather a rite of calling in, of remembering that Jesus came that we *all* might have life in His name and that we might *all* be one.

The second sacrament that the UCC recognizes is Baptism. The act of baptism is a sign of our salvation through faith. The waters of life are marked on our bodies as a sign of the grace of God that sanctifies us each and every one. We are baptized in the name of our triune God, the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, the God who made us, saved us, and is with us all the time. In this way, I understand Baptism as a covenant between an initiate into the Christian church, or a child represented by their parents, and the congregation. The church commits to aiding the initiate every step of the way in their Christian life and in turn the baptized makes a commitment to take up their yoke as part of the church, with responsibilities to be a part of the church's ministry. I was personally lucky enough to be a part of a church that took its' Baptism vows

seriously. Not only did my congregation commit to aiding in my faith development throughout my upbringing, but it still supports me now and I feel a part of it, even separated by time and distance.

In part because these were the circumstances of my Baptism, as an infant whose life was transformed by the act despite being unaware at the time, the fact that the UCC does practice infant Baptism forms a great deal of the meaning of the sacrament for me. I also value the aspect of Baptism that points towards the UCC's identity as a united and uniting church. It is significant that we recognize one Baptism, at any age, even those performed under the conditions of other churches, even for those who come to the church later in life. If our stated goal is, as Christ said, "that they may all be one," then we must recognize any Baptism as an initiation into not only our church but the Church Universal, with all of the joys and responsibilities of this community.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him. Amen.