

Reflection on and Demonstration of the Marks of Ministry

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As a member in discernment in the United Church of Christ, I was required to provide examples of the ways that I engaged with the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers in the United Church of Christ. In recently revised ordination process, members in discernment share and discuss our engagement with all 48 marks with our mentor and two readers from the Committee on Ministry on an ongoing basis. During our ordination interview with the full Committee on Ministry and before the Ecclesiastical Council, members in discernment are invited to share a sample of our engagement with the Marks. This sample of engagement with the Marks is shared instead of an ordination paper. It is my understanding that I am the first person in the Minnesota Conference UCC to have an ecclesiastical council with this new process. What follows is my engagement with 11 of the 48 Marks of Ministry, with examples from each of the eight ministry areas.

A) Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practice

A1. Speak clearly with others about the importance of faith, worship & prayer in daily living.

During my time working with the Benedictine sisters at St. Paul's Monastery and leading online retreats during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, I participated in and co-led many retreats on different forms of prayer. These conversations reinforced my belief that there are many ways to pray. It also helped me understand that everyone struggles with prayer—including clergy and nuns. Personally, I have been self-conscious about my prayer life because I do not want God to think I am a whiner when I describe my problems or my deepest desires. And because certain forms of silent prayer are difficult for me.

Here are a few insights I have gained from and shared with other pray-ers:

Prayer is Challenging

Listening to people talk about prayer, I often hear people grappling to find words that describe their approach. Some people claim that they do not know how to pray or even *if* they pray. These statements (which I have also uttered myself) are often combined with an assumption that others pray more frequently and elegantly than we do. But if we are honest, few of us pray like we wish we did. We all yearn for a deeper connection to the Divine and we all endure very real human limitations as we reach toward God.

To Start: Build on What You Already Do

Many of us simply need a little help identifying what we are doing that is already prayerful and building on that. This has certainly been true for me. My colleague, Sam, helped me identify the way I engage with music as a prayer practice. Before his observation, I had not thought about it that way before, but naming it as prayer helped me claim it in a different way and be more intentional about it. One of the participants in a workshop I led was cultivating a habit of asking questions (rather than immediately arguing) when engaging in difficult conversations or unwelcome opinions. When another companion pointed out that asking questions was one of Jesus' regular spiritual practices, it gave this practice more meaning and depth. Naming and claiming what we are already doing as a form prayer can help us live into it more fully.

Prayer Comes Alive in Fresh Ways with Others

Each person's prayer life is beautifully unique. At the same time, there are similarities and synergies that come to life as we gather and share our experiences. There are some beautiful elements of our relationship with God that we encounter as individuals, especially as we seek silence. But the Spirit is truly present in different ways in community. This happens in worship and any time two or three are gathered. During a month-long workshop I led on praying with scripture, as we engaged in a conversation with one another and with God through our different scripture passages, the text themselves seemed to be having a mystical conversation with one another.

Show Up Authentically and Humbly

Whatever form our prayer lives take--whether alone or with companions, whether silent or speaking, whether moving or still-- the first and most important step is to show up authentically. It is ok to come with whatever words we have to offer. It is ok to be silent in the best way we can muster. It is ok to be a little wiggly as we settle down into our awareness of the presence of God. We bring all of who we are into relationship with God through prayer---our grief, our sadness, our anger, our disappointments, our hopes, our joy.

No matter how or when our prayer takes place, it will always involve God meeting us (just as we are) in the present moment (just as it is). Over time, we may get “better” at prayer--perhaps able to sit silently for longer periods of time, more able to share our real struggles, perhaps more prepared to craft meaningful words with a grieving friend. But no matter how long we have sustained a practice or how “well” we pray, there is no PhD level of prayerfulness we can attain. We will never stop learning, growing, and becoming. As St. Benedict taught us: *Always we begin again*. Each and every day. Each and every moment, we begin again.

B) Nurturing a UCC Identity

B1. Exhibit a commitment to the core values of the United Church of Christ: continuing testament, extravagant welcome, changing lives.

When I was a senior in high school (1995), the Montana State legislature proposed legislation to require people convicted of sexual crimes to register with the state. One representative proposed an amendment defining gay people as sexual criminals. The pastor of Mayflower Congregational UCC in Billings wrote a letter to the editor of the Billings Gazette opposing this legislation and affirming that God loves people of all sexual orientations. After my dad read that letter, he suggested that we attend worship at Mayflower.

At Mayflower, I ended up in the high school Sunday School class by Ann Hanson. A few weeks after I arrived, we began planning the youth-led worship service. Because Ann practiced such extravagant welcome with the teens of the church, I felt free to fully participate in the Sunday School class. Based on what I had shared, Ann thought the whole congregation should hear my perspective as a newcomer. She shocked me by asking if I would be willing to “preach” during the youth-led worship service. Though I did not know it at the time, this experience was formative for me and is likely the primary reason I am still part of the UCC today. If my reflections had stayed in the Sunday School classroom, I may have counted that as a valuable experience and then gone off to college a few months later without getting to know most of the adults in the congregation. Instead, my debut sermon introduced me to the whole congregation—who greeted me warmly during coffee hour and who remembered my name for the next several weeks. Before I left for college, I felt connected to that community and the beginning of my identity as a member of the UCC began in earnest.

Though I did not know it at the time, my welcome into the UCC affirmed Jonathan Edwards’ words: “there is still more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy Word.” Pastor Jeff’s letter to the editor was one form of continuing testament. And although the God is Still Speaking campaign was still years in the future, Gracie Allen’s quote, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” is apt. My parents and grandparents moved away from the Church because it was exclusionary, judgmental, and seemed irrelevant to their lived experiences. Because of Ann Hanson’s extravagant welcome, I can testify to my life being forever changed.

My experience of being welcome into the UCC as a teenager continues to shape many aspects of my ministry including speaking publicly about how I understand Jesus’ radical love and how I facilitate gatherings--listening to and lifting up voices who may not be expected to share anything valuable. They may be the very people whose voices most need to be heard.

C) Building Transformational Leadership Skills

C1. Accurately assess own leadership strengths and challenges and seek out help from mentors as needed or required.

Leadership Strengths:

- Building relationships and working collaboratively.
- Being willing to pitch in wherever is needed most.
- Bridging the ideal and the practical
- Clarifying the purpose/mission/values and reminding people of the purpose and values when there is conflict or decisions to be made.
- Orientation toward fairness and inclusiveness. Mindful of who might not feel included or fully welcome.
- Actively seeking feedback from trusted colleagues and mentors.

Leadership Challenges:

- Dislike being the center of attention.
- A tendency to overthink.
- Wrestling with skepticism and doubt. This can be helpful sometimes but can also undermine my self-confidence.

I do not expect to “overcome” my tendencies toward overthinking, skepticism and doubt, nor do I expect that I will suddenly love being the center of attention. I expect that I will struggle with these challenges in some form for the rest of my life. My relationship with these challenges feels more like a shadow or a dance partner. I can alter my relationship with them, but they are present. Centering breathing, practicing silence, rehearsing my words ahead of time when I need to speak, imagining myself doing something, and connecting with trusted colleagues and friends all help me move through my fears and challenges rather than letting them paralyze me.

As a deeply relational person, I thrive in collaborative organizations and in learning environments where I am both supported and challenged. Wherever I find myself, I actively seek feedback from caring mentors and competent colleagues. I have been supported and held accountable to these areas of growth by personal mentors, colleagues at Grace Hospice and by CPE supervisors and peers.

C2. Build relationships of mutual trust and collaboration across diverse communities demonstrating sensitivity.

My CPE peer groups at the Stillwater Prison were comprised of people of African American, Nigerian, Puerto Rican, Asian, and European American descent. Our religious backgrounds included Muslim, Buddhist, Spiritual/Agnostic, Unitarian Universalist, Celtic Mystic, Catholic and Protestant. Our genders and sexual orientations were also varied. It was humbling to be part of this unlikely group of humans.

Doing CPE with incarcerated people exponentially expanded my understanding of the complexities that human beings can hold. All my incarcerated peers were responsible for ending other people’s lives. At the same time, they are some of the most beautifully brave and compassionate people I know. They care for themselves and for one another within a system designed to punish them and break them down. While making sense of their own culpability in their crimes and withstanding the relentless noise and physical discomforts of prison, they find ways to offer care to their brothers who are hurting. While navigating the social dynamics of competing gangs, racial tensions and drug use, they write poetry, create paintings and cultivate spiritual survival skills. They befriend the ostracized (mentally ill, gay or transgender inmates)—often putting themselves as physical or emotional risk to do so.

Because my CPE supervisor, Sue Allers-Hattie believes in shared leadership, she often asked CPE peers to facilitate sessions related to their work, passion, and skills. She asked me to facilitate the sessions on grief. During my first time facilitating in prison, it was humbling to craft a process that would invite participation and trust from such a diverse group who had experienced grief I could only imagine (including the complicated grief after killing your own family members). While preparing for the conversation, I discovered the language of *disenfranchised grief*, a term coined by Dr. Kenneth Doka to describe grief that others may not understand or believe is important. It may involve secrecy or shame and often does not have clear language or rituals to honor it. Examples include estrangement, the death of an ex, the death of a pet, or a miscarriage. Disenfranchised grief was a helpful framework to invite everyone into the conversation.

During my fourth unit of CPE, I was again invited to facilitate a conversation about grief. I asked Sue if I could co-lead the session with D, one of my incarcerated peers. D and I were part of two CPE units together and had established a relationship of trust and mutual respect. D asked many questions about hospice and was amazed that I could meet day after day with people who were close to the end of life. Likewise, I was in awe that he could endure the violence, loneliness, and dehumanization of incarceration and remain compassionate and clear-headed about how to respond to people. D worked in “seg” (the isolation unit), helping to deescalate potentially violent situations. Correctional officers, case workers, mental health workers, and fellow incarcerated people could all be allies. Or they could offer resistance, anger or violence as a response to any given situation. D had to develop stealth emotional intelligence skills because his quality of life and his ability to do his work depended in large part on discerning who had his best interest in mind and who did not.

With respect for each other’s wisdom, we crafted a more holistic grief didactic than either one of us could have done alone. We also worked with limited resources and limited time. Because of prison rules, we were not allowed to communicate with one another outside of CPE time. Most of our preparation was done in writing when we were not together and then given to one another to edit and make suggestions. Then, we had to trust each other to lead from the heart when it came time to facilitate the session.

D) Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions

D1. Maturing in effective proclamation and preaching /

Bringing life to sacred stories and traditions in worship, proclamation, and witness

January 26, 2025 Sermon (starts about 28:00): [United Church of Christ, New Brighton | Video Recordings](#)

E) Caring for All Creation

E1. Be cognizant of and practice appropriate personal boundaries when offering care or concern.

In my daily work, with verbal patients who are open to my presence, “competent use of self,” and appropriate personal boundaries involve slow physical movements, gentle eye contact, and asking if someone wants a visit before proceeding. It also involves asking permission to hold someone’s hand or pray with them. Because I have experienced several deaths recently (my mother, mother-in-law, stepbrother, uncle) and because I have had my own near-death experience, I carry that grief with me, and it fuels my sense of calling to this work. I am mindful of it, but I do not often speak directly with patients about it. However, recently I briefly mentioned that my mother had died to a grieving daughter who was wondering how long her intense grief over losing her mother would last. I offered my experience that grief never “goes away,” but that for me and for most people, it tends to feel less intense with time. With a patient who experienced cardiac challenges, I briefly shared that after my heart attack, I experience emotions more strongly than I did before. I did this as a way of “joining” her in her experience of crying more easily after her heart condition changed.

Many of my current hospice patients are from Christian traditions that have a different view of scripture and religious authority than I hold. Engaging in prayer and discussions requires that I honor the beliefs and traditions that they hold while also staying centered in myself. Most of my patients are decades older than I am and some come from traditions that do not ordain women. Although it is rare that that people tell me directly that they do not welcome my presence, I sometimes feel indirect communication (body language, tone of voice) about the fact that I am a (younger than the person/family) woman.

In these situations, “competent use of self,” and healthy boundaries mean staying grounded in who I am and my full humanity. I cannot change people’s perceptions of my age or gender, but I can gently and competently show up and offer the best spiritual care I can offer at any given moment. Sometimes, providing the best care may involve stepping out of the way and allowing hospice patients to receive spiritual care from others.

F) Participating in Theological Praxis

F1. Identify and accurately interpret theological implications of social discourse, public policy and community engagement.

In my role as a chaplain, I have been asked to participate in “pinning ceremonies” for veterans who are on hospice. The ceremony usually involves patriotic songs, prayers, and time to share stories and memories. Veterans and their families find these ceremonies deeply meaningful, especially at a time when they are facing their mortality, reviewing major moments in their lives and making meaning of it all. Usually, these ceremonies are small. They involve a few (or even just one) veterans and family members.

Last Veterans Days (right after the 2024 election), I was asked to speak and pray during a worship service honoring veterans at a care facility. A few hundred people gathered in the chapel for the service: veterans, family members and staff of the facility.

Praying at pinning ceremonies and Veteran’s Day worship services is complicated for me. I am not a veteran, so I cannot speak about military service from personal experience. I have uncles, cousins, and grandfathers who have served in the military. For my relatives, the military provided training, structure and education that they otherwise would not have received, but it also came with a cost. For some, being a veteran is foundational to their identity, and their service reinforced a deep patriotism, which is woven into their understanding of G-d. Some of my family members came back from war deeply wounded and that woundedness continues to ripple through our family. For some of my family members, as for many veterans, all these things were true to a certain extent.

I believe that being a disciple of Jesus calls people toward pacifism and nonviolence, but that ideal has not personally cost me much—so I do not want to pretend to claim a moral high ground that I do not have. And I have no desire to diminish anyone’s service or what gives their lives a sense of purpose.

At the same time, when I am asked to pray at an event where people sing *God Bless America* and the default narrative emphasizes only the positive aspects of military service, it gives me pause. During a time of rising militaristic Christian Nationalism, I do not want to lend my voice (implicitly or explicitly) in support of violence, ethnocentrism, or militaristic patriotism. When I offer a prayer, I am seen as the official representative of Christianity (in some people’s eyes, the representative of *God*) in the room and I want to choose my words carefully.

I want my words to recognize that the effects of war last long after the fighting is over. The effects also extend far beyond the individuals in uniform. I pray for those who are wounded physically, emotionally, and spiritually—that they will get the care they need to heal and make meaning after their experience. And I pray

for leaders to discern carefully about when and how violence and weapons will be used. I also want to help sincerely honor the sacrifice that veterans have made. I just do not want that sacrifice cloaked in upbeat patriotic songs and glib catchphrases. Many veterans put their lives on the line to defend an ideal. They deserve --and we all deserve--better than that.

G) Working Together for Justice and Mercy

G1. Serve diligently as an educator, advocate, organizer or speaker for the sake of justice and mercy.

One way that I have educated, advocated and organized for justice and mercy is by teaching and advocating for comprehensive, inclusive sexuality education (both in local congregations and with elected officials). I have taught the *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) curriculum in congregations and recruited and trained others in many different traditions to teach OWL. Teaching OWL for the last 20 years has been one meaningful way for me to practice our incarnational faith. I love being part of conversations with young people --welcoming their questions and affirming their bodies as created good by G-d. I also love being in conversation with parents about how to best support our embodied children as they live into their embodied values while also being respectful and caring toward others. Teaching OWL is also good practice for many other forms of ministry because it requires that I speak truthfully about uncomfortable subjects and be present with people as they wrestle with their own discomfort.

G2. Reach across cultures with maturity for the sake of the Gospel.

For the last year of her life, I accompanied S, a Japanese American woman who spent time in an internment camp as a child and whose mother died by suicide. By the time I got to know her, S was in her nineties, with dementia and a heart condition, living in an assisted living facility. She considered herself Christian and had attended a local Methodist Church years before--though no one visited her from the church. Since she was estranged from her living relatives, her longtime neighbor served as her POA (power of attorney). S spent almost all her time alone in her apartment in front of a blaring television. Usually, she told people to leave her alone as soon as anyone walked in the door. Of the twenty or more times I tried to visit her, she accepted a brief visit from me only a few times. I honestly do not know what caused her to eventually receive rather than reject a visit. During that visit, she shared some of her life story as the television blared in the background. When I asked if she wanted to pray, she said "either way. Don't matter to me." I prayed but kept it short.

For months after that visit, S rejected my visits, no matter what time I visited or even when I brought along her favorite maple donuts. (She accepted the donut but still sent me away). After consulting with her POA/neighbor, I learned that S sometimes refused the neighbor's visits as well, maple donuts or no maple donuts. When she spoke to me, S said clearly that she had been alone most of her life and that she preferred to be alone. Because she often rejected my visits, I could have simply stopped visiting her. However, I wanted to honor S's spoken desire to be alone while also giving her the opportunity to connect on the rare occasions when she wanted company.

After consulting with my CPE group in the prison, I decided to learn a few phrases of Japanese. S had not spoken Japanese in decades, but my words surprised her so much that they broke down a barrier and she welcomed me to come and sit by her wheelchair. As I sat on the carpet at her feet, we had our longest visit and best connection.

After that connection, I was hopeful that she might welcome another visit. But alas, S's trauma responses were well-founded and deeply embedded. She had good reason not to trust people, especially white people. In subsequent visits, I spoke Japanese to introduce myself. She still sent me away. Because she rejected so many visits, I could have legitimately discontinued spiritual care and spent my time with other people. However, because she had lived such a lonely existence and because connection is as essential as food and air to human beings, I continued to visit S and gave her the power to accept or refuse each time.

Like most people, as she moved closer to the end of life, she began sleeping more and more. Sometimes, her neighbor and/or I would sit in silence with her as she slept or read to her from the prayerbook on her bedside table. We usually would not stay long--trying to honor her spoken words that she preferred to be alone, but balancing that with a desire for her know that people cared.

G3 Work effectively for justice with ecumenical and interfaith partners and with people of no faith.

The Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (MNRCRC), where I worked as Executive Director for four years, is an interfaith organization that was established as a collaboration between several religious organizations. Organizationally, the coalition was comprised of Jewish women's groups, Christian denominations/organizations, and Unitarian Universalists. Individuals from other faith groups also worked with the organization, even if their religious group was not officially part of the Coalition.

Discussing abortion, contraception and sexuality in religious spaces can be complicated, even within the religious groups (including the Minnesota Conference of the UCC) that had officially joined the organization and were organizationally supportive of reproductive justice. Some of my work involved working with congregations to facilitate conversations about the ethics and morality of abortion—and giving people space to process and articulate how their faith informed their understanding of abortion. The most difficult conversations I helped to facilitate were in the UCC churches in Rapid City and Sioux Falls, South Dakota right before a state-wide abortion band referendum.

In addition, MNRCRC worked collaboratively with several reproductive justice organizations on education and advocacy. Many of the staff members I worked with at Planned Parenthood and other sexual health organizations were not personally part of a religious congregation. Sometimes secular organizations invited us to partner with them for events or actions, but they did not always have a sensitivity to different religious groups' practices. For example, the regional Planned Parenthood asked me to help them organize an interfaith breakfast—that they wanted to host on a specific Saturday morning. I had to gently but firmly tell them that Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath, and MNRCRC would not co-sponsor a breakfast at that time.

Justice and social change work sometimes involve organizing, equipping and motivating people who already agree with you about a particular issue. Sometimes it involves going into spaces where people have conflicting ideas and allowing space to reflect more deeply about values and motivations. The work also involves being clear about your own values and advocating for your partners so that as many people as possible can be present in ways that honor what matters most to them.

H) Strengthening Inter- and Intra- Personal Assets

H1. Interact with others in ways that affirm their sense of dignity and help others to do the same.

Last year, as a chaplain resident, during the same span of weeks, I accompanied both a Catholic priest and an angrily anti-religious conspiracy theorist (who lived just a few doors down from each other at a care facility). For different reasons, I was concerned about how I would be received by these men and how I could best be present with them. My interactions with Father J usually involved helping him get his socks on and reading his mail to him. Most of my interactions with D involved holding space while he ranted about the government, the staff at the care facility, and his deceased friend's wife (who was the only person who still visited him).

Both men had a newfound vulnerability as they lost physical abilities. As a non-ordained female chaplain resident, I got to experience embodying “the priesthood of all believers” as I served as Father's J's chaplain. I prayed with Father J, but I spent very little time with him performing religious rituals. I used my power in the situation to be present and to attend to what was needed in the moment, which often meant tending to immediate physical needs. With D, I came to understand that his anger stemmed from a difficult childhood. For most of his life, that

pain had come out sideways and alienated most people in his life. The pain continued to come out (mostly in the form of anger), even as he entered his last weeks of life. After several visits of mostly listening, I asked D if I could say a few “wishes” for him. He had told me that he hated religion, so prayer was off the table. And arguing with a dying conspiracy theorist seemed like a bad idea. I expressed wishes for D and his healing and wellbeing in the best language I could find. He held my gaze and thanked me. My “wishes” did not completely quell his anger, but for a moment I tried to reclaim a sense of dignity for both of us by trying to articulate some basic wishes for his well-being. Affirming others’ sense of dignity means rightsizing my use of power—stepping forward or stepping back, advocating or just being present and not flinching when you witness a moment that could be embarrassing.

Both men died only a few days apart. As I sat bedside with each of them as they entered the labored breathing phase, the social markers that shaped their lives ceased to matter. Father J no longer donned the vestments that he wore every day of his adult life. And D’s racist rants no longer had a voice to speak them aloud. They were both simply human beings making their way back home to the Love that holds each of us and all of us, always.