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Introduction

In this ordination paper, I will share my spiritual journey, my theology, and my approach to ministry. I pray that the reader will discover that what matters most to me is love for God and neighbor, seeking justice and peace, and faith in the saving grace of the resurrection through my personal Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

My Spiritual Journey

I believe my spiritual journey began before I was born. My mother had an accident while I was still in her womb. She was told she needed to abort the baby or risk her own life. She put her faith in God, and we both survived. She always called me her miracle baby.

I was baptized in a Methodist church in Elm Grove, Wisconsin. As a child, I was always involved in church activities where my father was a leader within our church. In my youth, I attended a Baptist school in Ohio. The school was very influential in my early studies of scripture. We studied scripture every day.

After graduating from high school, I decided to attend a small liberal arts school in Wisconsin, Ripon College. At Ripon, I was required to take classes in the liberal arts, including Philosophy. I liked Philosophy. I enjoyed applying logic to complex problems. I loved having rigorous debates with my classmates. We would argue about nearly any topic, often well into the night. Sometimes we'd even argue about whether we existed or not. We challenged and questioned just about everything. Nothing was beyond some element of doubt.

My father was concerned when I declared Philosophy as my major. He thought it would challenge my ability to be a Christian. One day, he told me that "Christians base their belief in God and Jesus on faith alone. Philosophers base their beliefs on logic and that which has empirical evidence." My father was worried that a love of logic was in conflict with my Christian faith.

One Day, I remember learning about the story of doubting Thomas in Luke, chapter 20: 19-31. In this text, Thomas says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Jesus responds to Thomas by saying, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus responds to Thomas, not with rebuke, but with an invitation.

A couple of years ago, I took a class on the New Testament in my Faith Foundations course, a course offered by the UCC's Damascus Project. Our professor, Rev. Matt Mardis LeCroy, stated that the doubt that Thomas expresses leads to him making one of the strongest statements of faith we see in any of the gospels. After Thomas inspects Jesus' hands and touches his side, he declares (v:28) "My Lord and my God!" Rev. Mardis LeCroy argued that because of Thomas' doubt, he is led to a place of greater and deeper faith. Thomas' doubt leads him to proclaim to Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" Perhaps we all should do a bit more doubting, especially if it will ultimately lead us to deeper faith.

Rev. Mardis LeCroy's perspective was inspirational to me. It brought me back to this dialogue I had with my father regarding the study of Philosophy. In my mind, the study of logic is, in some ways, a kind of doubt. This is to say, logic forces us to question what we believe and why we believe it. And, I think, questioning things is very much like doubting something. But that was not my epiphany. My epiphany was in the invitation given to Thomas by Jesus. Jesus does not rebuke Thomas for having doubt; rather, he invites him to investigate so that he may overcome his doubt. Jesus invites him to look closer. Jesus loved Thomas. He wanted to save Thomas from his doubt.

This made me wonder about the dialogue with my father. I wondered if the discussion my father wanted me to have about the potential conflict between Philosophy and faith was a rebuke – or was it an invitation. My father never said it was bad for me to study Philosophy. So, perhaps he was saying, “make sure to take a deeper look at your faith”. Like Jesus' invitation to Thomas, perhaps my father was inviting me to look closer, to touch it up close and personal. I know my father loved me, so I must assume he also wanted me to be saved. In the end, my studies in Philosophy did not lead me away from my faith. Rather, it helped to solidify it. I remember telling my father, “Isn't the act of faith an act of reasoning and logic?” For me, faith was a logical conclusion of all my musing about God and Jesus.

Later in life, I met my wife, Rhea, and we moved to Waukesha, Wisconsin, where we began attending First Congregational Church of Genesee, UCC. Over the last 30 years, I served in many roles within the church, including Trustee, Deacon, Vice-Moderator, and Moderator.

In December 2019, the pandemic began. My job in international sales and marketing changed dramatically. I went from traveling 150 days a year to 20 to 30 countries to sitting at home day after day. When I realized that wasn't going to change anytime soon, I began thinking about my retirement plans. I had always wanted to enter the Lay Academy and explore other ways I could expand my service to Christ. I was thinking this would be my focus in retirement. Now, I saw an opportunity to get a head start.

One day, I got an email from the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC. It was promoting the Faith Foundations Class through the Damascus project. I inquired about the class, and Rev. Tisha Brown asked me if I wanted to consider the “Assessment” path. After I learned more about it, I realized this was God speaking to me – this was me being called into a new role of service for Christ.

I began Faith Foundations in August of 2020 and finished Year 1 in April of 2021. It was an awesome journey. It was nothing like what I expected. I figured we would be learning what was in the Bible. I had no idea how much I would learn about interpretation of scriptures and theological reflection. I wrote essays about how I moved from embedded to deliberate theology. (Most of my historical beliefs were built on mandates from a strong Baptist tradition, which didn't encourage personal exegesis. The Damascus project helped me evolve my theology into a deliberate theology based on my personal interpretation of scripture.) I fell in love with the laments of the Psalms and the messages of social justice in Amos 5 and other books of the prophets. I couldn't get enough of it. This rich history, the covenant with God, and the various ways God speaks to us. It was inspirational and wonderful. The best part was the diversity of my class and all the unique viewpoints. My eyes were opening wide to the realities of how differently we all read and interpret the Bible. I slowly realized how challenging the different

aspects of Christian ministry can be: Pastor, Priest, Prophet. There was so much more that I needed to learn. I was excited about the wide and deep faith journey in front of me.

After my Faith Foundations studies, I began exploring “what’s next”. I asked my Pastor, Rev. David Schnepf, what I needed to do to formalize my desire to pursue being a Member in Discernment. He introduced me to the Church and Ministry Team of the Southeast Association and Rev. John Helt. Church and Ministry approved my status as a Member in Discernment. I began taking many more classes within the Damascus project and elsewhere. I am now in my fifth year as an Assessment Learner.

In 2023, Rev. Rachel Bauman asked me if I would be interested in serving as a Designated Interim Pastor at First Congregational East Troy, UCC. I started in September of 2023. In January of 2024, they called me to serve them as their settled Pastor. The call vote took place in early March, and I was approved unanimously. I have never been happier. They are a small church and can only afford a quarter-time pastor. As a retired businessperson, I wasn’t looking for a full-time position, and I was hoping to serve a smaller rural church. God has called me to the exact place I wanted to be. I love my congregation, and I feel love flowing from them.

I am open to whatever God puts in front of me next. And I continue to listen for God’s voice as I passionately believe God is still speaking to me. I continue to pray for God’s guidance, the wisdom to know God’s will, and the strength and courage to act upon it. I love my faith journey, and I know it will continue to grow and change each day. I remain faithful, prayerful, and loving towards God and neighbors.

My understanding of: History, Theology, Polity, and Practice of the UCC and how UCC ordination connects with my sense of call.

This history of the UCC is certainly one that resides in diversity, cooperation, collaboration, covenant, and autonomy. The ability of the five streams to come together to form the UCC is an impressive act of faith, humility, and cooperation amongst believers who knew that God was still speaking. I remain impressed with the flexibility and openness of those people who helped form the UCC in 1957, as the Evangelical, German Reformed, Christian, Congregational, and Afro Christian Convention Churches and traditions were inspired to merge together to create something far greater than they could on their own. Each of these Churches is rich in its own theology and traditions. Only by God’s grace could they have worked through the challenges of creating a common Affirmation of Faith, a Constitution, and By-Laws with such deep discernment, care, and success.

UCC Theology is equally rich and diverse. The UCC slogan “God is still speaking” strongly resonates with me. Growing up in a Baptist tradition where we were often told to take the Bible quite literally always felt impersonal, conflicted, and restrictive. As I began taking Biblical studies in the Damascus project, and as I continue to study UCC Theology, I am liberated by my own “great awakening” and my own personal renaissance of deliberate theology. That is, a UCC Theology where members of the church are encouraged to interpret the Bible for themselves and allow God to speak to them individually, considering their own context, bias, place, and time.

Freed to listen to God on my own, and inspired by my teachers, mentors, advisors, preachers, and friends in Christ within the UCC, my own theology calls me to believe in the same Foundational Theological Claims as the Members of the Historical Council of the United Church

of Christ Affirmed in 2016.¹ (I have not listed those claims here, but I can provide them if needed.)

In support of these Foundational Theological Claims, I also believe that I am only saved by God's grace and not by works of my own good will. And I believe because I love God and Jesus, I am motivated to do good works for God and for my sisters and brothers in Christ. I believe we are all children of God, and as such, all humans are members of my family whom I deeply love and serve faithfully.

I also consider the UCC Statement of Faith, adapted by Robert V. Moss², as another cornerstone of my personal Theology and agree with the beliefs stated within the UCC Statement of Faith. I will not reproduce it here. But I believe strongly in the views which it affirms.

I also subscribe to the view of UCC theology so eloquently stated by Sarah Drummond in her book, Sharing Leadership, where she states:

*The United Church of Christ is a denomination whose theologies align with Reformed, mainline Christianity, but has no patron saint or patented, singular theology. Individual believers and whole faith communities draw from different sources to make meaning of the world around them. The sources change over the course of an individual or community's lifetime, but the UCC's Christ-centeredness provides a plumbline for grounding the integration of varied perspectives on faith. The UCC makes abundant room for doubt and variety among believers. This internal diversity could easily be mistaken for secularism, or a tendency to change views based on convenience, not so. Striving towards Christ holds the UCC's theological thought together.*³

As a member of a UCC church, and by definition therein, a member of the UCC, I respect the UCC Polity and its tension between autonomy and covenant. I am committed to and believe strongly in the value of the Covenant between myself and my church, my church and the UCC, my church and my Association, my Association and my Conference, and my Conference and the General Synod of the UCC.

Another critical covenant that I deeply value within the UCC is the covenant of ordination. UCC ordination represents a strong covenant between the pastor and the church of call. It also represents a covenant between the pastor and the United Church of Christ. Most of all, it represents a covenant between the pastor and every individual member of the UCC as a servant leader to those members. And while Lay Ministry includes these covenantal elements, Ordained Ministry represents a deeper commitment to the wider church, study and exegesis of scripture, support of UCC polity and life-long learning and servant leadership. For me personally, it demonstrates an extreme dedication to the faith we embrace and the fellowship we enjoy with those who are committed to serving that faith beyond just the local church. It calls me into a community of commitment and support with all ordained ministers within the UCC.

UCC ordination mirrors my own call to my covenant with God and my commitment to serve God and my fellow sisters and brothers in Christ as their life-long servant leader and messenger of God and the Good News. And as I move closer to ordination, I don't see ordination as the

¹ Document provided by Rev. Michael Jones during 2024 UCC History and Polity class from 2016 UCC Synod.

² <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith/#Robert-V.-Moss-Version>.

³ Sarah B. Drummond, *Sharing Leadership*, (Cleveland, Pilgrim Press, 2021), 61.

conclusion of my faith formation and learning. Rather, I see ordination as a motivation to expand and deepen my faith formation and learning. I fully intend to spend the balance of my life deepening my understanding of God, Christianity, scripture, theology, and the never-ending flow of questions that come to those of us who cherish “faith seeking understanding”. There is no view on my horizon where my thirst for learning is ever fully satisfied. I have a long “to learn” list in my grasp.

My Theology of God

I recently completed “God Talk”, a Damascus Course on Systematic Theology taught by Rev. Trish Zimmerman, St. Olaf’s. The course was based on the book, Quest for the Living God. Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God, Elizabeth A. Johnson. I was inspired by our reflection on many different theologies, including: Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Black Liberation Theology, Latino/Latina Theology, Political Theology, and several others. My final assignment was to incorporate what I learned into a personal Creedal statement that captures my current understanding of God. That assignment, along with much spiritual reflection, has helped me focus my personal theology of God into what it is today.

My personal theology of God, in its simplest form, is that I believe God is love. And, for me, I believe that is enough of a theology to guide my life and my ministry. Yet, admittedly, I do have additional, important beliefs about God.

I believe God is the one and only God, Creator of all things. God is Great. God is Good. God is loving, kind, compassionate, caring, nurturing, accompanying, listening, forgiving, saving, rescuing, true and just.

I believe God is Savior through Jesus Christ, the Word, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus Christ is God made human, perfect in love, offspring of God, Savior of humankind, resurrected to save humankind, provider of forgiveness of sin, and deliverer of salvation in heaven.

I believe God is the Spirit which moves through the world and humankind, ever present, ever accompanying in every day and every way.

I believe God came into the world. God is in the world. God is with the world. God loves the world. God saves the world.

I believe God is Light, omnipresent, illuminating, life-giving, mysterious, all-powerful, infinitely positive, sustaining, warming, glowing, showing the way, eliminating darkness, guiding paths to where all can be seen and known.

My personal theology also draws partially from my lifetime of work with Latino cultures. I am inspired by a Latino/Latina Theology, which views God as a daily presence in all aspects of life. Most importantly, I share in a theology that believes that God doesn’t allow unjust suffering, God accompanies unjust suffering, is deeply compassionate, a God of Pathos. God walks with humankind in daily life, ever present and ever accompanying, favoring those who are poor, suffering, and marginalized.

God is not a God that watches unjust suffering from a distance, but rather a God who shares and grieves in the unjust suffering of the oppressed, persecuted, and marginalized. God defends, protects, corrects, and nourishes the very same social group the world disdains. God offers the oppressed, persecuted, and marginalized hope in God’s love and salvation.

I believe God is Trinitarian: God as Mother, Lover, and Friend of the World. All love, all related, yet different forms of love, yet all love. I believe God desires humankind to enter into a life of love and communion with others.

In summary, I believe God is love and God loves me and knows that I love God.

Theology of Ministry / My Role as Minister

My theology of ministry is focused on Jesus as my role model. It is founded on the words of Jesus in Matthew 22:37-39: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.”

I wish to lay witness to my Christian faith and my commitment to following Christ and sharing the good news in my ministry. My ministry attempts to imitate those actions we witness in Christ:

- Teaching disciples the meaning of the scriptures.
- Helping all people to know God’s love and grace.
- Seeking to heal those suffering and help those in need.
- Loving all people and encouraging them to love one another.
- Pushing the world towards justice and obedience to God.
- Serving others with love and humility.
- Listening to those who need to tell their story while be attentive and offering empathy, referring them to counseling resources when needed.
- Shepherding friends and followers towards charity, community, and fellowship in God and with one another.
- Leading community by being a living example of love and humility.
- Caring for all God’s creation and all God’s people as God allows, desires, and provides.

God/Christ/Spirit – Sacrament Theology – Sin/Salvation...

Trinity: I believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Trinity – three in one – a Triune God. I believe complete knowledge of God is beyond my understanding. God is ineffable. Perhaps all I really need to understand about God is that God is love. I prefer not to think of God as “three people” but rather three variations of a divine essence. God as Trinitarian: God as Mother, Lover, and Friend of the World. Agape...eros...philia. All love, all related, yet different forms of love, yet all love. God as the brain, Jesus as the heart, and the Holy Spirit as the soul. And although I find this oversimplistic view of the Trinity helpful, I do not limit my understanding of a Triune God to only this understanding. I find guidance in the words of Theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson,

Wherever the human heart is healed, justice gains a foothold, peace holds sway, an ecological habitat is protected, wherever liberation, home and healing break through, wherever an act of simple kindness is done, a cup of cool water given, a book offered to a child thirsty for learning, there the human and earth community already reflect in fragments, the visage of the Trinitarian God. Borne by “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,” we become committed to a

*fruitful future inclusive of all people, tribes and nations, all creatures of the earth. The reign of God gains another foothold in history.*⁴

Sacrament Theology

There is an inscription on the church bell at the Danish Lutheran Congregational church in Luck, Wisconsin. It is inscribed with the hope that people would know this is what the bell is saying every time it is rung. The inscription says:

*To the bath and the table,
To the prayer and the word,
I call every seeking soul.*⁵

Baptism Theology

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Jews living in ancient Israel began immersing themselves in a mikvah to purify themselves. Drawing on this tradition, John the Baptist began calling people to repent, offering to baptize them in the Jordan River in a symbolic ritual of renewed spirit and devotion to God. In this same spirit of renewal and devotion to God, today's baptism is an important sacrament that represents a covenant between the person being baptized and God. It represents a covenant between the person being baptized and the greater Church and the local congregation. It represents a covenant between the congregation and the person being baptized. "We are all parts of the Body." Just as it was intended by John the Baptist and by Jesus, baptism is meant to be a proclamation of one's faith in God and in Jesus. It is a promise to be faithful to God and the Church. I recognize the challenge of this proclamation within the context of infant Baptism. I respect the faith of Christian parents who desire to make this proclamation on behalf of their infant, with the promise to guide them to their own independent proclamation as a young adult through the tradition and journey of that child's Confirmation experience. I embrace the parents' covenant with the church as a commitment to that child's future Confirmation through the Spirit's guidance and God's grace. I view the child's future Confirmation as a divine connection and affirmation of the infant's baptism to their adult confirmation of faith.

Baptism is also a sacrament that mirrors the resurrection, as a confession of our belief and faith in Jesus. I believe baptism symbolizes rebirth and being raised with Christ by God's grace. In baptism, we die to our old selves, our sins are forgiven, and we rise as new individuals. At the cross, Christ died. Our sins are forgiven. And Jesus rose with a new identity as the resurrected Lord of the Church. Through Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection, we receive God's grace and forgiveness. I believe in baptism; we also receive God's grace. Baptism is a holy sacrament and a cornerstone of Christian theology, and it truly represents new life.

I believe Mark chose to start his gospel with the story of Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:1-8), as Mark wants us, as readers of this gospel, to seek new life in Jesus. Jesus wants us to be baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and renewed in a straight path in Christ. Jesus commands us to be baptized when he directs his disciples to baptize in Matthew 28:16-20:

⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God, Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, Reprint ed. (New York, Bloomsburg, 2011), 224.

⁵ Gordon Lathrop, *Central Things, Worship in Word and Sacrament*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 20.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Both the church of my youth as well as my adult churches also practiced confirmation. Confirmation classes offered to teenagers was a rite that allowed the process of infant baptism to be completed into a proclamation of adult faith. Confirmation offers a course of study where young adults learn scripture, reflect on its meaning for their own lives, and ultimately declare their faith before the congregation of the church. This was also part of my embedded theology.

Looking back on these reflections, I came to realize that my embedded theology of baptism was one that assumed only infants are baptized, and only in the church, and always with the Pastor sprinkling some holy water on the infant's head. There were always sponsors (usually parents) who vowed to raise the child in the church and in the Christian faith. And it wasn't complete until the infant grew up in the church, completed their confirmation studies, and declared their faith before the congregation. Confirmation completes what was begun in the infant baptism.

Today, as I move towards a more deliberate theology of baptism, I have opened my heart and mind to baptism of adults, baptism by full immersion, and new circumstances that God may place before me.

As a member of the United Church of Christ, I seek guidance from the UCC rules on baptism.⁶ The UCC gives each church and each person the ability to make their own choices. I am comfortable with a theology that allows each person to make their own interpretations but encourages us to do so in covenant with our church, our congregation, our denomination, and the greater Church. This is a new theology for me, and one that is far less restrictive than the "traditions" that I grew up with. But it is not an endorsement of "anything goes". I continue to reflect on my deliberate theology of baptism, one that is open to individual interpretations in a variety of baptismal practices, both infant and adult, with immersion or with sprinkling water, in church and outside of church. I have discussed these views with peers, family members, and members of my church. These discussions reinforced my deliberate theology as conversations helped give confidence to my thinking, as friends offered support and similar viewpoints. I believe discussing theology with others is an important element of making my theology truly deliberative and my faith formation a lifelong journey.

As I continue my own theological reflection on baptism, I feel that when someone is seeking baptism, I would want to carefully and prayerfully discern if they were sincere in their desire to be baptized and understood the meaning of baptism and the important covenants it represents. There are always circumstances that can surface or influence anything that happens in our church and in our service to God.

Earlier this year, a young couple asked me to baptize their infant daughter. They were not members of my church. The mother, "K," was the daughter of a friend of mine, a member of my home church. But "K" and her husband were not members of my home church, nor any other

⁶ Ibid.

church. Before agreeing to do the baptism, I met with “K” and her husband. I shared with them a small pamphlet on baptism. I gave each of them a copy to take home and read. I carefully read through the pamphlet with them as I sought to understand why this young couple wanted their daughter to be baptized. I wanted to be sure they understood the commitment they were making to God and Church, and most importantly, to their daughter. They convinced me their hearts were in the right place. And they promised to raise their daughter in the Church and in a Christian home, a household focused on Jesus. It was a great experience for the family and for me as well.

As I move forward in ministry, in baptism and all things, I pray for God’s guidance and wisdom, and the courage to do God’s will in the best way I can discern.

Eucharist Theology

I believe that the Eucharist (the Sacrament of Communion, “Supper” or “Table”) is central to worship and to Christianity. I believe as it says in the Gospel of Matthew 26:26-29:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the^[a] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you; I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

These words, spoken by Christ and repeated by millions of Christians in the act of the holy Sacrament of Communion, represent the new covenant we share with God, by God’s grace, through the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I find affirmation of my Eucharist Theology in many of the reflections shared by Gordon Lathrop in his book titled, Central Things, Worship in Word and Sacrament. I am drawn to Lathrop’s words about the Luck Bell inscription mentioned earlier in this document when he says, “The other great mystery and mercy of the Luck bell inscription is found in the phrase, ‘every seeking soul.’” Actually, nobody else is invited. Only seeking souls. Yet, everybody is invited because that is what we all are. By this conception, if a service is worship in word and sacrament, then it is God’s own “seeker-service.”⁷

Lathrop goes on to say, “We then begin to see why these things are set out, according to the Luck bell, mysteriously, for ‘every seeking soul.’” In Christ, according to Christian faith, we meet the God who wipes away tears, gives life to the dead, promises, and says yes to the promises, and sets out the food of forgiveness and festival. We need Christ, the historic biblical Christ, and not simply our own projections and ideas of Him.”⁸

Lathrop’s words resonate with me as I embrace the Sacrament of Communion as God’s action of grace, giving me life, through the food of forgiveness. It is given to me both through Christ

⁷ Ibid, 21.

⁸ Ibid, 31-32.

resurrection and through my intentional thoughts and actions when I accept the body and the blood of Christ, given to me, and that I consume, accept, and enter into the new Covenant through the Sacrament of Communion.

“Because of the centrality of this thanksgiving, the entire meal and indeed the entire word-meal service, is sometimes called eucharist, from the old Greek-Christian word for thanksgiving to God through Christ in the unity of the Spirit.”⁹ Says Lathrop.

Lathrop concludes, and I agree. “But the supper sends us away to be the body of Christ to our neighbor, to be for our neighbor what we have received in the supper.”¹⁰ Like Lathrop, my theology around the Sacrament of Communion is that Communion is essential and central to Christian Worship each and every Sunday.

I continue to evolve my own Eucharist theology, and I don’t pretend to know everything at this time in my faith formation. I listen to God to speak to me as I discern how to lead our congregation and as I remain in covenant relationship with all members of our congregation.

Sin/Salvation

I believe I am born with sin, and I believe we are all born with sin by our human nature. Even if we are free of sin at birth, our flawed human nature and the flawed world we live in eventually draw us to sin. I believe I am only saved by grace through Christ’s sacrifice and perfect obedience on the Cross. I believe that Jesus is the Messiah, died on the cross, and was resurrected on the third day after his death. And through the resurrection and God’s grace, my sins are forgiven so long as I believe and have faith in Christ. My own theology is built upon the need for both belief in Christ and faith in Christ. I believe I am saved, and my salvation leads me to heaven in my own death and my ascension to be with Christ in heaven. I believe heaven, like God and Christ, is eternal.

(Note: I know that sometimes people equate faith and belief to be one and the same. I understand that the English translation of these words comes from the same Greek word, and as such, one could argue that faith and belief are synonyms. And, in some contexts, I would agree with that. However, in the context of salvation [John 3:16], I do not equate my own definition of the English words of faith and belief to be equal. Why? The devil believes in Jesus. The devil doesn’t deny that Jesus exists, nor do the many demons that call out to Jesus as described in various texts in the New Testament. However, the devil doesn’t place his faith in Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. I have preached to my congregation that it isn’t sufficient to believe Jesus was a real person, after all, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists believe that. What differentiates Christians is the FAITH that we place in Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior. For me, faith surpasses belief in the spiritual sense of “following” my Savior.)

In some of my theological discussions with my peers, we have debated many questions about salvation. Are all people saved? Can people of other faiths be saved? Can people of other faiths and traditions experience eternal life?

⁹ Ibid, 51-52.

¹⁰ Ibid, 54.

My theological approach to these questions may be overly simplistic. Essentially, I choose to respond to these questions with affirmation of what I believe. As I interpret scripture, I hear God saying that I must believe and have faith in Christ to be saved through God's grace. John 3:16 says "whoever believes". It does not say "everyone, regardless of belief". If God wants to save Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Mormons, I leave that to God to decide. What matters to me is that I believe and have faith in Jesus as my savior. And I am not inclined to judge others. I am inclined to share my own belief and faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus – in the Good News!

How do I understand and approach Biblical Matter?

I believe the Bible was written by humans (Moses, disciples of Moses, Priests, schools of priests, Prophets, Kings of Israel, Apostles, and others) who were inspired by God but also influenced by their context, bias, place, and time. I believe understanding the context, bias, place, and time of each piece of scripture assists in our deliberate exegesis of the text and its application to our lives today. I believe scripture is inspired by God, but not necessarily to be taken literally. Scripture should be interpreted prayerfully and carefully, listening for God's divine voice while also considering the author, context, bias, place, and time of the scripture we are reflecting upon. I believe the Bible is the written history of Israel, God's chosen people. I believe the Bible speaks to our experience and understanding of God and how God interacts with humans on earth: God's creating, loving, judging, forgiving, saving, and acting upon human existence. I believe the Bible is Good News, announcing God's grace, Jesus' resurrection, and our salvation. I believe the Bible is for each of us to hear for ourselves, listening for what God wants to say to us, and that we are all capable of interpreting the Bible for ourselves. I believe that faith formation is a lifelong journey, and that God continues in conversation with us as we journey.

Theology and Practice of Worship

My Theology of worship is "word and table". My Theology of worship is also that it is critical to the life of every Christian and every Church. Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Christianity is rooted in sharing our faith in fellowship together, and in worship of our God together.

I believe the essential elements of worship are both listening to the word of God and the invitation to God's table experienced through the sacrament of Communion, the bread of life and the blood of Christ, the blessings of God for the people of God. I utilize the following elements of worship leaning into a flexible approach and guided by liturgical seasons and personal inspiration: call to worship, passing of the peace, opening hymn, opening prayer, time with young disciples, truth telling, assurances of pardon, additional hymn(s), time to breathe, reflect, centering, scripture, message, prayers of the people, Lord's prayer, offering, doxology, sacrament of communion, prayer of dedication, closing hymn, holy sacrament, affirmation of faith and benediction.

Community Outreach and Justice

I believe community outreach, justice, mission, and ministry all go hand in hand. I believe mission and ministry are essential to the vitality of any church, as well as our collective Church.

Jesus sent his disciples into the world to share the Good News to all the Nations. Those 11 disciples proclaimed the Good News to all nations, spreading God's love around the world. The apostles began to establish early Christian churches in Israel and the Mediterranean. Soon, Christianity became the official religion of Rome. And eventually, Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe and the Western world. Millions of souls were saved. Millions of lives were changed through God's love.

The world has witnessed God's grace. The world has received salvation through Christ Jesus. The world has benefited greatly from the missions and ministries of the early apostles. Yet, much of our world still lives in fear today. Much of our world still lives in darkness. Much of our world still suffers. We need not look far to find hunger, suffering, oppression, hopelessness, and injustice. There is still more of God's work that needs to be done.

As modern-day Christians, we are also witnesses to God's love and God's grace through Jesus. We are also called to mission and ministry. We are called to proclaim God's word to all nations.

I believe healthy and strong congregations seek sustainable missions and ministries. We are called to love our neighbor and help those in need. I preach this consistently on Sundays. These missions and ministries require currency. When we think of currency, we often think of money. Through participation in a book study with other Pastors in the SE Association of the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC, I have learned that not all currency is money. In Eric Law's book, Holy Currencies, 6 Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries, we learn about Holy Currencies.

Holy Currencies is a model for stewardship and congregational vitality, moving beyond "time, talent, and treasure" to create missional and sustainable ministries. This model enables church leaders to understand, develop, and utilize five other kinds of currencies besides money. These other 5 currencies are: time and place, gracious leadership, relationship, trust, and wellness. These currencies flow and recirculate to form a cycle of blessings that empower congregations to strengthen their internal relationships as well as reach out and connect with the diverse populations in their neighborhoods.¹¹

One of the greatest currencies is relationships. Jesus understood this, as Jesus was always focused on relationships. Jesus focused his teachings on the value of relationships – loving relationships with God and loving relationships with our neighbors, our sisters and brothers in life.

Eric Law says, "Internal and external relationships are the foundational structure, the frame in which sustainable missions and ministries are formed and built."¹²

As I lead my congregation in meaningful mission and ministry, I consistently call on the currency of relationships and encourage members to focus on this valuable currency as well.

There are equally rich lessons to be learned from Eric Law's book and discussions about the other Holy Currencies. What's important to me is the need for Church to focus on mission and

¹¹ Eric F. Law, *Holy Currencies: Six Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries*, (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2013).

¹² *Ibid*, 22.

ministry. Mission and ministry certainly include justice initiatives and community outreach, but also go well beyond these to embrace Jesus' teachings to his disciples. I believe Jesus' greatest mission was to establish the Kingdom of God. (John 1:15) "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" Jesus' mission was to seek justice as we seek to love everyone, especially those in need. People suffering injustice are clearly in need of assistance, just as those who are hungry, homeless, broke, without work, sick, wounded, suffering, widowed, orphaned, depressed, oppressed, or simply need love, God's love.

Since accepting my call in East Troy, I have begun encouraging the congregation to shift their focus from survival to mission. In 2022, they chose to sell their church building. Since that event, they have struggled to believe they are capable of mission. "How do we host a meal, an event, or a fundraiser without owning our own building?" I have encouraged them to believe that God is present everywhere. God does not need a building. A church is not a building. A church is a congregation gathered together to share fellowship, worship, and MISSION! I am using the lessons from Eric Law's Holy Currencies along with an Appreciative Inquiry process aimed at leading this congregation into a shared vision of mission in their community. So far, we have had some success, supporting several local missions and gaining congregational involvement. It's the start of a longer journey of meaningful mission and making a difference in our community. I trust in God's guidance and our collective discernment to lead us to where God wants us to be.

Youth Ministry

I believe strongly in Faith Formation for all ages at all times in all places. I believe Faith Formation should be based in scripture and tradition. I believe it should be intergenerational. I believe Faith Formation is best when it is embraced and supported by the entire congregation. I preach, teach, and encourage ongoing Faith Formation for all ages in my daily ministry. I support it by leading bible studies for adults, confirmation for youth, Sunday School for Kids, including a "Time with Young Disciples" in every worship service and also by organizing intergenerational Faith Formation events such as movie night, music night, hymn sings, or "field trips". Our most recent confirmation class participated in a youth retreat at Daycholah in Green Lake! We are seeking additional opportunities to immerse our youth in the many meaningful experiences available through UCCI events, camps, and retreats.

Pastoral Care

I believe pastoral care is one of the most important and powerful parts of ministry. During my CPE cohort, I deepened my passion and my faith in the power of pastoral care. Pastoral care is being attentive, listening with gracious hospitality, sharing someone's story, offering empathy, and just being present when someone is in need. Pastoral care has healing power and the ability to save lives. Pastoral care is for both the care seeker as well as those in relationship with the care seeker. Pastoral care is needed at all stages and ages of life, for those who are in crisis, but also for those living normal everyday lives.

I have taken great care to get to know the life stories, the tragedies, the needs, the dreams, the wants, and the wishes of each member of my congregation. I got to know and love them before I began to minister to them. Pastoral care is about loving those in your presence – focusing intensely on their story, and the story beneath their story. It requires the caregiver to purge their own thoughts, context, and bias for that moment when they need to be fully present and focused

on the care seeker. Pastoral care is a beautiful gift when it is done with love, care, compassion, empathy, and patience. Pastoral care might be the part of ministry I love the most.

During my CPE cohort, I learned to care for residents and patients at all levels of care, from assisted living to memory care, to vent care, hospice care, and end-of-life care. Some of the care experiences were intensely spiritual and meaningful. I am deeply grateful for all I learned and all the moments I shared with the beautiful people I cared for and spent time with.

My appreciation for pastoral care grew immensely during my CPE experience. It also helped me deepen my recognition and appreciation for the importance of self-care.

I initially gained an appreciation for self-care many years ago during a very stressful time in my business career. At the end of a long year of global travel, I looked back at my calendar and realized I had spent more than half the year out of the country. I had sacrificed 23 weekends away from my family, often spending the night sleeping on an airplane as I crossed the Pacific or Atlantic Ocean overnight. I realized it was time for change. I learned to allocate time for myself and my family, regardless of the many urgent demands of my work.

Over time, I have developed disciplines in the area of physical, mental, and spiritual health. Physically, I have spent the last ten years overcoming a lifelong battle with chronic obesity and high blood pressure. Healthy diet and routine of exercise helped me lose over 130 lbs. – and keep it off! I continue on this journey today under a medically guided weight management program focused on GLP-1 medication, daily exercise, and a highly nutritious diet. Mentally, I have learned to give myself space and time to process, decompress, or just lament as necessary for self-preservation. For example, during my recent CPE cohort, I told my instructor that I had some good cries as I reflected on specific care experiences. These moments of sadness provide my soul with relief and healing. They are private and spiritual moments of healing. Spiritually, I rely on a mix of daily prayer and devotional readings. I also find great strength in my relationships with my peers, my advisor, my mentor, my COP group, and UCC gatherings. I also draw on friends and family. I am blessed with a large family, most of whom live locally and all of whom get along pleasantly. I have recently begun a daily routine of centering and meditation that has enhanced my spiritual strength and devotion. Finally, the glue that keeps all of this together is my wife, Rhea. We have been happily married for 30 years. We communicate openly about our joys and concerns. We share beliefs, values, and goals. We have a deep love for one another that assures each of us that there is always someone there when we need a shoulder to cry on, a friend to lean into, a voice of reason to pull us back from chaos, and a gift from God to appreciate and embrace in our daily walk.

Conclusion

I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength. I love my neighbor as myself. I seek to help those in need. I fight for justice for those who are marginalized and oppressed. I seek to bring peace wherever I can. I want to share the God news with everyone. I love the Church, and I want to humbly serve my God through my belief and faith in Jesus and through my mission and ministry. My desire for ordination is founded in love for God and humankind and a passion for servant leadership. Amen.