

ORDINATION PAPER
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Statement of Faith

As-salamalaukum. Shalom. Peace be with you. We are all children of God. Whether we agree on the name of or the doctrine(s) required by our “Higher Power(s)” or even if we do not believe in a higher power, we are all beloved children of God. God created us in God’s image. While describing how this belief has influenced my ministry, I formerly used the phrase, I am “more accepting” of others. But I have come to associate the word *judgement* with the concept of acceptance. Currently I replace the phrase, more accepting, with the word welcoming. Extravagant welcome is an important concept in the United Church of Christ. No matter who you are or where you are in your journey you are welcome here.

The theological heritage we are born into, just like the culture we are born into, can designate our initial spiritual identities and affiliation with a particular earthly religion. Spirituality may be exemplified by living for a higher purpose without a particular belief system. As children we are taught and follow beliefs that are prevalent to the culture we are born into. As we mature, we make decisions to continue following the systems we are taught or, either by exposure or desire, we perceive other beliefs and religions and again decide to expand our knowledge, or not.

I respect other cultures and belief systems. Their diversity enriches our personal and communal spiritual lives. As we learn more about our non-Christian siblings our own view widens and causes us to examine our perspective and beliefs. This

exploration also allows us to find common ground and appreciate shared origins of our respective faiths.

Even as I celebrate this diversity of the children of God, I revel in my relationship with God as a Christian. I believe in the Holy Trinity. It can be difficult to understand and explain the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity as one God, for this is not an earthly concept. I use my own understanding of this belief to correlate the Three to the One in human terms. As the word Trinity suggests, there is the presence within of three beings.

Our Creator God is the Eternal Spirit. God created us in God's image. We are all Children of God. I see God as an authoritative and ever-loving Father. I, as well as many others during their earthly lives, really didn't have a father in my life and interactions with him were painful at best. I find comfort and consolation of my perception of God as father. I feel wonder of knowing unconditional love through God. Someone else with a similar fatherhood experience may not include father at all in their perception of God as that would establish a distancing or divisive factor in their relationship with God. They may however be open to the concepts of discipline and unconditional love from an Eternal Spirit.

Jesus is the Son of God, our Savior and Salvation. Jesus came to us in earthly form to teach us, offer the new covenant, and to sacrifice himself, that through reconciliation we may be redeemed from our sins and may be rewarded with eternal life. As Jesus took on an earthly form, I feel kinship towards him. His teachings, the Way, pertain to human lives with first-hand knowledge of human struggle, strife, joy and amazement. During His time here on earth, he provided a physical bridge between

humans and God, becoming an eternal intimate connection upon his Resurrection. This connection created a bond that, for me, makes the Holy Trinity more accessible. I have noticed that when I converse with Jesus, I pray with raw emotions putting my feelings into words. My relationship with Jesus brings me closer in relationship to God the Creator and Father of us all, as well as the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit fills us and guides as with faith and wisdom. I believe my call to ordained ministry originated from the Holy Spirit. My member-in-discernment journey has included internal and external twists and turns. I am sure this is normal for every MID. I believe that the Holy Spirit has stayed with me throughout this journey and was with me before I was even aware that I was on this path. At my first WI Conference Annual meeting, I walked towards the dining hall with my sister voting member. I shared with her that I had been wondering where I would be if I had grown up within the United Church of Christ. Our pastor, Pastor Zayna Thomley, turned around and stated I would have been a pastor a long time ago. That was an exhilarating notion. I have thought about that moment many times. Gradually, I have realized that past life-changing experiences were lessons that I was able to forge through with the guidance and grace afforded me by the Holy Spirit. I would not be the person I am today if my past was different. I am blessed that whoever I used to be, God is calling me to serve Them by ministering to God's children.

The Holy Spirit provides us with grace and strength to continue following Jesus' teachings and to keep the new covenant Jesus offered. "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." This covenant encompasses the commandments of the Old Testament and directs us to love ourselves. To my human ears, I hear that I am worthy,

for I am not only a child of God, but Jesus became human and undertook great suffering to save all humankind. This makes me feel worthy at my core and in no need of earthly justification.

I was brought up Catholic and that is how I started my journey with God. As I learned more about the doctrines and hierarchy of this denomination, I discontinued my affiliation. One of those doctrines required a belief in transubstantiation, which I did not conform to. The Sacrament of Communion has always been dear to me throughout the years. I feel strengthened and filled with grace when answering yes to the invitation to the table. I feel it is a remembrance and celebration of our Savior, Jesus Christ's sacrifice and suffering to complete God's new covenant with us through reconciliation. No longer having that community, I widened my gaze and increased my appreciation of all being God's children. After I left the Catholic church, I returned for a funeral for a Catholic member of my predominantly Catholic family. The priest leading the Mass stood before those gathered and instructed us not to come up to Communion unless we were Catholic! "Jesus wept." This reinforced my belief that I made the correct decision to leave the Catholic church. Last year I attended my nephew's Catholic wedding, and the presiding priest invited non-Catholics to come up with their arms crossed over their chest for a blessing. This act replaced receiving the Elements. A softer barrier but a barrier regardless. Jesus' teachings mandated inclusivity. This is a foundation of my belief system. As we say in our UCC invitation to receive communion, "Come to the table, all are welcome."

Growing up Catholic, I was not taught or encouraged to read Scripture, much less discuss and/or give thought to interpretation. Scripture was read at Mass and the

priest told us what the Scripture meant, no need to think. Before coming to the United Church of Christ, I never realized how imperative reading the Scriptures are for a thriving spiritual life. Through exposure and encouraged exploration of the Bible by participation in Tuesday Night Fellowship, Adult Bible Study after services at Middleton Community Church, questions posed during the Messages at Sunday Service and the courses I have attended, I have found reading the Bible provides an enriching connection to God, Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit in me. Even before my relatively new appreciation of the Bible, I have been greatly blessed with a strong, continuous relationship with God. We have journeyed through our valleys and climbed to the tops of mountains, but we always keep our lines of communication open. It is a healthy relationship, and we have shared meaningful conversations for many years.

Human lives are full of ups and downs. Sometimes it is other people that contribute to these instabilities. To be a Christian, love God first and love your neighbor as yourself, we must forgive and reconcile. Jesus, our Savior, sacrificed his life for our salvation that through reconciliation we are offered eternal life with God. By following the New Covenant, God offers us a way to live freely through love during our time on earth. To love your neighbor as yourself, you must tend to loving yourself. Carrying the burden of your sins and sustaining the emotion of anger against others who have done you wrong creates a barricade between you and God. This also prevents you from learning from and growing through reconciliation. As in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, God forgives us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Years ago, I discovered that to do this, it was vital for me to separate forgiving, forgetting and judging. Whether it be for huge wrongs or small slights, to forgive, I must let go of my

anger, my sense of unfairness, my grudge. I share these with and give them over to God.

I have garnered invaluable lessons through the forgiveness process. We are humans and when we are hurt, when I get hurt, sometimes it is hard to forget. That's where the learning process occurs. Instead of using the memory to keep the anger alive, I strive to learn from the occurrence. To minister someone through the forgiveness process takes time and the use of appropriate methods for that individual or group, to facilitate a transformation. The necessary tools could include coping mechanisms, red flags to watch for, conflict resolution, better communication skills or just the need to be kind to yourself and let things go. It is not my job to judge. Judgement is not part of our forgiveness process. There are good and bad actions but that doesn't mean a person is good or bad. God is the only judge.

The UCC Statement of Faith is a definition of our relationship with God, our Creator. As a Christian, I follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and am graced with the direction of the Holy Spirit. I believe God is the "Higher Power" all religions worship and adore, no matter what name is used or if any name is utilized at all. God is all powerful and we are all God's cherished children. I strive to be God's servant on earth, to follow The Word through my thoughts, actions and words. With God's guidance and love, it is my privilege, honor and responsibility to care for my human brothers and sisters here in God's kingdom on earth. As God is the only judge, I am not burdened with deciding if someone is deserving of God's love and care by my hands. Everyone is! Being a Christian means accepting and welcoming all into the loving community of God, Jesus

and the Holy Spirit, no matter who they are or where they are on their spiritual journey.
Blessed be to God!!

UCC Polity and Covenant

The relationship between God and humans, the basis God interacts with us starts with the covenants made with us. Throughout the Old Testament, God revealed their character by making covenants. Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, David, Moses, and Miriam are some of the biggest examples. As God's people kept or broke these covenants, humanity's character was also revealed. Jesus, the final and everlasting covenant, is the head of the Christian Church.

Covenant is the United Church of Christ's past, present and future. Five different streams provide the United Church of Christ's foundation: German Evangelical Church, German Reformed Church, Congregational Church of New England, the Christian Church of America and Afro-Christian Church. Our very foundation is built on covenant in our polity, theology, and history. Even before our five principal streams united in 1957 to become the United Church of Christ, they were combining among themselves, for example the German Reformed and German Evangelicals. All our founding denominations brought unique methods, doctrines and perspectives to the table. In investing in compromise, covenant and each other, a new way of Church was born!

The United Church of Christ, differed from the norm by inverting the authority structure, placing the wide base of the local church at the top, supported consecutively by the main authority infrastructure of Association, Conference and General Synod. This order of hierarchy places emphasis and responsibility on the members of the

Church and the autonomy of each congregation. This structure does not burden or weigh the whole Church down with bureaucratic process or red tape. It instead allows the Church to be nimble and adaptive; to act (via resolutions) when appropriate and provide support and encouragement as needed. The members of the Wisconsin Conference recently voted to streamline the authority structure further by dissolving the authority of the Association and establishing three regions to continue direct church support throughout the state. The many voices of our diverse members are each heard with equal priority. Power to the people!! Democracy, an important principle our founding streams held dear.

My introduction to UCC doctrine, as a member of the Middleton Community UCC congregation, has given me many opportunities to grow both in spiritual maturity and consequently, deepen my personal spiritual practices. As members of the United Church of Christ, sharing these opportunities to God's beloved is our honor and duty. I feel that the members of my congregation are siblings and I am part of the congregational community.

By God's Grace, I have served in many different volunteer capacities for Sunday worship. In a practical sense, serving in various roles has taught me how things function and has allowed me to continue to learn and to offer assistance. By performing these duties, I have also learned how much work is donated by the congregation, broadening my view and expanding my appreciation of the congregation's covenantal role in the United Church of Christ community. We all have a place in ministry. We are all disciples of Christ.

This is the basis of how I minister and how I see ministry. I see each of us as ministers. Not necessarily in a church leader sort of way but in the way we minister to each other. Smiling at a stranger, a kind word, a held hand, volunteering at a food bank, donating, are all different types of ministries where we offer, give back, the gifts God has bestowed on us. In my own ministry I strive to share the understanding that as God's children we are unconditionally loved. Our worth doesn't come from deeds or reciting prayers correctly. In God's eyes we are worthy from our beginning. This along with the concept of unconditional love might be hard to grasp for those who do not know God.

It seems at a very young age we start forming our concepts of worthiness and love. For myself along with countless of others, we were not exposed to healthy messages regarding self-worth and unconditional love. Living in relationship with God, living in Jesus' teaching and entering into the New Covenant, and reading, interpreting and proclaiming the Word allow us to find and feel anew the true meanings of the words worthiness and love. I feel that an important part of children's ministry is to disrupt the unhealthy messages children may be receiving in their environments and instill through Jesus' teaching, God's love and the Holy Spirit's guidance, the true knowledge of worthiness and the feeling of unconditional love.

In my ministry and in my personal life, I look for words of positive action to reinforce the concept of love into Jesus' new commandments. Rather than "not" doing things, I try to include in my sermons and my interactions manners of "doing" to share love. Showing respect to, forgiving and reconciliation with, uplifting, encouraging, listening to, comforting, and supporting others.....these concepts and others are what I strive to incorporate in the Message, my conversations, and my actions. For how can I

claim to be part of the Body of Christ if I neglect Jesus' covenant? Love God, love others.

Change is fundamental for transition, and the United Church of Christ has embraced this principle starting at its origin and continuing through the present and in its planning for the future. Supporting the Civil Rights Movement, being the first main stream denomination to ordain a Queer minister, instituting invitation-only Mission work, initiating an Open and Affirming directive are all examples of the United Church of Christ's willingness to be a leader and role model of adaptability and change; becoming a champion, not only for the Church to thrive but for all of God's children to thrive. What an extraordinary gift God has given to all of us!

Personal Call

I have felt God's call in my past, as early as 13-14 years old, while going to a Catholic high school. I already had reservations and questions regarding Catholic doctrine and hierarchy and did not see a future for me within that denomination. Over the years the feeling that God has given gifts to me for God's use has remained. I have gone through personal trials, been on a surgical mission, done hospice volunteering and have had several careers during my life. I never felt that I was completely fulfilling God's purpose in any of that. I do believe that God was preparing me for this, for what is to come while we journey forward on God's path. The lessons God has been teaching me throughout life has developed God's Way in me, imprinting as my way. My values as a 13-year-old to accept and love each human as an individual have been

fortified by my journey with God. Using that core along with my life experiences and God's teaching and guidance will give me an advantage while ministering to God's people, my siblings, and to offer relatable messages while guided by the Spirit.

Before finding the UCC, I was often told that I have a calm, soothing demeanor and am good with people. I have come to accept my kindness or "niceness" as a strength. During my personal growth process at that time and some personal struggles, I had not been able to be totally vested to answer the call of caring for others. So, I have done so intermittently, situational and informally. I have been hearing the call towards a formal role more urgently in the past few years. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I hope to engage with others to heal, encourage and help them on their own journey forward.

My most recent attempts to answer God's Call occurred in 2020, 2021, and 2022. Explaining to the current pastor, a different one each year representing a retiring, interim and permanent respectively, that I feel God wants me to be more, do more. Feedback wasn't the most supportive from the retiring pastor. The interim was newly ordained and offered support and action as I applied to the Chaplaincy program at Unity Point/Meriter which we found out was in the process of being discontinued. When our new pastor was in place for a few months, her messages at worship service stirred the embers of desire for God to use me as God wills. I approached her, getting an immediate response- (paraphrasing) "you need a discernment committee, let's get started!" Shortly after that my pastor asked if I thought I could preach. I didn't even hesitate and said, "Yes!?" God, as always, has purpose in the timing. God was setting me up for success!

As is intended during the Member in Discernment process, my reflection and prayer regarding God's use for me has intensified. I believe that God provides a path or guidance that we then decide to follow, or not. We don't know why that particular path, or the reason for any personal hardship. What lessons do we need to learn? I think personal growth opportunities starting at an early age have made caring for others an innate part of me. A part of me that God can use in service to God's will and design.

Recently God has guided me to accept that I also need care. I am after all human too! Whether it be self-care or help from others that I am offered or that I request, I now know how vital "care" is for me spiritually, emotionally and physically. I cannot count how many times I have advised others in various caretaker situations to take care of themselves, or they wouldn't be able to help or care for others. I have embraced this adage into my own belief system, with some editing. I no longer base this need for caring for myself as a requirement to care for others. Taking care of me, whether it be through self-care, or accepting or requesting help is a basic need for all humans. It isn't based on a reason or requirement. I was unable to grasp this principle until I let go of a long-standing belief that I "had to" and "should be able to" do everything by myself. So ignorant of the fact that I had never been alone, for even through the trying experiences that helped create that belief, God was always with me. Through God's guidance and wisdom, I have learned this and many other lessons that I believe God wants me to utilize during my ministry.

During the past three years I have discovered a lot of things about myself, for example, the reason I embrace change is because I closely associate the words growth and transition with the word change. This association encourages seeing change as a

positive event. I have also realized that my greatest tool for avoiding delving into past traumatic experiences is keeping my mind busy or distracted. Reading a book while I have the television on and the radio, always playing the radio in the car, knitting and again watching TV, always noisy and never quiet is the way to go if I want to keep my thoughts free of deep reflection or pesky ponderings. But what a barricade this has been for change, growth, transformation. I have now developed tools and habits to explore the things that I previously kept buried.

Through the utilization of counseling, I now realize an objective perspective while discussing uncomfortable situations or confusing feelings can be a healing experience. During my Level 1A CPE course I learned healthy methods of self-reflection. When a situation causes me to experience an unexpected negative reaction, I have learned to acknowledge that reaction and set it aside to examine later; thus, giving me the space to live in the moment I am in, while caring for those I am with. This also creates the space I need afterwards to promptly tend to the reason I felt negatively affected. This allows me to seek, discover, explore and at some point in time, resolve whatever it is that needs tending.

Doing this work is hard, exhausting and takes time. It will be a journey, but I have already reaped benefits that have allowed me to be a better person improving how I identify in the different roles of my life including ministry. My most recent favorite Scripture is “Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10, for God is with me on every journey.

At Worship service there is a shared individual sense of vulnerability with each other that combines to form our community. With that vulnerability we can build

relationships with others, our selves, and God. The things that can occur when two or more are gathered in God's name! I know God is always calling me and everyone else to ministry! As Jesus commanded, we are to love one another, and to love one another we must minister to each other.

My ministerial role will evolve as God instructs. God is with me every faithful step along this path and with their guidance I will share God's love through my words, actions and interactions. I will answer God's call whenever it comes to wherever it leads.

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