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Ordination Paper

Part One: The candidate is to articulate their theological perspective and grasp of the historic Christian faith.)

In the articulation of my theological perspective I have chosen to use the Statement of Faith as my outline. The Statement of Faith in the United Church of Christ was adopted in 1959 by the Second General Synod in Oberlin, OH. There have been two revisions to the Statement of Faith over the decades: the first in 1977 by Robert Moss, Jr. and the second in 1981 which was written in the form of a doxology.¹ The first revision was prompted by the need for a more inclusive language that would better reflect our changing cultural diversity. The second revision is the one that I was most familiar with growing up and best reflects the inclusivity of the United Church of Christ's vision for our ever-changing world. The revisions to the Statement of Faith are not meant to replace one another but are instead meant to enhance our faith expression and understanding. In this section of the paper I have chosen to use the 1981 doxological version of the Statement of Faith.

"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.

¹ "United Church Of Christ", United Church Of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through 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."²

I believe in a triune God: God is the Creator and architect of life, Jesus is God's child and the lived example for us on earth, Holy Spirit is the wisdom and energy that moves us to transformative spaces. They exist separately and all together at the same moment, continually flowing between each other.

*"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."*³

I believe that God is eternal and has been present before there was any form of the created as was illustrated in the Genesis creation narrative. "Before the mountains were born, before you birthed the earth and the inhabited world—from forever in the past to forever in the future, you are God." (Psalm 90:2; CEB) The worlds and the cosmos were created by God scattering the stirrings

² "United Church Of Christ", United Church Of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

³ "United Church of Christ", United Church of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

of our Creator's infinite imagination. Humans were created from the dust of this earth and were formed into God's own image. Our elemental connectedness to this dust of the earth is a part of our call to care for and to be good stewards of all the elements of this created world. The image of God, in which we are all created, is reflected within each individual member of humankind, resulting in an ever-expanding mosaic of peoples with differing abilities, orientations, genders, races, and cultures. God is unconditionally loving and compassionate and extends radical grace and welcome to all the created world. God is faithful to the covenants that were made with humanity and the created earth, connecting us all as a part of one family.

*"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."*⁴

I believe that Jesus the Christ was the incarnation of God on earth; the human vehicle to set before us the ways to live out God's compassion, love, faithfulness, and grace. Jesus came to us to walk with us in our suffering and grief and to rejoice with us in our living experiences and celebrations. He is my best friend and my confidant - One who knows the depths of my heart and soul and still loves me just as I am, as he does all of God's beloved children. My understanding and finite grasp of the human brain also allows me to see Jesus through the lens of having a neurodiverse brain. The term neurodiverse defines a variation in the human brain regarding cognition, sociability, attentiveness, mood and other mental functions. I believe that Jesus was fully human and fully divine and that exposure to the fully divine spirit that indwelled within his human embodiment would have likely given him a neurodiverse brain. This allows for greater entry into seeing Jesus through the lens of someone that is labeled as "disabled" or as "differently-abled" which is crucial when expanding and Jesus' love and sacrifice on the cross for someone

⁴ "United Church of Christ", United Church of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

that lives even further on the margins of our society, our culture and our churches. While on earth, Jesus sought God's justice for the community of "others" that gathered around him and uplifted the most downtrodden and weak amongst us. Through his revolutionary actions he spoke truth to power and led others to find true, loving relationships with God. Jesus' commitment and obedience towards God's will and sharing God's unwavering message for all of humanity brought him forth with unyielding love all the way to the cross. This message that Jesus embodied spat in the face of the priestly human corruption that claimed to operate through God's authority. Jesus "took it back" and turned the structure on its head. His death on that cross was a murderous action of that empire to illustrate Jesus as an example of what happens when others seek to push back against idolatrous, unjust behaviors and practices established by the imperial, societal, cultural and religious forces. In glory and wonder he was resurrected, conquering death and earthly injustice.

*"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."*⁵

I believe that the Holy Spirit is the energy and the voice that moves us to action. She is felt in the gentle voice of the summer breeze and the refreshing drink of the summer rain. Holy Spirit is the transformational energy that comes to us as an advocate to show us where and how we are needed to reach those living on the margins and in the wilderness. She comes to us in our middle spaces of comfort and resignation and seeks to press us into conversation with those marginal spaces that we cannot see as clearly see without her guiding us to make a way for God's moral and ethical will. She is in constant motion and is ever-present. She fills and touches each part of our body, soul, and mind to bring comfort and peace, and to guard our hearts from hardening and succumbing to the harsh realities of our world. Holy Spirit meets us where we are, fills us and

⁵ "United Church of Christ", United Church of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

journeys with us from our first cry to our last, earthly breath. As we gather in our churches, Holy Spirit is present with us walks with us as we discern the ways in which we are able to be the voice and action of God's morality in our present times. She gives us the strength and courage to move beyond our spaces and mindsets of "we have always done it that way" to bring new and fresh interpretations and perspectives alongside traditional doctrine that inspires and draws us closer to life-giving relationship with the Divine.

*"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,"*⁶

I believe that the church is the people; the coming together (physically or virtually) of the priesthood of all believers that connects us all within the Body of Christ. Through the church we are bound to each other in covenantal relationship to seek God's justice on earth for all of humanity and all the created. The church exists as the living, breathing people that get up each day and do their part in building God's kin-dom in whatever way they are able - to feed the hungry, to care for the immigrants, widows, and orphans; to be the active presence of love, kindness, and grace to the "other" among us and within our communities of faith; to overturn oppression and offer a lived expression of the "new thing" that God began and is faithful to complete.

*"to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory."*⁷

Through the church we participate in sacramental practices: Baptism and Holy Communion. Through our baptism we are called and claimed as a beloved child of God. Through the baptismal water we are sealed within that holy love that God promises to all. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward truth that God has claimed us as we were carefully and lovingly knit together in our mother's womb. God calls to each one of us, by name, to enter the family of faith

⁶ "United Church of Christ", United Church of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

⁷ "United Church of Christ", United Church of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

and participate in the community of faith which upholds, accompanies, and guides us on our spiritual journey. Through our baptism we are joined to the village that helps to raise us up. By coming to the Holy Table, we share in a sacramental meal of remembrance for the life of Jesus. The table is long, the table is wide and there is always room for everyone. Through the consecration of the elements, the bread and cup we share, we do more than simply remember the last meal Jesus had with his beloved friends on the night that he was betrayed by one of them. The breaking of the bread reminds us of the broken body of Jesus as a sacrifice for all and the cup of blessing reminds us of the promises of God poured out in love for each of us. We engage all of our human senses as we are invited to come and witness, touch and taste the pouring out of that Godly grace which we take into our bodies. Partaking of this consecrated, sacramental meal allows space for the re-membering of Jesus' broken body; recognizing the binding of us all together within the Body of Christ. As we re-member Jesus' body, we also remember that God suffered with and through each moment of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross so that we too may be born as a new creation and into eternal life with him through the glory of his resurrection. By coming together at this Holy Table of re-membering and remembrance, we are bound together within the beloved community that transcends time and spaces between us.

“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.”⁸

I believe that there is an amazing, radical grace that is orchestrated alongside and through God's unconditional love for all of humanity and all of God's created earth. As humans, we will and do fall short of the agape love and grace that God has for all the created. This agape love is

⁸ "United Church of Christ", United Church of Christ, 2020, <https://www.ucc.org/>.

the highest form of love attainable and it is able to enfold us all through the covenantal promises of God. That is the space where the gift of grace can be felt at the deepest level - when we have the awareness of knowing that when we do miss “the mark” in living the way we ought and/or haven’t extended the grace and love that we should, that God is there with unconditional love and grace from which we are never separated.

In the radicalness of this grace, I cling tightly to the understanding that the whole of humanity are God’s beloved children. I do not believe that the only way for salvation or to God is through the belief in Jesus Christ. I do believe that it is important to me and my faith as a Christian, but I don’t believe that that is necessary in order to be in a covenant, intimate relationship with the divine, creating God that I believe in. We live in a pluralistic world with many faith traditions, religions, and spiritual beliefs, and I do not believe that God would turn away from those that didn’t proclaim Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior, or those that live faithfully into cultures that allow different pathways for accessing God.

I was gifted with the privilege and ability to live for a short time in Kuwait. My time there spanned seven months, and during that I time witnessed the faithfulness and love of this Muslim country. Their God, I believe, is the same God as ours; though they refer to theirs as Allah. It is my belief and understanding that God and Allah are the same God of Abraham, which our Holy Scripture tells us and their Holy Quran tells them, I cannot deny their being a part of the same beloved family of God. Their radical hospitality, their love and care for their neighbor (both foreign and domestic) holds true to the same Godly moral practices of our faith and the lived example of Jesus. Even as I journeyed through public marketplaces I was never treated badly or cruelly because I looked different or dressed differently. Instead, I was embraced and loved in a way that I had never had the privilege of experiencing in my own country that prides itself on

allowing and celebrating religious freedoms. One of the most moving experiences of my life took place in a marketplace. My middle son was only a year old at that time, and I was carrying him on my hip. I didn't notice that he had been tugging on my necklace, from which, dangled my small golden cross. I placed him back into his stroller and peered a bit more closely at some of the items in a shop stand table. The man that ran the booth grabbed me by my wrist and pulled me behind a curtain where it was just him and I...and I had a death grip on my son's stroller of course. I couldn't understand a single word he was saying except, "You Christian, you Christian." I said, "Yes, I am." He then pulled up the sleeve of his robe, or dishdasha in their culture, and he revealed a tiny, tattooed, cross on his forearm. And with great pride and beaming he said, "I Christian, I Christian." And then...we both wept. This man, too, embraced his Muslim faith and culture as I noticed his prayer mat carefully rolled on the table next to him; and yet, also he had a deep belief in Jesus which meant so much to him that he had this Christian symbol permanently etched onto his flesh. Pluralism, in my theology, is something that I believe we should embrace as a part of our understanding of the vastness of our ever-creating God.

Part two: the candidate student is to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the history, theological roots, polity, and practice of the United Church of Christ.)

The United Church of Christ is steeped in a rich history. Our roots can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther when he stepped up and out on conscience to seek reform within the Catholic church as he felt called to do. It is my belief that he was not only acting on conscious and hoping for reform instead of schism, but he was taking a historical stand for social justice on October 31st, 1517. I imagine that with each “bang” of the hammer (if that was in fact the way in which his 95 theses were presented/attached to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral) the echo of God’s justice rang out against the streets of cobblestone. These deep roots shifted the power of scriptural understanding and interpretation to the people and away from the hierarchy, power, and corruption of the Catholic empire. This “people-focused” structure is still seen today within the United Church of Christ in its polity and practice.

Traditionally, the United Church of Christ is understood to have been birthed from four congregational strands that unified in 1957; however, it is important to note that there is a 5th strand that appears to have possibly been “white-washed” out of our narrative heritage. It can be found if close readings are done through particular sources; however, it has not made its way into a well-known part of our history. The Afro-American Christian church is that 5th strand (merged with the Christian church in 1929; very close to the time of the merger of the Christian and Congregational churches) and deserves to have its place not only recognized, but also, to be lifted up in equity to the traditional four to two to one lineage that ultimately became the United Church of Christ on June 25th, 1957 in Cleveland, OH.

The “big four” that came together to birth the United Church of Christ were the Congregationalist church, the Christian church, the German Reformed church and the German Evangelical church. We are better able to understand where we are today by looking closer at where we, as a denomination, have come from.

The Congregational church traces its roots back to non-separatist Puritan (made up of Pilgrims, Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians) immigrants in the early Colonial period. The immortal words spoken by John Robinson in 1620 to the Pilgrims as they set sail for the “new world” are echoed within our “God Is Still Speaking” campaign which has become a huge identity piece of the United Church of Christ: “There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s holy word.” It was these Puritans that embodied the people of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Covenant is the tie that binds. When we disagree, or see things differently as each other, we promise to continue to journey with each other with God as our God. These covenanted communities, and the precedence and dedication/determination of the binding idea of covenant, set the foundations for the covenantal relationships that carry through our UCC polity today.

While bound together by covenant, congregations felt the need for their own independence within their own churches. Autonomy allowed for individual churches to determine what a congregation would adopt into practice or not; while still remaining in covenantal relationship with the denomination. Autonomy and covenant are the ties that bind together our polity and practices in the United Church of Christ and while recognizing that Synod statements were advisory, they were not authoritative.⁹ Another thread of Congregationalism that we can still see within the United Church of Christ today was the concept of “consociation”. Consociation was adopted

⁹ Dr. Jill Baker, “The Congregational Way”, (Lecture, repr., Eden Theological Seminary, 2019).

through the Saybrook Platform of 1708 which grouped and gathered congregations together for order, procedures and support. We recognize this today as Associations and Conferences.

The Christian church is the least known/recognized but is the most American in its origins. There were three separate groups that came together to form the Christian movement: the Virginia Methodists (1794) under the leadership of James O’Kelly, the New England Baptists (1801) under the leadership of Abner Jones, and the Kentucky Presbyterians (1803) under the leadership of Barton Stone. The coming together of these “like-minded” folks brought together those in the rural “frontier” setting and they drew strength and energy from revivals and revivalism. In 1820, the group came together at the “First United General Conference of Christians” and henceforth resolved to be formed as a denomination; however, their goal was to be identified and understood as a “movement with shared perspectives that unified them.”¹⁰ The principles of “Christian Character” being the only requirement for membership, recognizing the “right of private judgement, interpretation of scripture and liberty of conscience,” with the goal of “unity of all Christ’s followers on behalf of the world” are threads that we still see and live into in the United Church of Christ today. The strong pull of justice also comes from this thread as many responded to James O’Kelly’s denouncement of slavery. Many blacks came to the movement as a result of the denominational passion and zeal; this also inspired the joining of the Afro-American Christian tradition into the Christian movement in 1892 as a result of the Afro-American Christian Convention.

To be sure, unity and an irenic spirit was the heartbeat of the Christian movement in its ecumenism, and this focus is what brought the Christian denomination and the Congregational

¹⁰ Dr. Jill Baker, ""The Congregational Way"", (Lecture, repr., Eden Theological Seminary, 2019).

denomination together in 1931. While the Congregationalist churches varied in location (geography), style of worship and worship size, they were a good match for merger with the Christian denomination. “The free-spirited frontier Christians balanced in tension; head intellect and emotion, unity and diversity and this as a gift to the Congregational tradition.”¹¹ The strong emphasis on unity is certainly evidenced in the scriptural motto of the United Church of Christ that we hear today, “That they may all be one.” (John 17:21)

The German Reformed church places its American roots in a movement that brought them to the shores of the “new land” after Germany had become a battleground for all of Europe during the 30-years war. These immigrants settled in Pennsylvania and brought with them a “reformed” tradition of faith from their German culture which, to be sure, was rooted in the Reformation and the works of Martin Luther. The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 was more focused on relationship with God than with dogmatics. An individual’s relationship with their God is what cultivated the love of the essentials while living in peace with each other. Love of essentials is the tie that binds the United Church of Christ together in a motto that most certainly comes from this Reformed church tradition, “In essentials, unity; In non-essentials, diversity; In all things, charity.”¹² Essentials which lie in the embodied life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Well educated clergy and a governing body, elected by the congregation, developed from the leadership of John Phillip Boehm at Falkner Swamp in 1725. These two pieces still remain in our practice in our beloved United Church of Christ today. Under the leadership of Rev. Michael Schlatter, the Reformed church became a denomination in 1793. The practice of gathering every other year as a Synod derived from Schlatter’s leadership. As each individual church had its own

¹¹ Dr. Jill Baker, ""The Congregational Way"", (Lecture, repr., Eden Theological Seminary, 2019).

¹² "What We Believe", United Church Of Christ, 2019, https://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-we-believe.

elected governing board, so too did the denomination as a whole through the gathering at Synod. The Reformed tradition celebrated worship in a “lower church” style/ceremony, focused on pulpit centered liturgy, recognized Communion as a “remembrance meal” and found more freedom through and within prayer. Our United Church of Christ still recognizes and practices Synod every two years and partakes of Holy Communion as a meal of remembrance at our Tables.

The German Evangelical church places its roots in America as a result of immigration due to the oppressive religious mandates of Frederick Wilhelm, III. These immigrants made their way into the “new land” via the Mississippi river and migrated north. Their communities were insular, clinging tightly German culture, and looking to each other for survival and homesteading. The Evangelicals arrived with no pastoral leadership or way to establish churches. As a result of this recognized need for churches, Hermann Garlichs (layperson) bought a farm on Femme Osage Creek in Missouri (about 50 miles from St. Louis) and began pastoring to his neighbors and those in the community. Although Garlichs was not ordained, he was highly educated and in 1833 he established The Femme Osage Church which is the oldest Evangelical UCC church in Missouri.

In order to educate clergy in the “new world,” the Basel and Barmen Society sent missionaries to assist with education and ordination which resulted in pastors being sent back to Germany for higher education and marriage; bringing with them a strong emphasis on piety which is a characteristic of the German Evangelical tradition. This characteristic placed an emphasis on experiences of personal salvation above confession to determine church membership. This group also pushed back against “synodical ecclesiastical authoritarianism” which was deeply rooted in their reason for immigration to America. German Evangelicals developed their own catechism (Evangelical Catechism) which branched off of the Heidelberg catechism of the Reformed tradition.

The Evangelical Church Society of the West was established on October 15th, 1840 in response to Louis Edward Nollau's recognition of the need for fellowship and organization among Evangelical churches, resulting in the birth of German Evangelical denomination. Evangelicals looked to their hearts to determine ways of practicing their faith - their piety and ecumenism pulled them away from embracing strict creeds and formal practices, embracing autonomy, and implementing governance at the local level. Declarative statements from the Synod level were advisory instead of authoritative. This autonomy allowed for the church communities to continue their "insular" culture and traditions which is still seen within these communities in the United Church of Christ today. They carried an irenic spirit through their mission-oriented work with a theologically generative approach in biblical studies and interpretation.

The Congregational church and the Christian church merged in 1931. The German Reformed church and the German Evangelical church merged in 1934. The "big four" had become the "big two"; and on June 25th, 1957, they all became one in the birthing of our beloved United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio. Autonomy and covenant continue to be the ties that bind all of us together in our denomination. We continue to have a Synod gathering every other year that speaks to the church, not for the church. As a united and uniting denomination, we press forward into the future with the words from the Gospel of John 17:22, "That they may all be one."

Part three: Presentation of an integrating statement that invites the candidate to relate the faith and practice of the Church to their own pilgrimage of faith and understandings of and intentions for their ministry as a person ordained by the United Church of Christ.

“But Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.’” (Matthew 955). This is one of my favorites of Jesus’ teachings. I’ve always known that Jesus encouraged the children to come to him, but as a child, there were so many roadblocks placed between me and the church that I really didn’t know how I was supposed to get there.

My earliest experiences of getting to church were of my mother dressing me up in my best clothes and having me wait by the door for my aunt to take me to church. My mother rarely came with me to church unless it was the traditional Sunday School Christmas Pageant. However, she always knew when I would be singing in the Cherub Choir, and as we pulled out of the driveway, she would say, “Sing loud enough for me to hear you.” Those were words that always resounded with me, and as I stood on the altar steps, I would sing as loud as I could so my mom could hear me in the next town over.

Throughout my childhood, church was a place to which I was sent and not a place we went together as a family. My aunt was always busy with the “ladies groups” and sang in the Chancel Choir, so I always clung to my Sunday School teachers and tried my best to make friends. But, because I did not go to the same schools as my classmates, I always felt like I was an outsider that did not fit in quite right. My teachers and my Cherub Choir director were my favorite people at church.

My church family played a significant role in raising me and instilling in me the beliefs that I have today. They were where I belonged without feeling like I was expected to give anything back. They were who formed me through the stories of God and Jesus, and they took me under their wings when they had no responsibility outside of the community of faith to do so. Their lived examples mirrored what I heard from the Bible and what I learned about the cloud of witnesses that came before them.

In Sunday School, I learned all the well-known Bible stories about Noah, Moses, Zacchaeus, Jesus, Christmas, and Easter, but in church, I learned that God lived in the sanctuary, and he didn't like children to make noise or to be in the sanctuary very long. The sanctuary was a cold, intimidating place where I was seen and not heard (unless I was singing in the Cherub Choir of course). As children, we did not sit with the people that brought us to church. Instead, we sat in the front pews with our Sunday School teachers. Worship began with "Children's Time" and then we were shooed away to Sunday School.

As a teen, I began to drift away from the church. I tried to attend various Youth Group functions and church camps throughout junior and senior High School, but I still did not really feel connected to my peers. I started teaching the music at Vacation Bible School when I was 15, and that was my one solid connection that brought me back to the church every summer. However, I did not feel like I had a relationship with God, and I had a tough time understanding who God was. I believed the Holy Trinity existed, but Jesus was the only part of it I truly understood.

Although we had two pastors, the Associate Pastor, Rev. Jan, was who I most connected with. Jan always made time for me and my dysfunctional family. She was so real and relevant, and I was always so thankful for her influence on and within my life. In the film *Hope Floats*; the leading character, Birdee Pruitt says, "Childhood is what you spend the rest of your life trying to

overcome” (Whitaker). I am certainly not an exception to that rule. My childhood was not one of sunshine and rainbows, but Rev. Jan was always there for me in every way possible. Her guidance and support helped me learn what God was all about. She taught me that I was never alone, and helped me see that no matter what, God was always there, loving me unconditionally.

As I grew into early adulthood, my understanding of God did not change much. I got married and had my first child. Having my daughter baptized was one of the happiest days of my life, and there was something so beautiful in the act of committing her to God. For her to be called by name as a child of God was such a precious moment, and within that moment, my understanding and image of God softened and became that of a caring and guiding father figure. I began teaching junior high Sunday School, became active in the Chancel Choir, and continued to teach music at Vacation Bible School. I even served on the Board of Christian Education. Once I truly began to see God as a true and loving father, I was able to begin to develop a deepening relationship with God. But that feeling did not last for long.

When my daughter was 4 years, old I became pregnant with my 2nd child. Approximately 4 months into my pregnancy, I suffered a miscarriage. I was grief stricken and angry. How could God do this to me? Why would God take away my child and my daughter’s little brother? How could God allow this to happen? The relationship that I had just begun to build with God crumbled around me. I hated God. I was angry at God and I would scream and shout it up to the heavens. Soon, my anger turned to depression, and I was ashamed of how I had treated God in my pain and anger. I felt that I was no longer worthy of having any type of relationship with God, and I was certain that he would never be able to forgive me or love me again. I withdrew from everything at church and shut everyone out. That is, until almost a year later, when it was time, once again, to teach music at Vacation Bible School.

I thought about not going. I was certain someone else would be able to fill in that year, but when the director called me, I agreed to teach music once again. I distinctly remember trying my best to not make eye contact with any of the other adult leaders at church - especially Pastor Martha. After my miscarriage, she had reached out to me and offered kind words. She told me that I was always welcome at church whenever I was ready to come back, and she assured me that I was deeply missed and loved. But I did not believe that those words were really meant for someone like me. I had been and was still so angry with God.

Every day after Vacation Bible School, I successfully managed to slip away without having any one on one interactions with her or with anyone else. That is, until the last day. I lingered a bit too long in the sanctuary after closing worship, and she must have sensed that I was there because she came back into the sanctuary after everyone was gone. She knew that I was troubled and struggling just to be in that building, and she helped me by sharing her story with me. It was about her own personal anger with God while she was on her journey to ordained ministry. She told me that it was ok to be angry with God and that I was still unconditionally loved. After listening her story, I said, "But why would God do these things and allow these things to happen?" She told me that she did not believe that God did these things or allowed them to happen. She believed instead that God was there for us after the tragedies to give us strength and to build us up again. Afterward, as we sat in the sanctuary, she prayed many prayers with me, and I felt myself begin to soften. Later that night I prayed on my own for the first time in almost a year. I told God that I was sorry and asked for help in moving forward. I knew that if Pastor Martha could come back from her anger, re-enter in to relationship with God, and even go on to become an ordained minister, then I could certainly give reconciliation my best effort as well.

Things got much easier after that. I jumped back into church with both feet and began volunteering everywhere I could: Music Ministry, Christian Education, Youth Ministry, Sunday School etc.... I was falling in love with church again, my relationship with God deepened, and my faith was strengthened and renewed. I began to take steps to learn more about our denomination and the StillSpeaking campaign that was being rolled out across the country. I felt enlivened and in love with my church and my God. My love and relationship with God became more embodied as I would pour my heart and soul out through music and worship; and yet, my narrative is vast and is riddled with brokenness. Apart from my church family, I grew up inside of cultures of addiction, mental illness, socio-economic oppression, dysfunction, co-dependent relationships, and abuse (to name just a 'few'). They have made me the person that I am today despite all of them and they have given me a lens through which I am able to have a greater empathy for others in similar walks of life, whether past or present. Through all my life, I have never been separated from God. Not by my anger, frustration, choices, or times in the wilderness. God has always been with me...rising and falling with me and standing at the edge of the path waiting for me to take his hand.

I was blessed with the opportunity to begin working for my church as the Administrative Assistant and Youth Ministry Director. In that time, my understanding of God has grown more than I ever imagined it could. As the Youth Ministry Director, I took our youth on a mission trip to Henderson, Kentucky, and the whole experience was by far the most faith rocking and humbling I had experienced to that point. I did not anticipate or fully understand the challenges, responsibilities, and pain that would be heaped on me throughout that journey. My faith, my heart and my soul had been torn down and ripped apart in every way possible, and I felt like I hit rock bottom once again. Everything that could have gone wrong on a mission trip did. We got lost and

arrived hours late to the settlement. I had a chaperone that was doing their best to undermine me, cause division and was abusive towards the youth every second of every day. I had youth that were physically fighting with each other and with other youth gathered at the settlement. Work projects we had no clue how to complete. Youth having allergic reactions, weather not cooperating, dangerous road conditions (where there were roads)...and everyone was looking at me to fix it all and make things “better”.

But then I learned that that was all part of the process in my leadership role. I had been trying to do it all on my own, and I realized that I could not. God was telling me that it was ok and that we were going to get through this together. I just needed lean and lean harder than I ever had before. And I rose. I rose stronger, with a faith and connection to God that had deepened to levels it had never reached before. God filled me with love and strength and walked with me through my fire and I welcomed and accepted that Divine company. It was shortly after returning home from that journey, that I began to feel a nudge. A tiny voice deep within me was softly telling me that I was meant for and capable of doing so much more for my God and for my church.

That still, small voice became much stronger over the next 3 years. The journey to General Synod in July 2017 took me to so many different places spiritually and emotionally, and I finally realized that the voice I was feeling was the Holy Spirit calling me to ordained ministry. As soon as I verbalized those words out loud to Pastor Martha, my husband, and my closest friends, I felt as if a cog inside me had clicked into place, and I felt a renewed sense of purpose. God was with me through it all.

God, for me, is a God of love, grace, and compassion. No person or creation in this realm is more or less worthy of God’s grace and steadfast, unconditional love. God is ever present and waits patiently to meet us where we are; this was more often than not mirrored in the actions and

relationships with my church family. This loving, affirming, village fostered an immense joy inside of me. This embodied joy was integral to the formation of my optimism, hope, positivity – my “sugar,” if you will. This “Pollyana-ish” outlook drives me to want to help people feel better, get better, etc. It is also sometimes seen as “over the top” or “inauthentic,” but if you know me and you know my story, then you know that it is my ‘little light’ shining that God planted in me. My “little light” is not something that I will put out, nor is it something that I have an easy time balancing with salt (or other essentials from my ever-expanding, living spice rack). I want people to experience the feeling of joy and love that I feel and have experienced from God and from Christ Jesus. Whether they understand that as coming from the divine or not, and the feeling or emotion is the closest thing that I can bring to them, that is simply a part of who I am. However, I do understand and am learning more EVERY day that there is not always a time and place for my “joy” or for my “sugar” and I must keep it in check for everyone to have a place at the table and so that I can sit with and meet everyone where they are. I do not want to offer a ministry of silver-linings. Those silver-linings gloss over spaces of real human emotional spaces and do more harm than help in many situations.

I have a deep love for the United Church of Christ as a denomination. I believe that the primary strengths of our denomination are love, unity and justice. Love is the greatest force that drives the efforts of the United Church of Christ. Well-grounded in scripture, Jesus was clear about love being the foundational “wheelhouse” we need to work from to live a life that is pleasing to God. Matthew: 22:6-40, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.” John

13:34, “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other.” Our actions, our behaviors, our service must be grounded in and come from a place of love for each other as beloved children of God and sibling of Christ.

The United Church of Christ is unwavering in its efforts to ensure that all of humankind is loved to the best of our human capabilities. It is through the “wheelhouse” of God’s love for us and for each other that our efforts for justice and unity are derived. Justice is what I believe that the Bible tells us that God wills for all the created. That justice extends past humankind and to the seen and unseen. Human beings were created to care for the earth and everything that encompasses it. I do not believe that we were given “control” or “power” over the earth, but instead we were entrusted to be caretakers of God’s beloved creation. I believe that we are to care for the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. We are to seek justice for those that live on the margins of our society and of our cultures. We are to love them as God loves them. That does not mean that we assume their needs are our needs; however, it does mean that we need to give of ourselves to establish justice through their lens. By not assuming needs of those most vulnerable members of our created world, we are able to establish unity.

I believe that we are all united in Christ Jesus and that we are all God’s beloved children. When one part of our family is hurting, we hurt; it is our job and our responsibility to restore peace, seek justice and to love them as God loves them. This unification can come in many forms and there is no single path to unification as we exist in a pluralistic world; however, in the Christian faith and in the United Church of Christ, the unifying has been established through the sacrament of our baptism in Christ and through the sacrament of the Table.

I believe that the primary limitation of the United Church of Christ is that the denomination is too quick to “leave behind” and “criticize” the voices at the Table that don’t echo the cry for

justice in the same way. Our autonomy that is rooted in our historical birth is also our “Achilles heel.” While the UCC is known as the church of ‘firsts,’ those firsts most assuredly were met with mediation and education surrounding God’s vision of justice for all. The justice-driven focus shifts the pendulum sometimes so radically that the fallout can be irreparable. I am mindful of the necessity that our motto, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity” brings to our denomination. We must remain vigilant in our practices; holding space for the possibility that a non-essential to one person is an essential to another. Times such as these may lead to breaks and divisions which are also woven through our history - spanning thousands of years of Christ’s beloved Church, not just the United Church of Christ. To be sure, there is an unrelenting, urban focus from our national UCC-setting that has left quite a gap and a feeling of being “left behind” by the hundreds of rural congregations that situate themselves in this conference and are a part of this “united” church.

I have always had a passion for disability advocacy for my son, but I can now truly state that my call and vision has grown past just that of my son and extends out to all the created. My son is on the Autism spectrum. He received his diagnosis when he was two and a half years old and I was admittedly unaware of negative societal ramifications that awaited him. I have battled and advocated for him in school and in church. I have witnessed firsthand how structural and systemic oppression leads to the ostracizing and marginalization of persons with disabilities as they are firmly kept on the margins of our society and of our faith communities. To be sure, there are invisible communities surrounding every one of our faith communities that choose isolation as opposed to ridicule and judgement. It can also be said, with certainty, that there have been occasions in our churches that persons with disabilities have this isolation thrust upon them through exclusionary practices, educational blind spots, and structural limitations. Two thousand

years of embeddedness of keeping those seen as “different” or “other” within the confines of the wilderness on societal fringes allows this to lurk in our faith communities unseen, unchecked, and without awareness. Bringing awareness and education to these spaces is an integral part of my call and my ministerial work. This work is not simply about creating spaces of “inclusion” it is about creating spaces of “belonging.” The distance between these two spaces is vast. Providing a space or spaces that persons with disabilities are included is one thing - providing elevator or ramp access allows people to be included in worship spaces; that does not mean that they feel they belong in that space. The words of Psalm 139:14 is the cornerstone of this theological grounding and ideation, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.” To be sure, we are all fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God – this extends to those that are living with physical, mental, or cognitive disabilities. It is an intimate part of my calling and of our call as communities of faith to foster their belonging and place within the Body of Christ.