

group of churches that did not value that model. The precedent set in the constitution of the United Church of Christ wisely avoids an authoritarian mandate that would quell the potentialities of this tension. In paragraphs 17-19, the autonomy of the local church is affirmed and upheld in a paragraph beset on both sides by statements establishing a responsibility to the well being of fellow churches and suggesting that "Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in highest regard by every Local Church." (P. 19). The type of relationship between the Local Church and the wider settings of the church is envisioned here in a way that leans heavily toward the preservation of a congregational polity while also making clear the idea that the local church does not exist as a self-contained unit.

From the perspective of the congregations facing the prospect of a new merger in the years leading up to 1957, one can understand the fear that a yet unrealized new group of congregations might set in motion new policies that degrade the proposed stability of the present. Donald Freeman frames the concept of autonomy in relationship to covenant in his essay "Autonomy In A Covenant Polity," noting that congregational autonomy is meant to set the stage for engagement in commitments that extend beyond the singular. In fact, such commitments and responsibilities, Freeman notes, are only pursued fully from a place of autonomy: "Only such a sense of self and other can allow for both interpenetration and respect of boundaries at the same time." Thus, the model for the UCC contains an autonomy that must coexist with a sense of responsibility that extends outside of the Local Church itself.

Freeman also discusses limits on autonomy; a healthy reminder that the concept is in place equally as both a protection and a call to mutuality and sacrifice. The autonomy of the lo-



cal church is extended to a vast network of coexisting units, which necessitates a respect for the equal authority of all congregations, even when that means the respect of discord or disagreement. This dynamic in the wider setting of the denomination looks similar to the situation in meetings of single congregations and their voting members in that it often seems that the flattening of authority can sometimes mean that one voice has overly significant sway at any given moment. Freeman's example from General Synod 19 shows this to be true, highlighting the potential volatility that can manifest as the product of basic autonomy. Ultimately, trust becomes paramount; trust both between congregations and trust that "...the Holy Spirit, or the Head of the Church, is truly present to guide whenever and wherever people of faith gather in the name and service of Christ."

In bringing the concept of covenant to the fore of a discussion on congregational autonomy, Reuben Sheares II attempts to clear up what he views as some common confusions regarding UCC polity. First, he argues that to simply label UCC polity as congregational is inadequate. Next, he points out that a congregational structure is often reduced in scope despite the fact that it applies to a wide array of churches, often conflating settings in which the local church is the *only* unit with those in which it is merely the *basic* unit- an important distinction that "...has to do with the integrity and existence of the other units of church life and their own legitimacy."<sup>12</sup> Thus, it seems that a simple congregational labeling is all at once too much as well as not enough.

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<sup>12</sup> Sheares II, Reuben A. "A Covenantal Polity." *Theology and Identity: Traditions, movements, and polity in the United Church of Christ*. D. L. Johnson & C. Hambrick-Stowe (Eds.), United Church Press, 1990, p. 69.



Sheares also cautions about what may be seen as an over-emphasis on autonomy, pointing to an important difference between *freedom from* and *freedom for*.<sup>13</sup> He also points out that the helpfulness of looking to our predecessor bodies to make sense of our present polity fades over time as an increasing number of our members have no direct recollection of those structures in the first place. Thus, in search of an “apt metaphor”<sup>14</sup> to classify UCC polity, Sheares cites the work of Louis Gunneman, and opts for the description of a “covenanted relationship of autonomous units of church life.”<sup>15</sup> This indeed provides a more complete description than the reductions to more traditional polities. It also blends the concepts of autonomy and covenant nicely, pointing to the dynamic that begins with the freedom of the local church that bounds itself in entering into relationship with a wider network of congregations. Of course, autonomy is a prerequisite of such self-limitation, and as such it remains evident so long as UCC churches continue to interact in support and fellowship with one another.

### **Authorization For Ministry**

One of my greatest hesitations in pursuing ministry at all comes from an underlying assumption that most people ascribe an automatic sense of fortitude and respect upon anyone who can get "Reverend" placed before their name. Still, the stereotypes of what an ordained minister is come with the territory of the office, and I do not wish to let them overpower my sense of call. I have always had a skeptical relationship with both religion and authority, and so I experience some tension and some irony in the fact that I would pursue ordained ministry at all. My inter-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 69

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 71

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 72



ests have led me to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies as well as a seminary education. I care deeply about the church and the Christian tradition, and so I have pursued those concerns vocationally and professionally. Ordained ministry, then, feels like a logical next step. It also feels like a call from God. I think that there is room for both perspectives.

The spectrum of views of ordained ministry is framed well in the UCC by the concepts of *empowerment* and *embodiment*. Barbara Brown Zikmund teases out these concepts in a way that sustains what she sees as a helpful tension between the two in the UCC. These concepts are traced with considerable accuracy to the two major theological and structural traditions that merged to form the UCC. The major difference between the two is the difference in how one would answer the question of which is primarily necessary for the true church to be present- the pastor or the congregation?

The empowerment model is the idea that ordinary church members become ordained as leaders. "Logically, this understanding of ministry always relates ordained status to function."<sup>16</sup> I lean heavily toward this view of ordination, especially insofar as it rejects an emphasis on the "nature of the person"<sup>17</sup> being ordained, which I see as an outright statement of inherent superiority. Zikmund points out that the risks of the empowerment model include a lowered sacramental emphasis as well as a decreased notion "...that a church vocation demands any special calling from God."<sup>18</sup> The use of the word *special* in that criticism accurately illustrates my frustrations

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<sup>16</sup> Brown Zikmund, Barbara. "Empowerment And Embodiment: Understandings Of Ministry In The United Church of Christ." *Theology and Identity: Traditions, movements, and polity in the United Church of Christ*. D. L. Johnson & C. Hambrick-Stowe (Eds.), United Church Press, 1990, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 83

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 84



with the nature of the ordained office. I certainly do not wish to diminish the idea of being called by God to ordained ministry. I am, however, pleased to let slip away the idea that such a calling is any more *special* than that of any other member of the priesthood of all believers. The vocation of ordained ministry is necessary and important, and it does serve a distinct purpose for the wellbeing of the church as well as that of the wider community. However, any notion that the call to ordained ministry is qualitatively unique would suggest that ordained ministers are somehow of a higher ontological nature than the teachers, mechanics, and nurses in their midst; and that is notion worth diminishing.

Embodiment suggests that gifted leaders become ordained leaders. I am sympathetic to this view of ministry insofar as it sees ordaining people as an exercise in bringing forth the gifts and skills of certain individuals. Where I depart is in the suggestion that such gifts and skills were acquired because of some underlying or inherent increased holiness in the ordinate. Zikmund describes this view as one that "...insists that there is a unique quality to Christian ministry which is more than professional competence or entrusted faithfulness."<sup>19</sup> I agree with that statement insofar as it recognizes that the gifts that lend themselves to Christian ministry are not of a higher order than those that lend themselves to any other vocation, and also admits that those same gifts can also be employed elsewhere in faithful and effective ways.

In Clyde Steckel's essay *Ordination: "Biblical Foundations" and "Traditions,"* he mentions that even after the Reformers did away with a sacramental view of ordination, they "...continued to appoint pastors or ministers, to specify their personal, confessional and educational

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 85



qualifications, and to install them liturgically with the laying on of hands and prayer.”<sup>20</sup> In discerning the call to ordination, I have ruminated on the idea of being distinguished amongst a community of faith, and while I remain uncomfortable with the idea of being set apart for leadership in any way that suggests me to be closer to God or more worthy of anyone’s respect, I do come back to the idea that I am confident in my “personal, confessional and educational qualifications.” I am also comfortable with the idea that taking on the call to put these qualifications to work calls for a liturgical moment of support and encouragement from vocational colleagues as well as my faith community. Steckel here points to a historical balance between empowerment and embodiment that I hope to find in my ministry, recognizing the qualities that make me suited for the role while discouraging any notions of my being any closer to God than the next person.

Part of having discomfort in taking on any measure of power and influence lies in the human tendency to wield that power and influence for one’s own advantage. Resisting the urge to do so is a matter of self awareness and support. One must keep a sober awareness of the perceptions of a minister, and be sensitive and understanding to that. One must also not go about the task alone, and seek the support of colleagues and friends alike in establishing some checks and balances. In my work as a chaplain, I try always to be clear with those under my care about where my expertise begins and ends. When people ask my opinion on matters of faith or theology, I try my best to present a sort of menu of options and explain various possible views on a given subject, rather than simply transferring my own opinions onto others. My hope is always to simply facilitate and support people’s journeys of faith. I think that my personal, confessional,

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<sup>20</sup> Steckel, Clyde J. “Ordination: Biblical Foundations and Traditions.” *The Living Theological Heritage Of The United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Vol. 7. Trost, F. R., & Brown Zikmund, B. (Eds.), The Pilgrim Press, 2005, p. 247.



and educational qualities make me an effective resource in that regard; and I am happy to be responsible to any community of believers who might wish to call those qualities forward in order to bolster their spiritual journey.

### **My Journey of Faith**

Among the descriptors of Evangelical, Liberal, and Progressive, I identify to varying extents with each. First among them (at least in terms of chronology) would be the identity of an Evangelical. While the term is broad and somewhat elusive, my experience with it is as an identifier of a Protestant who is generally conservative on issues both political and theological, and values above all else the saving nature of a personal relationship with Christ, without which a person would be unable to spend eternity in heaven. Some common extenuations of such an identity usually include a rigid interpretation of the Bible, bordering on fundamentalism, and a belief in the inerrancy of scripture.

Another important layer of the Evangelical identity is its sprawling sub-culture. Slews of music, movies, and books that may be completely unfamiliar outside of the Evangelical universe were important parts of my life and journey. As someone who has, in many ways, had an exit from Evangelicalism, I still consider this to be a part of my identity mostly because I view it as a cultural heritage that cannot (and ought not) be easily shed. I may no longer be an Evangelical in belief or practice, but I can still speak the language and identify with other Evangelicals in ways that people outside of that world may not be able to understand. I began life as a Christian under the Evangelical umbrella, and received my Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Evangelical institutions. Wherever my spiritual journey takes me in the future, it would be impossible not to consider that label to be an important part of my identity.



In my experience with the Evangelical world, terms like ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ are used more than anything as insults. This partly explains that an ideological shift in that direction from a more conservative worldview can be a difficult road to travel. When I began my college education, I considered myself a staunch conservative. However, not long into my academic career, having begun to investigate and study scripture independently for the first time, I saw my opinions about nearly everything begin to change. This process is ongoing, suffice it to say that I am now a member of a church that would be categorized as being on the liberal/progressive side of the spectrum, and my beliefs and identity have shifted heavily in that direction as well. That journey has involved attempting to understand both sides of a discussion, and making every effort not only to get to know “the other,” but striving to see one’s self as an “other.” This has meant a view of scripture that maintains that God is still speaking, and that when one lets go of unnecessary commitments to the idolization of the Bible, one can begin to experience it as truly living and active. I enjoy being where I am today, as I feel that I have the opportunity to access the different compartments of my identity depending on my surroundings. Thus, while I identify in the present as a Progressive Christian, I have a strong Evangelical background that will always affect my journey.

I know that my journey into Progressive Christianity out of a more conservative background is not unique, particularly amongst my UCC brothers and sisters. In terms of UCC theological perspectives, I think that my current identity fits well. However, what is more important to me is the way in which this denomination commits to making space for people to question and explore rather than to conclude. I am of the opinion that theological perspectives different than my own should first be met with a sense of fascination and interest, and that being able to under-



stand the perspective of another is a requirement of relating, dialoguing, and potentially disagreeing in a healthy manner.

The great challenge in all of that is learning to coexist with those whose faith and beliefs look different than one's own. In most churches, I feel that such a lack of uniformity is seen as disruptive and potentially destructive. However, in those situations, I feel that my role as a minister would be to try to help people understand one another's opinions, and perhaps a little bit about how those opinions were formed. Overall, I would encourage my congregants to minimize their non-negotiables, especially when it comes to theology, as this ensures that we are not closing ourselves off to the idea that God can always speak to us in new ways. Even when somebody expresses a disagreement with something that the leadership of the church believes, I think that the task is to be okay with the tension that exists when we affirm our own values while also affirming the right of someone close to us to hold a dissenting view. I go to church with people who think quite differently than myself on a number of things, but this certainly does not mean that we do not share the bond of Christian kinship, and so long as we are committed to that kinship, I think that our disagreements will serve simply as interesting bases for conversation rather than as potential destroyers of community.

Ultimately, the room that has been made for such diverse perspectives and experiences is a fundamental drawing point toward the United Church of Christ in my journey as both a congregant and an ordained minister. The church in the Western world is changing, and expressions of faith that appeal to younger generations are looking increasingly different than traditional models of doing church. I hope to be attuned and open to these expressions. I hope to be ready to listen to voices of change. I hope to be willing to listen to the voices of the marginalized. I



hope to leave room for the entertainment of doubt and the true freedom of expression within the journey of faith. I hope to preserve the Christian tradition in a way that takes risks in seeking to see the kingdom of God inform the way in which our world is ordered; and I feel that, given what I have learned about its history and polity, the United Church of Christ is a denomination that makes room for all of those commitments.

### **Theological Statements**

Having provided my take on some of the fundamental characteristics of the UCC, and having said a little about my own background and journey, it seems appropriate to try my hand at stating some personal beliefs regarding God, revelation, creation, and humankind. I hope this can serve to demonstrate my own journey of faith as well as the influence of the UCC in shaping my understanding of some fundamental aspects of Christian faith. Rather than these statements serving as boundaries, I would hope they provide starting points for conversation. Such statements are meant to help folks revisit their own positions and think critically about what they think and why they think it. The statements are framed in the first person plural as though written for a community, bearing in mind that things like this are best constructed in that context:

*As followers of Jesus Christ, we have faith in one God; originating force behind the universe; self-disclosed in history as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. God is sovereign over all the universe, but self-limited in entering into relationship with humankind, desiring all of humanity to respond to the mystery of existence with love and devotion both to God and to one another. God is self-revealed both generally throughout the universe and specially through Holy Scripture. The divine spark is evident throughout the universe in the human experience of the sublime.*



*In Holy Scripture, God is self-revealed through the stories, writings, and histories that portray foundational truths regarding God's relationship to creation and to humankind.*

*We believe God to be sovereign over all creation, yet choosing to endow humanity with free will. Thus, God's hopes for the fate of humanity exist in tension and paradox with human action. God hopes toward a future in which humanity offers its unequivocal worship, love and devotion; but said future is not brought about by manipulating the human will. We believe that every human being is created by God, and made ideally to be in community with that God and with fellow humans. The human will is free, with inclinations towards and capacity for both good and evil. Human existence is challenged with idea of sin and evil lurking at the door that we must do our utmost to master and control.*

*We believe Jesus to be the Christ, a manifestation of God in the form of human flesh, existing somehow as both fully divine and fully human, imbued with the capabilities and potentialities of God the Creator and also the limits and conditions of a mortal being. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are an extension of solidarity and grace from God; an affirmation that God's grace and presence are available to all despite the pervasive and continuing existence of sin and death.*

While I consider these statements to be foundational elements of my faith, I hope that I have made it clear that I do not hold to them with a closed fist. In keeping with the tradition of the UCC, they exist for me as invitations to explore rather than hurdles to clear. They are starting points, and I hope they lend themselves to a multitude of interpretative pathways. Any person's disagreement with some or all of what they contain would also simply serve as a potential starting point for a conversation. While nailing down some foundational theology ought to be



included in the life of any who wish to take up the tradition of Christianity, I personally would be more concerned with a person's willingness to try and exhibit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We can and we should take the time to argue over the doctrinal specifics of what we do, but our foremost concern should be for the fruit we bear as people, regardless of our beliefs about the metaphysical and the divine. I am glad to have the Christian faith be the backdrop against which I try to process the world around me, but I understand and I celebrate the fact that other people have other lenses and other systems for making meaning, and I am always happy to be enriched by those perspectives. For those who do choose the Christian tradition, whether by some experience of conversion or a mere happy accident of birth and upbringing, I look forward to being someone who can help facilitate that journey, and I look forward to doing so as a part of the United Church of Christ.