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Ordination Paper

Spiritual Autobiography

Much of my story with Christianity can be best described by my resonance with Jacob, the God wrestler. Jacob is no perfect biblical character, but allows the messy, transformative process of relationship to offer him a blessing (Genesis 32:22-32). I love the story where Jacob has been running from a confrontation with his brother and knows he needs to face what he has been avoiding—repairing broken relationship. It is in this context that Jacob wrestles God, experiences the cost and pain of that struggle in the dislocation of his hip, and yet remains engaged until he receives his blessing of transformation, his new identity and name. This story parallels so much in my experience—with the Bible, with Christianity, and with justice work in this world. There are so many times when I have wanted to (and still want to) escape a confrontation with my tradition, my people, or even myself. But this is where God shows up in love, in compassion, and yes, in the wrestling. Just like so many in our tradition, I too long for a blessing, for new life—for myself and for my people. This is my story too, a story of relationship and transformation.

I was a spiritual seeker as far back as I can remember. I grew up in a Lutheran church in Duluth Minnesota, where my spirituality was nurtured, especially in music and through Bible Camp in the North Woods. Layered on this experience, I had conservative Christian (Assemblies of God) friends who introduced me to Christian praise music and more fundamentalist Christian thought and experience. This became an important Pentecostal thread for me that continues to enrich my understanding of diverse expressions of Christianity.

When I went to college, I became involved in campus ministry and further explored evangelical Christianity, followed by a period of questioning and rejection of Christianity. It was a time of heavy deconstruction and sorting out who I wanted to be in the world and what this meant for me theologically. It was the earnest beginning of my wrestling with Christianity, where I felt the cost of a dislocated spirituality, a time of unknowing. It was the start of many cycles of struggle, pain, and transformation in my spiritual journey.

When I moved to Washington DC post-college for 2 years with the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, I connected with the Church of The Savior through one of their communities called 8th Day. The community was an interesting mix of believers; half the congregation believed in Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins and the other half of the congregation simply said they were “followers of Jesus” with not much doctrine beyond his teachings. These two facets of the community were in constant conversation with each other about their theological similarities and differences, holding each other in relational love. It was what I needed to bridge the divided parts of myself and was a shining example for me of how to be in covenantal relationship. I fell in love with this rich and human community, committed to activism, dialogue, and living out of a deep sense of personal and communal call. This was and remains one of the most significant experiences in my spiritual and religious life, and perhaps most embodies the first of the marks of ministry, setting me on a path for committed and continuous “lifelong spiritual development.”

When I moved to Portland a couple years later to complete my MSW, a whole new world of spiritual pluralism opened to me. I was exposed to Yoga and many other embodied Buddhist and Hindu traditions. These were important seeds planted in my spiritual life. I often say that

meditation is a tool that allows me to live out love and be a more present follower of the Jesus way.

After my first year in Portland, I connected with a small house church called Wilderness Way Community. In this space I developed a deeper connection with Christianity again (they describe having roots in the wisdom of Christianity and roots in the wisdom of nature). I began to see how nature and Christianity are connected, I created songs for the community, and learned about theologians who were making the same connections, such as Phillip Newel and John O'Donohue.

After leaving Portland, my partner and I got married and we took an extended honeymoon to California to study with theologians Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, where we spent a month reading and daily engaging in theological conversations. Ched convinced me to let go of my long-lasting ambivalence about Christianity. I decided to love the parts of my tradition that held deep wisdom for me and to wrestle with those parts that made me bristle. They remain important, ecumenically-grounded mentors who seek to lift up the best from each denomination, urging Christians to connect the seminary, sanctuary, and the streets.

These last number of years at my current congregation, especially after becoming licensed, have opened up a new chapter of my spiritual journey and understanding of leadership. I believe my experience in a variety of Christian settings has equipped me for leadership in the UCC. Further, I feel that the UCC has become a home precisely because I have integrated so many theological perspectives in my own journey. I love that the UCC came from at least 5 different streams—Congregational, white Christian, Afro-Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed. This is a tradition that makes space to honor the best gifts found in the diversity of God's people.

Not only that, but my experience in the UCC has helped me understand that the Christian tradition actually provides a structure for the wrestling.

One of the New Testament stories that I find spiritually challenging and nurturing is the story of the Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15:21-28). The reason I love it so much is because it presents such a human Jesus; like Jacob, Jesus is confronted when the Syrophenician woman questions his narrow way of seeing, he wrestles with her challenge, and then receives the blessing of new vision—an expanded sense of ministry, of who is in and who is (not) out. Christianity offers divine companionship as we wrestle with God—along side Jesus. Even our liturgical year makes space for this kind of transformation, which can also be articulated through the language of the cycles of death and resurrection. Advent brings us the birth of new hope, Lent offers us a period of sometimes painful wrestling with what leads to us away from life and into death, and Easter brings us the resurrection blessing of transformation and new life. In this way, every year the grain of wheat dies to bear new fruit (John 12:24) as we continue to find new ways of living Jesus' call to love, to relationship that gives life to all.

Statement of Faith

I believe in God, the silent source and musical movement of relational possibility who is always inviting and compelling all beings into our best and fullest possibilities. In this beautiful and broken world, I give gratitude for the gifts of Black Folk Religion and Liberation Theology when I name that I believe God is especially found in the struggle, with the poor and oppressed, seeking life abundant for all creatures, reaching the fullness of empathy (but not all powerful) and arching our stories toward justice and right relationship.

God speaks and becomes incarnate through the diversity of interconnected peoples and worldviews, showing us many different faces of God, mysteriously working in both the suffering of the world and the peace of all things, always shining in the cracks toward redemptive love.

With a cosmocentric theology that moves toward greater complexity and constant becoming, I join Octavia Butler when she says, “God is change.” This is a belief that is big enough to hold the chaos and possibility, suffering and redemption. I join with Sallie McFague in believing that the Universe is the body of God, holding and creating all that is.

Though we are born of the stars with relational possibility as our birthright, we as people forget that we are meant to live in right relationship. We all fall into the “trap of the self”, as Steven Charleston puts it, to put our own needs above the needs of the community. Sin is a choice we make to break right relationship, to deny our best possibilities, which ultimately manifests in society as systems of evil like patriarchy, white supremacy, and classism. Many people in power use these systems to perpetuate violence and injustice on a large and small scale and people with little power are often complicit in these systems.

Because God is the source and movement of relational possibility, always inviting us back to interconnection, our salvation is always at hand. For as many times as we break right relationship, we have opportunities to come back to the centrality of the “we” over the “I”.

I believe in Jesus, who showed us the way of the “we” over the “I”, whose constant call was to relationship. His focus on caring for the bodies of the most vulnerable among us offers us a relational path of collective salvation. When we love the bodies of those suffering most among us, we love all our bodies and heal God’s body. I understand Jesus as a prototype in an

incarnational world, one of many important breakthrough figures who shows us a profound sense of love—a “for instance” embodiment of love and connection to the divine, as Howard Thurman put it. In this way, I can say Jesus is my savior who leads me to salvation, while not making narrow, exclusive claims that he is the “only way”.

I believe in the Spirit, the great connector and dissolver of barriers, who moves in all times and places, singing a song of life and justice into the heart of the world, co-creating and renewing the worlds into being.

Call to Authorized Ministry

At a time when the Israelites were doing something they had never done before—entering the wilderness of unknown and new possibilities, Miriam sang a song (Exodus 15:20-21). I believe she sang the song of her people to reflect back to them who they were, what they had been through, and then sang a prophetic song of who they could be. I think the church as we know it today is in a wilderness moment—full of the unknown and full of possibilities. I want to be like Miriam, singing the song of my people and joining so many who are catching the vision of who we could be.

Though my path has been far from linear, my individual and communal discernment continues to reveal that I am called to ordained ministry. My discernment committee has helped me articulate my uncertainties, gifts, passions, and insights. An important confirmation of my call came through some obvious but pointed questions that members of my discernment committee asked me: “Am I called to ordained ministry? If I stopped this discernment process today and chose not to pursue ordination, what feelings would come up and what would that

mean for me?” My answer revealed a lot to me. I shared initially that I would feel sadness and disappointment, but I know I could take another path and be happy, find meaning and use my gifts well. The deeper insight came when I said it would feel like a waste of my story—there’s so much in my life experience that points to ordained ministry—the map of God’s work in my life leads me to this place. My entire life story seems to be a preparation for ordained ministry. I grew up in the Lutheran Church with a family deeply embedded in the Christian tradition. I went through a process of doubting and rejecting Christianity followed by coming back to it with a strong commitment to reclaim it. I have an MSW with a focus on community based practice. I have been mentored by the radical discipleship movement with leaders like Ched Myers and Elaine Enns who have helped me understand through ecumenical movement building how seminary, sanctuary, and streets must be connected. All these chapters of my story lead me to listen to God’s call to ordained ministry.

I am clear that I come alive at the intersection of sharing song, movement justice work, and congregational work. One of my local discernment committee members asked me once, “if you are a paradigm-shifter, how could you bring new ways of thinking into the traditional roles of preaching or pastoral care?” As I have pondered this question, I have realized I am already integrating justice work and song into the preaching and pastoral care I have done in my current role, and it seems to both bring me alive and meet needs of the church.

When I sat and listened to a member of our congregation who was going through acute depression, I offered comfort and encouragement through sharing two songs, both deeply grounded in images of resilience that are rooted in the justice work I have done. When I preach, I almost always include song or string together various voices for justice that speak to an

emerging and continuously resurrected gospel in our times. This process has me continuing to discern with questions like, “what would it mean to take the principles of the healing justice movement and infuse them in a small group or an event?” Of course, each role of a pastor is relational, so the answer to this question may look different depending on the person or group of people, but it has helped clarify for me how my call to ordained ministry integrates with other important pieces of my call.

My particular call to leadership and ordained ministry in the setting of a church is also grounded in the mentoring I have been given in my social work education, in justice movement spaces around collaborative and transparent leadership, as well as a deep understanding of relational group process and accountability. While I understand systems often take time to change, I long to integrate into congregational process the knowledge and experience I have gained in restorative justice and consensus-based values. These are currently counter cultural ways of being and it takes time to help others fully understand them, but I also believe they are an important part of the future of the church. I feel particularly equipped and called to be a leader who helps lift up the best of what has been and open space for what is emerging, supporting lay leaders in integrating these aspects into the life of the church.

I am grateful for the variety of ministry skills I have been able to develop these last number of years in my faith formation role at Peace Church. They also have given me further confirmation about my call to ordained ministry. I have held various worship roles—including quarterly preaching, creating the liturgy, leading the story for all ages, leading our prayer time, and presiding over communion. I have planned numerous retreats for different groups—including a family retreat, men’s retreat, and confirmation retreat. I have raised funds for youth

trips and led our confirmation program. I have led premarital counseling and presided at weddings. And I have offered pastoral care to both youth and adults—sometimes by making hospital or hospice visits and sometimes offering pastoral care in the context of a spiritual journey group through song and conversation. Each of these experiences has enriched my learning in ministry and continues to build my knowledge and skills in providing church leadership.

Lastly, when I reflect on why I am called particularly to the United Church of Christ, I believe I have found a fitting home in this denomination. As the national UCC website states, “The UCC has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. Its overarching creed is love.” This is the kind of church that I want to share with others. I love the UCC polity, the respect for each person’s spiritual path, and the space that is created for a wide range of theological beliefs and understandings. As my ordination advisor once said to me, “the fact that the denomination can hold space for pluralistic thought and understandings seems deeply UCC.” Said another way, a Synod statement in 1957 described a vision in which “God’s very life is a dynamic eternal dance of unity-in-difference.” Though often messy in practice, this theological orientation is a core part of who I am and what I want to be committed to in covenant with others. And then there’s the long-standing value of justice—both historically and in present time. Knowing I come from a tradition that includes abolitionists who helped free enslaved Africans in the Amistad and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, a pioneering figure in women’s ordination, is a powerful heritage. Justice is another core part of who I am and central to how I see the gospel. I am proud to be a part of a denomination that consistently lifts up and shows up for justice work. Finally, I find the UCC’s intention to be a “united and uniting church” to be

particularly profound and meaningful. I have always seen covenantal relationship at the center of what it means to be Christian, to be fully human—in all its messiness and beauty, and I see this aspect of UCC identity to be particularly important in laying the groundwork for how to embody the gospel in the world.

Ecclesiology and Sacraments

My understanding of church and sacrament has been implicit in my writing and I want to address it here explicitly. I see church as a place to learn and relearn how to sing the song of right relationship. Rather than primarily a place to find right belief (orthodoxy), it is a place to practice (orthopraxy) and integrate belief into right relationship, living out Beloved Community or the Reign of God, to practice interconnection, where we reorient from our individualism to the community. If the world embodies death dealing systems and breaks right relationship consistently, the church is a place to cultivate counter cultural practices, where we lift up those who are suffering most. Because white supremacy often supports the structures of capitalism where wealth is hoarded for only a few who push for constant production, in church we practice rest and “enough for everyone”, where bodies are nourished and we are satisfied. In church, we ritually remember our connection with God, the source and musical movement of relational possibility.

With the sacraments, we use water in baptism to connect us to discipleship, the commitment to following Jesus into valuing community, emphasizing (right) relationship. Baptism is the place where a person or family publicly recognizes their commitment to following Jesus in relationship with the community, where the Spirit is revealed in the ongoing relational transformation of the church. Just as Jesus was sent out into the wilderness after baptism to

wrestle with all that keeps us from connection, so in baptism are we sent out to follow Jesus in relationship, “for we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body...” (1 Corinthians 12:13). This includes the choice many families make in baptizing infants, committing publicly to raising children in the way of Jesus, entering into covenant with the body of Christ through the Spirit. With Communion, we use bread and cup as a way to connect us to all those saints who have come before and who are with us now in a path of healing, a web of relationship that Jesus celebrated in his last supper. It is the story of Manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:1-18), where all have enough and no one has too much. It is the story of loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:15-21), the miracle of abundance when we remember that we are healed and flourish when we share what we have in relationship. This is the story of Jesus that reminds us when we eat the body and blood, we become one body, one river of relationship. And we remember in church that we come into our fullest selves when we integrate our experiences of struggle and liberation, connect to our sense of agency, and love each other by believing that each person is worthy of offering their gifts of creative possibility. When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we experience the fullness of beloved community, a taste of feast to come when all are one, living in right relationship.

Though church will always be imperfect and messy like any other human institution, I believe church is at its best when it calls forth individual and collective aliveness and wellbeing. We are the church when our lives are transformed, practicing what Ruby Sales says, when “we harmonize the we with the I and the I with the we.” We are the church when we experience deep love and belonging in relationship and follow the Spirit into an ever widening circle of beloved community. And we are the church when we know and share our stories. We connect

ourselves to all those who have gone before us by loving and wrestling with the Bible, a long and varied set of stories about many people's relationship with God over time. These books include the inspiring and the painful, weaving together our best wisdom and our most vulnerable limitations to show us who we are in relationship. When we allow our own contemporary stories to speak into the stories of our tradition we create a new, relationally connected story that points us toward wholeness. We can hear where God is still speaking.

Ongoing Spiritual Practices (Mark 1)

One of the ways I embody my theology is to nurture spiritual practices in myself and others that help us live into our best possibilities and relational connections. Spending time out in nature, whether cross country skiing or taking in the quiet next to a stream, is where I experience the Spirit most profoundly and where I catch most of the songs that come to me. My daily early morning practices of writing and reading often ground me and focus me toward love in my relationships throughout the day. But I also want to offer here an example in greater depth of how I sometimes build on a personal spiritual experience and expand it to offer it to others in my ministry.

A number of years ago, I participated in a 2-part retreat series with the Center for Courage and Renewal. I cherished my time there, soaking in the space to read poems, write, reflect, and engage in the process of clearness committee. Indeed, it was at the closing retreat where I discerned I wanted to start this ordination process. The beauty of this experience was that it gave me a space to deeply discern my call in the context of community, as well as tools for future small groups where I could lead others in the same discernment processes.

A few months after my last retreat, I created a small group series at my congregation using a combination of songs I caught/wrote, poems and prompts from the Center for Courage and Renewal. Then again after the pandemic began, I created an online version using Zoom to gather a small group to reflect and discern our call in this time. After 4 weeks of structured time together, the group decided it wanted to continue, so I continued to convene the group, letting the members of the group give direction to the focus of our time, sometimes focusing deeply on call, sometimes simply sharing about our own spiritual journeys. Each gathering I always offered a song, my attempt to lean more deeply into my call of creating and leading music, to follow in the tradition of Miriam. I also wanted to bring elements of worship into our space, inviting each person into a space of nurturing their faith and spirit. Our time together offered deep connection and a space for discernment that led some in our group to make significant life changes, helping them move toward right relationship with themselves and their communities.

UCC Identity, Transformational Leadership, and Encountering the Other (Mark 2, 3, 7)

In this next section, I want to offer another example from my ministry that ties together ways to engage UCC identity, transformational leadership, and encountering the other with justice and mercy. It is connected to UCC identity because it is my way of living out my commitment to covenant, my expression of John 21:17 “that all may be one” that is the inspiration of being a uniting and united church.

A few years ago, I worked with the adult education team to put together a series on community safety and policing. Though I personally want to see radical changes in how our policing and larger criminal justice systems function, I am constantly checking my own perspective to make sure I’m providing the leadership that our congregation needs. This is how I

engage transformational leadership, understanding the importance of navigating change within a community. I tried to make sure we had a range of perspectives represented in our forums, spanning the political spectrum of what I understand in our congregation, from moderately conservative to radically progressive. I also ended each session by inviting feedback on the series so I could keep a flow of input into my facilitation.

After one forum, a member of the congregation reached out via email to give feedback, expressing concern that our speakers (one Indigenous and one Black) were not giving accurate accounts of past police incidents, that when they referred to national incidents of racial violence they shouldn't be bringing that into how our city police operates, and that we needed to hear more from police unions in our series. I took a few days to contemplate my response, knowing I needed to integrate the pastoral with the prophetic in what I offered this person. I also needed time to get in touch with my own emotions, knowing internally what I really wanted to do was put them on blast to say how much their perspective embodied white supremacy and how arrogant it was to dismiss the perspectives of the speakers. I know from my experience with tough race conversations, and my own knowledge of what it means culturally to be socialized a white man, that blasting white folks rarely leads to greater insight or better relationship, especially when I hold greater power in the relationship as I do as a staff member of the church. Instead I tried to hold to my theological belief that God is always trying to draw out our best possibilities. In my email I tried to lift up ways I would integrate the suggestions they gave and offered encouragement for them to be more open to the perspectives of the speakers. It was a way to both confront the implicit bias I experienced in their comments, while still offering pastorally the radical hospitality of God.

A few days later, we talked on the phone and had an honest and opening kind of conversation. In relationship—reaching to embody our call to baptism to form one body, I got to hear more of where they were coming from, share my understanding of why the speakers shared what they did, and I believe we both came to greater understanding and common ground. At the end of the conversation, I expressed how much I appreciated their honesty, willingness to talk, and their perspective. I felt the movement of the spirit expressed in our covenantal relationship, in our deep listening, and in our learning to be unified in our diversity.

Engaging Sacred Stories and Theological Praxis (Mark 4, 6)

I am grateful that my life has been full of opportunities to nurture ongoing theological reflection and preaching. In addition to ongoing reflection with mentors like Ched and Elaine and opportunities for quarterly preaching at my current congregation, my studies at United Seminary have enriched my ability to lead and reflect with my church. My most recent New Testament class helped me understand more deeply the worldviews of those who wrote the books of the Christian (New) Testament. I was able to put the writings in their own context more fully and understand how what they wrote was related to their worldviews, comparing and contrasting it with my own worldview. My Constructive Theology class also gave me a deeper understanding of church history, that each generation of Christians has had a different set of issues in their time, each engaging with them the best they knew how. Knowing this history helps me ask what they might mean for our time, given our own unique set of issues. Using the Bible side by side with contemporary readings as our Interim Pastor has modeled for us is a beautiful way to see how God is still speaking. Indeed, much of what comes alive to me in my own theology and the relational writings of people like Ruby Sales, Steven Charleston, and Sally McFague can also be

found in the relational and interconnected nature of the gospel of John (15: 5): “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” In this way, I can draw on traditional stories as well as current theological praxis to preach effectively in sermons.

As an example, I have been working weekly with our interim pastor, pastoral associate, and music director to create our worship services. We rotate roles each time, sharing the leadership of preaching, story for all ages, call to worship, community and pastoral prayer, and the benediction. I have seen the fruits of how a team planning approach can lead to more connected faith formation experience for adults and children.

This last year during Black History Month, we led a service that focused on John Lewis. The service included a video of John Lewis praying as our opening call to worship. Then I provided the story for all ages by sharing a story called “Preaching to the Chickens”, which was about John Lewis’ early roots of preaching love to his chickens. The sermon built on understanding how John’s lifelong dedication to love was connected to Jesus’ call to “turn the other cheek”, an important Biblical text supporting the nonviolent movement. The music included songs like “Keep your eyes on the prize” and the benediction was a video of John Lewis dancing. It was a beautiful service and we got a lot of feedback about how engaging it was to everyone across the age spectrum. This experience came alive for so many because it connected the contemporary with the ancient. God spoke in the space between the world of the gospel writers and our world in the 21st century.

Caring for Others and Personal Assets (Mark 5, 8)

I begin this section with acknowledging in gratitude my educational background with social work (BA and MSW). This gave me a foundation for understanding wellness and mental health, anti-oppressive frameworks that acknowledge diverse identities, as well as learning about what community health can look like through an organizing framework. I have had experience in 2 different places where I have worked with houseless folks, many who experience various kinds of mental illness. I know many ways anxiety, depression, and trauma can manifest and the different needs that come with them, sometimes eased by relational care and sometimes needing more psychiatric support. In most cases, non-judgmental listening and pastoral care offer a much-needed balm to help move toward wellness, toward right relationship with themselves and others. Caring and love can often look like connecting someone to a therapist or reminding them of the tools they already have to care for themselves.

Though I have many examples I could share in my last number of years of ministry, I want to focus on a recent example because it integrates my own work of building a healthy sense of identity for myself with caring for youth, parents, and other adults. Part of my own journey in building and maintaining a healthy sense of self has included coming to understand myself as queer/nonbinary. I am grateful for my time in Portland, which gave me the spaces to begin to understand and explore what that meant for me in relationship to others. Since then, I have talked with many queer and nonbinary friends, listened to podcasts, read books, and reflected on what language actually reflected my experience. Though my journey is still ongoing, I now feel comfortable sharing my pronouns as they/he, am starting to explore queer gender expression, and feel confident in valuing my place in the diversity of gender identity.

Because of these experiences, I have especially been able to support and provide pastoral care for youth in my congregation as they begin to understand their nonbinary identities. For the purpose of this writing, I'll use the name John for one teenage youth who shared his experience with nonbinary identity with me last summer. It began when John came to help out with our VBS day camp and immediately shared in a small group of youth and adults that their pronouns were now "them/them". After initially affirming the new pronouns and thanking them for letting us know (and using their pronouns to let them know I understood and would be supportive), I followed up with an individual side conversation to ask if they were interested in sharing any more about their process. They shared that it was pretty new, that they had recently let their family know and that was difficult. I asked if they had any other supportive people in their life, and they said I was the primary supportive person right now. I let them know that I was here if they needed to talk and then mentioned a couple local resources for queer and nonbinary teens if they were interested. Later when I offered to send resources over email, I copied John's parent to make sure they knew John and I were in contact and okay with me sharing resources. This led not only to affirming the desire for me to share resources, but a follow up conversation with the parent to help them process and understand what might be supportive to John.

I continued to be in contact with John (some through email and some through personal conversation in the context of the Our Whole Lives sexuality program) and John's parent throughout the year, and through the process as John eventually began to use he/him pronouns. I was often mostly a supportive and affirming presence, but I believe an important pastoral presence that let John know his pastor and his church were here to support him and love him fully in his dignity as he is and was becoming.

Because I had the privilege of providing pastoral care to John, I was able to help him and his family navigate some logistics related to gender in preparation for a high school youth trip this last summer. I was able to check in both with him and his parents about where he would use the bathroom and sleep during the trip, as well as connect with the organization that was directing the experience. In addition, I had a conversation with our adult leaders about what it meant to affirm our nonbinary youth—going over the importance of using their pronouns, not using previous names for those who changed them, etc. All of this was possible because I had done my own work, knowing something about how to support nonbinary youth, and then offering pastoral care when the opportunity arose.

Boundaries and Self Care

My recent experience during a congregational transition has deepened my theological understanding of hope in the midst of conflict and brokenness. I now know first-hand what a church system (and the individuals in it) can do when in the midst of conflict and change. People can hurt each other deeply and that can often lead to shame, revenge, and broken relationships. While I often want to see everyone live into a vision of love that Jesus lays out for us, the truth is that there are times when there might be nothing to do but witness as communication breaks down. In those times, I kept professional confidentially, even when others did not, seeking to keep important boundaries around information and process. And out of those times, I learned the importance of maintaining boundaries and self-differentiation, trusting that the Spirit is working among the pain, praying for all involved. Even when there are no immediate paths toward healing, I trust that God is change, that transformation will come at some point, as it is beginning to do so now under the leadership of our current interim pastor.

I also learned that in order to make it through as a leader, I need to make sure I have my own relational support and spiritual resources to keep me grounded. During the last couple years, I have drawn heavily from theologians Ruby Sales and Steven Charleston. Grounded in “Black Folk Religion”, Ruby Sales gave me the language to “find a way out of no way”, to have hope even when it seems lost, to continue believing in our best possibilities. Drawing from his Indigenous heritage, Steven Charleston has sustained me with his hope and courage. He acknowledges how lost we can feel in the pain of the world, but yet nurtures a collective belief that a new way of love is coming, always present for us to see if we can open our eyes. I have relied on supervision with our lead pastors, sought out therapy, spiritual direction, and cultivated supportive friendships outside my church system. At the most difficult times, I have needed all of these to get through. These are what also what helped me keep boundaries between work and my home life with my partner and kids, allowing me to prioritize being present to them even as things were difficult at work. Now in this time of beginning renewal, these systems of support have been sources of healing, helping me engage my wounds from this time and find the gems of wisdom and new strength that have come from them. Though I have had to wrestle with the cost of these wounds, and know I will again in this long, cyclical journey of struggle and transformation, I have been so grateful for the blessing of new courage and identity in this new chapter of my ministry. I trust that as I continue in this journey, God will meet me in the wrestling. I’m so grateful for the opportunity to connect my pastoral journey to the stories of people who wrestled with questions of faith and I know that I join a cloud of witnesses as I continue the lifelong work of resurrection.