

**“Toward A Better You:
Walking with God and Journeying to Wellness”**

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Acknowledgments

To Elias, Olivia, and Judah, you are the very essence of my being. Your hugs, kisses, and laughter lift my spirits. Your love has reached every part of me and has made me a better person. I love you, my babies.

To my companions and confidantes, what a blessing you all have been in my life; encouraging me along the way on this journey and showing up to celebrate, affirm, and encourage me to keep going. "The race is not to the swift but to those who endure."

To my mothers and mentors; Monica, Lisa, Rev. Mabel, Julie, Rev. Dr. Velda, Ginny, Anna, and Pastor Judy - all of you raised and formed me into who I am today. Your strength, wisdom, brokenness, and deep commitment to the faith have been an inspiration to me. Thank you for everything.

As Issa Rae iconically stated, "I am rooting for everybody Black." My ministry has always been committed to our liberation. We are free!

First Sacred Movement of the Ordination Paper Process

Unanchored: Discerning My Worth to be Called

I have chosen to become unanchored.

We all have a story and that story for better or worse impacts us. A few messages from my story are as follows: You are unworthy. You are disposable. You are nothing. Being the good Christian I am, I called the devil a liar!! This is when I would anchor myself in the fight against these deceptive messages. The problem with this is that the enemy is crafty - by putting myself in a relationship by fighting against these messages life would have a way of reinforcing this message of being unworthy, disposable, and nothing. The harder I fight - the more this storyline gets played out and the deeper I get into what feels like despair. I have always desired to be well so you can imagine that feelings of being unworthy and so forth simply do not jive with that desire. It is an affront to it and to know me is to know that I abhor defeat especially when something is so clearly a lie.

Recently, I had what I can only describe as a revelation: I am anchored in a fight against a lie of the enemy. If I am worthy, loved, and something to God and the people God has placed in my life - then I do not have to fight for it or prove myself to it... I just get to live it. I get to receive it. I get to let go of this lie, even if it is a fight against it, and accept a "well-er" version of that which God has for me.

Friends, to be unanchored has come with instability. I do not know how to live unconditionally loved. Live unconditionally worthy. Live unconditionally chosen. In the spiritual, sure! But not in the natural. History has not been a kind reflector of this unadulterated truth. I know how to fight to be loved, chosen, and deemed worthy while having a deep desire just to live it. What a revelation to believe you are anchored in the Lord only to learn that you were anchored in a fight against the adversary. Well, no more, friends. No more. What will come to pass is this and I am permitting you to hold me to it: I will live loved. I will live worthy. I will live chosen. But until then, I will offer myself the grace of taking anxiety medicine to help regulate me (a first in my almost 35 years of living) until I get my footing and find my stride. I will solicit prayers from any community that I am a part of as I attempt to do a new thing as well as connect to my faith community, my God, and my people.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, I will share my story in the hopes that it liberates someone else. You are loved. You are worthy. You are chosen. This is an unadulterated truth. You do not have to fight for it or prove yourself to live this truth.

I love you. Be well.

Reflection from my Facebook status on September 28, 2022

I. UCC Statement of Faith/Personal Faith Journey

I was 13 years old when I decided to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. I was baptized in the Catholic church at five, attended catechism classes at 12, and participated in children's church and youth ministry for what felt like most of my adolescent life; but I had not believed as I did when I consciously chose to be a follower of Christ at age 13. Truthfully, even when I had I

was confused about what it meant to be a disciple of Christ. I vowed to pay more attention to the preacher during the sermon and to read my Bible more adhering to the words in it, but there was a deeper ache within my whole being that I could not reconcile. I wanted all aspects of me to be well. While attending church and participating in worship filled a spiritual and emotional void in me – I felt lost in the “real” world.

While completing my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) essays and as I began to deconstruct my narrative to highlight significant persons and events two things became apparent; I was moved around a lot which resulted in emotional trauma and feelings of displacement; and, women were and are heavy influencers in the trajectory of my narrative. My biological mother was a beautiful mystery to me when I was a little girl. She felt elusive and absent as my primary caregiver. It was not until the Department for Children and Family Services (DCFS) took me away from her that meaning began to form - something was wrong and the elusiveness went by another name... negligence (though I did not have that language at the time). So, my great-grandmother became my guardian, and while I experienced the separation from my mother as my fault resulting in feelings of guilt and shame - there were benefits of living with my great-grandmother e.g. having my room (superficial and significant). Two years later, my mother gained custody of me again and I had reservations but felt I had no agency to say what I wanted (to stay with my grandmother) because I was a minor. Furthermore, I experienced my great-grandmother's willingness to allow my mother to have custody of me as me being undesirable. Again, feelings of guilt and shame.

My great-grandmother dropped me off at a shelter for women (with children) who were recovering from addictions which gave context to why I was taken away from my mother in the first place. My mother was and is a recovering addict. Two years later, we moved in with my

youngest brother's father (though he was not born yet). A few years passed, and my mother needed a reprieve from the relationship with my brother's father so she sent me to live with an aunt while she spent some time away in St. Louis with my middle brother and extended family. Again, feelings of guilt and shame. Two years later, my aunt told me I had to return to living with my mother because she was going through a divorce. Again, feelings of guilt and shame. In addition, the feeling of numbness. Two years later, my mother, brothers and I moved to live with the same aunt to have a fresh start. Numbness. Two years later, my mother came home and told me she had gotten married and that we were moving. Numbness... accept that... I had been attending the Faith Community of Saint Sabina with my aunt and the Youth Minister had gotten to me. She told me that there was something special about me which confused and excited me at the same time. The fact that someone saw me as special - hell - that someone saw me at all... intrigued me. I was curious about how she got that impression of me. It was here that I believe I began the journey to self-discovery and wellness, and at this juncture, I became a follower of Christ through a person. It was at this moment that I asked God what does it mean to be made well.

I have always been an observant person who looked past peoples' verbal utterances into what felt like the internal world of their external presentations. I was less interested in the words that people spoke and more interested in their bodies when they spoke them, and their non-verbal demeanor. I began to learn that people automatically responded giving no thought or consideration to questions being asked e.g. How are you doing? to which the answer was how are you doing; while I was not interested in disrupting the comfort of passing absent-minded pleasantries, I began to wonder about the harm to others' wellness if I ignored the non-verbal inconsistencies that I saw with their verbal expressions. I wondered often if folks were really

fine, or had they felt blessed and highly favored – because their eyes looked sad, or their shoulders were slumped down; not to mention that while the pastor was preaching I saw tears streaming down their faces and every time I saw tears I wondered – were they of sorrow and if so how could I be present in a meaningful way. I was searching for the truth about my situation and trying to find an example in the other of wellness that was courageous enough to say I am not doing well and I need support but this was to no avail. My wonderings about wellness were always searching for ways to attend to internal brokenness as someone who had lived with it for decades and as someone who had trained my whole life for solutions to heal myself. My tension with the church, particularly the **Black** church, is that it seemed to look at its abled body members and presumed those bodies were well – though their non-verbal cues seemed to be inconsistent with their verbal affirmations of wellness. So, I decided that I would model what wellness looks like as someone who has yet to arrive and presses toward the mark to win the prize. My ministry would be one of **becoming** well; inviting others to walk with me as I walk with them and as we walk with God.

In my late 20s and early 30s, the conflict and the discontent grew because I grew increasingly weary of my disposition. I began to feel that too often – in the Black church – pastors opened up wounds in their congregants to provoke a response that felt (to me) most like an emotional response to the pains of the past, and this response has been misdiagnosed as a spiritual encounter or experience and has been used to legitimate spiritual authority over members. I began to wonder why people were lamenting about the same thing year after year. I had a CPE Educator who once said people do not talk about things that they are fully healed from. Perplexed at why people were not being made well, and saddened to observe people's circumstances – like a person enticed by a highly publicized diet – they got better before things

got worse. I came to this conclusion... I was not well and I was not finding my help in the church that I so loved. I wanted more for me and I wanted more for the life and vitality of the church. My focus has primarily been on finding ways to liberate Black people which has meant that my context has often observed the Black church but as my professional scope has widened I have found that this need for wellness expands beyond race.

What does it mean to be made well? Jesus summoned the woman with the 12-year issue of blood – who touched him – and said, ¹“Daughter, your faith has made you well; now go in peace.” A man could not walk for 38 years laid by the pool of Bethesda, Jesus asked him, ²“Do you want to be made well?” The man does not say yes, yet Jesus heals him. There is a blind man, blind from birth, that the disciples wonder whose sin caused his condition to which Jesus replies, ³“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed.” Jesus makes mud, puts it on the man's eyes, and tells him to go wash it off. After the man has done so – he receives sight. The point of highlighting these scriptures is to emphasize that in the church the responsibility of being made well or healing is on God through one’s transformative walk with the Divine through liturgical wisdom lived out in the context of community. There is not one way - the way to healing is dynamic but everyone should feel like they belong in their becoming. I have always wanted people to know God's love, and I often offer myself as a case study for people to examine, and to belong to the Good News of the Gospel which welcomes all. My desire is for people to live free in the love of God, and to be whole (made well) in the knowledge that nothing can separate them from the love of God. My

¹ Bible Gateway (n.d.). *Luke 8:48*. Www.Biblegateway.com. Retrieved February 5, 2024, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke+8%3A43-48&version=NRSVUE>

² Bible Gateway (n.d.). *John 5:6*. Www.Biblegateway.com. Retrieved February 5, 2024, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+5&version=NRSVUE>

³ Bible Gateway (n.d.). *John 9:3*. Www.Biblegateway.com. Retrieved February 5, 2024, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+9&version=NRSVUE>

desire has always been to walk softly with people alongside the Divine encouraging them to enjoy, endure, and find rest in the pilgrimage.

II. Inner Call & Vocation (Four-Way Covenant)

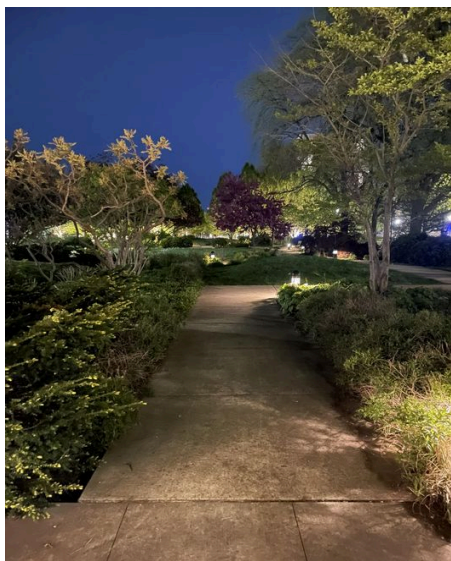
As I continue to discern God's call in all things, what has been true is that I have been a bi-vocational minister for over a decade. I am a Chaplain Pastor. My inner call is to accompany people and journey with them to greater self-awareness. I live this call as a full-time Chaplain at Loyola University for post-graduate students at the Health Sciences Campus of Loyola who are training to be future physicians, nurses, and healthcare professionals. Our philosophy is to teach students to care when they cannot cure through the Ignatian value of *cura personalis*, care for the whole person. Additionally, I care about the health and vitality of our denomination, and therefore feel called to the governance of our conference and denomination. I serve as a pulpit supply minister at St. Paul's UCC in Monee, IL, and St. John's UCC Kankakee to understand what is happening in our local churches, particularly at points of transition, from these denominations in the Eastern Association. I also was nominated and volunteer as the CMA (Lay) Moderator and the Chair of the IL Conference Personnel Committee after serving for three years on this committee.

It has been my great hope and desire to set a path forth for our four-way covenant authorized ministers such as chaplains to hold positions as Conference and Associate Conference Ministers by setting precedence and a pathway for them to be appointed and employed in Church Governance at the conference, regional, and national level without having to be bi-vocational leaders. How can we create a process for four-way covenant ministers such as chaplains to become these leaders through volunteerism at the association and conference level to understand search and call, church governance, committee on ministry, church and ministry, and all facets of

the Church to be adequately prepared to receive a call in these roles? I feel like there is a gap in the process that undermines the spirit of Ubuntu for all of our authorized ministers to be valued the same in their contribution to the denomination to govern the denomination.

At the same time, I recognize that at the heart of the UCC is the local church but to not have a process for four-way covenant authorized ministers to hold these positions within the denomination though we can serve as pastoral leaders of hundreds of people - I serve 700+ students (not including faculty and staff) this academic year alone - seems disempowering and unfounded. So, I seek to be a trailblazer. I often think about how I can be the first without precedence in a historical tradition that has had a history of leaving out folks who informed the tradition, as I know our chaplains and four-way covenant ministers do in this denomination day in and day out. I will continue to serve this faith tradition as a called chaplain, and bi-vocational leader and hope that one day like Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk - I can pave a way for our four-way covenant ministers to work at higher levels of church governance that does not bypass local church ministry but comes at it possibly as pulpit supply or as a volunteer. I hold to the theme of Ubuntu and love this faith tradition enough to press it into something more than what it has been. God is still speaking and our denomination is still becoming...

Second Sacred Movement of the Ordination Paper Process



“Light Up My Path”

While walking with God and my best friend we got to a point in our walk where it was time to rest. As we sat on the park bench we began to check in. The conversation was intentional yet all over the place. Mostly, we talked about the process of healing and transformation (my word proclamation for the year). As we concluded our resting point, in the walk, she invited me into a time of

prayer. As she prayed, and as I looked out, I heard, *God, light up our path.*

Friends, in the pursuit of wellness and this walk that is life we must stop to rest. Rest to hear the invitations of our bodies along with the invitation of the Spirit. Rest can be putting down old habits that no longer serve us or it can be getting out of our heads and getting into our bodies. It can also be intentionality around getting a good night's sleep. Sometimes, the invitations to rest seem clear and at other times we need God to light up our path. Let's invite God's spirit to show us the way.

Walk with me...

Adapted from my Facebook page Toward A Better You written by Ramona Bamgbose on 5/10/2023

III. The Church & The Bible: Its Mission, Ministry & Relevance for Today

In 2016, I applied for a Youth Director position with University Church in Hyde Park after Rev. Dr. Velda Love sent me the job description. I was attending school at Loyola's Institute for Pastoral Studies and was at the halfway point in my studies. While interviewing for the role, I still remember the people in the room - they represented different ministries of the church. It blessed me to see that they would take the time to sit with me on behalf of their congregation to make sure that I was the best fit for their faith community. While I had observed a model of church that had a consensus process for hiring the Senior Pastor - I had never seen a model of church that was inclusive when hiring staff. Rev. Julian invited the congregation to interview candidates before they met with him because he ultimately believed that while he had been granted the authority to hire staff - he wanted the faith community to be a part of the process and choose who they believed would lead their children well. I was blown away and I knew it was the right place for me. He extended an offer to me and I spent five years serving as their Youth Pastor.

The Church's Ministry: Dedications, Baptisms & Communion

I have had the privilege of assisting Pastor Julian in baptizing and dedicating to the church over a dozen children and youth. It is one of the most beautiful things I have ever assisted

with and witnessed. University Church recognizes that anyone who has yet to be baptized could be baptized at any age with the essential element of water, under the witness and celebration of the local church and in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through baptism, we believe ⁴“we are joined with the universal church, the body of Christ. In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God’s people always.” While we believe anyone could be baptized at any age - including our belief in infant baptism - most often parents within our context opted to dedicate their children to the church because they were committed to raising their children in the church yet also believed in their children’s autonomy to decide if they wanted to be baptized in the Christian faith.

When the disciples asked Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”, he called forth a child. Jesus said, “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:4-5). Another passage of scripture proclaims, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). We believe that children and families are at the center of our ministry and therefore believe that dedications are to be held during worship as a celebration of the initiation into the covenantal relationship between the child (by way of their family), God and body of Christ. While this moment is not a substitute for baptism - it does acknowledge the child is accepted and covered by the faith community until the family on behalf of the child or the individual is ready for baptism.

University Church is Christ Disciples (DofC) and UCC - with this background, we have a communion table open to all. We recognize that mostly within our faith tradition communion is a

⁴ United Church of Christ (n.d.). *Baptism: A Practice of Faith in the United Church of Christ*.
www.ucc.org. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from

https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/local-church/mesa-ministerial-excellence-support-and-authorization/ministers/ministers_local-church-leaders/worship_baptism/

ritual for the baptized in Christ, from infancy and beyond, yet have never excluded anyone from the table who wanted to be present and have never made it a mandatory tenant to be a part of the meal for those of us who are not Christ Disciples. However, the communion table is a point of deep connection with our fellow friends of the faith in remembering what Christ did for us by the giving of his body, broken for us, and blood shed for us. Ultimately, we believe that it is, ⁵“an intimate experience of fellowship in which the whole church in every time and place is present and divisions are overcome.” In this sacrament of our faith tradition, we are one body re-membered by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We get to remember the love of God for all of humanity. We get to remember together who we are and hopefully, this ritualized remembering gives us strength to continue on until the Kingdom of God is on earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.

The Church’s Mission: Marks of the Faith

Building Transformational Leadership Skills. It was here that I felt the call to authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ. As mentioned earlier, I had grown up Catholic but learned that I did not have a place within the institution for authorized ministry. I attended the Faith Community of St. Sabina, and under Fr. Mike’s leadership I learned the responsibility of the church to the work of justice as a spiritual matter that concerned God. I grew up with a Black image of Jesus and a sign that read *Discipleship Cost: Are you willing?* Our Associate Minister was and still is a Black woman, and St. Sabina was and still is a predominantly Black congregation that partnered with churches such as Trinity UCC and Apostolic Church of God under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright and Bishop Arthur

⁵ United Church of Christ (n.d.). *Holy Communion: A Practice of Faith in the United Church of Christ*. www.ucc.org. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from

https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/local-church/mesa-ministerial-excellence-support-and-authorization/ministers/ministers_local-church-leaders/worship_communion/

Brazier Sr. along with the Nation of Islam with Louis Farrakhan as an ally. I grew up under an ecumenical approach to ministry. I have eaten with Dr. Cornel West, prayed for Bishop Desmond Tutu, and sat at the feet of Maya Angelou. I marched in Washington D.C. for the passing of affirmative action and kneeled at the spot where Michael Brown was gunned down.

It had not dawned on me in my youth that there would be a time that I wanted to be the pastor of a prominent historically Black justice-oriented church and 1) would have to find another denomination to get ordained in and 2) that every ecclesial institution would not care about social justice and the work of antiracism. This came with a bit of an identity crisis for me. I attended college at North Park University which was affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church and decided to be a leader of the Black Student Association and student governance to speak on behalf of those who were underserved and marginalized. I won the Fannie Lou Hamer Award for First Year Student Excellence and the first-ever student impact award from our Diversity and Student Cultural Center. After graduation, I moved to New York City where I became the Operations Manager of a Respite Bed Program that partnered with houses of worship to temporarily house homeless self-regulating individuals. We partnered with over 23 faith communities, placed over 300 individuals annually, and worked with over 2,000 volunteers.

Working Together for Justice and Mercy. I am driven by Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" My heart is with the underserved and those who consider themselves to be broken and unredeemable. If you were to take a look at my resume, you would find that I have worked as a project coordinator and operations manager of homeless shelters partnered with houses of worship (as mentioned above); a youth and program director to provide safe spaces, recreation, and food equity programs to urban youth; hospital chaplaincy in

acute and behavioral health settings to promote healing of the whole person; operation manager of a faith-based organization creating back end systems that are dignifying and now, as a chaplain of future healthcare professionals at Loyola University Medical Center.

When I came back to Chicago for graduate school, I attended Second Baptist Church in Evanston and was awakened to the ministry of Black women in the church. They were mostly UCC ordained, they all were justice-oriented and they all were dynamic and powerful ministers. This is my legacy and my inheritance - to lead following in the steps of Rev. Dr. Velda Love, Rev. Dr. Karen Mosby, Rev. Dr. Danielle Buhuro, Rev. Regena Glenn-Caldwell, Rev. Traci Blackmon, and the mother of the UCC Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk. At General Synod 2023, I served as a delegate and Rev. Traci Blackmon spoke a Hebrew word over me... *anavah*. It means humility. She explained that this kind of humility more accurately means ⁶to occupy your God-given space in the world - to not overestimate yourself or your abilities, but to not underestimate them either. She extended her hand towards me, placed her hand over my heart, and asked me to accept that it was time for me to live in my God-ordained place and that it is not selfish or boastful when God has ordained it.

Caring For All Creation. Part of my God-ordained ministry includes relying on my educational background in pastoral counseling. When I encounter anyone as a pastoral care professional, I do so with a trained understanding of psychological disciplines. It is common for me to employ a Person-Centered approach. Carl Rogers was a founding psychologist of the humanistic or person-centered approach. He believed that for a person to achieve self-actualization they must be in a state of congruence. This means that self-actualization occurs

⁶ Radical Mentoring (n.d.). *Anavah*. www.Radicalmentoring.com. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from <https://radicalmentoring.com/anavah/#:~:text=The%20Hebrew%20word%20anavah%20is,to%20not%20underestimate%20them%20either>

when a person's "ideal self" (i.e., who they would like to be) is congruent with their actual behavior (self-image). Theologically, I understand persons as journeying towards all that God has called them to – to complete congruence and to the good, and pleasing, and perfect will of God. Yet, until then, as a spiritual care professional it is my great work to attend to people by understanding social determinants of health to offer the best spiritual interventions. As a result, I always seek to establish, deepen, and conclude professional spiritual care relationships with sensitivity, openness, and respect.

An example of this philosophy can be found in this example of a patient who was readmitted to the hospital almost a year after I first saw him when I served as a chaplain in a hospital setting. He suffered from a drug addiction. When I first met him, he was clear that he was not ready to stop using and that because of this unwillingness, he knew that it could result in his death. We talked about his family's expectations of him, how they were ready to support his sobriety – and how he wanted to please them but knew that he could not because of his desire to use drugs. We talked about small steps that could be taken versus diving into sobriety – like discovering what he wanted to do with his life. He mentioned that he used to assist his dad in carpentry until his dad passed. After I acknowledged the pain that came with the loss of his father, I asked him if he liked that work and if there were opportunities for him to work in that field to which he expressed great interest. I wanted to take his focus off of ways he believed he had failed and focus his attention on areas where he had succeeded. When I saw him again, he looked at me and said that he remembered me. He told me that the last time he saw me was the last time he had been admitted, and he said that he was ready to stop using. After visiting, I asked if he wanted to be referred to the hospital's social worker with the hope that he would be transferred to a rehab facility. He said yes to the referral and thanked me for supporting him. He

continues to be the patient who has impacted my desire to always treat people with unconditional positive regard, and it's because of people like him that I remain committed to caring for all creation.

Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions. As I have immersed myself in the history and polity of the UCC I have learned that it is the denomination of my heart! While in my history and polity course with Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniel, she asked us a question, *The UCC One Hundred Years from Now: Dead or Alive?* and this is a little of what I wrote:

⁷As it pertains to the question if the UCC will survive and be a viable faith tradition one hundred years from now my simple answer is yes. The UCC cannot die. Our history is that of a church that is "also becoming" (Book of Worship, p. 7). We are anchored in faith traditions that have stood the test of time so while the UCC is relatively new her DNA is not. The UCC was birthed by Congregationalists, Congregationalists birthed from the Brotherhood, and the Brotherhood birthed from Lutherans, Evangelicals, Reformers, Catholics, and Black Congregationalists. Our history has deep roots of transient people holding the people above all else towards the Creator who they and we have always believed (even when we fall short) radically loves us ALL.

The Church's Relevance for Today Through Covenant, Autonomy & Transformation

It is this faith tradition that invites people, like me, who have wandered away from our inceptual faith origins to this united community of people who believe that we do not have to show up in "likeness" to be relevant, impactful, and bearers of the imago Dei. Our value and desire to be an autonomous church allows us to see the unique needs in our local communities and attend to them - to be "a kayak" that can adapt swiftly if we must. Rev. Dr. Daniel stated often in class if you've seen one UCC church you've seen one UCC church. The freedom the

⁷ Bamgbose, R. N. (2). *The UCC One Hundred Years from Now: Dead or Alive?* [Final Paper].

UCC provides the local church, its associations, conferences, and the national office to live out their distinctions, while chaotic at times, makes room for her evolution to be appropriate, relevant, and God-ordained to the needs of the “times” locally and globally. As written in the story of Esther, we can be what the people need for such a time as this.

The UCC’s impact has long legs and its ability to reform makes space for folks to join and be a viable church and choice long past the here and now. In the UnOfficial Handbook of the UCC, the authors write this about the United Church of Christ congregations:

⁸To join a United Church of Christ congregation, you do not need to be able to put a checkmark next to each entry in some list of fundamental beliefs or truths. You *do* need to be willing to covenant, or promise, to act in certain ways with your congregation. These promises vary from church to church but will include things like worshiping together, serving each other and the world, seeking truth together, giving your resources, and more. Think of it like a marriage, only with a hundred times the chores, a thousand times the in-laws - and then a thousand times the love and support. (Caldwell & Preston, p. 121)

As we have continued to reckon with our history and origins we have moved to a greater understanding of our history as a denomination that is committed to the transparency and understanding of the Fifth Stream, that is the Afro-Christian Convention, which was an integral founder of the formation of our faith tradition that infused the theme of Ubuntu (I am because we are) which focuses on humanity towards others. Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk said, ⁹“A history that does

⁸ Caldwell, Q., & Preston, C. (2011). *The Unofficial Handbook of the United Church of Christ*. Amazon.<https://www.amazon.com/Unofficial-Handbook-United-Church-Christ/dp/0829818758>

⁹ Delk, Yvonne . *The Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ*. The Pilgrim Press. https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0291/5177/files/STUDY_GUIDE_web.pdf (p. 4)

not press us into the future is dead... As we look back to see who we have authentically been, we also lean forward into who we are authentically becoming.”

Our faith tradition does not hold your hands to the fire in rigor to join and perform for better or worse, and yet it mysteriously beseeches you to consider if you are in a covenantal relationship with your neighbor to stand with them not only in word but also in deed. It prefers presence over performance and it aims to be a reputable voice on the national stage to represent what it feels is a better way of being the Church. Tim Downs once said ¹⁰“The UCC is not a refugee camp. We are [people] on a journey who have found this to be the denomination of our hearts.” While I believe we are all refugees, I do stand by the UCC not being a camp - or breaking away from our “real” faith communities as believers. The UCC is a denominational destination that resonates and resounds within my spirit because it seeks to include me in the decision-making, and aims to stand in solidarity with me in my unique victories and lamentations. While I have not grown up in the UCC, I have found elements of my faith tradition within the denomination and am grateful for my local church’s care for those of us who are reformed Catholics and wanderers at large. The UCC is not for everyone, and still, everyone can find a home with the denomination. I have found my home, and I am ready to take up my God-ordained place. Thanks be to God!

Third (and Final) Sacred Movement of the Ordination Paper Process

To Make Light!

“You are not the darkness you endured. You are the light that refused to surrender.”

by John Mark Green

In my walk with God, I have felt God’s nearness in the absence of people. It has never been lost on me that God journeys with us. God is anthropomorphic - in plain speak - the Divine

¹⁰ Downs, T. (2022, January 12). *CTS: UCC History & Polity (J-Term 2022)* [Lecture].

can be humanlike. While I have known darkness, I have always felt God's omnipresence (present everywhere at the same time). The problem is: that I never asked. I never asked for God to attend to me in the dark places because I did not have much successful practice with it in the natural. I have endured many dark things that can begin to make anyone feel like they are indeed the darkness they've endured.

But God!!

God continues to call me. Just this year, I asked God to save me from the darkness, and God showed up through a little boy and his entire family. They sat around me as I wept atop Starved Rock and let Adam (meaning "to make") have an entire childlike conversation with me. He introduced his sister to me, Lena (meaning "light"). God invited me away to make me light. I let go of a lifetime of pain with the support of an entire family of strangers. I walked away from that encounter with God, through a family, lighter than anything I have ever known.

Friends, scripture reveals that we walk through our valleys of the shadow of death, and God is with us. I am not sure what is going on in your life but I am here to tell you that God can do it for you as God has done it for me. It did not happen how I thought it would happen, but it happened in a way that I could not deny the hand of God. God sent a family to call me back unto God's self and I cannot unsee the work of a Savior who sees me and knows me intimately. God invited me to walk so that I can forevermore invite you to walk with God and me. God wants to make you light.

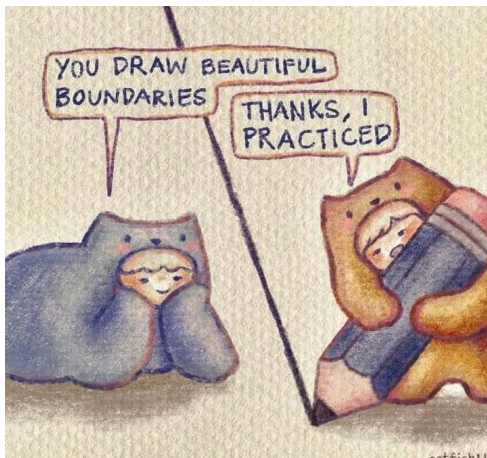
Won't you walk with me?

Adapted from my Facebook page Toward A Better You written by Ramona Bamgbose on 5/11/2023

IV. Ethics and Boundaries

I desire to be an ethical being with healthy boundaries so that I can continue to extend a hand for people to walk with the Divine and me, and to be open to being used as a vessel of welcome. I have learned that healthy boundaries founded in love know when to rest, seek wise counsel, and step away. While I seek to be a trailblazer, I think often about the ethical considerations of not being a local church pastor, yet desiring to receive an affirmation of call as the pastor of all the churches, of all the clergy, and all its members. If one has never held a pastoral role how can one do this great work in the spirit of excellence, solidarity, and by paying their dues? What is my ethical obligation to the local church at the heart of our denomination? It

matters that we are faithful to the health and vitality of our denomination by vetting for appropriate fit for these roles and as we know through Fitness Reviews and Plans of Growth that these processes end up vetting out people who are not willing to do the work of being transformed for their roles in ministry.



¹¹I have learned to draw beautiful boundaries because as the picture shows, “I have practiced.” I have learned the signs of an unhealthy Ramona when she has failed to take space for adequate rest. I have learned the signs of when I have not sought wise counsel because I become rigid in my thinking and close-minded in my

understanding of others. I have learned when to step away when something or someone no longer exhorts my spirit, and have learned the signs because I become more cynical and move away from curiosity. I have learned what an unhealthy me looks like because I have spent a great amount of time on my formation and development by fostering greater self-awareness. My foundation is anchored on inviting the Divine to walk with me through our holy texts to greater knowledge of God’s will made evident on Earth as it is in Heaven; God’s invitation to me concerning self and neighbor; and God’s continuous call to me for the sake of Kingdom building. Lastly, in regards to boundaries, if you consult my UCC profile one of my references lists that boundary setting is a top strength of mine. I have a high value and standard of clear and effective policies because ultimately I think they promote transparency, good faith, and direction for good church governance. In essence, it makes for beautiful boundaries and the utmost ethical integrity.

¹¹ Unknown source

V. Conclusion of Movements & Paper

To conclude, I have been made light! I feel equipped and called to this four-way covenant as a paid chaplain, and yet know that I am called to a bi-vocational ministry that one day will result in me paving the way for a four-way covenant authorized minister to be appointed to a settled position in a church governance role at the Conference level and beyond. The race is not only to the swift... it is also to those who endure. I am just getting started, and I know that trailblazing may mean joining for the sake of transformation. I have been made light to endure, enjoy, and find rest along this pilgrimage of creating precedence and process as God continues to light up my path to advocate one day in the life of our denomination to have a four-way covenant minister serve in a settled position at the highest level of the UCC's governance. I look forward to giving my life, my love, and my devotion to this hard and most holy work.

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