

Ordination Paper

Submitted by

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Introduction

This paper is prepared as my ordination paper for the United Church of Christ, New London Association. It includes a discussion of my theology, my understanding of the United Church of Christ, and a description of how I see my call to ministry and how this has developed over the time I have been in-care.

I have changed the order from that outlined above, which is as it appears in the Manual on Ministry. In the first section I introduce myself, in the second my theology, and in the third I tie the first two to the United Church of Christ. I chose this order because I do not believe that one's theology is an academic exercise only; but reflects the person and their background. One's theology is a continuing interaction with God and emerges from experience and reason at least as much as from scripture and tradition. I outline my theology in the second section offering the reader a better insight into its development. In the third section I reflect on the United Church of Christ: its origins, tensions, and promise. By putting this section third it allows readers to see how my life flows into my theology and then how together they flow into my love of the UCC and its ongoing efforts to live in freedom within community.

I end with a short conclusion which completes the circle of topics. In that section I sketch out those things I most value when thinking of my ministry within the UCC.

Ministry and Pilgrimage

“...choosing the way and being chosen are the same...”
(Dorothee Soelle, “The Silent Cry,” 24)

Soelle's quote reflects my understanding of call -- a passion so compelling that internal joy exceeds itself. If we are lucky, we get to live at least some of our passions, and, if we are

luckier still, we get to intertwine them, thereby expanding into more beautiful patterns and activities.

When I wrote my call statement I indicated that I brought five major gifts: a Congregational heritage; sociological understanding; long experience in the secular world; strong community identification; and success as a teacher, researcher and seeker. Each of these has grown and blended with my more recently developed passions for worship leadership, theology and ethics -- mainly informed by post-modern philosophy -- and a growing embrace of my mystical poetic side.

Heritage

“The church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.”
(Fred Pratt Green, 1969 – NCH 306)

In discussing my heritage in my call statement I began with the words of John Robinson my spiritual and biological forbear. His parting words to the Pilgrims ask them not to limit the truth of God to their “poor reach of mind.” Today as I consider my ministry I see Robinson’s charge as the 1600s rock (Plymouth?) underpinning my passion to “claim and test” our “heritage and keep on rising from the dead.” We live in a country where although many claims are made (shouted, perhaps) about God, most people are not in church on Sunday and many claim that Christianity, in particular, demands an embrace of ten unbelievable things before breakfast. As part of my ministry I want to involve those people. I am called to minister to them. They hunger. I, like Jesus, ask little in terms of doctrine from those I engage. As a pastor I want to help them connect with the holy in their lives. A cornerstone of UCC theology, both historically and currently, asks that we seek relationship with one another and with God. Belief in a triune God implies that we cannot separate the two. A Triune God is by definition a God in internal

relationship. A part of that God is God incarnate. As we seek relationship with the incarnate Christ in one another we also seek relationship with the source of all and with the sustaining good that surrounds and transcends our selves. For many there exists a great hunger for this holy heritage and many of those who hunger are currently outside of our church doors. In the depths of my soul I feel that hunger (mine and theirs). The gift of feeling that yearning, that longing, defines my feeling of call -- to pastor to that unquenched thirst, both within the current generations within the church and to the next generation that is still searching for ways to engage or re-engage with our traditions in a meaningful way. For that generation, I talk about an understanding of the trinity that involves relating to a source (of all), holiness within each and all, and a goodness that transcends each. If we cannot find ways to pastor to the next generation, to make our tradition accessible to this generation, then as Nick Carter, President of Andover Newton, would say, we can use our pastoral talents to be “grief counselors to our dying congregations.”

Theologically I embrace the distinction Borg (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time) makes between “belief in” and “belief about.” “Belief in” involves trusting with all one’s heart – trusting that God walks with us in joy and in sorrow, trusting that God wants good for each of us and all creation, trusting in the essentials of Jesus’ teachings – love is stronger than hate, non-violence is stronger than violence. Many of those things which much of the modern world and the next generation might find fantastic fall into the “believe about” category – the *only son* of God, born of the *Virgin* Mary, made several bodily appearances after his death.

As part of my ministry I am committed to creating safe life-long learning/exploring/growing holy spaces where all those who hunger and seek can experience the holy and claim their own spirituality. Holy growing/learning spaces need to occur in our

worship, our study groups, our retreats and in any place the church is present. The “belief in” and “belief about” distinction helps form a common basis for the church and the unchurched and helps create safety for all.

Sociologist

I tell my skeptical fellow sociologists that theology is sociology raised to the infinite and eternal. Sociology is the study of social structures and how humanity forms these structures and is formed by them. Theology concerns itself with “ultimate” (Tillich) forms and questions. With passionate joy I love exploring the interplay of holy/cosmic/ultimate structures with our human social structures.

Without incorporating one another the fields of sociology, ethics, and theology will continue to explain problems essential only to previous theoretical configurations and be unable to “keep on rising from the dead.” Each of these fields overflows with meaning and part of my ministry involves mixing the overflow. Ideally I would like to develop and teach a course on the sociology of Christianity and teach it in churches and both sociology departments and theology schools and departments. I want to write in this area. I want to work with the UCC in forming programs that incorporate each of these fields and apply them to the pressing questions of the day whether these questions be the plight of small churches, the continual extension of freedom within community, the degraded quality of work in our country, environmental degradation or the numerous other problems we live and face each day. I want to draw on each of these fields in worship, particularly sermon preparation. I also want to draw on these fields in helping both the local church and the church universal confront the oppression and poverty of our time.

Reconciling the Secular and the Divine

“The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.”
(Mark 1:15)

“...the criticism of heaven transforms itself into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of the law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.”
(K. Marx 1845)

Speaking to his disciples Jesus declares, “...there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come...”
(Mark 9:1)

God’s reign is here and we are the builders of that “shining city” envisioned by the Jewish social ethicist Felix Adler (1876) in his hymn, *Hail the Glorious Golden City*. I want my ministry to help bridge the secular and religious worlds. As a pastor, I want to translate the language of faith to this secular time. Personally, I walk the edge of the secular and sacred worlds. As a minister I want to serve in part as a translator in several settings - in worship, secular or religious classrooms, or in church discussion groups, or at academic meetings or denominational events, or at the bedsides and burial places, births and other important transformations of those deeply involved in the church, or those for whom the church has become at best a ritual during times of transition.

We cannot continue to engage in “church babble” to each other and further alienate those growing American masses that say something like, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” We need to hear what is behind that call which says in part, “I’m hungry but the church does not feed me.” The lists of bestselling books usually include at least one that is mainly spiritual or religious or a critique of religion. The readers in our society are devouring or at least “consuming” such writing. We need to be ready to discuss it if we are to have any chance of engaging those readers and responding to their hunger. My call in this area is clear.

Building the “Beloved Community”

I grew up in a community. As a pastor I am called to aid in the construction of the “beloved community” envisioned by Martin Luther King. I am called to aid in continuing to build the community Paul envisions when he speaks of, “...neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female.” Assisting individuals to grow into God (Ralph Waldo Emerson) can best be done communally. It is within community that true freedom can be experienced. African American religious experience and early Black theology may capture this best. Gayraud Wilmore offers an understanding of freedom within community when he writes of freedom as,

... existential deliverance...liberation from every power or force that restrains the full, spontaneous release of body, mind and spirit from every bondage which does not contribute to the proper development of the whole person in community.
 (“Black Power, Black People, Theological Renewal” in Black Theology Vol. I, 133)

It is this type of community I strive to build within churches. I view the role of pastor as both individual “building” and community building.

While I feel passionate about nurturing freedom and faith within community, this section is perhaps the most painful for me to write. In my call statement I described my “home” church – the church of my childhood that originally welcomed me and re-welcomed me during important transitions in my life. It was that church that covenanted with me and supported my entering into care with the UCC. It was that church in which I gave my mother’s funeral eulogy from a lectern constructed in memory of my father and grandmother. I remember the strength that flowed through me as I grabbed that pulpit so rich in family and church tradition. I keep displayed on my bookshelves the plate that church gave to us after our wedding. In 2007 that church broke its covenant with me and the UCC by voting to leave. I will not recount my effort to stop that sad event.

It was in relation to my childhood church that I learned the importance of community. Now that I have learned at a gut level the fragility of community, I am even more determined to use my community building skills as part of my call. The sad destruction of community calls me to use these skills in strengthening the relations between association, conference, and national levels of the UCC and local churches. I want to incorporate this skill into my ministry in both (up to national and down to local) directions as well as laterally (among congregations). The poignancy of the loss of my church reminds me each day of the urgency of fostering connections.

Teaching

“Teachers are challenged to cultivate expectation and wonder...”
(Moore, *Imagine Peace*, Handbook of Process Theology, 205)

I have added a mystical side to my call to teach. In a society in which more and more learning is “measured” by standardized tests, creativity and “expectation and wonder” get suppressed. “Expectation,” “awe,” “serendipitous creativity” -- these are the nouns that describe an experience of God. At some level, whenever true learning occurs we encounter God. For me, to learn is to engage with God. I have a friend who is a Methodist minister and he, knowing many more ancient languages than I, once told me that “truth” and “goodness” share the same Greek root. I have never checked this but have come to recognize that the “search for truth” is the same as the “search for goodness.” The image I like to offer is feeling the breath of God enticing us toward the good. If this is even partly true churches need to be offering lifelong learning opportunities within safe spaces. As part of my ministry I want to do that within a church or group of churches and/or within an association or conference. I also deeply believe that I can create safe learning places within academia, including theological settings, professional settings (e.g., business schools, schools of public health, medical schools), and liberal arts

settings. I would also like to have enough time to write and present papers– another form of teaching. I have and want to continue to do this across a number of fields. A ministerial goal of mine is to make the Spirit and Biblical scholarship more accessible within the larger academic setting while at the same time offering scholarship within our church communities. My church activities have included: co-leading a retreat on “Faith and Ethics in Everyday Life,” leading weekly discussion groups on “Living the Questions” programs, book discussion groups of timely religious publications such as Mother Teresa’s, “Come Be My Light,” reflective theological discussions of popular films, leadership of small group ministry groups. It is these types of activities that I want to foster within our churches. These activities are by definition pastoral. Moreover, they often lead to pastoral activities in which I mainly offer my presence and my witness as individuals share burdens such as the experiences and impacts of living with alcoholics; or the total rejection of one’s being and understanding of the world when sexual harassment and abuse occur. It is those privileged, intimate moments, which I share with parishioners that most touch and ultimately direct my “teaching” call to church.

The experience of “houses of worship” encompassing “places of learning” perhaps is expressed more in the Jewish tradition than in the liberal Christian tradition. As an adult, one of the first clear calls to ministry I heard was while attending a Bar Mitzvah. Two responsibilities of adulthood were identified – find a teacher (rabbi) and find a study mate. One of my Jewish friends was relating to me that she was sorry that her synagogue was several towns away. This made it hard for her to attend education programs which she described as her most intimate encounters with God. As a pastor I want to strengthen this intimate encounter in our churches.

Theological Perspectives

“Belief” in relation to God (Yahweh, Jesus, a triune God, etc.) is not so much declaring with certainty that God exists in the way doctrines suggest, but rather that this God is one that we can trust, one that is always with us, and one with whom we can be in relationship. All our acts of damage and all our acts of healing are to God – “...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25: 40, NRSV)

Before I outline my theological understandings of God, I offer a quote that captures my caution in this area:

“...we are attempting to speak of the One from whom all-that-is derives, and no metaphysical scheme can pretend to encompass more than all-that-is. So our reading of various attempts will have to be tempered by our prior realization that such a task will have to stretch human conceptualities beyond their proper limits.” (D. Burrell, 1994, “God Religious Pluralism, and Dialogic Encounter,” in Chopp and Taylor. *Reconstructing Christian Theology*).

I accept that my most intense experience of God affects how I conceptualize God, and acknowledge that God extends beyond my ability to conceptualize and experience. I also accept that we find the part of God that we need, but caution that we not idolatry that portion of God into the totality of God. With that caution, I have written in poetic style how I envision the essence of the God described in Scripture and tradition. It is written from God’s point of view and thus reflects how I hear God speaking. I share this because it serves as a summary of my theology.

God’s View

Before the light, before the dark,
Before the fluid, before the firm,
I was one. I was alone.
I longed for you. I ached for you.
At the time appointed,
The light exceeding all candles burst forth.
The sound exceeding all cymbals burst forth.
I, God, gave myself that there might be life.

I became the visible and the invisible.
I stretch beyond your comprehension.
Your birth is more painful than any birth you can know.
My labor is longer than any labor you can know.
All is created from me.
All will return to me.
All that you see is of me.
All that you do not see is of me.
All that is firm is of me.
All that is fluid is of me.
All that is breath is of me.
All that grows in one place is of me.
All that moves is of me.
All creatures of the water are of me.
All creatures of the air are of me.
All creatures of the earth are of me.
All is of me.
As you care for one another
 You also care for me.
All love is to me.
All injury is to me.
All that you do to the least of my creation,
 You do also to me.

I have given my substance for you.
When you eat, you eat my substance.
When you drink, you drink my fluid.
With each bite of bread you take, think of me.
With each sip of wine you take, think of me.
Eat and drink of my substance which I have broken for you.
For love of what my creation would become,
 I have endured all things;
 I have believed all things;
 I have hoped all things.
It is this love in which you walk.
It is this love in which I walk with you.
Whenever your actions are guided by this love,
 They will be actions pleasing to me.

With this overview and the caution concerning what we can really say about God, I will now discuss God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, humanity, and the church.

God

The Trinitarian God is a communion of three essences which early church councils envisioned as persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) -- these essences understood as being co-eternal, co-infinite, self caused, co-equals in eternal community. A God in internal communion embodies relationship and at some level *is* relationship. The internality of this God is relational. God's internal relationality spills over to all creation. Things/energies/essences/persons can only be understood in relation to others. These Councils did not dictate how this relationality occurs or how it is to be explained. Our tradition offers us multiple ways to experience and relate to God, all of which are authentic. The characteristics of the Biblical, Christian God can only be experienced in relationship. Love, mercy, faithfulness, justice, holiness only have meaning in relation to something beyond one's self.

A God, internally in relation, is a complex God that continually changes. God's immutability is best understood as unchangeable in character (e.g., loving and just); and these characteristics are not compromiseable.

In a relationship or communion one party cannot be omnipotent. Even if a relationship is with one much less powerful, relationship is with an entity with its own will and desires. If what the other is can be fully determined by the partner in the relationship, then there is no relationship for there is nothing with which to be in relationship.

I think of God as part of everything included in all-that-is with a consciousness that comprehends and loves each essence of all-that-is. Many essences now in existence were created by earlier essences. Plants and animals have their own internal ability to reproduce and thus have become co-creators with God. Each essence's existence causes many changes to all-that-is. For example, when a tree grows the soil around it is no longer the same nor is the way

light reaches that soil or anything growing in that soil; water consumed by the tree is no longer available for other uses; what can grow in a changing environment continues to change as the tree grows. The changes are nearly endless and spread well beyond the tree to influence other changes throughout the universe.

All that now exists contains a part of God -- the matter and energy that pre-existed that which we have come to refer to as the known universe. God remains in internal relationship with each of these essences and is therefore dynamically aware and caring about the actions of each. Each "each" affects in some way all-that-is.

God's comprehension includes understanding each essence's needs, joys, dangers and desires. God also comprehends all interrelations among all essences. All-that-is is ever-changing and everything within all-that-is contains some part of God. God as a conscious force acts for good, and for love of all-that-is. Humans may know God in any relationship with any part(s) of all-that-is, e.g., other humans, water, sky, cats, dogs, horses, work products. The greater the experience of the interconnection of the relationship to something that exceeds either, or all the entities involved, the more one experiences God. God is in relationship with each essence of all-that-is.

God can only align with the good. Each essence with its part of God can align with forces of good greater than itself. Such alliances are with God, which as a force can be "joined" for the good. Because God is in continual relationship with each entity and each entity is in a constant state of change, God's aims and the aims of each essence constantly change.

I believe there is a God the creator or ultimate source. I also believe there are and have been for a long time co-creators. Minimally, I include among co-creators any essence that can create itself or create new objects/essences from those already in existence. God is then in

relation with and part of all these creations from other creations. I believe that there is a co-eternal Spirit who is God's presence available to each of us. I believe that the Jesus the Bible describes was a person who was able to understand God's aims (the aims of goodness, and mercy, kindness and justice) much better than most. Jesus acted on them far more than other humans and was more immediately aware of his ability to move toward the good.

Jesus Christ

I, like many in the UCC, stress Jesus' teachings more than the theology of his being. I relate to him as the one who exemplifies how to live a good life -- the one who always asks what would love do, what God would (that divine part of me) do. Having said that, traditional Christian thought about Jesus consists of three major points: (1) a Jesus that is fully human and fully divine (although the means of mixing these two natures and the exact nature of the divine was the subject of much debate in the early church and continues to be); (2) a Jesus who is Jewish -- an oppressed minority group in his time -- and who clearly spoke against the rich and for the poor and inverted the social structure as demonstrated by the beatitudes (Matthew 1, 5:3-12, 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22, 12:41-44, Luke 1-2, 4:18-19, 6:20-23, 18:18-23, 21:1-4.); later to be reflected in Christianity's preferential option for the poor (although its meaning and emphasis differ among various communities); and (3) a Jesus who comes to redeem humanity for its sin and suffers and dies in this cause (1 Peter 4:1).

Human/divine – Would Jesus be satisfied if we simply followed his example and behaved as he counseled, regardless of our existential understanding of him? From all we know of how he lived and what he taught, it is hard for me to believe his answer would be other than yes. I find his teachings and actions consistent with how I believe God would act as a human being. His teachings have a quality of truth so clear that I consider them divine pronouncements.

I also find the type of person that Jesus became (poor, often homeless, part of a conquered and abused people, and not an official leader of the oppressed group) consistent with what God would become. The crucified Jesus was an innocent victim of human violence, and blame is widespread. This gruesome death and humanity's widespread responsibility for this death speak for how broken its relationship with the divine is. By adopting the symbol of the cross, Christianity directly confronts us with the evil of which humans are capable. God suffers with those in Guantanamo as Jesus did on the cross. God suffers with those in Darfur as Jesus did on the cross. God suffers as each condemned prisoner is executed as Jesus did on the cross.

That the cross remains a symbol also says, "The worst you have to offer will not stand." The power of the Roman Empire did not stand; the ossified and colonized religious power structure of Jesus' time did not stand.

Jesus the Oppressed Jew Who Sides with All Oppressed Persons -- The Gospels stress this theme. They are telling the story of an oft-conquered and oppressed group of which Jesus is part. The constancy and importance of this theme wanes after Constantine, since by then the Christian community had received civil recognition and would no longer be described as an oppressed minority. The intensity of this theme of conquest and oppression in Biblical writing attests to its centrality. Furthermore, it is this theme that constantly reasserts itself as various parts of the world are conquered and/or enslaved. This theme inspired abolitionists, and Martin Luther King and his followers; it attracts liberation theologians in all parts of the world. This theme has led the UCC to have many firsts in inclusivity; it led UCC volunteers to join the United Farm Workers in their continuing quest for fair wages and working conditions. It is this theme that asks us to see the face God in all others and act accordingly.

Humanity's Sins and Christ's Redemptive Death – Within the Christian tradition, the consistent answer as to why God joins humanity on earth is that humans became separated from God (sinful) and could only be redeemed by God's presence. For me at least two interpretations ring true. If one considers God totally other, only a human/divine being can reunite humanity with God. If, on the other hand, one considers God, in part, to be part of all-that-is and also part of each-that-is, then separation from God means that humans have become disconnected in some way even from themselves. It is this separation, this alienation, which is sin. When we lose communion with any part of creation, particularly the least among us, we are in a state of sin.

Humanity

The Christian view of humanity acknowledges its creatureliness (createdness). Traditionally, it has put humans at the top of creation with powers of reason, love, and a resemblance to and possibility of relationship to God that exceeds the rest of creation. The ability to reason is a gift, but the ability to love is the way in which humans mirror (image) God. All human reasoning ability cannot explain love. While we humans have the God-given ability to love, we do not understand love. Perfect love is God's love of creation and desire for good for all within creation. Sin is an expression of disordered love, which is any love that does not put God first, nor trust that God desires the best for all of creation, e.g., amassing wealth for ourselves and our families at the expense of others is disordered love. A major source of this disordered love is human's awareness of their finite and dependent situation. When our highest priority becomes the securing of our continued existence we are most likely to turn to sin. Each of us knows that we cannot continue to use the world's resources at the rate we do without ultimately killing our planet and, in the mean time, each of us knows that our wealth may be at

the expense of others. We know that, when we shop at stores supplied by companies not providing a living wage, we are participating in furthering hunger.

Humanity has made many technological inventions, and figured out many laws of nature; pride in these and other achievements also is a temptation. This pride motivates our conquests and constructions -- activities we believe mitigate our dependence. Humans have free will and therefore can act for good and for evil. Some maintain that the responsibility for good behavior belongs to humans alone. Niebuhr takes a middle route arguing that only trust/love in relation to God can be the source of overcoming our anxiety and pride. Augustine argues that love of God helps human behavior. He takes this position to the extreme saying, "Love God and do as you please." When we are in communion, we will act in love. We will be in touch with the loving abundance, the profound grace, and the fecundity of serendipitous creativity, of God.

Niebuhr and others such as Tillich see humanity's issue (major sin) as pride, which, they argue, results from anxiety. They addressed a human condition that the poet Houseman expressed when he wrote, "I am a stranger and afraid in a world I never made." Today's Western condition might be better captured by the folksinger John Gorka when he says, "I'm from New Jersey. I don't expect much. The world ends tomorrow, I would adjust." The words in the UCC statement of faith especially concerning aimlessness may better capture today's sins than do Tillich and Niebuhr: "You [God] seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

Worship and the Church

Worship offers moments to join with all-that-is and receive God's abundant love. The two UCC sacraments offer intensified moments of joining. Within this most imperfect world, we continue to have moments of perfect joining with all that is. For all our pain, for all our

separateness, for all our brokenness, for all our cynical despair, we still witness and experience those moments. For me such a moment is perfectly catching a wave and riding it as it breaks right under my nose; and, as sure as anything, I am part of that wave and part of the ocean and part of all oceans and part of all that is. The wave is there for me to join. Its existence is the invitation. I only respond to the offer. These perfect moments cannot be suppressed -- not by cynicism, not by anger, not by corruption, not by greed, not by anything. They are unstoppable. They are repeating gifts and we need only catch them.

The communion table offers such a moment – a moment when our being reaches through all the heavens to the entire universe as well as to the center of the earth, and is embraced. As with the waves, this moment exists by self-renewing invitation. This moment exists regardless of what harm we have done the moment before and what harm or betrayal or failure in courage we will do in the next moment. This moment is when we are invited to join perfectly with the peace of God – when we are invited to join perfectly with all-that-is.

I am always drawn to include communion in “teaching” activities. To “join with” is what makes learning possible and reinforces safety. The ability to offer communion in God’s name reinforces the sacredness of study and the sacredness of one another. Communion also reinforces a new “becoming” as we add new understanding to our own all-that-is.

Within the UCC, Baptism offers the other moment of intense joining. A tiny baby is handed to the minister. The parents share their new and most precious addition to creation. After baptism, this child is no longer theirs alone. The baptism takes place with water -- water, that part of the earth that is never still, that part of the earth that can always overflow whatever bounds it; it is never a captive, that part of creation in which the slightest disturbance, a pebble, a

breeze, the lightest of breath, creates a ripple that flows to all that try to bind it. I am called to create a living image that joins and frees and binds.

The lectionary combines Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism with Isaiah 42:1-4. This tiny baby, the servant "in whom my soul delights" (Isaiah 42:1) will "bring forth justice" while not breaking a "bruised reed" or quenching a "dimly burning wick." To the tiniest of shoulders we add the freedoms and responsibilities of the church. In other words, not only will (s)he bring forth justice, (s)he will do so in the most peaceful of ways; (s)he will not break even a bruised reed. Now this nice scene of joining takes on a challenge. As part of all-that-is, as part of God, we are asked to establish justice, and do so in peace. But there is also a promise, and it's a profound promise, like the one we make to the children we baptize, when we promise our love and support. "He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching."

When we baptize our children we not only symbolically recognize them as a most precious addition to all-that-is, it is the beginning of their charge to go forth into the world and establish justice and to do so in peace. And knowing that, our charge is to love them as hard as we can, forgiving all their shortcomings. It is an awesome charge – a charge that not only unites them with God but also reunites each of us with all-that-is. It is this promise of love that must protect them and us from becoming "faint" or being "crushed" until justice is established (Isaiah 42:4).

I am called to make the sacrament of baptism a living moment of joining that offers freedom and belonging -- the freedom and belonging that empower us to establish justice non-violently, without breaking even a "bruised reed." The painting of this scene is an important part of my ministry.

United Church of Christ

The UCC lives in dynamic relational tension, capturing and reflecting current and historical theology and ecclesiology as well as its own internal history and polity. It is a uniquely American church (its Christian denominational roots beginning in the United States) whose history reflects the tensions of the history of the Americas -- colonialism and imperialism in tension with a passion for freedom and justice; a strong commitment to education in tension with an anti-intellectual bias; a striving for unity in tension with protection of local tradition; a democratic ethos in tension with the protection of individual liberties; conquest and assimilation in tension with diversity; an instinct to flee (from the Old world to the New, from the East to the West) in tension with an instinct to witness/confront/transform/sustain. The major tensions within the UCC echo these tensions -- autonomy and individuality in tension with covenantal commitment; ecumenism in tension with internal identity; sustaining proud traditions in tension with transforming the church to respond to the current world crises; and providing internal sustenance to souls hungry for the holy/for God in tension with social action. These tensions do not stand alone but interact with those of the United States and with each other, resulting in feeding/fertilizing the dynamic tension of continual creation internal to the UCC as well as God's universe.

Autonomy/Individuality and Covenant

Autonomy/individualism is most strongly brought to the UCC from the Congregational Christian Churches side of the merger. Congregationalism indicates the form of governance -- each church independent. This independence represents an ideology suspicious of hierarchy and reflects the realities of colonial (Congregational) and frontier (Christian) life. During the early life of each of these traditions, the ideology of individualism supported the very American

tradition of literally fleeing (moving West, moving across the ocean) hierarchy. In turn, the isolated conditions of life reinforced autonomy.

The Evangelical and Reformed traditions reflect different ideologies and different realities of arrival in the New World, which had become the United States -- no longer a group of relatively independent colonies, each with more or less its own religious traditions. The Reformed tradition brought a connectional polity from its very beginnings and the Evangelical tradition echoed the Congregational and Christian traditions of suspicion of authority and connectionalism.

Connectivity for the Evangelicals, Congregationalists and Christians reflects essentially a mutual aid society in a hostile world, whether in the harsh colonial and frontier conditions of Congregationalists and Christians or in the Evangelical experience of being non-English-speaking immigrants trying to establish themselves in a new country. In contrast, the Reformed community conceived of the church as a body and saw the atomism and independent separatism of American churches as destructive and something that must be overcome. Here, as in Germany, a connected structure was seen as essential to the nature of the church, as opposed to something voluntary, as was the case with the other traditions. Internal theology drove connection for this group while external contingencies provided the main drivers for the other groups.

Not surprisingly, UCC history (1957 forward), has involved continual struggle over the issue of covenant. To this day individual congregations threaten to and do leave the UCC when in disagreement with stands taken by national, conference, and association levels of the church.

In a powerful act of faith, a Statement of Faith was produced before the Constitution. This Statement differs from historic creeds in that it formed a uniting document and not a

document from which heretics could be identified. No churches or individuals have been expelled for non-agreement with the Statement. It seems natural that Elmer J.F. Arndt, the chair of the committee originally charged with preparing the statement of faith, comes from the Evangelicals, who proclaim, “In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, freedom, and in all things charity.” The Statement of Faith is mainly a statement of the essentials of faith, leaving some details – how, God “calls the worlds into being,” or what exactly is involved in the “risen” part of the proclamation concerning our “risen Lord” -- to individual and church discretion, harkening back to Christian and Congregation roots and the Evangelical concern that laity study the scriptures for themselves.

The issue of hierarchy is addressed by recognizing the sole head of the church as Jesus Christ. This approach echoes the position of the original Christian churches, who declared Christ to be the sole head.

In form and in substance the Constitution crafts a polity statement that is relational and autonomous – freedom within community. Paragraphs 9-18 affirm the local churches but they are carefully placed between paragraphs emphasizing covenant. The last two sentences of paragraph 8 read, “The Collegium (of UCC officers) provides a setting for *mutual accountability*, for *mutual reporting*, and for assessing the ongoing programs of the United Church of Christ. It shall reflect the commitment of the United Church of Christ to be an inclusive church.” (Italics mine.) Paragraph 19 reads, “Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church.”

Ecumenism and Internal Identity

A true commitment to ecumenism by definition means success will lead to individual denominations losing their identity. For many originally Congregational churches, the UCC has barely become part of their identity. The UCC is oft criticized for having neither a coherent theology nor an internal structure beyond the local churches. While both are false, the perception persists even among many within the UCC.

The UCC was formed just prior to the height of the major social justice movements that emerged during the 1960s and 70s, and just prior to the beginning of the general decline in religiosity and church attendance in the United States. The UCC took a liberal, ecumenically-oriented identity at a time when social liberals were leaving the church. Ecumenism was driven by both a theological commitment to reuniting the “one holy catholic and apostolic Church” (Nicene Creed) and practical concerns relating to falling membership in mainline churches. To the extent that the union was driven by the latter real identity change did not occur. To the extent change did occur, it was not fully accepted within many churches. Each year, resolutions are introduced at General Synod reaffirming the autonomy of local churches, demonstrating the continuing concern in this area.

A Mainline Church and a World in Crisis

The history and roots of the UCC reflect the history of the United States. In much of New England, during their early history, the Congregational churches were not separate from the political structures of the towns in which they were located and indeed were supported by taxes. Fully intact churches migrated from Europe and formed New England towns. The culture of those churches became the “American” culture in New England and, I would argue, a significant

definer of the dominant WASP culture of the United States. It was/is the culture to which immigrants assimilate and against which they struggle to maintain their internal identities.

The strong historical ties of the UCC and its root denominations to American culture subject the church to the same crises that the country now experiences. We participate in an economic system that, to be “healthy,” needs “consumer confidence” (in which we buy and buy). We need to recognize the consequences of this participation and the ways in which it clashes with the Christian values of sharing, feeding the hungry and tending the sick. We need to strive to stay conscious of the fact that we disproportionately use the world’s resources (God’s bounty). We disproportionately pollute the environment (God’s bounty). For the comfortable in the United States to maintain their independence, we are more and more dependent on allowing, if not imposing, oppression around the world (non-living wages in much of the third as well as our own ghettos of poverty and at times outright military aggression). For members who related to its strong rural roots, traditional ways of life and making a living (by farming) have nearly become memories as opposed to realities.

The mobility of persons in this country presents another challenge for the church, especially a church mainly dependent on individual local churches. These churches no longer have stable memberships or even stable population bases from which to draw membership. Population bases are tied to economic decisions, such as what manufacturing plants close and where company headquarters and research facilities will be located. The church has essentially no control over these decisions and for the most part has not sought it.

To continue to operate in this world, the church must align its memories/history more closely with reality: ravaged land, decimated Native American nations, witchcraft trials, slavery. These must be remembered as well as actions for justice such as the abolition movement.

Churches have and must continue the difficult task of adapting to the changing conditions of mobility, employment, and threats to the environment.

Action and Solace

All the root denominations of the UCC have historically been socially active churches. All have a history of “right behavior,” which is at least equal to and sometimes surpasses “right belief” or “doctrine.”

Today’s Western world tends to be divided into institutional sectors – economic, political, religious, family, and educational. These divisions sectionalize our lives. The church is no longer part of the political sector and mostly no longer part of the educational sector. Economic production is no longer family centered as was the case with family farms. Within this segmented society the church and the family became islands of solace, but with vastly decreased functions within the larger society. The church no longer holds towns together, nor establishes nor runs the major educational institutions. The role of the church in forming society has diminished; it has become only one of many voices. Recently, however, as government has both failed and been dismantled, this voice and role of the church has taken on significantly greater responsibilities. For example, after Hurricane Katrina, the churches were the one functioning institution providing any early assistance to survivors. The church is one of the few potentially critical justice voices. It stands, as Jesus did, in contrast to, and as prophetic witness against, the building of empire for the few, as opposed to the building God’s reign of justice and love for all.

The church’s ability to give spiritual solace is severely limited if it is not actively engaging oppression. The UCC actions at General Synods since its formation speak to the need to engage society. For example, in the midst of approving its constitution, the UCC passed

resolutions supporting conscientious objectors and moved away from organizational issues to deal with the “racial crisis.” This action orientation reflects both its roots and its formation during a time of social ferment. It further recognizes the fact that individuals cannot be offered spiritual solace in a vacuum. The roots of the UCC support the critical unity of spiritual solace and action for justice. As with the abolition movement, part of offering spiritual solace to individuals of color involves confronting racism. This concept applies to many other oppressed groups, e.g., gay and lesbian persons, women, workers.

The tensions of the UCC and the tensions of our country echo and buttress each other. All the denominational roots of the UCC were nourished here and contain the contradictions, trials, trespasses, and promise of the history of the United States. We must strive to bring our actions in line with the “promise.” We must act to reconcile all that is held in tension. As a mainstream church we exist in part as the “powers and principalities.” In line with Jesus, as our head, we are called to risk all that is of value in this world to bring about justice. No acts of solace are complete unless acts for liberation accompany them. We are part of a larger body of Christ than our denomination. We are called to risk our proud heritage and identity in the work of repairing the tears in the body of Christ. As we move toward community we must do so certain in the knowledge that community cannot exist without freedom as freedom does not exist outside of community.

Conclusion

In my head, in my heart, in my theology, in my very being, I truly do not separate pastor, prophet, teacher, and passion. I do not even know how to distinguish among them in term of parts of speech – what would modify what or what is a verb or a noun. I am comforted by the fact that each can be used (with minor changes in the endings) as any part of speech and do so in

relation to each other. I cannot imagine being other than a passionate pastor or teacher or prophet. I cannot imagine my passion other than tempered by pastoral, prophetic and educational needs. I cannot imagine being a teacher without pastoring or a pastor without teaching. To the extent that I disconnect any of these from the others, I limit my ability in each.

I looked up the root of the word “passion” and found it was from the Latin “patior,” meaning to suffer or endure. I did the same for “pastor” and found it came from the Latin “pastor” meaning herdsman(person). As I reflect on these sources, I do not think God glorifies suffering, but rather stands with those who suffer. I cautiously believe with Julian of Norwich that Jesus’ suffering continues and will continue as long as we cause one another to suffer. I do and have “suffered” “for righteousness sake.” As I look at these roots, it is true that I am more drawn to stand and suffer than I am to herd. In some deep sense my call to teach is a call to share in the suffering of the cosmos, and through such sharing, end it.

I cannot imagine being other than a prophetic, pastoral, passionate teacher or a passionate, prophetic, teaching pastor or arrange these words as you wish, this is the combination to which I feel called. It will be this combination that defines my ministry regardless of the specific title or where it is done. This self description more than any other that captures my sense of call (a place where choosing the way and being chosen are indistinguishable). A good teacher is a pastor -- maybe not the type we picture because of how accustomed we have become to thinking in dualistic roles. A truly good teacher, which I strive to be and at which I often succeed, exudes awe for whatever (s)he teaches. A good teacher asks students and herself (I am writing about me) to take each new and difficult idea and if they believe this idea, rearrange their whole self such that the new is incorporated. If this cannot be done, they need to hold it in tension with those parts of one’s self that most oppose it. These issues cannot be resolved if we

simply forget about one of them. Jesus asks us to turn our world upside down and create true community. A good teacher, as a good pastor, asks all to act with good will toward others – no learning can take place otherwise. Even if we absolutely reject a new idea, fact, theory, or religion, we cannot truly love the one who is the source of that idea unless we strive to understand how they came to hold it. For me this is the deepest love – the deepest following of Jesus’ commandment to love one another as we love ourselves.

We must ask from where our understandings, our beliefs, the things we take for granted, come, and we can ask it of others as we strive to understand them. Love without understanding is an easy love – a loving without wanting to know. Perhaps we can only love as wholly as we can know. That kind of love hurts deeply because one feels the wounds as Jesus feels ours. I do not think I have ever conducted an educational program at a church without at least one person accessing a pastoral part of me, nor conducted worship without at least one person learning something, nor engaged in pastoral care without each of us opening ourselves to greater understanding and love.

Appendix I

Statement of Faith

United Church of Christ

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior
Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being,
create persons in your own image,
and set before each one the ways of life and death.
You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness
and sin.
Your judge people and nations by your righteous will
declared through the prophets and apostles.
In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and
risen Savior,
you have come to us
and shared our common lot,
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,
tongues, and races.

You call us into your church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
your presence in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen