**Personal Call**

My faith journey has been defined by ecumenism and inclusivity. I grew up attending Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, in Madison, WI, which was growing at the time, and is now the largest ELCA congregation in the synod. My extended family lived primarily in Michigan and Connecticut, and included all branches of Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant – from Episcopalian to UCC), so from my earliest years I had a very broad understanding of Christian faith. During college and graduate school, I spent several summers working at church camps. This is where much of my faith formation and call to ministry happened. Four of those summers were spent at Voyageurs Lutheran Ministry (VLM) in northern MN, working with a wilderness camping program. While I was on leadership staff at VLM, one of our trail guides drowned trying to save the life of a camper, who also did not survive. I needed to provide strong leadership during this crisis, while also grieving, and I had strong support and empowerment from other leaders in the organization. This time was pivotal for me in both personal growth and in discerning a call to ministry in times of crisis.

After graduating from college, I spent a year volunteering abroad through the ELCA, and was placed at a Catholic retreat center in the UK. As the Catholics excluded me from Communion (in violation of their own polity, as I was baptized Catholic), it was a difficult year for me spiritually. I was blessed to find a church home at a small Baptist church, and still maintain friendships with people there. When I was present, the congregation of about 20 people included worshippers from 5 continents. Through all these experiences, while I remained a member of the Lutheran church, I had experience with a wide variety of Christian traditions, practice, and life application.

During my extended time in the ELCA ordination process, I completed an MDiv from Yale Divinity School, an MTh in New Testament from Luther Seminary, two units of CPE, a year-long internship with time shared between a nursing home and a congregation, and did licensed pastoral ministry in the Madison area. I served four ELCA congregations in the Madison area over the course of 11 years (two were contracted work, meaning there was an end date). I was ordained as a pastor in the ELCA in 2011, and served calls as an associate pastor, solo pastor, and co-pastor in different congregations. My last call ended in 2019, with a lot of stress and trauma. I spent the next three years working at Rutabaga Paddlesports, where I had taught canoeing and kayaking part-time for several summers. When the owner, a Mormon bishop, learned about my church situation, he offered me full-time year-round employment. Rutabaga was a very good place to heal from the wounds of the church, as a secular business where most employees claimed no religious affiliation. During those years I discerned a call away from the ELCA, due in part to my own trauma, but also as a result of the denomination's pitiful responses, and even complicity, regarding COVID and the racial justice issues of 2020 and beyond. The UCC has welcomed me with open arms so far, and I am glad to be here.

I left full-time employment at the beginning of 2022 due to family needs. My primary vocation now is healthcare chaplaincy, working part-time jobs at a hospital and a home hospice organization. I also receive regular invitations for pulpit supply, and I enjoy preaching most Sundays. Moving forward in ministry, I hope to continue in chaplaincy, but I also would like to support my colleagues in congregational ministry. Having experienced trauma and burnout, I feel called to help pastors take their vacation time, sick time, parental leave, and sabbaticals. Taking time away and maintaining good boundaries will make for more sustainable ministry long-term. There are a lot of unhealthy systems in many established congregations, and I believe I can help

communities rediscover the call of God as a driving force over and above "the way we've always done things." I would also like to be able to walk with congregations in transition, doing interim ministry. I look forward to learning how to do this important ministry in the context of the UCC.

The Marks of Faithful and Effective Ministers is a new resource to me, since beginning my journey with the UCC. As I'm acquainting myself with this model of ministry and mission, the Marks that speak most to me are:

- Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions: I continue to have regular preaching engagements, which require ongoing study of Scripture. I have also worked with various church camps to help them develop resources to share God's story with campers, regardless of their prior engagement with church and faith.
- Building Transformational Leadership Skills: as a healthcare chaplain, I work in a collaborative and intercultural environment. This is one of the pieces that I value greatly about this work. I also continue my growth in leadership skills by attending conferences on fundraising for nonprofits, and by chairing an organization for networking and education for local spiritual caregivers.
- Working Together for Justice and Mercy: confronting injustice and practicing radical hospitality have become the touchstones of faith for me. After spending many years caught up in the minutiae of church politics, I yearn for ministry opportunities that prioritize the Gospel above tradition and ego.

The Mark which requires the most growth for me is Nurturing UCC Identity. This is understandable for someone who was a member of a different denomination until recently. I continue to seek out ways to grow in my understanding of the UCC, and engagement at the local, regional, and national levels.

**UCC Theology**

The United Church of Christ is among the Trinitarian Christian traditions (Walker 56). According to the Statement of Faith, God is viewed as creator, judge, and the giver of life and life eternal. Jesus was human, but did the divine work of reconciling humanity to God. The UCC Constitution recognizes Jesus as the head of the Church and the Son of God (paragraph 2). I agree and resonate with these descriptions of God and Jesus. Additionally, the Holy Spirit is described as the one who creates and renews the church, "binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races" (Statement of Faith).

I find that, for a Trinitarian faith tradition, the UCC is rather weak on describing the Holy Spirit, and what we believe about the third person of the Trinity. This is not a problem unique to the UCC, however; in my experience, most Christian traditions do a poor job of describing the Holy Spirit. The Apostles' and Nicene Creed both basically say "we believe in the Holy Spirit, who is worshipped alongside the Father and the Son," without getting into who the Spirit is or how we experience God's Spirit.

It is noticeable that the UCC uses the name "God" to refer to God the Creator (or Father), though Trinitarian theology would stipulate that Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God just as much as the Creator is God. I appreciate the use of "God" rather than the sexist language of "Father" that has permeated so much of Christian history. However, by equating the name "God" with the first person of the Trinity, UCC statements and documents imply that Jesus and Spirit are somehow less divine (less "God") than the Creator. Again, this is pervasive across Christian traditions. The UCC isn't any worse than other denominations about this use of "God" or the implication of the subordination of the second and third persons of the Trinity to the first. Within the UCC, a member need not state a belief in the Trinitarian God in order to be part of the

community, but I do think that the denomination could do a better job of describing the roles and symbiotic relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, for those who are looking for guidance.

I believe that all three persons of the Trinity must be considered together in a complete statement of theology. In fact, I would go so far as to say that we would have no knowledge of Creator or Christ without the movement of the Spirit. The UCC values the fact that God is still speaking, as evidenced by the newer denominational logo with a comma. The Holy Spirit is the way God speaks to us at this time in history. Without the Spirit's inspiration, when we read the Bible, we would simply see stories from another age, like Greek mythology or ancient Chinese folk tales. Instead, we experience God's presence in Scripture, and in the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, and in works of justice, because the Spirit is present in those things and brings us to an awareness of God. People experience God most fully when recognizing the movement of the Spirit to reveal the reconciling work of Jesus and the lifegiving work of the Creator.

Consistent with all traditions of the Reformation, the UCC believes in salvation by grace through faith, and not works. In other words, salvation is God's work, not ours. Because of this, the UCC does not place much emphasis on salvation in daily life or preaching. We are more concerned with works of justice, faithful living, and following the example of Jesus and the call of the Spirit.

**UCC History**

The story of the UCC is one of diverse theology and ecumenical efforts. The UCC was established in 1957, after 20 years of dialogue, debate, and discernment. The two denominations that united to form the UCC had themselves been formed in the 1930s by mergers of other faith traditions: Congregational with Christian (1931), and Evangelical with Reformed (1934).

The Congregational tradition is one of the oldest in North America, tracing its roots to the Pilgrims and Puritans (W2 Hawkins lecture slide 10). Congregational theology stipulates that "society should be guided by the church" and thus this branch of Christianity brought a strong social justice tradition to the UCC (Walker 34).

The Evangelical Synod of North America emerged from the Reformation churches in Germany (Lutheran) and Switzerland (Zwinglian). The Lutheran and Reformed churches reunited as the Evangelical Church in Germany in 1817, as a result of the Prussian Union of Churches (W1 Hawkins lecture slide 14). When these Europeans immigrated to the USA, they brought this united Protestant tradition with them. Evangelicals placed a high value on confirmation instruction and the education of clergy. Their tradition was pietist, mission-oriented, peaceable, centered on the Bible, and ecumenical in nature, all of which influenced the priorities of the UCC (W1 Hawkins lecture slides 26, 32, 34).

The Reformed Churches also grew from Swiss and German roots, with more influence from John Calvin than the Evangelical Church. They were guided by the authority of Scripture, as well as the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, and the Second Helvetic Convention of 1566. These documents affirmed a belief in predestination, attempted to maintain unity and openness, focused on mission and service, and defined practical life in Christian community such as worship practices and the meaning of the Sacraments (W1 Hawkins lecture slides 39-41, 43-44).

The Christian Church developed in the USA in part in part as a response to the Second Great Awakening. This church united Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists who wanted to avoid a hierarchical church structure, and focus on the faith of the New Testament over any creeds or other confessions of faith (Gunneman 162). They chose the name Christian to focus on

their belief in Christ as the head of the church, and to emphasize their unity, avoiding any divisions or denominational distinctions.

The Christian denomination included many Afro Christian congregations, who valued this identity over and above their denominational affiliation. The Afro Christian tradition began with the forcible removal of West African people from their homes, when they were captured by Europeans and sold as slaves in the Americas. Folks of African descent retained their ancestral spirituality, believing that God could be present anywhere at any time. African spirituality recognized the Divine in nature and acknowledged revelation in ways that European Christians did not, seeing God in everyday life just as much as in the sacraments, Scripture, and worship.

Over the course of their enslavement, whether by force or choice, most people of African descent adopted Christianity as their religion. Immediately after Emancipation, many Black folks in the South worshipped in the same churches as their white neighbors, within the Christian tradition. The Afro Christian tradition established a unique identity after Emancipation and prior to the formation of the UCC. Despite legal equality, people of African descent continued to be mistreated and ostracized by white people, who held more power in society and in the church. Afro Christians were relegated to balcony space in the sanctuaries, and were not considered to be full partners in ministry. As Dr. Delk described in the lecture, “The History of Afro-Christian Churches in the UCC,” they were treated as the objects of mission rather than as subjects.

After generations of enslavement, Afro Christians were unwilling to remain second-class citizens. Their African theology had been further shaped by stories of liberation in Scripture. Afro Christians left the churches founded by white people and created their own congregations. Within these congregations, individual skills and talents were recognized and encouraged among all members. Sunday School programs defined much of congregational life. Women gained

powerful leadership positions, though most of the pastors remained male. Church members would bless and anoint one another for the ministry to which God had called them, regardless of any hierarchical or denominational endorsement. In Afro Christian churches, members looked out for one another and taught life skills along with the stories and songs and values of faith. (Delk, The Afro Christian Tradition in the UCC).

The Afro Christian Convention was founded in 1892, bringing a unique and vital perspective to American Christianity. When the UCC was created in 1957, this tradition was one of five main streams of Christianity that united to form the new denomination.

**Autonomy and Covenant**

According to Gunneman, "United Church of Christ identity is rooted in the freedom and unity that Jesus Christ gives" (103). As described here, "freedom" is equivalent to "autonomy," and "unity" is equivalent to "covenant." In the UCC context "autonomy" means that each congregation is able to maintain its own independence. Denominational leadership cannot dictate the worship order or congregational structure as can be done in other faith traditions. This was of specific importance during the negotiations that eventually led to the creation of the UCC (Gunneman Chapter 2). Several of the traditions that came together to form the UCC were created in response to oppressive church leadership, particularly by the Catholic Church and the Church of England, so retaining congregational freedom was incredibly important to their identity. This is why a clear statement that Jesus is the only head of the church was so crucial to the formation of the UCC.

At the same time, congregations remain in covenantal relationship with one another and with other denominations. "Covenant is the commitment of God to God's people, of the people

to God, [and] of the people to one another as the body of Christ" (W4-2 Hawkins lecture slide 2). Covenant has a broad meaning within the UCC. Most simply, everyday use of the word covenant refers to the autonomous choice of each individual and each congregation to be in community with others as they do God's work in the world. Covenant implies mutual accountability. In the context of the UCC as a denomination, this means that there is mutual accountability between congregations, associations, conferences, and the national church body (W4-2 Hawkins lecture slide 3). Covenant is also used to describe congregational commitments to various theological causes, such as Just Peace, Open and Affirming, and Creation Justice designations.

Every faith tradition has their own insider language, where words mean more than their face value, and which those closest to the tradition often find hardest to define. Even after completing the UCC history and polity course, and spending time in UCC circles over the past few years, I'm not convinced that I have a complete understanding of autonomy and covenant in the UCC context. These terms seem to carry implicit meaning within the UCC, which isn't immediately apparent to a newcomer. I expect that growth in understanding the concepts of autonomy and covenant will continue to be part of my journey with the UCC.

**Ministry**

One of the guiding values of the Protestant Reformation was the priesthood of all believers. This value emerged in response to the abuse of power by leaders in the Roman Catholic church, and a conflation of church and political authority. The reformers sought to return to a biblical example of all people following their calling to fulfill their role in the body of Christ, as described in 1 Corinthians 12 and elsewhere.

As a church grounded in the Reformation traditions, the UCC holds this value in high regard. Jesus is the only head of the church (Constitution 2), which automatically lowers the standing of clergy relative to some of the more hierarchical traditions, and creates a more equitable relationship between clergy and laity. The priesthood of all believers stipulates that any work can be a calling from God. Clergy are set apart by ordination to perform certain specialized ministries, but they are not inherently more holy than their neighbors working secular jobs. Likewise, any work undertaken faithfully can be done in service of the church – this is especially notable when congregations today call upon the gifts of their members who are accountants or fabric artists or woodworkers, and ask them to use those gifts to aid the congregation.

Ordained ministers are called to the specialized ministry of presiding over the sacraments and proclaiming the Word of God, and doing so with a level of training and commitment that is not required of lay ministers. At the same time, any ministry of the church can be led by a layperson, depending on the circumstances. For example, lay ministers may be authorized to serve in a pastoral role at a specific congregation when an ordained minister is not available. Also, in extreme situations, any baptized Christian may preside at a baptism – I have witnessed this often in my chaplaincy work. In general, however, for the sake of accountability and consistency of practice, the sacraments are presided over by an ordained minister. Likewise, though preachers and teachers need not be ordained, the pastor generally oversees who will teach and proclaim the Gospel in the ministry setting where they serve.

Ordained status in the UCC means recognizing that God's call for one's professional life coincides with the call to serve faithfully in daily life. Ordained ministers serve the specialized roles of preacher, presider, and pastoral caregiver both within and outside of the congregation (The Ordained Minister's Code). Ordained ministers should not seek to do the work that a

layperson has been called to do, and is able to do better than the ordained minister can. Likewise, lay ministers should respect the calling of ordained ministers and support their ministry of word and sacrament whenever and wherever it is needed.

Ordained ministry is a role of service to the community, not a position of power, and ordination does not give the minister control over laypeople. Instead, the ordained minister is called to administer sacraments, proclaim the Gospel, and care for God's people following the example of Jesus. An individual's sense of call must be affirmed by the denomination prior to ordination, and the professional minister remains accountable to rules and expectations set forth by the denomination.

The gifts of an ordained minister are relevant to many ministry settings. After spending over a decade serving congregational calls, I have become convinced that the Church is more than congregations. In my experience, the most important and meaningful work of the Church is done outside the walls of traditional congregations. Doubtless this feeling is due in part to being a member of the Xennial Generation (late Gen X, early Millennials), and maintaining close relationships with many of my peers who are not affiliated with any religion. Unchurched people respond to chaplains, and to religious folks they meet in public spaces. Skeptics who were raised in Christian households expect public figures who espouse Christianity to abide by the values of Jesus, a poor and rebellious leader of the people, rather than embracing the values of empire which resulted in Jesus' death.

Congregational ministry is vital to many people, and still serves as a center for spiritual growth. But it is not the only (and may not be the primary) method of faith development. For the foreseeable future, congregational ministry remains vital to the life of the Church, and for this reason, I feel strongly called to support my colleagues in congregational ministry; by helping

them achieve respite through sabbatical, vacation days, and parental leave. I also feel strongly called to continue service to the Church at large as a chaplain, as well as through writing, creating new resources, supporting parachurch organizations, and working with denominational leadership or local committees to pursue the greater good.

I believe that God continues to speak to people through worship, Scripture, public action, music, creation, and secular spaces. All of these communities can be vessels of God's continued call on our lives. For me, this call occurs most frequently in healthcare settings. For others, I hope to help them hear God's call on their lives.

**Church and Sacraments**

Creedal Christian traditions talk about the universal Church in reference to all followers of Christ across time and space. I've found that most American Christians don't actually have a good understanding of this, however. They know virtually nothing about Orthodox Christian traditions, or the oldest branches of Christianity such as the Coptic Church, and Christian communities in Palestine. I believe that the universal Church includes all of these traditions, and many others, and that more education needs to be done to make people aware of the wide variety that exists within Christianity. In this context, the UCC is one of many faithful branches of the universal Church that has borne witness to Jesus since the day of Pentecost.

Colloquially, the word "church" is most often used to refer to a local congregation. This is right in line with the values of the UCC. In a sense, each local congregation is representative of the whole – though you cannot have the complete representation of the whole in any single congregation (Walker 130-131). Full worship and a complete life of faith can happen in any given congregation, though there are more versions of worship and faithful living than any one

congregation would ever be able to offer. In this way, congregations and denominations are interdependent on one another. It is when we come together – as the United Church, or in ecumenical partnerships – that we are most able to fully reflect the image of God in the world.

Continuing to translate churchy words for today's, the word "sacrament" is based on Latin terms meaning "sacred thing." In a sacrament, God works through ordinary things to help worshippers experience the divine presence, and the promises of forgiveness and community. Everyday objects of water, bread, and wine or juice become sacred or holy in that they tangibly represent the presence of God. In Greek, the language of the earliest Christian writings, the word translated as "sacrament" is "mysterion," meaning "mystery." The meaning of the sacraments, and how exactly God works through those ordinary earthly elements, is a mystery even to the most experienced pastor or accomplished theologian. The important thing to know about the sacraments is that God works through earthly elements to help people experience the Divine.

Most Christian denominations recognize at least two sacraments, with Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions recognizing seven (and Anglicans, depending on who you ask). Despite differences in theology and practice, the sacraments unite various Christian traditions. They are recognizable across traditions, and demonstrate that we are all part of the same family of faith. The UCC recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and Communion (Constitution 2). The UCC website states, "Sacraments are ritual actions in worship which, according to Scripture, were instituted by Jesus. In the sacraments of baptism and communion we ask the Holy Spirit to use water, bread, and wine to make visible the grace, forgiveness, and presence of God in Christ." While sacramental practices vary by congregation, they remain important ceremonies that help worshippers experience the presence of God. Especially in the UCC, which does not emphasize the historic creeds, Baptism and Communion are important symbols of Christian unity.

Interpretations of God's "presence" in the sacraments have led to schism over the years. (W1 Hawkins lecture slide 5). I believe that God is present in Baptism and Communion, by which I mean that worshippers experience the presence of God while partaking in the sacrament. Some worshippers may experience the "real presence" of Christ, and some may see the sacrament as an action done in honor of Christ, or as a memorial to him. The UCC allows for all of these understandings of God's presence in a sacrament. I tend toward the Calvinistic view, which has been dominant in Protestant circles for several centuries, that Christ is spiritually present in the water, bread and wine, but that after the sacramental act, they go back to being ordinary elements as they were to start.

**Justice and Witness**

To me, justice means caring for those who are in need, advocating for those who are oppressed, and working for a world in which all people can be healthy – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I believe this is the call of both the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, for those who seek to honor their teaching and examples. (e.g., Isaiah 1:17; Zechariah 7:9-10; Matthew 5:1-12; James 1:27; Hebrews 13:1-3). Justice requires seeing all people as creations of God, made in the image of God. When we recognize a glimmer of the Divine in others, we can't help but understand the call to bring justice to each person and community in the world.

I lived in the same community as my congregation of membership long before I was a member. From my perspective as a neighbor, the most visible witness of my faith community is flying the "Progress" Pride Flag on the church sign near the street. (Previously the classic Pride Flag was flown.) This church is on a main thoroughfare, with plenty of traffic passing every day. In a society which often sees Christians as close-minded oppressors to everyone who isn't white,

cis, male, and Christian (based on the actions of many groups that do act this way), such a public statement of acceptance is a huge testament to justice for our community. In addition, my congregation is Open and Affirming, and recently became a Creation Justice church. The congregation and individual members take visible and measurable steps to live out these values, and remain accountable to one another for their actions.

Public witness to our Christian faith matters not just on my congregation's busy street, but in the nation and the denomination as a whole. How we live our faith, and how we portray ourselves to others as individuals, congregations, and a denomination, makes a difference to our ability to work towards justice in the world. The UCC's witness to justice issues on a national level is part of what drew me to the denomination. During the racial tensions of 2020, through social media and on their national website, the UCC offered helpful and justice-oriented resources. They acknowledged the pain of the Black community, and called for action from the Church. Responding to issues of concern to society, in a fashion and on a timeline that is relevant to society, is the most visible witness of the church today.

The quote by Brennan Manning is more relevant today than ever: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and… deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." In order to witness to the ministry of Jesus, Christians and churches must be willing to condemn those who exploit others, welcome those who are oppressed and marginalized, and continue seeking guidance from the Spirit for daily life. Too many Christians in public circles have failed at this in recent years, but the UCC seems to be working hard to keep teaching and action consistent with the Gospel. I appreciate the public witness of the UCC and look forward to continuing to live out my faith with this denomination.

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