A Call To The Journey

A paper submitted in application for ordination in the United Church of Christ to the Southwest Association of the Wisconsin Conference, Division of Church and Ministry

by Laura E. Davison Kolden

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**Table of Contents**

I. **The Call to the Journey – An Introduction**  
   *Page 1*

II. **Theology – A Guide for the Journey**  
   *Page 1*
   
   i. The Nature of God  
   ii. God as Creator – Creating in love  
   iii. The Matter of Sin – The absence of love  
   iv. The Matter of Suffering – Love in the midst of trouble  
   v. God in Jesus Christ – Reconciling with radical love  
   vi. God as Holy Spirit – Liberating through love  
   vii. Christ’s Church – The witness of love  
   viii. Participating in Love’s eschatological kingdom

III. **In the Company of Others: the United Church of Christ**  
   *Page 9*
   
   i~ Our Common roots  
   ii~ Looking to the Word of God in scriptures  
   iii~ One with Jesus – sacraments of baptism and communion  
   iv~ Kindred community – the priesthood of all believers  
   v~ Our life together: privilege and obligation

IV. **Chapter 3: Wherever you are in Life’s Journey – A personal story**  
   *Page 15*
   
   i. Roots and resistance  
   ii. Recognition  
   iii. Some rules for the road  
   iv. A journey of sacred accompaniment  
   v. “Go to the land that I will show you” – Concluding words

V. **Notes**  
   *Page 22*
I. The Call to the Journey – An Introduction

“Go, to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1); it is with these words that God called Abraham to a journey. Throughout the biblical story, and woven through the history of faith we bear witness to this sacred call as God continually beckons all people into covenantal relationship and towards the realization of God’s kingdom.¹ My own call to ordained ministry echoes this journey narrative; like Abraham, I have not fully known where the journey will lead, but I have trusted in the promise of God’s accompaniment. And like Sarah I have laughed at the seeming absurdity of giving birth to a new vocation in mid-life. This journey has led me inward towards an ever deepening intimacy with God, but it has also directed me outward to “come and see” (Jn1:39) through the eyes of Jesus the beauty and need of the world that I am called to serve and the people that I am privileged to accompany. It is a journey in which God’s presence has further blessed and nourished me with the companionship of others – family and friends, colleagues and congregations, the prophetic voices of scripture and history, and even the encountered stranger. In their faithful but sometimes wandering way, Abraham and Sarah would often pause to mark a place of encounter with the Still-speaking God who led them. In a similar manner, I pause at this point in my journey to offer these words as a witness to the faith that I hold: with thanksgiving for all that the journey has taught me thus far, with trust in God’s guiding presence in this moment, and in joyful anticipation of my continuing participation in the realization of God’s love for the world, a world of healing and wholeness, justice and peace.

II. Theology - A Guide for the Journey

ii~ The Nature of God

Just who is this Still-speaking God, the One who invites us into the journey of sacred relationship? Our attempts to name God reflect both the expanse and mystery of the Holy, and the immediacy of our intimate experience. The early Christian theologian Iraneus said, “God is invisible and indescribable to all things that have been made by God, but God is by no means
unknown.”² Abraham had no seminary training or scriptures to guide him yet he “knew” the voice of the Holy One who called him to his journey. Countless theologians have struggled for a vocabulary that describes the essence of God³ with Paul Tillich perceptively noting, “Nothing is inescapably secular.”⁴ As such, Tillich might be paraphrasing the words of another Paul, who said nothing and no one can be separated from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39). It is such divine love, which lifts up all creation in sacred embrace and which I am convinced has the ability to seep through the hairline cracks of humankind’s most desperate and despairing dwelling places, that is at the heart of God’s identity. Whatever words we use to describe God – as parent, creator, defender and judge; as reconciler and as liberator; as majestic power and as still, small voice, and more – they all describe God as one whose purpose, intention, and very being is that of love. The Epistle of 1 John (4:8) puts it most succinctly: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love”.

To say God is love is not a sentimental expression but a relational one. As Love, God values the beloved without qualification but not without accountability. God’s love can be unflinching and tough in its perseverance, as much as it can be gentle and reassuring. Love does not avoid the deep wounds of suffering nor step away from the ugliness of hatred and injustice. God’s love is eternal, yet tangible in moments of encounter. Love is the living being of God, made known by the grace we receive through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, which reconciles us to God and frees us to love to one another. Love is the fullest expression of God and the greatest desire of God’s heart for the world.

It was in seminary that I was introduced to the struggles of the early church to describe God through the distinct persons in which the love of God was known to humankind – as eternal creator, in the embodiment of Jesus’ humanity, and by the presence of the Holy Spirit, who calls Christ’s church to a life of witness. The articulation of God’s Trinitarian nature in the ancient creeds of the Apostles and Nicaea, subsequently affirmed in the Protestant Reformation, and
claimed by the United Church of Christ in its Affirmation of Faith all testify to the relational nature of God: within the persons of God’s self (the immanence of God) and in the outward invitation to relationship with all people and creation (the economy of God). With holy imagination, I came to a renewed understanding of the Trinity not as a static construct of the institutional church but as a dynamic description of the living, moving, relational nature of God that theologian Karen Baker Fletcher wonderfully names the “Dance of the Trinity.” In their ensemble, the three persons of the Holy Trinity reveal both the particularity of expression and the unity of full relational community of God’s self. God’s persuasive love beckons us into this dance of relationship with God and mirrors God’s desire for our relationships with one another.

**ii - God as Creator – Creating in love**

Scripture introduces us to God in the very first line of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning, God” (Gen 1:1). God does not begin in time but time begins in the eternity of God, the creating source through which all life is lovingly imagined and brought into being. God calls everything good, but that should not be confused with finished. God rests, but does not then leave us alone. To paraphrase a United Church of Christ byline, God does not use a period but always a comma, evidenced by God’s continual activity in creation and among humanity, who is made in God’s likeness. That likeness (Imago Dei) does not privilege humankind over creation, but privileges us to be faithful stewards within and as part of creation, accountable for its care. Further, the Imago Dei honors our likeness to the Trinitarian God by celebrating the unique particularities of our human expression while sharing the commonality of our humanity.

**iii - The Matter of Sin – In the absence of love**

Created in the image of God, we are gifted with the autonomy that is honored within the three persons of the Trinity. More simply, we call it freedom. Just as the old adage suggests that parents bequeath their children both roots and wings, God grounds us in the rich soils of divine and human love while gifting us with the freedom to reciprocate. God’s love does not impose or
imprison us, but instead relentlessly seeks to persuade us to freely love as we are loved. It is when we fail to use our freedom to act in love that we cause harm, the harm that we name as sin. I understand sin to be the failure to love God before all else (Dt 6:5) and the rejection of God’s image of love in ourselves, in one another, and in the beauty of creation. In our sin against creation, we fail to balance our need for the earth’s resources with the integrity of its order and its limits. In human relationship, sin happens when we fail to hold the uniqueness of each person and the unity of God’s beloved community in equal tension; if we lean so far as to privilege ourselves or a particular people, we compromise the well-being of others and the wholeness of God’s beloved community. If we lean too far towards the unity of all, we risk airbrushing the beauty of our human diversity and fail to see the particularities of need or injustice. The intention of God’s judgment is to call us to repent for our acts of harm and return to the tasks of love that result in human flourishing. As Christians we recognize that this demands that we be accountable for our own complicity and privilege - known, or unknown - in the circumstances of human brokenness. Sin ultimately becomes an act of omission by the failure to love. Sin creates a divide between the life that God calls us to, and the way of life that we confess to.

*iv - The Matter of Suffering – Love in the midst of trouble*

Our personal and collective sin can often be, but is not always, the source of human suffering. Some would say that the far-reaching impact of human activity upon the world is an increasingly disproportionate cause of the world’s trouble. Yet there are also circumstances in which human suffering has no discernable explanation. Those who ask the question of what we have done to deserve our suffering presumes we have the agency to prevent it. Others reason that suffering must be part of God’s indiscernible plan. Alternatively, I do not believe that God needs to inflict suffering in order to shape the world to God’s purpose. The words of scripture and my personal encounters with suffering convince me that God does not cause us to suffer trouble; instead, God is never absent from us in the midst of it. We don’t always know, nor can
we always explain what it is that brings us to the place of suffering, but I am convinced that God meets us there with a sustaining embrace of love and grace. We see evidence of this in Jesus, who shared tears of grief at Lazarus’ grave, who wept over the injustice of empire and the corruption of the temple, who ate with the outcasts and who responded to the desperation of all those who were marginalized. In the power of the cross and in the agony of his death, Jesus demonstrates there is no limit to his solidarity with our human vulnerability. In the most heinous of circumstances, and even in death, the creative possibilities for healing and redemption are always waiting.

v - God in Jesus Christ – Reconciling with radical love

It is into the divide that marks our separation from God by sin and in response to our suffering that God comes to us in the human form of Jesus. By his radical example, he transforms our understanding of what and whom it means to love. We are first to love God above all else – to love anything more than God, as Augustine suggested, would be idolatry. But we cannot love God without loving our neighbor. (Mt 22:37-40). In his life and teaching, Jesus reveals the unprecedented and expansive identity of our neighbors. He lived and taught in the marginal places of the world, touching the pain of those who suffered from all forms of affliction and estrangement. Jesus challenged the powers of tyranny and wealth and preached a gospel of love that does not privilege one person or group over another, whether they be friend, enemy, or alien. We are called to do the same. In bidding us to lift up our cross and follow him, Jesus calls us to reject the powers of privilege, to die to the temptations of our self-centered autonomy and to claim the paradoxical freedom that comes in Christian discipleship.

Such a love is bold, demanding, and challenging but it is also a reconciling and restorative love (2 Cor. 5:17-2). The roots of the word “reconcile” suggest “a bringing back together” and our meeting place comes in the person of Jesus. Jesus’ story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) teaches us the nature of God’s expectant love that is always waiting upon us to
confess our need for grace and to receive it, in the words of Luther, with “the certainty of God’s acceptance of us in spite of what we do”\textsuperscript{17} As recipients of this grace, Jesus insists we must share it with all others, loving them “as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34-35).

The realities of our sin and our human suffering are made incarnate in the crucifixion, but the transformative power of God’s love is demonstrated in the resurrection, breaking open the invitation for reconciliation and the promise that God’s love will always have the last word. In Jesus’ resurrection the gap between our mortality and eternal life is bridged, and the fears of separation and loss that are attributed to death can be dispelled. Our “meeting place” in Christ’s love is undisrupted by death, and held fast in God’s eternal care. I appreciate the wisdom of feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson who suggests, “Heaven is the symbol of a community of love sharing the life of God.”\textsuperscript{18} Our trust in the coming realm of God anticipates that heaven and earth will be united in one full community, and that such a transformation is already begun in ways that far exceed our understanding.

\textit{vi - God as Holy Spirit – Liberating through love}

The presence of the Holy Spirit fulfills Jesus’ promise to be with us in the world, and the means through which all who follow Jesus are empowered to live out the gospel news. There is mystery in the ways of the Holy Spirit, but the winds of the spirit are always blowing, and we are summoned to “open our windows” to their transformative power.\textsuperscript{19} The Holy Spirit creatively binds us together in full community, arouses our senses in times of worship, equips us with diverse gifts for God’s purpose, and leads, comforts, and encourages our journey in Christ’s way. That said, I believe that the limitless nature of God allows the Holy Spirit to work throughout creation, in whatever ways people imagine or call upon God, and even in those places where God is seemingly spurned. I describe the Holy Spirit as the liberating love of God because of the creative freedom through which she accomplishes Love’s work in the world; when we are unsure of a way forward or feel constrained by our abilities, the Holy Spirit surprises us with new and
unanticipated possibilities, freeing us from the boundaries of our human imagination and leading us forward in the path of Jesus. More importantly the Holy Spirit is liberating by dynamically equipping the church to bring the mission and ministry of Jesus to fruition: “to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” (Lk 4:18)

\[vii - Christ's Church – The witness of love\]

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Church is called to be the embodiment of Christ in the world, just as Christ was the embodiment of God (Jn. 14:9). Blessed by its diversity of gifts but called to be one with Christ as Christ is one with God (Jn. 17:21), the church is to be a living witness to God’s grace and love for all people. I believe that today the church is entrusted with two primary tasks – the welcoming work of worship and evangelism. We gather in worship to offer praise and thanksgiving to our creating God, to nourish the hearts and minds of all who gather in Christ’s name, to confess our need of God’s grace and guidance, to hear the good news proclaimed in our time, and to celebrate the sacraments.

The work of evangelism, despite its unfortunate reputation, is quite simply the joy of sharing the good news of God’s love that comes to us in Jesus Christ and which is meant for all people. In an increasingly secular world where many claim the name but not the spirit of Christian discipleship, and where an increasing number of “nones” have little understanding of the radical freedom that is found in God’s love, the work of evangelism is imperative both within and outside of the church. The ministry of evangelism within the church is to share the faith stories over and again through the practice of spiritual disciplines, Christian education and faith nurturing, preaching, congregational care and fellowship in ways that enrich and expand our communal and personal experience of the gospel message. The work of evangelism beyond the church walls does not operate from a position of privilege but enters with a spirit of humility and solidarity into all the places where good news is desperately needed. Equipped by the gifts of individuals and the community’s discernment of the Spirit’s leading, the church must serve those
who live in the margins of society and culture, call to task the powers and privilege of those who diminish justice, and work towards the fullness of God’s’ kingdom with the inclusive welcome and radical love that Jesus has exemplified for us. I appreciate Oscar García-Johnson’s suggestion that the church should not live solely as an Easter people but more importantly as a people of Pentecost – a relational and diverse community empowered by the Holy Spirit to actively embody and share the gospel news of the resurrected Christ in a world that has such dire need. In its life of gathering in and sending out, the church both reflects and participates in the movement of Trinitarian relationship, the life of God.

viii - Participating in Love’s eschatological kingdom

The storyteller Marshall Dodge recounts a conversation between a summer tourist and a Maine native: “Lived here all your life?” asks the tourist. “Not yet…” comes the dry and drawling response. To me this is a wonderful metaphor for how we are to understand the nature of God’s kingdom and our place in it. Our personal story is part of a larger story of the creating work of God that continues to unfold, but the fullness of which is “not yet” realized. Before entering seminary, I confess to a certain queasiness around the topic of eschatology. I had difficulty reconciling my experience of a loving, grace-filled God with the commonly held notion of a rapture that would privilege a mysteriously chosen faithful over those who had fallen short of spiritual perfection. In such a scenario, the ghost of Luther’s anxiety lingers on! Through the course of theological and exegetical study and rich conversation with colleagues of diverse persuasions, I have come to a place of greater comfort with the vocabulary of the eschatological kingdom, not as a replication of a human patriarchy that can inflict harm with its privilege, but as the fullness of eternal community that lives in the liberating power of God’s love and covenantal relationship. We cannot fully grasp what the imagination of God anticipates for us, but Jesus’ prayer that God’s desire be known on earth as it is in heaven, and John of Patmos’ revelatory vision of God coming to pitch a tent and dwell among the people (Rev 21:3)
offers a vision of unity in the kinship of God and suggests that God’s realm is not withheld from the material world but instead encompasses it. The description of a “new heaven and a new earth” uses the Greek word *kainos*, which can be understood to mean “the transformation of suffering into blessedness”\(^26\) and anticipates the realization of the world that God intends it to be. Yet the fullness of God’s kingdom on earth cannot wait solely upon a future hope, for that presumes a withholding of God’s goodness in our current time and ignores the work that has already begun with and through Christ’s incarnation. Instead, the beckoning movement of the Triune God invites us to join the witness of the saints by living boldly and radically in the present, questioning and challenging what is, while also living joyfully “as if” the kingdom of God has already come.\(^27\)

I believe this is the journey into which God first called Abraham and all who come after him, a journey towards the covenantal community that God plans for heaven and earth and all who inhabit it. The United Church of Christ articulates this as the mission of the church – “to discern and to celebrate the present and coming reign of God,”\(^28\) the already of what has come, and the promise of the not yet. I turn now to the articulation of this promise as it is professed and practiced by the United Church of Christ, through which I seek ordination.

### III. In the company of others: the United Church of Christ

#### i~ Our common roots

“We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify.”\(^29\)

The United Church of Christ is an ecclesiastical community formed from four distinct denominational streams, each of was earlier shaped and influenced by the emerging traditions of the Protestant Reformation.\(^30\) The merging of the Congregational/Christian and Evangelical/Reformed Churches offer an intentional response to Christ’s prayer that we “all may be as one” (Jn 17:20-24); it is a unity that does not require sameness, but a oneness in love. As our Statement of Faith attests, the United Church of Christ is a community that welcomes all people
in mutual and covenantal relationship, united in our belief in the Triune God and the “holy love” that redeems us and reconciles us to one another and to God in Christ. In it we acknowledge not only God’s goodness but also God’s call to discipleship and all that entails, guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The beautiful doxological form of the Statement attests to the relational nature of our belief, in that we do not profess a faith about God so much as we joyfully confess our love and faith to God in the presence of God and one another.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the UCC offers an important definition of our life together, identifying the “core theological consensus” of the merging churches that claims the historical faith of the early church as it was professed in the creeds as well as the “basic insights of the Protestant Reformers”. This is significant in several respects. First, this wording affirms our common ecumenical roots with the universal church. Second, the vocabulary of “basic insights” of Protestant belief makes room for the variation of expression between Protestant denominations and also within the United Church of Christ. We have only to look at the disagreement between John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Ulrich Zwingli about how the presence of Christ is experienced in the practice of Holy Communion to appreciate the divergence of theological thinking that marked the Protestant Reformation and the not unfriendly tensions that still exist within the Protestant faith. In so doing, this language also lays the groundwork for the paradigm of autonomy and relatedness that underlies the life and governance of the United Church of Christ. Lastly, this acknowledgement of “core theological consensus” attests to our belief in the dynamic, unfolding, and continual revelation of the Still-speaking God throughout history; that our professed belief is not yet fully shaped. This is underscored in the beautiful line that follows in the Preamble, that it is the “responsibility of the church in each generation to make this faith its own.” It reflects the unity and distinction of the Triune community and appreciates the importance of context of time and place to a meaningful faith. Three significant legacies of the Protestant Reformation that are the foundational to our denominational identity
are articulated in the Preamble. They are also important to my own theological perspective and so I will highlight them here.

ii~ “Looking to the Word of God in Scriptures”

The Biblical story is a story of relationships, a story of the human experience in relationship with one another and with God. It is a love story fraught with beauty and with human brokenness, with hope and with human confession, the incomplete arc of the human journey that is led by God and throughout which God faithfully calls us back into covenantal relationship. When, over time, that story could only be accessed through the privileged and the literate, the work of scholars such as John Wycliffe and Martin Luther translated the biblical story into the vernacular, returning it to the community of people in whom it had originated generations before. This prompted both the freedom and the responsibility of all Christians to discern the voice of the Still-speaking God in the Biblical story. That word “discernment” is important, for while the UCC looks to the word of God in scripture it does not imply that scripture itself is inerrant and indisputable. The contradictions in the biblical text remind us that these stories are re-told by real people, whose account reflects their particularity of interpretation and context. Our understanding of God’s activity is imperfect, yet that does not prevent the reality of God from being glimpsed through even the most difficult and confusing of scripture. Dr. Osvaldo Vena, my New Testament professor, challenges students to always look for the good news in the Biblical text, admonishing his students to read the text, wrestle with it, and much like Jacob at Peniel (Gen 32:22-29) “don’t let it go until you are blessed with God’s liberating word.” Such a liberative reading is affirmed in the Preamble, which yokes the biblical message with the work of the Holy Spirit so as to make room for God’s “creative and redemptive work in the world”. To read and discern in this way requires us to give up the privileged places from which we might be tempted to interpret the text, and be open to the new
ways in which the text speaks to us, challenges, humbles, and gives us hope, holding us accountable to the Still-speaking God and to the community of faith of which we are a part.

**iii– One with Jesus – sacraments of baptism and communion**

A second legacy of the Reformation is reflected in the UCC’s observance of Holy Communion and Baptism. Celebrated as the two practices instituted by Jesus, they bind all Christians together in the person of Jesus Christ and gather us together as Christ’s community. As sacramental practices, they are an “outward and visible sign of the inward grace” that is freely and lovingly bestowed by God. By baptism, as an infant or as an adult, that love is both acknowledged and professed. I grew up in the tradition of believer’s baptism; I was dedicated to God as an infant and professed my faith through baptism by immersion at the age of twelve. I appreciate the UCC’s openness to the age and manner in which we are confirmed in our faith and the diversity of expression by which it characterizes our denominational nature. Whether dedicated or baptized, the grace of God’s love is present in each young life, and young children are to be entrusted to the covenantal promises of their family and the congregation to nurture them with “love, support, and care” in the Christian faith. Whether as baptismal candidates or confirmands, the next step is to claim and affirm this faith as their own in the presence of the worshipping community. We are baptized not only in response to Christ’s love for us but we are baptized and confirmed into the life and body of Christ, what Ronald Cole Turner suggests is not only a blessing but a vocational call to join the community of Christ and share in his life.

With bread and cup, we gather to celebrate our oneness in Christ, believing that “where two or more are gathered in [Christ’s] name, [Christ] is there” (Mt.18:20). At the table, we offer thanksgiving to God, confess our need for grace, remember the life that Christ has given for us, and are strengthened, equipped, and prepared to be sent out once more as witnesses of Christ’s love in the world. It has been one of my joys at Salem to plan the liturgies for World Communion Sundays, and so to celebrate the “ties that bind” us to the beautiful and extravagant
diversity of all who gather in Christ’s name, those of the great cloud of witnesses and those of
Christians around the globe, all gathered at the abundant feast of God’s love.

*iv– Kindred Community - The priesthood of all believers*

Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformation leaders reclaimed the scriptural
authority of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9). This convicted the tradition of church
leadership that governed from a patriarchal and top-down hierarchy. More importantly it
affirmed the responsibility of each believer in discerning scripture and living as Christ’s
disciples. Looking back over the past five hundred years, we can see that the Reformation was
just the beginning of the liberating, Spirit-led movement that in its time was radical enough to
disrupt the existing ecclesiastical structure, yet which did not fully grasp the work that awaited –
and which we are still engaged in – of realizing a church that reflects the full diversity and
giftedness of God’s people. A particularly meaningful discovery on my theological journey has
been my introduction to women who were influential in the Protestant and Counter
Reformations. Women such as Marguerite de Navarre, Katherina Schutz-Zell and Argula von
Grumbach engaged scripture to authenticate their place in the priesthood of all believers and
their competency for the ministries and theological conversations of the church.  
I am inspired
by their prophetic and creative courage and consider them among my theological and spiritual
companions. In the words of Marie Dentière, a former prioress who married a clergyman,

“If God has done the grace to some poor women to reveal to them by His Holy Scriptures
some good and holy thing, dare they not write about it, speak about it, declare it, one to
another...Is it not foolishly done to hide the talent that God has given us?”  

Through them, and other saints of the church whose voices have been hidden in history the church has been stretched and expanded. The UCC has helped to further widen the circle,
among the first to ordain women to ministry, and the first denomination to recognize and affirm
the call to ministry for those identifying as LGBTQ. I believe this testifies to the United Church
of Christ’s desire to take seriously the welcome of Christ and the intention of God to “so love the world” (Jn 3:16), and to continue the tradition of inclusive evangelism that was initiated by Paul.

Our life together: privilege and obligation

“The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession.”

When my grandparents married in 1925, they agreed upon vows of “mutual privilege and obligation” rather than promising to “honor and obey”. In much the same way, the United Church of Christ is bound together in the mutuality of covenantal relationship, a Christian kinship that honors not “freedom from” responsibility, but “freedom for” it. In keeping with the nature of the early church and subsequent Reformation practice, we are not governed by any human person or hierarchy to inform us, but we are led solely by the instruction and example of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. We are assembled in a polity that both protects and reflects this relatedness, which Louis Gunnemann describes in a dry but intentionally unspecific way as “a covenanted relationship of autonomous units delineated but not regulated by a Constitution and bylaws”. The local church is the “basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ” which is in equitable relationship with all other members of the body but distinct in particularity of tasks, including national officers and boards, geographically located Conferences, and their Associations. Within the UCC, ordained clergy are entrusted with the privilege of ecclesiastical leadership, not defined by hierarchy or sacrament but by the recognition of particular gifts, a vocational call, and theological training; Dorothy Bass refers to this as “the church’s assignment of a distinctive function to one of its members”. A clergy member’s obligation is to tend to their ministry in keeping with The Ordained Minister’s Code, which requires faithfulness, integrity, and care. While the local church holds the final decision-making authority within their particular community, many actions are taken in concert within the affiliation of the Association, which among other things offers mutual guidance and support in
the ordination, disciplinary oversight, and calling of clergy. In the spirit of the priesthood of all believers, every member - clergy lay, local, and national assemblies - freely participates in the ecclesiastical journey. We do that as privileged partners in Christ’s life and ministry, and in our mutual obligation to gather for worship and to faithfully discuss, deliberate, and discern the leading of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is not always easy; the task of reconciling, liberating, and grace-filled love can be messy and our efforts to emulate the dancing movement of the Trinitarian God at times are clumsy. But in the words of the UCC, “love and unity in the midst of our diversity are our greatest assets.”

As an ordained leader in the United Church of Christ I will keep these tenets of privilege and obligation before me as I continue in the journey to which I am called, thankful for the community of the wider church, in whose company I walk.

IV. Wherever you are in life’s journey – A personal story

i~ Roots and resistance

My own life journey has been marked by the deep and sustaining love of a family that is strongly interwoven with a love for God. That came with an assurance of God’s love for me that I knew not only through my family but also in the close-knit community of the Christian church. Perhaps that should not be surprising, given my heritage includes three generations of American Baptist pastors (one of whom is my father), a Methodist missionary and Christian educator (my mother), and assorted biblical scholars, denominational leaders, seminary staff members, and active laypersons. Family gatherings were always ripe with lively theological conversations, church politics and pastoral concerns. The women in my family were and are inspiring models of leadership in the church and community, well supported by their male partners and counterparts. Their influence, and that of a denomination that claims Helen Barrett Montgomery among its daughters and has long ordained female pastors, instilled a norm that valued equity of gender and identity. Now, as the mother of one who identifies as gay, and as friend and relative to many
others in the LGBTQ community, my conviction stands fast in the belief that neither gender identity nor orientation define our place in God’s realm any more than race, culture, or ability.

Throughout my youth the church was an extension of our home and family; it set the rhythm for our daily living, and it afforded a sense of belonging and loving relationships that continue to this day. The contexts of our community helped shape my understanding of the church. Growing up in university towns amid the turbulence of the 60’s and 70’s I experienced the church as a place where differences could be acknowledged, negotiated, and wrestled with. It was there that I also learned that the church could never be set apart from the issues that challenged the wider community. The church offered a presence of radical love, a critical and prophetic voice for justice and peace, and became a discerning conversational partner in the work of reconciliation. As bearers of the Gospel in difficult times, it could do no less.

When my father was called to pastor a 160 year-old downtown church in a faltering rust-belt city in upstate New York I learned that life was neither as homogeneous nor optimistic as it had been in the liberal, Midwestern town I had known. For the first time I discovered that my youthful idealism for the world was not going to “make it so”. I was confronted with the realities of prejudice and poverty in an extremely diverse community that challenged my white Protestant privilege and which couldn’t be reconciled with hymns of hope and the prophetic songs of Bob Dylan. The local church too, reflected a very different culture, but underneath I found that the convictions of faith were the same. That congregation became a refuge in a foreign land, offering strengthening friendships and support that sustained me, and a consistent response to the diverse challenges of the world. There, again was a safe home.

Attending a women’s college where women are “challenged to excel”55 I briefly considered attending seminary but instead chose to pursue a social justice “ministry” with a career in community and clinical social work. In retrospect, this choice was my attempt to respond to a sacred vocational call on my own terms, and to distinguish it from the ecclesiastical
focus of my parents and family. My vocational ministry included advocacy and intervention for the mentally ill, protecting children against abuse and neglect in the Chicago housing projects, crisis intervention in rural mental health clinics, and caring for individuals and families in private practice. Some of it was brutal and dangerous work, coming face to face with human degradation, despair, anger, and violence that tested my confidence in humankind. In the course of nearly fifteen years as a social worker, I leaned heavily upon the strength of God’s presence, and sought to be an affirming witness to God’s love and grace for others.

As my husband and I moved from place to place, the church continued to be a welcoming community, a source of lifetime friendships rooted in the commonalities of faith. I became active in lay leadership, developing Christian Education programs for adults and children, and staffing youth ministry programs. With the arrival of children I suspended my social work career and immersed myself in the ministry that is parenthood and also “professional volunteerism”- working within the church and the community to serve others with care and inclusive hospitality. Yet more and more, the joys and the challenges of the ministries within the church became the work that I hungered for and through which I experienced growth and fulfillment. My leadership within each beloved church family resumed a familiar life rhythm. It is a rhythm in which I now recognize the yearnings of a sacred vocational call.

**ii~ Recognition**

After being lovingly mentored by two female pastors I took a paid, two-year interim at our church as Coordinator of Christian Education and Director of Youth Ministry. Following an intergenerational Palm Sunday service that I coordinated, the senior pastor asked me if I had ever considered going into the ministry. In that question came an affirmation, that I had finally found what Frederich Buechner describes as the meaning of true vocation: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”. At the close of that position I accepted a call to serve as the Associate in Ministry at Salem UCC, a
congregation within a denomination I had previously held membership in and which was theologically in keeping with the progressive arm of the American Baptist Churches, my home denomination. While my primary focus and passion has been to develop an active youth ministry program, I am blessed with a senior pastor who has served as a mentor in pastoral leadership and who has encouraged me to share in the privileges of pastoral care, worship planning and preaching, teaching, and leadership in congregational life. In the course of those experiences I have been challenged to articulate what I believe and to live and teach it more faithfully; I have been privileged to accompany people through the valleys of personal pain and the shadows of death, and equally blessed to celebrate the mountaintop experiences of life and the journeys of growth in faith. I have been afforded grace in the rigors of preaching and creating worship liturgies. On my journeys with youth and adults into some of the borderlands of our world I have been deeply touched by our encounters with vulnerable people who have taught us not only how to give but also the blessing of receiving. And I have grown to love and appreciate the mission and the identity of the United Church of Christ as a diverse but unified community of Christian faith. My ministry at Salem UCC and the welcome and support of its members has taught me much and excited my passion for ministry in the local congregation. What was an exploratory path into ordained ministry is now a convicted sense of call.

That said, my hopes to begin seminary work several years ago were temporarily delayed by the pressing concerns of family members struggling with mental illness and other health issues; I wondered if I could possibly do justice to both. The challenge of balancing the needs of loved ones with the rigors of seminary and church has humbled me with the understanding that a deep faith doesn’t protect us against human suffering; it does however give us something to hang on to in the midst of it all and reminds us that God is always hanging on to us. These challenges have taught me how to entrust others and myself to God’s care without trying so much to tell God how to go about doing it. It has taught me how to be less of a “fixer” and more of a listener,
how to receive as well as how to give. It has been both a challenging and revealing journey, sustained throughout by the loving presence of God.

My faith journey was put on wheels in 2012 when, with the loving support of my husband and children I began a weekly commute to Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Il. A Methodist seminary, Garrett Evangelical draws faculty and students from all over the world, bringing a diversity of cultural and theological backgrounds that have provided an incredibly rich learning experience and forced me to examine my own cultural and ecclesiastical biases and my socio-economic and racial privilege. The conversations, classroom collaborations, and the wide array of church scholars and theologians in whose work I have been immersed at Garrett have expanded my world view and given me a deeper insight and appreciation for the ecumenical diversity of expression within the Christian faith. The work of seminary has also helped me to articulate my embedded theology more fully, to understand what I believe and why. It has helped me move from an intuitive faith to a far more intentional and deliberative faith. The gift of my tenure at Salem while studying at Garrett is that each informed the other, the congregational context raising questions that prompted inquiry and debate in the classroom, and the seminary work prompting the questions of how the work of theology is translated and meaningfully applied to congregational settings.

*Some rules for the road*

When I embark with youth and leaders on our yearly Serving And Learning Together summer journeys, I offer two rules: First, no trips to the emergency room. Second, take risks - step outside your comfort zones. These can be equally good guidelines for the journey of the church and the pastors who lead them. First, avoid reckless behaviors that ignore the leading of the Holy Spirit and which can bring harm. (And if harm does occur, give the work of healing and reconciliation immediate attention). But remember that at the same time, we cannot be followers of Jesus and live risk-free. We are called into forgotten and overlooked places among the people
who suffer in the world’s margins. As Gustavo Gutiérrez reminds us, Jesus calls us out of the comfort of our own spaces to “come and see” the places where he dwells – among the oppressed, the sick, the impoverished, and the outcast. We are called to take risks within the church as well – to nurture, teach, and hold one another accountable to a covenantal love and the demands of a rigorous faith that offers an inclusive welcome to all.

iv~ A journey of sacred accompaniment

This is a challenging time for the church, and yet in the promise of the journey on which God leads us it also can be a time of anticipation and hope. As a pastoral leader, I understand my role to be a vocation of accompaniment, a servant-leader sharing the faith journey in loving relationship with the church and its people while remaining attentive to the context of the wider community. As leaders, suggests Henri Nouwen, “when we live in the world with that knowledge [of loving Jesus], we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope wherever we go.” These words of Nouwen are for me the essence of pastoral leadership, a journey of accompaniment requiring the same tasks of privilege and obligation that we hold as covenantal members in the United Church of Christ and in the wider church.

In this way, I feel called to equip and encourage a congregation to grow a rich and articulate theology of faith through the practices of worship, preaching, and teaching the good news of the gospel message, and to empower people to creatively engage their unique gifts to live out the gospel in service of Jesus. When the life path becomes rocky, steep, or slowed in step, I seek to accompany people with a pastoral presence, matching my pace with their own, and to be a faithful companion as they are welcomed into life and as they journey through death and into God’s eternal care. To be a leader requires compassion and the gift of presence, yet also the courage to confront injustice and hold in covenantal care the tensions that come with our differences. I hope to be a presence that encourages the church to welcome all with radical and unconditional love, to practice the reconciling grace of Jesus and to participate in the healing
liberation of God’s creation and all people. While my experience of the church has been a deeply positive influence upon my own faith formation, I am aware that has not been the case for everyone; many have not found the church to be a place of welcome, refuge, and inclusion, but a place of hurt, estrangement, or indifference. As a pastoral leader, I am called not to persuade otherwise but to offer a safe hearing of acceptance that also offers the possibility of something new. Similarly, remembering the words of Isaiah (43:19) in an ecclesiastical troubling time, I feel called to help the church lift its sights towards new horizons of holy possibility while drawing on the wisdom of the journey thus far, ever attentive to the whispers of God in the Holy Spirit. What I deeply love about the pastoral call, in fact, is the diversity of creativity that engages my mind, my body, and my heart in the undertaking of the spiritual and communal journey. Knowing that I go in the company of others, the burden of obligations and the joys of our communal life can and must be shared; they cannot be solely owned nor ever fully accomplished. “Everyone is to bring into the church and the process of new creation everything [s]he has,” notes Moltmann, and I shall honor that not only by making space for the gifts of others but also by attending to my own needs for spiritual growth, collegial support and self care. “Go to the land that I will show you.”

The Still-speaking God beckons us forward, joined by the company of humankind - the biblical and historical saints, and the saints of our own lives - in the joyful dance of God. Our steps lead us into the life of God’s ongoing work in creation to embody the reconciling love of Christ in the world, and to be led by the liberating power of the Holy Spirit. We journey as people of the comma, seeking to live our faith in ways that are relevant to the context of our time, in the space between the already and the mystery of the not yet. As I approach my call to ordination in the United Church of Christ, I do so trusting in the fullness of God’s love and in joyful anticipation of what is to come, remembering the words of the one who leads us, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
Notes

All scriptural references are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version.

1 I use the traditional language of God’s kingdom and God’s realm here, recognizing that it is an imperfect analogy but trusting that it is transformed by the inclusive, loving, and just relationship of God with creation, and anticipates a future that precludes our human imagination.

2 Iraneus, Against Heresies, XX.8.

3 For example, Augustine described God as “Our ultimate good” while Luther said God is “anything on which your heart relies and depends.” The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich describes God as “the ground of our being”, while Mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz says God is known in all that is beauty.


6 Karen Baker Fletcher, Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).

7 The premise of Trinitarian theology, says Mujerista theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna, is that “it is the essence or heart of God to be in relationship to other persons” with “no room for division or inequality.” Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion With Us” in Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 106.

8 http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking_church-resources_gods-comma

9 Commonly attributed to Hodding Carter

10 I am indebted to Karen Baker Fletcher for introducing me to the image of God’s love as pestering, persistent and persuasive. Karen Baker Fletcher, Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).

11 I am indebted to Howard Thurman for his theological work that explores the necessary and critical relationship between the authentic self and the beloved community.

12 The climate change that is prompting an escalation of natural disasters, the poisoning of our earth that makes us more susceptible to disease, the preferential treatment of those who are privileged by wealth, race, culture, or gender, are all manifestations of our complicity in a world that is not what God intends it to be. I am indebted to Dr. Stephen Ray for classroom conversations on this perspective.


14 A pivotal influence on my understanding of Jesus himself as a marginalized person, and the power of doing ministry in the liminal and borderland places of the world came in reading Sang Hyun Lee, From A Liminal Place: Asian American Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
As theologian Roberto Goizueta notes: "By recognizing Christ in one another we are liberated from our own constraints of privilege and/or places of marginalization, and in turn, are transformed." Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 210-211.

I am indebted to Luther E. Smith Jr., Professor Emeritus of Church and Community, Candler School for Theology, Atlanta, Ga. for this perspective on reconciliation.


“The winds of the spirit are always blowing, some people put up windbreakers, others open their windows.” – Annonymous.

“nones” – a name given to an growing number of people who claim no particular religious belief or affiliation. [http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/)

I am convinced of the suggestion by Rev. Dr. Mark Teasdale (GETS faculty member) that we must not only share the good news with those who are new to it, but we most also continue to do the work of “evangelizing the already evangelized.” Mark R. Teasdale, *Evangelism for Non-Evangelists: Sharing the Gospel Authentically* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2016).


It was Luther’s severe anxiety about his inability to achieve the perfection required for salvation that led to his epiphany of justification by grace.


Book of Worship, United Church of Christ, *Statement of Mission* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, Local Ministries, 2012), 514B.


[http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_preamble-to-the-constitution](http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_preamble-to-the-constitution)
Luther rejected the Catholic belief that the bread and the cup were transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation) but preserved the belief that Christ is somehow present and shared in the elements (consubstantiation); Zwingli’s profession was that Christ is remembered by and through the symbolism of bread and cup (as an ordinance); Calvin’s conviction stood between the two, suggesting that Christ’s spiritual (but not physical) presence was made known in the materials of the bread and the wine.

Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ
http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_preamble-to-the-constitution

Consider the differing accounts of creation in Genesis; the commandment “thou shalt not kill” against Old Testament stories of God’s pledge to annihilate Israel’s enemies; the inclusion of women among Jesus’ close community of followers against epistle letters that devalue the worth of women.

Dr. Osvaldo Vena, Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Ill.

Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ
http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_preamble-to-the-constitution

This language was first articulated by Augustine and expanded upon by John Calvin: John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 4.15.1. It is now often used to describe the meaning and mystery of the sacraments in the life of the church.

Book of Worship, United Church of Christ, Order for Baptism (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, Local Ministries, 2012), 139.


Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ
http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_preamble-to-the-constitution

http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/226/Autonomy-in-a-Covenantal-Polity-Freeman.pdf?1418423590


UCC Constitution: Article V. #9

The one non-geographical conference in the UCC is the Calvin Synod, representing the Hungarian Reformed Church of America.
The tradition of ordination as a church sacrament was abolished in the Protestant church during the Reformation.


The Ordained Minister’s Code of the United Church of Christ
http://www.ucc.org/ministers_ordained-ministers-code

Verhey submits that the work of the Christian church is to discuss, deliberate, discern, and act upon what is discerned to be good in the mind of God. Allen Verhey, Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).

http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-we-believe UCC “What We Believe”

With deep love and honor I name my father, Rev. Dr. James V. Davison; mother, Edith Scott Davison; uncle, Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Davison; aunt, Beverly C. Davison; grandparents Rev. Dr. William F. and Mrs. Virginia V. Davison, and Lt. Carl A. and Edith Scott. They have each been, and remain, the formative sources of love, inspiration, and faith throughout my life.

Helen Barrett Montgomery was elected as president of the Northern Baptist Convention (later the American Baptist Convention) in 1921 and as such was the first woman to lead a US denomination. She was an active laywoman and a strong voice representing women in ecclesiastical and public life.

Mt. Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA

My first experience in Youth Ministry leadership came in partnership with my husband Greg under the richly creative mentorship of our dear friend Rev. James L. Pike at Community Church of Wilmette, Wilmette, Il.

I am deeply grateful to Rev. Aurelia Hale and Rev. Tammy Martens

I am indebted to Rev. Mark Clinger, senior pastor at First Baptist Church, Madison Wi. for asking aloud the question that had been lingering at the edge of my consciousness.


Membership at First Congregational UCC in Waterville, Maine, 1988-1922.

A heart of unceasing gratitude for mentor, colleague, and friend Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs.

Each year I have the joy of leading youth on Serving And Learning Together (S.A.L.T. cf. Mt. 5:13) adventures to locations throughout the country, and to UCC national and regional youth gatherings. In 2016 I led a group of adults from Salem and 1st Baptist Madison on a SALT trip to Back Bay Mission, in Biloxi, Ms., and in 2015 joined members of Orchard Ridge UCC for a trip to the US/Mexico Border in concert with Borderlinks.

This journey could not have been undertaken without the love of my constant and cherished life partner Greg, and that of our beloved young adults – Anna, Jamie, Alex, and Chris. And for my brother Scott and wife Lorraine, forever thanks for helping make seminary tuition manageable.
I am deeply and affectionately grateful to my academic advisor and theological mentor Dr. Nancy E. Bedford, Gloria Harkness Professor of Applied Theology, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, for her wisdom, guidance, and support. I am equally thankful for the tutelage and ongoing mentorship of Rev. Dr. Mark Fowler in areas of preaching and leading in congregational life.

Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells* (New York: Orbis, 1992), 38.

My understanding of the role of pastor as servant-leader has been greatly influenced by the pastors I have been privileged to know, and by the work of Henri Nouwen, particularly in his book *In The Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (see below).
