

# **Marks Portfolio**

An Ordination Paper

Adam Joel Thompson

Licensed Minister

Minnesota Conference

United Church of Christ

2024

## Spiritual Autobiography

My experience with religion and the Christian church as a youth was turbulent and at times traumatic leaving God and spirituality something to be avoided at all costs. As a young adult, however, I began to feel that there was something more, something larger than my egocentric view of the world and I eventually joined the “spiritual but not religious” camp. Here I experienced a deeper sense of meaning and connection to the natural world around me but despite engaging in a multitude of spiritual quests, there lingered an overwhelming emptiness. This emptiness that I experienced longed to be filled and as with so many others I have since known, I filled it in unfulfilling, even damaging ways resulting in emotional harm to the very ones I loved the most.

The culmination of the devastation occurred about 10 years ago when my wife of then, 13 years had quite enough and sent me packing. My 4 children, twin 6-year-old girls, and two boys ages 9 and 12, left reeling in the wake. It is here that my spiritual journey truly begins. Broken beyond belief and stricken with anxiety so intense I was unable to work or eat. To this point in my life, I had never prayed in any meaningful way but here, in this moment, I felt a strong need to offer to God my transgressions and ask for grace and mercy, so I prayed. Upon waking the next morning, I felt strange, the anxiety was no longer. Gone also were the binds of addiction. I was granted a gift, an undeniable miracle to which I credit the catalyst for my transformation. Thanking God for this new life, I came to understand God had been there through it all. Recollection after recollection, the ways God has been involved in my life and the lives of my family proved too numerous to count, in short, “I was blind, but now I see.” John 9:25.

The night of this first prayer, I wholeheartedly surrendered myself to God’s will not fully understanding what may come, and what came into my heart was unexpected, to say the least, “What? Minister? Me?”, I questioned. Chalking this up to some misguided thought, I continued daily life. There it was again, but stronger this time, “You can’t be serious God, me?”. Not wanting to believe God was calling me, even though I prayed often for knowledge of God’s will, I set this aside once again. Short of a booming voice from Heaven, this time it was unmistakable, God was calling me to ministry. Accepting this, I went home and told my wife. Expecting a “You are crazy”, instead she

affirmed my call by telling me she had a powerful feeling earlier that day that God was calling me to ministry. Affirmation after affirmation came as I told my family and friends, even from the non-believers. Years have passed since that first prayer and my faith continues to grow and the call to ministry becomes stronger and more defined.

As I continue to grow in my faith journey, several milestones have been revealed and fulfilled beginning with a service of Baptismal Affirmation. Feeling drawn into service, I joined the Deacon's Board and began participating in and leading the missional activities of Meetinghouse Church helped solidify that God was indeed at work in the community and my life. At the time of my calling to ministry, I knew seminary was a significant step that God was calling me to. This has been a long and trying journey and has challenged me and my family to the core. While the expedition is not yet over, I can see light at the end of the tunnel as this is my final semester with an official graduation taking place in August.

A few years ago, I had been feeling lost as to which direction I was heading in school and ministry. One of my spiritual practices is "prayer hikes" where I hike local trails and talk aloud with God in a conversational manner. I asked, "What are we doing, God? Where are you leading me? I'm right here, show me your will." After the hike, I prayerfully went about my day. The next afternoon, I received a call from Rev. Sheresa Simpson-Rice wondering if I would do some supply preaching. Admittedly, my initial reaction was nope. Recalling my conversation and requests of God, I somewhat reluctantly agreed to three preaching dates in an unfamiliar church in a small rural town.

I feel it is important to note that I had, up until this point, never considered the role as solo parish pastor to be part of my call, rather I fancied some form of mission work since public speaking has been something I avoided at all costs. However, opening myself to God's will has taken me far from my comfort zone, into the unfamiliar world of rural church leadership. Both 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational-UCC in Glencoe and I were called to each other, an unlikely pairing I can only attribute to the Holy Spirit's movement from both sides. From that fateful and faithful first sermon, I have experienced a sense of peace in the pulpit. The same peace I have experienced at the pulpit, calm and

confident, ushered me into a chapter as designated licensed pastor of 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational-UCC in Glencoe, MN.

The position of solo pastor is a constant cycle of spiritual discernment, learning, leading, creating, and so much more. The process of weekly worship preparation has become a spiritual practice, wrestling with theology and scripture in prayerful contemplation I seek guidance from the Holy Spirit. Preaching and leading worship is a deeply spiritual experience that continues to baffle my mind that I am even able to do such a thing, yet at the same time I feel that this is precisely where God has brought me and in that I find great peace. Teaching confirmation and leading bible studies test my understanding of faith and provide new insights into where God is working. Through pastoral care visits, I am blessed with sacred stories of family and community, deepening my appreciation of God, the church, the UCC, and rural life.

Looking back, I can see that the broad and diverse experiences that life has brought, both painful and productive, fearful and faithful, have been no random accident but rather the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring me to this particular place and time. The gifts, talents, and abilities I have acquired, or rather that have been gifted to me, have been given to serve God's people in innovative and faithful ways as the church and the Church reimagine what God is up to in our world.

*I believe in the triune God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, 3 in 1 and 1 in 3.*

*As Creator, God brought the world into being and in God's image brought humankind. God provides us with unwarranted Grace, Mercy, and Love to share with all creation.*

*As Redeemer, Jesus came as the Son of God to bridge the imperfect nature of humankind and God's perfection by sharing our existence. Through His death and resurrection, reconciled our sins and by defeating death gives us eternal life.*

*As Sustainer, the Holy Spirit guides us toward God's will, nudging us ever closer to right relationship with God. The Holy Spirit moves within us in Grace and gives us the courage to stand for just peace. Every honor, glory, and power be unto God. Amen.*

## **Understanding My Call to Authorized Ministry**

I believe that all Christians are ministers in the eyes of God through the sacrament of baptism and as one body in Christ. That said, not all of God's ministers are called to leadership in the Church or church and this is precisely where Ordination enters the equation. While all Christians are covenanted to God and God's Church, there are those who are called into a deeper covenantal relationship to serve as leaders, committing ourselves to presenting God's Word in a multitude of settings. Ordination serves to acknowledge one's calling to ministry, exemplifying one's understanding and discernment between God, oneself, and the community. Ordained ministry is a gift of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Good News of Christ and live out the will of God

Without the Church, Ordination would not be relevant or even necessary. The Church serves as an integral element of Ordination as a calling requires the affirmation of community to be realized, it cannot be done in secret. The Church acts as a witness to the particular gifts one carries, and partners in covenant with the Ordained to discern and develop said gifts and foster new gifts. The Church is a platform for the Ordained to proclaim the Word of God, and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and lead through the Holy Spirit's guidance.

As I mentioned in my Spiritual Autobiography, my call to the vocation of ministry came as no small surprise. Feeling at first that I was not worthy of serving God in ministry, I remembered that God calls the most unlikely persons. Feeling the Holy Spirit leading me, I began accepting small roles of service and leadership. Moving further and further from my comfort zone yet feeling profound peace and joy while doing so. Now in my final year of seminary, the Holy Spirit has led me to a place I never imagined possible, church leadership. Initially called on to provide pulpit supply, I have been the solo pastor of a rural church for 3 years.

At the onset of my call to ministry, the position of pastor of a small rural church had never crossed my mind. I had envisioned for myself missions work in either a local social justice mission agency or possibly a congregational missions director. I will not

rule these roles out as being open to hearing and following the will of God, anything is possible. But as I sit here today, I feel that I am called to 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational-UCC Glencoe as a Licensed Pastor. As someone who has not spent much time experiencing rural life, specifically rural church life, I am continually amazed at the spiritual connection of this community. The ministerial opportunities to lead, learn, experience, and experiment have grown my faith and expanded my understanding of what ministry can be and why I have been called.

I understand my calling is to serve God's Kingdom both inside and outside the walls of the church. As one who has experienced the radical transformative power of God's love firsthand, witnessing to and leading people toward the reconciliation found in Christ feels natural and of paramount importance. My calling is committing myself to lead and be led, in solidarity, with the Triune God, the people of God, the Church Universal, and the local church. Each day serves as a reminder of this commitment in covenant with the aforementioned parties and signifies my commitment within the community.

Ordination in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ is where I feel called. The very origins of the United Church of Christ, as a coming together of differing denominations, reflect the belief in Christ's "one body", deepening rather than dividing the strength of the Christian community. The United Church of Christ's unending commitment to care for the impoverished and oppressed is a testament to its commitment in word and deed to the ministry of Jesus and places Jesus as the sole head of the Church. I am drawn to the horizontal polity found in the United Church of Christ, allowing each setting to set its path while remaining united as one. Lastly, the United Church of Christ walks the walk of Micha 6:8,

*"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.*

*And what does the LORD require of you?*

*To act justly and to love mercy*

*and to walk humbly with your God.*

## **Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practice**

I once thought that to pray one must sit quietly and follow a script of sorts. Thankfully, I realized this was not the case, and anywhere, anytime is a perfect time to connect with God. That said, I do seek out dedicated solitude for prayer but in between, I pray constantly. I pray in the car, the line at the store, and in bed but my favorite place to pray is in nature where I feel a deeper connection to God surrounded by God's uninterrupted creation. Prayer hikes, praying while walking in the woods, free me to engage in open and out loud conversation with God and has become a treasured spiritual practice. Worship preparation and sermon writing have become a deep weekly spiritual practice as well. Through prayer and deep listening, I am led to meaningful work discerning the message to present to the congregation.

As I reflect on God's love, I am overwhelmed by the magnitude of this gift, and I wonder how my love in return can even compare. Simply stated, it cannot, God's love is infinite and supernatural. My love for God stems from the flawed being that I am and is rather finite and worldly. However, reciprocity, at least on the scale of love, has never been part of the equation. Our end of the deal is to love God and to love others. Jesus commands us to both love God and each other. But Jesus goes further, he doesn't just tell us these things but rather shows us how to do these things. Yes, it is up to us to carry out loving God and each other, but we have help. This help is found in the Holy Spirit, ever leading us towards loving God and each other. As I mentioned earlier, we are flawed, we get lost, at least lost to ourselves. By living a life of discipleship to Jesus, we can limit aimlessness, all the while knowing the Holy Spirit will lead us back if we stray. God, through Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit never leaves us.

Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, I have come to believe I am called to Ordained ministry. A personal transformation, gifted by God, encouraged me to proclaim, through word and deed, to discern my calling and seek to lead others to the mystery of God's infinite Grace and Mercy. Community affirmation has solidified my call to serve God's Kingdom. Ongoing discernment within the Church community through

committees, advisors, coursework, and conversation continues to grow my sense of call and strengthens my faith in all aspects of life.

The work of the Holy Spirit is deeply enmeshed in my life, the local church I serve, and the world as a whole. I continually seek guidance, through prayer, on how best to lead and the direction of worship in my local setting. Being receptive to the discernment of the Holy Spirit provides strength to engage in faithful action and extend the invitation to the community. In this way, I am continually growing in my commitment to serve God, learning to deepen my spiritual development and enrich my personal stewardship of myself and God's creation. This is an endeavor that has no summit to reach, but rather it is a boundless journey to where only God is aware of the way.

### **Example**

Arriving at 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational Church-UCC Glencoe provides a specific example of being guided by the Holy Spirit. One day after asking God, what was in store for me and telling God, "I'm right here, show me your will", I received a call to do pulpit supply preaching. Never having preached and having a crippling fear of public speaking, I recalled my request to God and agreed. I learned later that not only did I have to deliver the sermon but the entire service from start to finish, in a church and community I had never been to.

Shaking uncontrollably on the 40-minute drive to Glencoe, I wondered how I was possibly going to do this. I arrived at the church early to survey the scene and found a quiet place to pray, asking for the Holy Spirit present within me. The worship service was starting, and I stepped into the pulpit. I noticed I was not shaking anymore, and a strange calm came over me, a peaceful feeling with a touch of confidence. The service went off without a hitch, the Holy Spirit was most certainly dwelling in me that day. I returned to the Glencoe church to provide pulpit supply several more times, each time with the same calm, peaceful confidence. Even now, serving as their Licensed Pastor, I am overcome each Sunday with the presence of the Holy Spirit.



As I continue to serve this church and community, I seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in my personal relationship with God, as well as, with my relationship with the congregation and the congregation's relationship with the community.

## **Nurturing UCC Identity**

*“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,”* (Ephesians 1:22) As Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, God has appointed Jesus as the sole Head of the Church, and I am not one to argue with God. In quoting Ephesians, chapter 1, verse 22, and not continuing the quote through to verse 23, we are left with a comma. By leaving it in a comma, we embrace that God is still speaking, which is synonymous with UCC identity, and allows us to consider the infinite nature of God, not only as the sole Head of the Church but sole Head of our lives. Therefore, I wholeheartedly acknowledge and believe that Jesus Christ is indeed the sole Head of the Church and my life. With Christ as the Head of the Church, we then become part of the body. Jesus, as the son of God, lives within God, and God within Jesus. Likewise, through Jesus, he dwells in us and we in Him. As followers of Jesus, we are individually part of the one Body of Christ.

Thus far in my ministerial voyage, I have been blessed to take part in several settings of the United Church of Christ. Among the first experiences was with the MN Conference through the application and interview process to become a Member in Discernment requiring a thorough reflection of my calling and faith journey. The MID process, through advisors, MID meetings, and yearly reviews, has deepened my understanding of the theology and polity of the UCC. Expanding outward into the national setting, my service as a Delegate at General Synod 33 exposed me to the breadth and width of the UCC through the engagement of resolutions and the theologically diverse representation found within the UCC. Returning to the MN Conference and the process of licensing with the Subcommittee on Ministry, provided insights into Ordination while discerning my call amongst seasoned ministers and

laypeople. Finally, service as a Licensed Pastor has taken me deep within the local setting, testing and preparing me to serve in Ordination.

I am fascinated by the depth found in the United Church of Christ's history, polity, and theology. The coming together of the Congregational, Christian, Reformed, and Evangelical Churches, in relative unity, is no small feat of grace as it pressed into justice issues in each era, as the hands and feet of God. The covenantal polity and non-hierarchical structure I have a great affinity for in that each setting is autonomous yet remains accountable to all other settings. This gives great freedom of expression while retaining the covenantal integrity of the whole of the UCC. The commitment to strengthening ecumenical and interfaith relationships is a profound asset of the UCC, realizing extravagant welcome is intended for all of God's people. Equally profound is the theology of the still-speaking God. The fact that God is active in our lives through the Holy Spirit gives me great hope.

## **Example**

Sharing in the love of Christ and embracing the oneness of the Body of Christ, gathering with both UCC pastors and congregations, and in ecumenical collaboration has allowed me to nurture the UCC identity. The area that I am serving is blessed with a number of UCC churches, each having their own particular way of worshipping and living in the communities that surround them.

In one capacity, the pastors of 7 area UCC churches gather on a regular basis to share a meal, express our joys and concerns, and collaborate on how we can serve our congregations and communities individually and collectively. Additionally, we gather as congregations to share in worship and fellowship. For example, each Lenten season, 4 of the congregations gather for a mid-week Lenten service by each hosting at least one service and dividing the service so each pastor has a role. Last year we began a new tradition, a mid-summer outdoor picnic service with a shared worship experience, potluck meal, and yard games at the nearby Regional Park. We were delighted and blessed by the beautiful weather and the presence and preaching of ASM Kelly Gallagher.

In an ecumenical capacity, I sit as the president of the local ministerial association consisting of 7 denominations. As the sole pastor from the UCC, I represent the voice of radical inclusion and welcome in a less than inclusive gathering of faith communities. Despite our potential differences, we gather and serve the community by hosting a Free Community Thanksgiving Dinner as well as worshipping together a few times per year at the local long-term facility.

## **Building Transformational Leadership Skills**

Entering into the role of Designated Licensed Pastor at 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational-UCC Glencoe was an exercise in openness to the surprise of the Holy Spirit for myself and the church. For me, it was not even on the radar of possibility and the search and call committee alluded to the same. This role has empowered both me and the church to be faithful to God's call. As I settle into this position and begin to understand the existing dynamic, I have sought to engage this community through the development of bible studies, confirmation, and the introduction to spiritual practices.

The opportunity to reach into the public square has come through print articles in the "Pastor's Corner" of the McLeod County Chronicle newspaper which features local pastors each month. These articles have allowed me to expand God's work beyond the church walls. Additionally, participating in the rotation of pastors at Glen Fields Assisted Living has provided the opportunity to lead worship in an offsite, ecumenical setting. In another setting, co-leading a "parking lot mission trip" to build a tiny home for a homeless individual and in partnership with Settled.org, Kare 11 spotlighted the project in which I was invited to share a few words on camera and later broadcast on the nightly news.

As a former business owner, necessary and appropriate administrative tasks are all too familiar. Utilizing the skills learned in the secular world has helped me to efficiently adapt to similar tasks within the role of church leadership. Collaborating with office staff, church council, and other committees are commonplace as is working

independently to provide reports, website administration, and other administrative tasks are prayerfully undertaken.

Working in Glencoe and living close to Minneapolis is a lesson in interculturality I experience each time I make the commute. I realized early on that I couldn't waltz in with guns a-blazing, expecting everyone to embrace my theologically and politically liberal ways. It has been a collaborative effort of both our parts to work together with intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Through the completion of the Intercultural Development Inventory or IDI, I have discerned that my orientation is towards minimization. In minimization, I rely heavily upon finding commonality amongst diversity which is both an asset and a detriment in leadership. As a strength, seeking a common bond has the potential for cohesion and connection, conversely, looking for commonality can diminish the value of the non-dominant culture. Understanding this orientation and my relationship with it provides me with a reference on how to improve upon my intercultural awareness.

Learning is a never-ending endeavor, whether structured education or a lesson learned from a 5-year-old, I embrace the process of leadership development. Of my top 5 Strengths Finder themes, developer and includer present as #1 and #2. These themes come through in revising or creating something new and empowering those that typically would not get involved in the implementation. Additionally, I seek out ways to expand my leadership potential. Through programs such as the Damascus Project, I have been able to engage with professionals and peers on several subjects both as an individual and with members of the church community.

## **Example**

Upon my arrival at First Congregational, it was glaringly apparent that the formal leadership structure was designed for ages past and did not reflect the current state of the church. Consisting of 14 committees and boards and requiring 77 people to fill the positions, the structure was unrealistic and a hindrance to the mission of the church. While it was readily apparent a change was needed, the lay leadership was unsure what to do.

Crafting a prototype of a team-based structure which reduced the 14 committees/boards to 4 Teams, and trimming the needed lay leadership to 18, the Church Council was intrigued. Over the summer of 2023, I led the newly formed Leadership Revisioning Team towards an entirely new leadership structure and constitution that re-focuses and empowers the congregation to operate more openly and communally that draws on the current reality of the church. The new constitution was voted into use at the last annual meeting.

## **Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions**

The process of research, preparation, and writing of sermons on a weekly basis expands my knowledge and understanding of the sacred stories of God. This knowledge and understanding are then displayed through preaching. It is always my intention to provide an accurate and truthful account based on the assigned lectionary texts each week. Additionally, the research, preparation, and leading of weekly bible studies further my knowledge base and provide a testing ground for said knowledge. Engaging in biblical study within the community challenges my knowledge base as participants come with preconceived understandings, as they do in worship, however in worship it is frowned upon to stand up and protest. In the intimate and conversational setting of bible study, challenging both my understanding is encouraged and often I am enriched with new perspectives.

As a solo pastor preaching is a weekly occurrence and has become a spiritual practice in itself. With no other staff within the church, worship service leadership rests solely on me. From the initial welcome and church announcements, litany, and prayers, other than scripture readers, I am responsible for preparing and delivering the day's message. The process of preparation I find to be a sacred time beginning with prayerfully engaging the assigned text. Leaning deeper, I engage in an exegetical analysis to expand my understanding of the context and meaning representative of our biblical ancestors. Throughout the process, I open myself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discern how best to convey the message in an applicable and relatable manner,

often utilizing lived experience in my preaching to ground the message in personal terms.

Seminary classes on the subjects of Old and New Testament, Christian History, and biblical Hebrew have significantly deepened my understanding of the history of the Christian Church and life throughout biblical times. I find this subject matter fascinating and frequently enjoy watching related documentary films, reading articles and journals, and studying biblical timelines. Sharing this history, whether through individual or group conversation or through preaching, reflecting on the lived experiences of the people, or imagining together the places represented in the Bible and beyond brings these sacred stories to life.

Serving a congregation with only a few families and the vast majority of members on the brink of aging out presents an intergenerational challenge but also creates unique opportunities to engage faith across generational lines. The very act of preaching serves as a chance to nurture faith in the various age groups mixed within the pews. Crafting a thought-provoking, inspirational message that the older crowd appreciates with enough elements to keep the attention of the younger ones presents a weekly challenge, yet is one that I enjoy

## **Example**

Reflecting on the multiple times I provided pulpit supply, I realize that, while this is important work, it really was pretty simple. None of the other aspects of pastoral responsibility applied, I preached, and I left, done. This is not the case in a solo pastorate, and as a first-call licensed pastor, everything was new and everything was my responsibility, including administering the sacraments.

From day one, I understood the importance of what I was there to do in the church and was comfortable leading worship but as I approached the communion table, the weight of it all hit me. I had partaken of communion countless times, even served the elements as a Deacon, but this was my first time on this side of the table. Taking a few moments of silent prayer, the peace I have experienced on other occasions washed

over me and I knew I was in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Bread was broken and wine was poured, and a new awareness of the Body and Blood of Christ was discerned.

Each month I cherish this sacred time with this small but faithful body of believers with new eyes to see and new ears to hear. Engaging the Sacrament of Holy Communion has been a transformation experience and I have found the power of an open table to be transformational to others as well, particularly those who have come from traditions that have made communion exclusive.

## **Caring for All Creation**

Two of my five Strengths Finder themes are includer and connectedness. Both themes reflect upon my ability and inclination to care for others and God's creation as a whole. As an includer, my natural tendency is to find the good in people and situations and to help others see the good in themselves or the circumstances. Maybe it is because I was/am a bit of a maverick myself that I am drawn to and empathize with people on the margins. The theme of connectedness has been with me since I was a child, I have always carried a sense that all things are connected. This connection is felt deepest in the natural world and the way humankind interacts with God's creation.

Mental health, more poignantly, mental illness has had an impact in the lives of my family and friends and the methods and value of managing mental health and wellness have been of utmost importance. Through my journey I have developed an acute awareness and empathy for the state of others' mental health and wellbeing and for the compassionate care of others as well as myself.

Proper mental health and wellbeing are directly related to actively practicing self-care and maintaining a life balance. Recognizing that proper mental health and wellbeing is a lifelong endeavor and a key element in ministry in any setting, I am committed to expanding my understanding and execution of self-care as it is only possible to care for others if I am whole first. Meditation, prayer, and a healthy dose of play in all settings help me to effectively care for myself. As a father of four, a full-time seminarian, and a licensed pastor, life balance can be a challenging endeavor. When

one area takes the dominant role, the others suffer. I have found that a regimented, yet flexible schedule allows for a relatively equal distribution of time and permits me to be fully present for the given activity. Extra emphasis needs to be placed on flexibility as even the best-laid plans are subject to spontaneous change.

The news provides a daily reminder of just how much God's creation is in pain. Shootings, wars, illness, natural and manmade disasters, and an endless array of other devastating and depressing happenings globally and out our front doors, hope can be hard to find, and healing is a desperate need in our world. This condition, however, is not a new thing, and the need for hope and healing is as old as humanity itself. Thankfully, we have a remarkable resource in which to find such things, the Bible. Dwelling in and sharing the Word, both in the Old and New Testament, directs us to the source of all hope and healing, God. I have found great hope and healing personally in Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

The greatest resource the Church has, besides Godself, is the people. The inherent value of God's people, from the tiniest baby to the oldest member, is something to be cherished and celebrated. Sadly, it is often the greatest giver or selfless volunteer that receives recognition, and I am continually striving to remedy this imbalance through my ministry by outward thanksgiving to all within the congregation even if it is for simply showing up on Sunday.

## **Example**

The topic of mental health has a different feeling in a rural area, it seems to carry an even greater stigma than in urban and suburban communities. The subject of suicide is even more hush hush despite middle age white males, farmer in particular, being among the most susceptible.

Knowing this, I have brought in as a ministry partner, 2B Continued who is a local Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Awareness non-profit. Not only have I attended a number of their training courses, but they were also our mission beneficiary for our



annual free outdoor music festival “Spring Fling” where they presented, and we recently offered a training at our church provided by them for the community at no cost.

Bringing awareness, reducing the barriers, and dismantling the stigma behind mental illness and suicide is a much-needed service for all areas but I feel especially for rural communities. Participating in and supporting organizations that serve the often-marginalized individuals and families experiencing mental illness and concerns or loss from suicide is one of the ways we can care for creation.

## **Participating in Theological Praxis**

The first three points outlined in this Mark are intentionally interrelated in my sense of my own ministry. Beginning with worship, bible study, and confirmation preparation by engaging the materials through theological reflection is of paramount importance to my ministerial identity and continued development. In this initial theological reflection, existing theological perspectives are complemented by utilizing Biblical commentaries, articles from reputable theologians, and scholarly journals to craft the respective content. The process effectively expands upon my theological understanding which helps to shape my ministerial identity. The content previously mentioned is in turn integrated into the community through my leadership in, but not limited to, worship, bible studies, and confirmation.

In presentation and conversation, in and outside of the church walls, I aim to represent a clear and consistent theology realizing not only do I represent myself, but the church, the Church, and the United Church of Christ. It is in this covenantal relationship that we all belong to and serve God in love and respect for all of God’s creation. As a pastor, serving God inspires me to proclaim Jesus as the sole head of the Church and share His teaching and message. This also encourages me to lead by and be led by the Holy Spirit, which empowers others to expand the Kingdom of God by allowing the Holy Spirit to move freely within their hearts.

Early in my faith journey, the Holy Spirit led me to a program serving families who were experiencing homelessness. Once again, I did not know what to expect, but I was

there to serve God in whatever way God chose. The program was and is Families Moving Forward, a service of Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative which provides rotating shelter and nourishment in a variety of congregations buildings. I served as the “congregational coordinator” for our church for 4 years which instilled in me a great appreciation for interfaith partnerships as the program would not be possible through any singular religion's efforts.

The process of entering into ministry can be overwhelming and frankly, intimidating. The covenantal prominence of the United Church of Christ's Ministerial Code is an inspirational and instructional guide to a life well lived in service to God. The code encompasses not only an overview of covenanted relationships to God, self, family, the UCC, and the ministry setting but provides a tangible representation of ways in which to engage in each relationship. Looking through the list in each covenant, the practical nature is encouraging and while I cannot check all of the boxes, I am well on my way and at the same time cognizant that this is not an all-inclusive list.

## **Example**

The process and work of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) was a truly formational experience. The core message I dwelt upon is from Matthew 22:37-39, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (NIV) With these two, interrelated and inseparable tenets not only informing but reinforcing my ministry and the call on my life deepened the encounter regardless of who they are and what they believe and to come alongside them in love, acceptance, and non-judgement. Also, acknowledging that I have much more to learn and in turn carry a curiosity of how others understand theology and how their views and experiences have shaped them.

During my time at HCMC, I met with a wide and diverse population from injured children and their parents to dying parents and their children, psych to ER patients and everyone in between. The CPE cohort itself was a diverse population and was an

opportunity to engage in relationships, cultures, and practices other than my own. My approach in all situations was to walk alongside patients and family, to listen to their needs, and to meet those needs whether it was a prayer, holding a hand, sitting silently with them, or telling them the hard truth. Moments of spontaneous and unscheduled spiritual care such as an elevator prayer, multiple impromptu visits with patients and staff, and building and continuing a supportive relationship.

## **Working Together for Justice and Mercy**

My initial understanding of my call to ministry, or so I thought, was to work in missions at a non-profit organization or as a mission director of a church, not a solo pastor of a small rural church. That said, I will not rule out anything as I am still very early in my ministerial journey and God's ways are not my ways. I have, however, been blessed with several opportunities to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus alongside a faithful community.

As I mentioned in a previous Mark, serving as the congregational coordinator for Families Moving Forward allowed me to exhibit the radical welcome and hospitality of God. This was presented to the families in the program as well as the 100 plus volunteers required to host the families. Further work with Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative, program facilitator for FMF, and congregations supporting and advocating for policy change local, state, and federal housing injustice has deepened my commitment to the homeless crisis.

Being a white, middle-aged male from an affluent and predominantly white suburb carries with it the inherent privilege common to this setting. Being aware of this characteristic and the intrinsic effect this place brings to daily interactions in ministry and life, in general, is the first step in overcoming the ingrained bias within. Both the church I grew up in and the church I serve suffer from a similar bias founded in the congregation's demographic makeup. Intentionality in the exploration of both explicit and implicit biases creates space to understand the impacts these biases have on the effectiveness of my ability to minister to both the dominant and non-dominant cultures.

Initially, serving in an unfamiliar rural setting brought with it mild culture shock. This required a crash course in the community context to understand and eventually appreciate how and why things were done the way they were. Coming in with a liberal theological and political stance to a relatively conservative community, which in the church's eye considered themselves quite liberal was and remains a challenge. Optimism for great and swift change was met with the realization that navigating even the smallest shift would require patience, preparation, and persistence.

Anit-Racism classes I have learned of the inherent biases I carry that come with my particular societal and contextual upbringing. Becoming aware of these biases and learning ways to confront and change them, I feel I am better equipped to effectively minister to a more diverse population. My experience in CPE proved evident that, while it is a continual process, progress has and continues to be made. Power and Boundary trainings have also served to make me more aware of who I am and how I can be a more just and equitable person and pastor.

## **Example**

I entered into the call at First Congregation took place shortly after the “soft” end of the pandemic. The church had, like most others, halted any form of programming and for the church leadership, a high priority was on the youth. In particular interest was the long-postponed Mission Trip. Given that it was already mid-June and far too late to arrange a trip with an organization, I reached out to a few people.

In a matter of days, I had organized a weekend service trip to St. Paul to work with two local non-profits, Settled and Walking with a Purpose with whom I had previously gotten to know and work with through Meetinghouse Church. While these two organizations provide distinctly different services, they both are called to serve the unhoused. Settled, in conjunction with local churches, builds tiny homes and then locates churches to house a collective of the houses, or Sacred Settlements. Walking with a Purpose on the other hand is involved directly with the unhoused by providing a mobile store via a large van.

With 4 kids and 1 volunteer chaperone we set off to work with Settled and Walking with a Purpose. From gathering and organizing supplies for the van to visiting with unhoused individuals, we served Walking with a Purpose for a day. We then build a large ramp for the up-and-coming Sacred Settlement. On our way back to Glencoe, we stopped at Georged Floyd Square to pay respects and experience the realities present in what seemed to them a foreign land. In three days, 4 rural youth were notably transformed, and barriers were coming down.

## **Strengthening Inter- and Intra- Personal Assets**

Living most of my life on my terms proved over and over again to be a hard and destructive existence. However, I do not condemn any part of it as without the past, this present would not have been possible nor would a hopeful future. Thankfully, through a rock-bottom experience, God came to be the guiding light for all aspects of my life. When I reflect on my past or find difficulty with the present, I dwell deeply in the words of James 1:2-4, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” However, I am not so sure any of us get to the point of “mature and complete, not lacking anything”, so I prefer to take the liberty to replace this with “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may testify to the glory of God.”

In reflecting on who I am in my covenantal relationships with God and the Church, I see myself as a work in progress. I question, do I represent myself with integrity, not just as I view myself in these covenants, but across the full spectrum of God’s creation? While I would like to answer with a unanimous “yes”, I think of times I fall short. However, in acknowledging these shortcomings the opportunity to improve arises which gives me permission to forgive myself and try again. I feel it is important to approach these covenantal relationships in this fashion as one cannot be in covenant with God and exclude God’s creation. Likewise, being in covenant with the Church requires serving Christ and in turn His people.

It is interesting to reflect on one's own moral character and personal integrity. To a large extent, these qualities cannot be discerned by personal reflection but rather insist on community to arrive at the conclusion. If left to one's own devices, the tendency is to accentuate the positive attributes and understate the lesser elements. Through community, traits can be affirmed, and it is through the process of community discernment that I have been deemed as having a strong moral character as well as deep personal integrity. For example, friends have commented positively on my honesty, trustworthiness, and reliability. Congregants remark on my self-awareness, respect, and stability. I have found that those with higher levels of morality and integrity tend to have difficulty "tooting their own horn" where those with a lesser degree of morality and integrity blast their horn for all to hear.

Regarding respecting the dignity of all God's people and understanding and ministering to a full human life span, I feel these play off each other as it is not fully possible to understand and subsequently minister without first respecting one's dignity. To respect the dignity of another is a simple task that boils down to a single word, lovingkindness. Lovingkindness opens the heart to another's story, giving room to the whole of the person. Leading with lovingkindness moves naturally to dignified respect and understanding, from there ministering becomes organic.

## **Example**

The experience of seminary has for the past four years been an exercise in "Strengthening Inner and Intra Personal Assets" The very process of attending seminary full time, working almost full time, and the always on duties of being a father of 4 and a loving husband has been an exercise in creating and maintaining boundaries on all fronts, not to mention allowing for self-care. While I will say that I feel that I have managed this all successfully, it has not been easy for me or my family, but it has demanded that I stay true to myself and to my calling.

The rigorous and often intense load has created difficult situations in all the relationships in my life, however by facing them with integrity, patience, and communication, the challenges served to strengthen my bond with God, my family, and

the church. The challenges also help me to understand myself and what I need to be able to wholeheartedly show up for others.

Attending a Lutheran seminary provided not only a deeper appreciation for the UCC, but it also afforded me the opportunity to learn from and study with, well Lutherans, but also the diverse student body that attends Luther. West Africans and Pentecostals, elderly and LGBTQIA students, non-denominational and those fresh out of undergrad. Luther Seminary, surprisingly to me, offered an education well beyond what I imagined it to be and expanded my understanding of theology, of course, but also my relationship with God and God's people.