

From the Sidelines to Advocacy

A Path to Ordained Ministry

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Background

From the moment I heard about Joseph's story, it caught my attention. He is one of my favorite characters in the Bible because his story speaks about enduring marginalization and developing resilience. His story became even more significant as I expanded a better understanding of my call to ordained ministry.

I was born and raised in deep South Texas, south of San Antonio and Corpus Christi. I am a multi-generational Chicano¹ and Tejano². By Biblical accounts, Joseph was Jewish and a heterosexual male, which is a significant point where we differ. In being betrayed by his brothers, Joseph and I come to similarities as I felt betrayed by my birth-family when they lost custody of me. Joseph experienced various disruptions and dislocations in his life. I experienced dislocation by being removed from my birth-family through foster care to my adoptive family. He didn't give up his faith or devotion to God as he learned new customs and practices that were part of his new home. I can imagine that for Joseph, the church held up in his heart, mind, and spirit as a form of resistance and endurance. He held community with God through his faith and prayer. I may have an inkling of how he may have felt forced into new customs. I, too, have lived a similar story of learning new traditions.

While I did not enter slavery, I did feel betrayed by my birth-family for not fighting enough to keep me part of the family. I was hurt for so long, but my parents' persistence in loving me eventually mended some of that hurt. I cannot say that I felt quickly embraced by my extended adoptive relatives. I was unsure how I would be treated, much like Joseph may have felt in a foreign land. My experience differs from Joseph's starting with his faith tradition, sexuality and lack of being in community with others. Another aspect of our differences is that

¹ A Mexican American.

² A male born and raised in Texas.

my faith gradually grew after I got adopted. My faith began with assistance from my birth-great-grandmother, who at bedtime prayers would hold up a statue of St. Martin de Porres to the light as it would glow in the dark. Not realizing who God was or what it meant to pray at such a young age, I felt safe.

After the foster home placement, I continued to seek that sense of safety and connection through prayer and security. I gravitated to a small sacred community of prayer and biblical studies with my foster mother. I was yet to realize the pattern of strong women that would develop for my life. After my adoption, I found another strong woman in my adopted mother who served as a catechism teacher. My mother worked a full-time job outside of taking care of her family. She would get up early, go to work, come home, prepare dinner, and manage to check our homework. By my accounts, both parents had an equal share in decision-making as they always placed a united front. It is not to say they never had disagreements.

One significant contrast that I saw in my mother is that she never joined my father and me when he took me to pro-life gatherings. I never questioned it as my mother was an independent person. However, I came to the realization when she once told me, "You a man have no business telling a woman what to do with her life or body." As my adopted father goes, he is a strong man who was a eucharistic minister and a Knights of Columbus member. Dad also worked a full-time job, came home to do chores except for mowing the lawn, which was a family activity, and managed to check our homework as well. Both of them demonstrated their strong faith in God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They also had a love and adoration for Mary as the Mother of Jesus. Their passion, faith, and teachings as they worked as partners would lead me to see and embrace an inclusive God as I joined the United Church of Christ.

As a pre-teen and teen, I began to live out my faith in the Roman Catholic Church by

becoming a catechism teacher, an altar server, and a volunteer during our summer program. What followed was working as a special education aide for a couple of elementary schools and teaching technology at a Catholic middle school. During this period, I met my husband of 17 years. He was also working in the special education field as a high school teacher. At the same point that I met my husband, I also began exploring the priesthood or other ways of going into ministry, but I ran into a wall. Around that time, I had a strange experience picking up our house phone receiver no longer in service, and I heard Pope John Paul II speak. I can't tell you what the pope said, only that I felt a sense of peace as he prayed. I felt connected to God and knew God had not left me; it would be a defining moment that would allow me to remain embraced with God.

In the years to follow, I struggled with where I felt at home. I attended mass but no longer felt a connection to the church. That not to say that I did not feel a relationship with God. My relationship would eventually lead me to look outside my Roman Catholic upbringing for my spiritual needs. After reading up on several denominations, I began the process of finding a church that would welcome me and my now-husband. We lived in an area that did not have an open and affirming congregation within a three to a four-hour radius.

As there were no UCC congregations nearby, we finally selected a Disciples of Christ Church that stated they were open and affirming. We began to attend and became members as I learned that I could still answer God's call. Deciding to leave the Catholic Church enabled me to meet the countless people I encountered and lead me to the UCC. Shortly after, my husband, friend, and I attended a *Building an Inclusive Church* workshop where I met several ordained ministers, some members of the LGBTQ community. These individuals are still in my circle several years later, and unbeknownst to them, they played a crucial role at this turning point in

my life.

In 2015, I answered my call to ministry, trusting God had plans for me with my husband's support; we moved across the country to Chicago, where we had no family. It was hard to leave my family behind to follow my calling but having my supportive husband did help. I continuously prayed for guidance from God. Soon after we arrived, I began to preach and do ministry with Iglesia Unida de Cristo in Berwyn. I joined the First Congregational Church of Evanston, where I continued to grow my ministry and discern my call to ordained ministry.

I graduated in 2019, and in that last semester, we welcomed our son, Nathaniel. Now, like Joseph, I would be a father and minister living in God's calling for me. Joseph's story had laid out blueprints for how to make all the bad experiences I'd lived through to take better care of my family and the larger society. A unique opportunity to share my struggles and successes came in 2019 when I began serving on the UCC Mental Health Network Board of Directors, where I could help individuals and congregations understand how to help others move into belonging from marginalization.

In serving the UCC MHN, I work towards inclusion for all of God's children so that all including my son grow up in a better world. I can also help bring awareness to mental health through my gifts of technology: sharing resources through social media, updating the website, and helping colleagues of all ages on the board learn how to collaborate at a distance using Zoom and Google Drive. My colleagues on the MHN board and I have also spoken out against police brutality as a team utilizing our platform. My involvement on the board has also led me to serve on the Chicago Metropolitan Association as vice-moderator and work for and with the Colectivo de UCC Latinx Ministries as their communications consultant. Today, I also share my ministry and technology skills as a designated term pastor at a Chicagoland church: Christ Church UCC

Des Plaines.

My story, like Joseph's, is one that journeys through the margins to belonging without assimilation. It began when I was forced from my home as a child; then I faced challenges as I tried to bring my full self to my childhood faith of Catholicism and faced rejection. From that pain and marginalization, my ministry arose. I now use that past pain to empathize and serve individuals and families often forced to society's margins: people of color and those living with mental health challenges. From this rich, nuanced, intersectional place of belonging, I can reflect on ministry issues and work with others to make it better for all of God's children. The work is far from complete; the work continues as God continues to speak.

Statement of Faith

God is different for each individual, and for me, God was Father for many years. Nonetheless, as I grew into my ministry and continue to do so, I have come to see God as all-inclusive. As part of my seminary preparation in Dr. Joanne M. Terrell's systematic theology class, we discussed how people see God through various genders, ethnicities, to name a few. I was having trouble comprehending how anyone could think of God, anything but male. My bump on the road to understanding was not about sticking to my beliefs. Instead, I wanted to see how it was possible; after all, my religious history was in the Roman Catholic Church, where God is male.

Dr. Terrell stopped to openly discuss what troubled me in understanding the concept in front of my peers. She explained it to me in this way. "Let us say you are preaching, and from the pulpit, you continue to address God as he/his/him. Now, let us suppose that there is a female sitting listening from the pews who have been abused in any number of ways by a male figure or

figures. How are you allowing her to see herself in God's image if you are adamant about God being male, and to this point, men have abused her? In reinforcing your direct relationship with God as male; you prevent someone else from seeing themselves in God. Did God not create us in God's image?"

It would not be for another few months when I would reach my "ah-ha" moment through teaching vacation bible study to children, including my nieces. I finally understood teaching my nieces to see themselves in God; I must be willing to allow them an inclusive image of God. Furthermore, my parents' nurture and cohesive parental relationship demonstrated that I could see how God could be both mother and father, masculine and feminine.

Jesus as the son of God was a non-violent disrupter. Systematic theologian Dr. Amy Marga describes God as reaching beyond boundaries and liberating people from personal, racial, ethnic, and social oppression.³ She goes on to share something that I have also seen in scripture and the life of Jesus. He stepped into the margins without looking back to help Samaritans, sex workers, debt collectors, and even those that may have seen themselves as his foe. Dr. Marga continues to discuss how through Jesus' work, God turns relationships around, hence, helping victims of violence find the promise of a better tomorrow. Her illustration of the life of Jesus is what I express to people in and outside the church. Jesus did not hang out with any VIPs; he hung out with those seen below society's standards. Jesus was the one who demonstrated that we must be willing and ready to sacrifice ourselves to help others regardless if they see us as disruptors. Simultaneously, for me to follow in his footsteps, I must be prepared to embrace God's Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit guides us to Jesus and lets us know that God's work is at hand. I like to

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/theology-and-interpretation/preaching-trauma-and-the-cross>

think of the Spirit as a flower bed that allows the ongoing parts of God such as the sun, water, and soil to come together to enable the plant to grow into its full beauty.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.⁴

The Spirit creates such a space that no matter what form one comes in, they are synced with Christ. I see the Spirit of God's voice similarly to when I was growing up and heard my mom's voice in my head. The voice guided me as to what was right or wrong. The Spirit goes further into helping see the potential hopes that God has for us through unity with Jesus and the Spirit.⁵

The Holy Spirit is the affirmation of each person regardless of age, tongue, or race. I think of the Holy Spirit as an affirmation of the good that I do in this world. The Holy Spirit jubilation Jesus symbolizes helps us live into what God hopes for us through the warm embrace and compassion. The Trinity is three equal parts that work together to accomplish the same objective, to make me feel affirmed, loved, and gifted. In all honesty, I do not fully understand the complexity of the Trinity. However, I know that God is God, God is Jesus, and God is the Holy Spirit. The Trinity keeps me from working as a minister who places or allows others to put him on a pedestal. It is also what helps keep us as grounded as we go about being one family.

As children of God, we reaffirm that we seek to do right for God through our acts of kindness and love through our baptism and communion. As a Christian, I embrace the Trinity, which means that essentially three divine beings live in me, God the Parent, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. If I am to believe that they live in me, they live in every other person I encounter. Moreover, knowing that we all carry the Trinity makes us all equal in the eyes of

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12

God, with the difference being that I am called to ordained ministry when others may be called to teaching, working in medicine, and other professions.

The Sacraments

The sacraments call to be performed by an ordained minister; thus, a minister would have the training and a substantial understanding of the religious rituals' importance. Yes, we are all called to the priesthood.

like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.⁶

The importance of communion in the church is high as Christ instituted it in an official capacity. Therefore, only officials recognized by the church are the ones to perform the sacred call to the Table. Jesus set the Table for us to willingly participate in his remembrance and to celebrate that we all come from different backgrounds. It is the act of us sharing our love for Jesus Christ who lived, died, and rose for us.

I believe the sacrament of Baptism is an act of seeking to become part of Christ's universal church. Baptism is us joining a selected body inclusive of those who believe in Christ. The UCC practices baptism at any age, allowing for the freedom to choose when. Nonetheless, when baptism occurs for an individual will differ from family to family. For example, for me, our son needed to get baptized as a child.

A parent's choice to baptize their child is an illusion as God claims the child from the start, as we are people of faith, essentially allowing us to step into our faith. God's love and

⁶ 1 Peter 2:5;9

compassion are embraced upon us living into our Baptism. For some families, baptism is a willful and intentional act of taking part in a ritual that will make you part of the Christian community. It is one that they feel their child should be able to take when they are ready and willing for other families. I will not argue what is right or wrong because taking part in a sacrament is a personal journey determined by family values not God's values. I affirm that through family values of love, grace, and compassion, one embraces one's extended Christian family.

Confirmation is something that I see as the intentional reaffirmation of Baptism. The act of confirmation is when we embrace the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as I did during my trip to the Holy Land during my last year of seminary. We came upon the Jordan River and knew that we were there to take a glimpse of the possible location where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. As our group prayed, our professor invited us to reconfirm our Baptism by taking part in a small ritual; where each turned to the next person and poured water over them. For us, it was a sense of what the Christian Church represents, an intentional act of being in community with each other. It sums up to a journey that we take as Christians through the act of free will.

Our free will helps us embrace each other when we come to The Table and intersect as a family. When we come to Christ's Table, we are not to behave in such a manner that causes trauma to others, like the horror stories from people during Thanksgiving or other holiday meals. The ideal practice in the UCC is that all means all when welcomed to The Table of the Lord. The ordained ministry will allow me to continue such theology and help potential siblings who may think otherwise. When Jesus celebrated the first Communion, He did not indicate that one must make a reservation, pay or be a particular type of person. Jesus opens the Table to all who wished to take part to come, eat, and drink.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread. When he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.⁷

I remember the latter part when knowing that The Table is set for all, including divorced, single parents, LGBTQ+ individuals, nearly all humankind denied communion in another denomination. It means that as I take part in this meal, I am to remember why it was shared in the first place. The celebration is not only our remembrance of the sacrifice endured for us but the affirmation He loves us all.

I think of Communion as an act of love and care similar to my mother preparing our holiday meals. I recall her getting up early every holiday, getting into our kitchen, and starting to prepare for hours for a meal that would potentially last a few minutes. For my mother, I do not think she cared how long it would take to eat it. The memories of joy, laughter, and smiles are what I believed carried her through the work. As I sit here and type of her loving acts, I can imagine it is what Jesus hoped for us as well: A hope that celebrating communion would bring a lifetime of memories of how much love and compassion Jesus Christ has for us to the point of dying for us.

Communion does not stop at the Table in our sanctuaries; Communion continues through our ministries in service to others, whether that is helping a family member or friend who does not have enough to eat or feeding the hungry in our communities. Jesus did not state that we were to celebrate Communion only during a worship service. Yes, it means that we can even

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 NRSV

have a family-style barbeque outside our buildings and share our food with anyone willing to stop and grab a plate. It is sharing our food and love with no strings attached. A transmitted message that the Table is genuinely open to all that come to it, much like Jesus calling for us to partake as often as possible and feed others around us.

Moreover, it reminds me of what my mother and father taught us that you never fight for food but share what little we have on our table. Communion is the meal of an array of meanings that strengthens, nourishes us to go out. We believe that participating in Communion by eating and drinking empowers us to push ahead.

The Bible

The question is, *how* do we use the Bible today to keep it pertinent. I believe that the scriptures echo God's voice as guidance to Christian life and human decency. The Bible is a symbol of hope in times of uncertainty. As the United Church of Christ, we believe that the Bible is an excellent book above all others, inspired by God, but not infallible: The Bible is not God or an idol. The Bible is the word of God for us to take seriously.⁸ Additionally, I appreciate that as part of the UCC, we take the Bible seriously enough to study the historical context and the social aspect. We believe that God is still speaking, and it is therefore that we continue to listen.

Unfortunately, as a pansexual⁹, I know many verses that cause harm to a person. The harm is the area where I continue to use Joseph's story of healing in helping others heal from the shame and oppression they have felt. I find it exciting and encouraging that his lived experiences permitted him to serve God and God's people in a capacity of healing. My faith and inspiration

⁸ http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/5413/Bible-and-the-UCC-FINAL-2.pdf?1418429664

⁹ Pansexual is a term for a person who finds a person attractive regardless of gender.

come from God and the Bible. Simultaneously, the Bible's motivation is not exclusive as God speaks to me through the people I meet, including various situations. I believe the Bible was not written to keep people away from the church but close to her. The Bible is our blueprint to help end the stigma of mental health illness, among other stigmatized aspects in our society.

The Bible serves as a guidebook for an ethical and moral person. Should it then not be left up to today's society to use the Bible as a guide that promotes compassion and grace. The Bible should not be a book that derails a person's self but helps them conquer a tighter harmonious relationship with God. As I prepare for ordained ministry, I must practice the value of looking at the Bible in its historical and contextual aspect and teach others how to faithfully engage the Bible as a source of healing and hope. The Bible is not a perfect book. Therefore, it falls upon us to help each other as children of God and see that the Bible does have a purpose in our daily lives. The Bible embodies the imperfections that make us perfect in God's eyes: we use it as a gift from God to help us live a gracious and meaningful life in a relationship with God. Our relationship with God continues through recognizing that each person is born in God's image.

The Church

The church has an enormous and essential task in its mission and ministry. The mission is no longer just about getting people closer to God and Christ. The UCC is called, according to our statement of faith, to be a uniting church that is to be prophetic in speaking the truth to power and liberating the oppressed and caring for the poor and afflicted. As the church, we are responsible for recognizing the whole person, including the emotional, spiritual, and mental scars. Jesus was a disrupter, an advocate against oppression and injustice, and a healer to the sick

and the poor which is why I appreciate, “*The momentum carried us out of the church and into the streets where true Christianity belongs.*”¹⁰ I relate what Chacour writes to the example Jesus modeled for us when he was in the streets among those whom he fought to uplift.

For the Church, the many abuses of human life, liberty, and dignity are a heartfelt suffering. The church, entrusted with the earth's glory, believes that in each person is the Creator's image and that everyone who tramples it offends God. As holy defender of God's rights and of his images, the church must cry out. It takes as spittle in its face, as lashes on its back, as the cross in its passion, all that human beings suffer, even though they be unbelievers. They suffer as God's images. There is no dichotomy between man and God's image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God's image, and the church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom.¹¹

Oscar Romero, a Roman Catholic Archbishop, assassinated while celebrating a worship service, was prophetic in calling out the church. He spoke against poverty, social injustice, assassinations, and torture amid a growing war between left-wing and right-wing forces in his home country of El Salvador. Romero is an important figure for Latinx people and others who wish to speak against oppression. Christ charges the church to speak out against the abuses against human life. Being entrusted with the earth's glory, the church should operate in such a manner that affirms the gifts all bring to the community. The church is responsible for seeing each person as an image of God. Dutch theologian, writer, and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen wrote on various interests when he was alive. These interests were psychology, pastoral care, spirituality, community, and social justice, often studied and read by many seminarians.

The true challenge is to make service to our neighbor the manifestation and celebration of our total and undivided service to God. Only when all of our service finds its source and goal in God can we be free from the desire for power and proceed to serve our neighbors for their sake and not our own.¹²

¹⁰ Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers*.

¹¹ Romero, O. A., & Brockman, J. R. (2010). *The violence of love*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
doi:<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/219744>

¹² Henri Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ*.
<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/excerpts/view/16704>

Nouwen's message is perhaps what I felt briefly working at A Just Harvest, a nonprofit that serves the neighborhood through a community kitchen feeding hunger, cultivating abundance, advocacy for social justice, and equity. I worked to help feed the hungry at the outbreak of COVID-19 when there was an influx of neighbors coming to the kitchen's door for food. I heard the anguish some were experiencing through phone calls we received. I found that my coworkers were loyal to coming to work even when tragedy hit their own families. I found myself providing pastoral care to them with things as simple as a thank you note or birthday card. The act was not about getting recognition but thanking them for their selfless act of serving the community. They were being the church in recognizing God's face in each neighbor, knocking for assistance.

I believe in the idea that God does not call a person free of scars to the church. The church is where you bring your vulnerability as you find love, comfort, and the care you need. Therefore, it is crucial that as a minister, I am knowledgeable, comforting, and be ready to use my lived experiences to understand those who trust their care to me.

UCC Identity

The UCC acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. As such, it also recognizes that each local church has a God-given responsibility for that church. Therefore, our denominational form is a covenant relationship between autonomous units that are intentional in their shared belief in Christ. My interest in being ordained by the UCC is that the authority does not lie with one person. Instead, the church's head lies with Christ holding the local church responsible for nurturing, nourishing, and in general, its wellbeing.

The UCC believes and affirms in the priesthood of all, and that belief resonates with me. It recognizes the worth and potential of all people called to serve God through the church which is why the local church is responsible for caring for the local Church and is not managed by the denomination. Being the church, we are called to take responsibility for our acts, putting into practice the model that the church belongs to the people and not one person, national or international governing body. The Protestant reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin believed that the Word of God's authority is held by the Bible and not just one person.¹³ The UCC calls for all congregations to actively participate, assuring that we live in a just world for all.

When we are cohesively united, we can achieve great things such as welcoming all, loving all, and seeking justice for all through God's inspired grace. Our identity in the UCC presents the potential to meet and love a person on their journey with God. Living into that model, the UCC has made covenants to advocate, fight, and voice for the oppressed, allowing the many to form their conclusion of what the head of the Church, Jesus Christ, would do with the various injustices we face. The notion that we, as humans, as God's children, can make a theologically sound decision to pursue justice for our neighbor speaks volumes. It becomes the practice of what I believe Christ called for our church to do day in and day out. Living out examples placed before us by Jesus on speaking and acting against injustices provides a living example of what Jesus did on earth.

The UCC calls for a realignment of practices. Church practices are challenged by people in and outside of the UCC. The UCC identity allows me to answer my call to ministry while advocating for undocumented immigrants' unfair and inhumane treatment. As a person of color

¹³ Post, M. R., & Dipko, T. E. (2007). A History of the United Church of Christ. In *History and program* (pp. 11-77). Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press.

who hears the spirit moving him, I use my UCC identity to create a just world in covenant with other ordained ministers, lay leaders, and congregations alike. We do not live in a just world when even our denomination drops the ball on diversity. In concept, the UCC identity is crucial to the work of the church and my ministry. We have much work ahead of us if we are to reach an indeed just world for all or at least a just denomination for all.

The beauty of the UCC identity is that I can be critical of it without feeling the threat to my ordained ministry path. After all, we have enough forces in today's world hitting us hard. I must join the many in being a representative of the church I describe through my evolving, intentional relationship with the UCC identity.

Pastoral Ethics and Boundaries

The pastoral ethics and boundaries are in place for several reasons and protect both congregant and pastor. Ethics and boundaries serve as reminders that the ongoing work in ministry is a covenant between various people and the minister. It is not to say that one should not already have some ethical behavior within their person. Instead, it offers a set of guidelines that should be practiced and maintained to the best of their ability to ensure that all involved know where each person starts and ends. Boundaries are in place to help us say, "this is who I am." Practicing a good balance in boundaries will provide a healthy system. If boundaries are too loose, boundaries may become emotionally draining, and too rigid will lead to loneliness. Vague boundaries can drive you to take on the needs and emotions of others. Additionally, loose boundaries may lead the person to be hypersensitive to others' feedback and criticism. Maintaining healthy boundaries helps us be flexible, avoid judgment, accept the truth, allow for thinking outside the box, and being clear on what we value and desire.

Boundaries signal respect towards what journey a person is on in life. Respect for non-heterosexual, non-binary, non-cisgender people, to name a few, occurs by addressing them by the pronouns they use; it is not outing a person to their family or friends or congregations as coming out is a very personal journey that should be left to the individual to navigate. These examples remind me of a temporary teaching job that I had last fall when I had one student identify as non-gender conforming. The counselor and the principal provided their perspective from an educational, administrative, public-school angle. However, they approached me as a queer person and a minister. My advice to them was that we serve as witnesses to the student's story. The principal put it best in stating that we were passengers in the school bus the student was driving.

As passengers, we are to follow the rules of the bus we ride in. We are not to cause distractions that will injure or cause injury to the driver. Our job is to ensure that the driver has a sound, safe environment where they may continue their journey, whatever that may look like, a quiet ride, or a ride full of laughter and joy. Boundaries are in place to protect all on the journey, whether the driver or passenger. They demonstrate to both parties what lines should not be crossed, like those on public transit buses; a yellow or white line near the driver keep the passengers from placing themselves in danger.

One of the best models and mentors that I have had thus far is Rev. Dr. Ann L. Rosewall, an ordained Presbyterian minister. I served as an intern at my home church, First Congregational Church of Evanston. Working with Ann was one of the most fulfilling, enriching, and supportive chapters that God could have presented me. God has paved the way for me in the UCC. Ann is a person who taught me how to wear various hats and still keep distinctive lines for each. She, too, helped me move from the story of being rejected into the priesthood to the "now what?" Under

Ann's instruction, I completed an independent study on boundaries for the average person, whether secular, lay, or ordained. Her guidance allowed me to find various ways to listen and do no harm.

Ordination Vows

I have engaged in ministry for many years. Last year, I experienced a potential vocational change to interview at an elementary school, which came when I was conflicted about my discernment process into ordained ministry. In caring for my son, husband, nieces, sister, and myself, I felt that the extra income of a potential calling in education would benefit us. The truth is that I continued to be a minister even in the classroom. I came to love, care, and guide my students the best I could to where they were saddened by my decision to leave and return to being a full-time caregiver for my son. During my secular job, I also found myself doing pastoral care for some of the adults. One in particular person at that school had a tough time during my last week.

I was happy to provide pastoral care to this person who, by their admission, is a non-churchgoing and possible non-believer. Amid my resignation, I was called upon by this person, invited to sit, listen, and reflect on their current situation. I felt that I was making the right decision to go back to being a full-time parent and continue to discern God's next phase for me. I place a high value on the gospel's truth, including being honest, compassionate, graceful, and confident, which I demonstrate as a minister; after all, I too am a child of God. It is admitting when I am wrong and need help. Good leadership means that I must say no to say yes to demonstrate good self-care. Partaking in the sacraments, rites, and pastoral care are intersections of what one must do. A minister cannot perform the sacraments without recognizing and

teaching the importance of each.

Pastoral care may take an array of forms, including being silent when the moment calls for it. The silence is not confused with the silence called when one becomes a pastoral counselor and confidant. Silence is also what comes in the form of judgment-free in showing equal love, support, and care to all of God's children regardless of faith or lack of faith.

The faith and order of the United Church of Christ allow for an interfaith relationship. In doing so, I have already developed relationships outside of the United Church of Christ by having friends and colleagues in other Christian traditions, non-Christian and non-believers alike. I firmly believe that to be a better and more understanding minister; I must continue to maintain, nourish, and develop relationships with people from all forms of life regardless of faith, spirituality, race, ethnicity, political affiliation, sex, sexuality, citizenship status, education level or economic level to name a few.

Conclusion

After so many years of experiences that include hurdles, joys, and sorrows, I have concluded that God is calling me to parish ministry and to involvement in the wider church while remaining open to other ministry spaces. Responding to God and looking after all of God's children's wellbeing looks similar to that of Joseph working for pharaoh as a leader looking to the wealth for the good of all. I wish to continue serving a congregation and helping the people of God through healing, loving, and caring for each other as siblings in Christ. God has spoken to me to see that it is not enough to speak and bring awareness to shortages; God continues to provide the tools. Through being ordained, I may help devoted church-going people and others

whom the church has rejected. I want to provide pastoral care to all people, regardless of the level of belief in God.

Who am I? I am a child of God responding to a call to serve God's people through parish ministry, advocacy, and practicing no harm to my fellow children of God. My lived experiences from the margins that include love, affirmation, and the rejections allow me to relate to the experiences others may carry with them upon entering the church. I am a child God taking ownership of his unique lived experiences to serve his call better. I believe that every child of God needs to be heard, affirmed, and walked alongside. Moreover, through my platforms as vice-chair of The United Church of Christ Mental Health Network, vice moderator of the Chicago Metropolitan Association of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ, communications consultant for The Colectivo de Latinx Ministries of the UCC will continue to share my gifts to help uplift my siblings in Christ. The makeup of my sibling shall not matter to this fellow child of God who happens to be a Chicano, father, husband, uncle, brother, son, friend, and pansexual using his lived experiences to grow in his relationship with God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and his calling to ordained ministry.