

How did we get here? In the process of writing this authorization paper, that question kept occurring to me. How did we get here, and where do I fit? Let me begin with an analogy from the world of science fiction.

When Rory Williams perched precariously on the ledge of a high-rise building in New York City, prepared to risk his life in order to save it (it's complicated), his wife - Amy Pond - took his hand and declared "Together, or not at all." That quote from the BBC television show 'Doctor Who' demonstrates the tension between covenant and autonomy that has extended through the history of the United Church of Christ, and that still exists today. The UCC is demonstrative of a people who have stepped out in bravery to achieve great things, and who have discovered strength in doing those things together.

The UCC is the child of the unlikely marriage of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and of the Congregational Christian Churches in 1957. It is, then, the grandchild of the Congregational and the Christian Churches, who merged in 1931; as well as of the German Evangelical and the German Reformed Churches, who merged in 1934 with the striking goal of unity first, details later.

The family tree of the UCC is infused with the teachings and traditions of four great reformation voices. The German Evangelicals bring Luther, and the German Reformed Churches have their roots in Zwingli. Calvin appears in the Congregationalists Puritan roots, and the Christian Church was profoundly influenced by the Anabaptist movement. It is no wonder, then, that these churches are a contradiction in similarities and divergence, and that they resisted for so long the various calls to merger. A deeper investigation into the histories of those early churches is necessary to truly understand those similarities and differences, and to better apply them to an understanding of the current and ongoing tension between covenant and autonomy in the UCC.

The key difference between the histories of the Congregational Christian Churches and that of the two German churches, is a matter of colonization and migration. The Congregational church was a byproduct of the Puritan colonization of the United States; it is written throughout its history. Early colonists arrived for social, political, and economic reasons, and few shared the Puritan goal of establishing a new order of church and social order. Even so, early settlers in the New England area entered a space without a distinction between church and state. Although most colonists were not church members civil privileges such as voting were tied to membership, and Bible law was enshrined as common law.

The attitudes and behaviors of colonists towards First Nation peoples was harmful from those within as well as without church structures. Not all were intentionally harmful. For example, John Eliot's ministry was grounded in the desire to raise the standard of living for indigenous people. Eliot's metric of an acceptable standard of living was rooted in white European standards, but his intent was good. Even there, his work was undermined by others who did harm in his name.

Another notable person of this time is Anne Hutchinson who spoke against the doctrine of election and declared that everyone who wanted salvation could have it. She held meetings in her home to large groups and spoke to both men and women of her beliefs. She was banished to Rhode Island for her troubles - further proof of the influence of religious thought on civil life.

Despite the efforts of church leaders, the early settlers were dismayed to find that their children were less enthusiastic about religion than they were. The Half-Way covenant of 1662 was a compromise that allowed their grandchildren to be baptized into the church, even though the children's parents were not willing to present them. This provided a sort of half-membership that provided the privilege of voting, but not communion. Full membership required the evidence

of a public confession of faith. This emphasis on living faith publicly and having the evidence of faith determined by the community, contributed to the extremism of the Salem witch trials in 1692.

Notable efforts to move the Congregational churches into covenantal relationships include Cotton Mather's suggestion that candidates for ministry be examined and licensed - a standard practice in the UCC today - and the Saybrook Platform of 1708, a new constitution that spoke against the individual approach and argued for a system similar to that used by Presbyterians.

Autonomy, not just of congregations, but of individuals, was a key element of the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century. During this period Jonathan Edwards and other reformers established individual conversion as the accepted way in to the Kingdom of God.

Generally speaking, the Congregationalist churches can be seen as the established, educated movement of the colonial period, as compared with the frontier churches who grew out of the Great Awakening and who established themselves as the Christian Church. These believers argued that frontier churches needed to be free to deal with their own unique issues. Although they have roots in common with the Methodists they split over the issue of Bishops, rejecting the hierarchical approach to church structure in favor of egalitarianism and autonomy. They claimed 'Christian' as their only name and the Bible as their only guide.

Christian character was the only requirement for membership in the Christian churches, and all members were welcome to partake in Communion. They claimed the right of private judgement, interpretation of scripture and liberty of conscience. They were an anti-creedal church. These things combined to make fertile soil for the acceptance of a proportionally higher number of women preachers compared to other churches at this time.

Their stated end goal was the unity of all believers. Unfortunately, as was the case with many denominations, they were unable to maintain unity within their own body. The north and south churches split over the issue of slavery around and during the Civil War. Following the war, black members tended to form their own churches.

It is worth noting that the 1892 Afro-American Convention was formed with five conferences containing a total of 6000 members. The eventual swallowing up of the Afro-American churches by the wider church is an often-forgotten part of UCC history.

The Congregational and the Christian churches were separated by their different theologies and structures, even so they found enough common ground to achieve merger in the context of the Great Depression. By comparison, the German churches had more points of similarity between them. Both were influenced by the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, as well as by the 1817 decision of King Friedrich Willhelm III to force a merger between German Lutheran and Reformed churches to create The Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU). Poor Friedrich was about 140 years too early for such a merger.

The German Reformed Church and the German Evangelicals both reached America by way to the mechanism of migration. Both groups were leaving places that had been torn apart by war. The Reformed Church were refugees of the 30 years war and the associated political, religious, social, and economic privations. They settled in Pennsylvania at the urging of William Penn, a Quaker. Penn described an area of tolerance, where laws guaranteed civil liberty, religious freedom, and economic opportunity without discrimination. It is noteworthy that this is not only the opposite of what the Germans were fleeing, but also the opposite of what early colonists experienced when they reached Puritan New England.

Noteworthy names and dates within the German Reformed Church tradition include Boehm, who in 1725 conducted worship and served communion at Falker Swamp. This was the first Reformed congregation in Pennsylvania, and still holds regular services. In 1774 the Kirchen-Ordnung, or Church Order was formed with the help of Michael Schlatter, creating the Coetus of the Reformed Ministerium of Congregations; a coetus being somewhat like our modern day Synod. These events led to the official formation of the German Reformed church in 1793.

The believers who would go on to form the German Evangelical churches were likewise refugees of war, migrating in the hopes of a better future. The Napoleonic Wars had reduced large swathes of Europe to starvation and destruction, produced heavy taxation, and had undone for many any sense of national identity. Church leaders argued over doctrines of salvation, as well as practical matters such as hymnals, catechisms, and forms of worship. They tended to settle in Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri because great rivers and the ability to navigate them by boat made those areas accessible.

The defining characteristics of the Evangelical Tradition were Pietism. ecumenism (while being ethnically homogenous), an Irenic (peaceful) Spirit, an orientation towards mission, being theologically generative, and holding the Bible as central. We can see the fruits of these beliefs in the UCC today. For example, ‘God is still speaking’ is modern speak for ‘theologically generative.’ Comparisons to the Christian Church can be found within the five characteristics of Pietism - faith is more important than education, character matters, be ready to serve others, commitment to church union to mission and social action, and a resistance to creeds.

Notable names and dates from the history of the German Evangelical tradition include Femme Osage, the oldest Evangelical Church in Missouri, founded in 1833 by Hermann

Garlichs a schoolteacher turned pastor. The community, fifty miles outside of St Louis, is named for the discovery of the dead body of a native Osage woman in a creek. In comparison to that unfortunate woman, the church is still alive today.

The Kirchenverein was a church society movement that came out of the Evangelical Society of the West, organized in part by Louis Nollau and founded in 1840 at Gravois settlement. It called for autonomy but also cooperation between benevolent organizations to advance the Kingdom of God. This was a move towards independence from the Mother Church in Germany and was persecuted by the rationalists who saw no need for beliefs outside of what could be proved by science. The Kirchenverein published The Evangelical Catechism in 1847, which came in the form of 219 questions and answers.

In 1852 Isaac Scott became the first ordained black pastor. In 1872 the German Evangelic Synod of North America was formed. It was not until after the merger of the two German churches in 1934 that Frances Kaptisky was the first woman ordained in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition in 1948.

All four of the strands that formed to create the UCC have different histories and different theological backgrounds. However, they all also hold one thing in common: they have all in some measure and at some time attended to the task of balancing the tension between autonomy and covenant. These histories matter because they influence church leadership and church life still today.

Many UCC congregations still feel very connected to their German Evangelical roots. They were formed in communities that much of the wider church disregarded and often geographically isolated. Many have histories of weathering intense hardship. Some are located in small towns where a racially divisive past still impacts the reality of today. All these things

combine to make them worshipping communities that see great value in independence and have little interest in what is happening at a denominational level.

These are not congregations who have shut themselves off from receiving new revelations from a God who is still speaking. Some of the smallest faith communities contribute generously to Our Churches Wider Mission. At the same time, they have less familiarity with the movements of the wider church and have varying degrees interest in regional gatherings or General Synod.

But let's go back to Rory and Amy, balanced on the ledge in New York City. At many points throughout the history of the churches who now make up the UCC someone, somewhere has stepped out on a ledge. There was Anne Hutchinson, preaching to groups of fifty men and women in her own home. It is seen in the frontier preachers of the Christian church who insisted on the right to private judgement. You see it in the response of the believers who first received Penn's invitation to pursue religious freedom in Pennsylvania. It is evidence in the ordinations of Scott and Kaptisky. In each of those moments a problem was identified, a risk was assessed, a heart - multiple hearts - pumped faster with the thrill of the danger and excitement of it. And an invitation was made to others to join in.

The success of failure of what followed each of those ledge moments was determined by the willingness of others to follow. Without others it would have just been Anne talking to herself in her kitchen. Without others the frontier Christians would be footnotes in history. Without others the German Reformed Church would never have been established in Pennsylvania. Without others African Americans and women would have faced further obstacles to reaching the pulpit in UCC churches. This is how covenant changes the world.

Conversely, those 'others' cannot be forced into action. When Rory stood on the ledge it was Amy's choice to join him. In the UCC church today churches are invited, but never forced, to join in covenantal relationship. Whenever the National Synod steps out onto a ledge each congregation is invited to step out as well. No congregation is commanded to make changes, to take risks, to declare "Together, or not at all." That is a matter of choice, reflective of the history of the original churches and entrenched in the polity of the denomination. Sure, there are times when autonomy leaves someone hanging on the ledge, but look how well we all fly when we choose to step into covenant together.

So, eight pages in, I am sure you're wondering where I fit into all this. Much like the UCC, I am the result of diverse cultures. I was raised on the traditional lands of the Kaurna people (now known as Adelaide, South Australia) by a first-generation immigrant mother who was born in England, and by an Australian father whose family had been settler-colonizers for many generations. I am now an immigrant to the United States, a country I have called home since 2005.

I feel the tensions of covenant and autonomy. I understand community to be central to healthy living and at the same time I value the autonomy to receive from and to respond to a Still Speaking God. I have been liberated from Biblical Literalism. I grew up in Christian evangelical churches. In my teens I worshipped in Anglican and Uniting Church of Australia churches. In my adult years I have spent time serving United Methodist congregations as a Licensed Local Pastor and have served three Unitarian Universalist congregations as a contract minister. I regularly provide pulpit supply to United Church of Christ and to Unitarian Universalist congregations.

At the core of my theology is the belief in a Deity who declares the following affirmation over all living beings: “You are whole, you are holy, you are wholly loved.” This can be a little tricky to remember, especially considering recent world events that cast humanity in a not great light; but we have a long history of redemption to remind us that God has decided we are all three of those things. We understand that the Israelites were living in similarly troubled times when it was written in Psalm 80:19, “Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” This is what I imagine God’s reply would be:

God’s Credo¹

I believe in you.

You are whole.
There is nothing inherently wrong with you.
You have value, worth, dignity.
There may be times when you are harmed
and require mending, but
you are not garbage.
You are always worth saving.

You are holy.
You have been called you into being and named Good.
You contain within you the divine spark of life.
Your continued existence matters.
There may be times when you do not live up
to the fullness of who you are, but
you are continually invited back into community.
You are always worth restoring.

You are wholly loved.
You are lovable in your entirety.
You contain no secret bad enough
that it disqualifies you from compassion.
There may be times when you find yourself
casting off the things that do not serve you, but
you are valued for
 whoever you have been,
 whoever you are along the way,
 and for whoever you are coming to be.

¹ All poems in this paper are my own, except where otherwise noted

You are always worth loving.

Communicating just how precious we are is fundamental to my practice of pastoral care. It also informs how I shape worship services, how I do the work of biblical interpretation, how I chair a committee meeting, how I write as an author, and how I preach. It is central to my own spirituality.

I find this message, of being whole, holy, and wholly loved, embodied in the personhood of Jesus, who is at the center of our faith tradition and who demonstrated love in context. From the life, death, and our new life with Christ we better understand how to give and receive grace, mercy, and forgiveness. I understand the primary ministry of Jesus to be about building a beloved community. Their² lessons, examples, signs, and wonders all point to a divine wish for closeness. That wish to be near has been particularly topical over the past few years of pandemic life. I have been familiar with Luke 17:12 since childhood, “As Jesus entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance...” Reading it again in the context of zoom meetings and online worship services brought me to a deeper understanding of Emmanuel, God *with* us.

Immanent

Where I come from, we are familiar
with the concept of distance.

We know about road trips
that are measured in days, not hours,
about beloved faces
aging years in the blink of an eye,
in our absence.

We humans crave connection.

Built for relationship
our fingertips press longingly

² I will be referring to Jesus using They/Them gender neutral pronouns throughout this paper (except when quoting from the Bible), which reflects my spiritual practice of leaning in on referring to Them likewise in my day-to-day life.

against the surface of a screen,
of a letter
of a casket.

There is something about
sharing the same air
that cannot be replicated.
Is this why you came here?
Folding reality, slipping into skin,
longing to be near.

Lonely God
moved to acts of compassion,
deeds designed to build community,
dismantle barriers, all to close the distance.

Be not forlorn, abide here with me.
Let us be lonely
together.

My experience of ministering through the early days of this ongoing pandemic taught me more than how to use Zoom and how to adequately light the room to produce a good quality video. It also taught me how to provide pastoral care via a video call and how to preach to the congregation behind the camera. More importantly, it taught me to long for community, the way Creator longs for creation to be in community, as evidenced by the presence of Jesus.

Further evidence of a Deity who wants us to understand we are whole, holy, and wholly loved is found in the gift of the presence of Spirit who has always breathed within and in chorus with humanity, and whose interactions with humanity shifted following the execution of Jesus.

We Christians call that initial shift in interaction Pentecost because of the events described in Acts 2; including ‘tongues, as of fire’ appearing and resting on the community of followers of Jesus. It is interesting to me that Pentecost (or, in the Jewish tradition, Shavout) was a celebration of the gift of the Torah, or Law, and that the reactions of those present to this new movement of Spirit was to act in ways that some might describe as ‘lawless.’ I find this to be a

compelling argument that the act of protesting against injustice can be a divinely inspired movement of Spirit.

Riot

Who set these streets on fire?

It blew up from the embers
of the coals in the courtyard
where empire warmed itself
while it made false accusations,
against one whose cheek
was kissed with melanin.

It smoldered in our midst
until we could deny him no more,

It blazed with righteous indignation
until tongues of flame danced
above all our heads.

And ash filled the sky,
and tears filled our eyes.
We gasped in like a bellows,
blew out with a shout
giving voice to the rage
in an almighty babble,
and we took to the streets
as an ungoverned rabble.
We screamed, "Say his name!"
in the face of the devil,
with a fury that matched
to the scope of the evil
of an empire that kills
with a smirk and a shrug,
takes an innocent life
and calls him a thug.
Yes, we took to the streets
in the Spirit of love.

Pentecost is a riot.

Beloveds, get ready,
the flames are licking at the door.

Spirit has been a great source of comfort for me through any number of trials, and She is my source of inspiration who enlightens and motivates. She informs my writing, and She pushes me beyond my comfort zone out into the public square. When I have participated in community organizing and in protest actions it has been because Spirit has emboldened me.

When Spirit stirs up the souls of faithful people, we respond by gathering in like-minded communities that we call Church. We meet to encourage, admonish, uplift, and remind each other of God's Credo, of Jesus' teachings, and of Spirit's presence. When our congregations function at their best we are the embodiment of God. We are the people you go to when you have a lot to celebrate, and we are the people we turn to when everything has gone wrong. We love each other enough to name it when we are not being our best selves and we encourage each other to love more fully. We are the people who wrestle together, as Jacob wrestled in Genesis 32.

Par Terre³

Don't just sit there, do something.

Precede me:

Show me you have been here.
Show me that you too have sent
the very best of yourself ahead,
casting your entire body of work
into the pit, hoping to assuage the wrath of an angry god,
only to find yourself here
with your face pressed into these rocks,
mouth full of dust.

Fight with me:

Show me that this has meaning.
Do not abandon me in the dirt:
arms flailing, voice wailing,
words railing, alone.
Square up against me, if you must,
or, better yet,
align your spine against mine,

³ French - 'On the Gound' In wrestling the Par Terre position is ordered by the referee when one or both wrestlers demonstrate excessive passivity.

bone to bone, fists clenched,
chin set, muscles tense
so that back to back we can face
the monsters of this night.

Curse with me:
Show me I can blaspheme.
Paint speech bubbles in the sky
and invite me to belch into them
the bleakest and brightest of all my doubts.
Throw sand into this fire as I exhale it,
as I twist it, as the granules melt and bubble
until these words fall as marbles at our feet.

And this, above all else, this:
Be with me.
Embody the Presence with your flesh
the Pneuma with your breath.
While the caravan of my treasures
proceeds ahead—
a serpentine river of fools-gold promises—
be the reassurance that without all that
I alone am something of worth.

And don't, do not, oh do not leave me
until I get the blessing.

If you love me, oh if you love me,
don't just do something. Sit here.

I am a person who has experienced loss. I have lived through trauma. I am a survivor of domestic abuse. All of those things have informed who I am as a person of faith, and as a minister. If I were interested in promoting a Pre-K Sunday School faith, I would teach a Pre-K Sunday School class. Simplistic lessons are significant and appropriate for small children, but we who have experienced life more fully find that we thirst for deeper waters.

In the congregation where I worshipped at the time my son died, some people were surprised that I went to church the Sunday following his death. They expressed the sentiment that they would be uncomfortable containing their emotions in that space. Everybody grieves

differently, and each way of grieving is valid but for me the value of a church community is that it provides a place where I do not have to hold it all together. Now that I am in ministry, I invite the congregations I serve to love boldly, to show compassion, to wrestle with the Big Issues and support each other through the Hard Times. Creating those brave spaces is a part of loving each other at our best.

Sadly, we do not always function at our best. We know that people are harmed within our congregations. We know of terrible cases of abuse from spiritual leaders, and from organizational structures that become complicit in that abuse when they try to minimize and cover it up. Abuse is clearly defined when it is something that breaks a law, but I would extend the definition to include spiritual abuse that hurts marginalized people based on aspects of their humanity that cannot be changed. That form of spiritual abuse is the antithesis of my thesis statement; it claims, “You are ruined, you are profane, you are unlovable.”

My earliest memories were formed within churches that sang, “Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.” And I have spent years in churches that followed the singing of that song with an implied or overt chorus of, “Just kidding, not you.” I believe that challenging oppression has always been essential to faithful living, and of late it has felt especially important. As a member of Queer community, I am troubled by the ongoing hijacking of Christianity by the regressive views of a relatively small group who profit from perpetuating harm. The work of affirming people of all gender and sexual expressions in the name of God is lifesaving. Psalm 139:13-14 tells us that we are divinely and wonderfully made. A large part of my work in ministry is reminding people of that.

Abomination

Who has unraveled you?
Who has snipped and ripped

at your intricate strands
until the very fibers of your being hang
like cobwebs across the chasm
between the lies you have been told
and the truth of who you are?

Who slipped loose the yarn,
who has dropped all these stitches,
who undid all My good work?

Who hung you out to dry
beneath the merciless heat
of an oppressive sun,
until the vibrant brightness
and the rich depths
of the spectacular spectrum I gave you
have faded and greyed into the muted pallor
of an over-washed sock?

Who stripped out the colors,
who has denied you the promise
of My rainbow?

Who has soiled you?
Who ground into your soul the filthy fallacy
that I made you wrong,
so ruthlessly that you have begun to settle limply
into this matted, besmirched
state of existing?

Who slung the mud,
who wrote your name in dirt,
who infringed upon My trademark?

Who has discarded you?
Who has removed you from the honored place of display,
slipping you farther and further back
into the shadowed corners of the closet?

Who discounted your worth,
who miscalculated your value,
who diminished My treasure?

Who has done this abominable thing
to My good and perfect creation?

Show Mama who did this to you,
I will sort them out.

If we understand ourselves to be God's people, if we *proclaim* ourselves as God's people, it is so important that we love and lead well, that we work to heal and not to harm. It is important that we oppose sin and evil - which I define as whatever seeks to undermine the wholeness, the holiness, the beloved-ness of each other and the universe. Sin and evil are the powers that destroy, that pull apart.

It is evil that the environment continues to be harmed by our actions, and we sin when we do nothing to change that. It is evil that poverty forces people onto the streets where their families are pulled about by limited options for shelter, and we sin when that fact does not move us to compassionate action.

In Psalm 8:4 the psalmist asks "...what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" In a million different ways we witness the diminishing and the demeaning of humanity, of people who are divinely loved. I call that evil.

Family Night

They sit on the steps
of the Red Door Church,
And make their plans for the evening
a night on the town in Saint Louis

They'll have to split up.
The beds for women are all taken.
Son wishes Mother and Sister well
and goes to find a place to lay his head,
while the women sit there, reminiscing.

Mother remembers a time
before he grew so tall, his beard so long.
They recall the way
his presence opened doors.

Oh, how those once-tiny feet
would lead them beside the waters
of hot soapy showers
and flushing toilets.
How the rise and fall
of his little chest in breathing
warmed even the hardest of hearts.

The feet are grown now and hardened.
The only notice of his breath
is the face people make
at the decaying of his teeth.
It has been many a winter
since people stopped to marvel
at the babe.

Now he is a man, a troublesome man,
a challenging, difficult, uncomfortable man.
Now no one wants Mother,
and Sister's spirit is all burnt out.
So, they split up—
and no one is there to witness the obscenity
of separating One into Many,
of dividing community into disunity.

Thus in the doorway of the church,
the divine creator of the universe
rests her head on the stone steps
and weeps for a world that has no room
for a Holy God, brought low.

The Poor People's Campaign, following the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has issued a national call for moral revival "...to confront the interlocking evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism."⁴ Work of that sort is central to my understanding of ministry because that work is all about bringing salvation: restoring wholeness, uplifting holiness, reminding us we are loved. I count the time I spent providing comfort and care to unhoused

⁴ <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/> accessed September, 2022

people with Winter Outreach in Saint Louis as some of the most meaningful and holy work of my life in ministry.

In Galatians 3:28 we read “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This verse speaks in opposition to Christian Nationalism, to racism, to sexism, to misogyny, to misogynoir, to hatred of trans and nonbinary people.

One

Before the Battle of the Sexes,
before Eve lamented or Adam toiled,
before the serpent
played man against woman,
before the parts were forcefully excised
from the whole:
the first human inhabited flesh.

Observe the integrity of their naked body,
bear witness to them in their fullness,
still damp from the clay,
lovingly made in the whole image of God.

Is this why Mary sang
that her soul magnified
and her spirit rejoiced?

Perhaps she understood that this new *adam*,
setting sacred, genderqueer feet upon our *adamah*,
would engender life for all genders
would, by Their very existence,
embody the reconciliation
of all that had been torn asunder.

Behold: They who make us One.

Discover in Them the assurance that—
beyond the arbitrary designations
of feminine or masculine,
behind the labels and libels
of ‘butch’ or ‘sissy’—
you are as you are, fully human,

complete and whole.

Galatians 3:18 also speaks to the saving work of Jesus, although not, necessarily, in Their death on the cross; which to me communicates more about the way sin comes to kill and destroy. I witness the saving work of Jesus in the universality of Their life, Their message, Their very being. They drew together diverse members of society. They continue to inspire and invite disparate individuals and communities into one-ness. They remind me that we are one: one humanity, one world, one intertwined, inseparable, and interdependent cosmos. They provide a divine embodiment of what it means to love even up to the point of death. They are the personification of love in action, inviting us into community, saving us.

This invitation into a whole, holy, and wholly loved community is at the core of the two sacraments of the United Church of Christ; Communion and Baptism are both invitations to gather closer in.

We celebrate Communion because we are asked to do so in Bible verses like 1 Corinthians 11:26, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” We also share Communion because sharing food has always been an important part of living together in human communities. There is something intimate about sharing a meal together. There is something significant in sharing food that includes ritual – like a wake following a funeral, or a wedding banquet. In a way, the Communion meal combines elements of both. We commemorate, we anticipate, we celebrate.

Meal

They always leave out the part,
right there between the wine and the walk,
when he turned to me and said, “Martha,
don’t let them make a fuss about this.”

For the first few years

I assumed he was talking about the arrest,
and all that followed.

But now, while this group argues
over the type of bread
and that group fights
over juice or wine
I remember that when he spoke
he did so through his last bite of food.

“Don’t let them make a fuss.”

It was as if he knew
the flights of fancy that would follow,
knew that someone hard-headed, efficient,
and down-to-earth
would be needed to tell them all:

“This bread and this wine”

simply the common everyday fare
that sits before us every time we eat.
This invitation to bring him to mind
at every meal, with each bite and sip:

it was never meant to cause
such indigestion.

It is a source of sorrow to me that Communion has been a divisive topic within the global church; something to be policed, to be used to exclude and condemn. I cannot believe that the Jesus who received the kiss of betrayal with the crumbs of the love feast still on his cheek would ever have wanted Their invitation into loving community to be weaponized for harm. No, Communion is the sacrament that draws us together to experience a love so good we can taste it. It has been my practice in ministry to preside over an open table, and that includes setting a place for people who, for whatever reason, choose not to participate.

Similarly, the sacrament of Baptism is a significant moment of ingathering in the Christian tradition. In Baptism we use ritual and water to recognize that we, too, are God’s

Beloved. We speak words of welcome and promise to provide love and support. We remember that we are born from water, and we consist of water – water that heals, cleanses, refreshes, and sustains life. Numbers 6:24-27 we read God’s instruction to Aaron and Aaron’s sons, to speak these words over the people:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

“So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

In baptism we are brought into community and consecrated as children of God.

Consecration

In this moment
as you set aside
that which was yours in the past,
and take up
that which becomes yours today

Know that this action
is not a dishonoring of your yesterday,
for the joys and struggles of your history
are the particles of dust that form your core

Know that this action
is no panacea against the future,
for the coming days
will bring their moments to you,
no matter how you are called

Know that you are situated
at precisely the correct location
in the heavens,
placed among the constellations,
set in the skies for the fullness of this time
to be called by the name
that was intended to be yours
from before you were conceived.

As you receive this name as your own,
your very own,

know that we receive you by this name,
 this very name
and we ask of the Universe
that all may know
that in the taking and keeping of this name
you are blessed.

In the United Church of Christ tradition, baptism also comes with membership. Christians who choose to be baptized in the United Church of Christ receive membership into the congregation. Christians who bring their children to be baptized bring their children into a community that promises to love and support them up to and beyond the moment when they, themselves, may choose to go through confirmation. There are times when a baptism might be a hurried, somber affair; in hospital room or on battle fields. In ideal circumstances baptism is not a private ritual, but a public affirmation that we have made a Spirit inspired decision to choose to belong to each other. After all, what is Christianity even about, if not choosing to be a part of something more than ourselves?

How to Love a Church

Wash your cup after coffee hour.

Greet a guest, join the choir,
teach the children.
Agree to serve on a committee.

Bring your talents, bring your energy,
bring your enthusiasm,
put your money in the plate,
show up for services,
show up.

Show up,
not because the doors are open
but because the invitation is open
to bring your whole self
to the gathering of selves
and dare to be challenged,
informed, inspired,

to be the one who challenges,
informs, inspires,
to be the presence that only you can bring
to the Beloved Community
in the tradition of the Spirit
of Love.

And love.
Do the hard stuff.
Stay in the room with the crying baby,
with the adult who glares at the crying baby,
with that person who gets on your last nerve.

Love the whole congregation,
stay in the conversation
even when you disagree,
especially when you disagree.
Stay because you disagree,

and leave
because love can mean knowing
when to wipe the dust and go
when to say no.

And know within yourself
when you've been wrong,
when being strong feels more like bending,
like picking up the threads and mending,
like finding new instead of ending
and tending things you find surprising

And find
to your surprise
that all the ways to love a church
are the same as all the ways to love yourself.

Greet a guest and show up,
be ready for the glow up,
you might even need to grow up,
proclaim your no, and sew up,
and wash
your own
damn
cup.

I don't recall my own baptism, in the literal sense of being able to bring a memory to mind. I was too young when it happened to meaningfully store memories. But 'recall' has another definition: to ask that something be returned. Through some of the most significant moments of my life I have been able to recall – to ask to have returned to me – the memory that I am not alone. I belong to and with a community of believers in a faith tradition where I feel compelled to participate in pastoral leadership in the context of congregational ministry.

Recently in my ministry formation I was challenged to write a poem in response to the UCC Statement of Faith. Perhaps you have not read that statement of faith recently, but I assure you it is, in itself, poetry. It is certainly not something I could hope to improve on. While reflecting on it I was reminded of the words, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope..." from Hebrews 10:23. How do we "hold fast" to the UCC Statement of Faith? How is it lived out in our congregations? How am I called to minister within the UCC in the context of that Statement of Faith? The following is the result of that reflection.

Confession (*A conversation with the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith*⁵)

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

Response: **Belief is no small matter. To be a faith community together is to engage in holy audacity.**

C: You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

R: In defiance of the reality of death, to nurture the seed of life within

C: You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

R: in defiance of the reality of sickness, to bind up each other's wounds

C: You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

R: in response to the reality of evil, to speak truth to power

⁵ A liturgy based on the *United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the form of a doxology*, <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith/>, accessed 01/04/2023

C: 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.

R: in response to the reality of risk, to welcome Holy Strangers

C: 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.

R: in gratitude for our differences, to be a beloved community

C: 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.

R: in gratitude for the love we share, to be unified in purpose

C: 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.

R: In life, in all of life, the whole of its complexities and challenges, heart-rending losses and heart-bursting joys, devastating sorrows and delicious delights, to be fully, wonderfully, cohesively, alive.

Belief is no small matter.

**So we who are small congregate (holding space for all our doubts)
in spaces consecrated to the largeness of wonder (holding space for all our certainty)
and profess the eternal prayer:**

C: Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

R: May it be so.

C: Amen.

R: May it ever be so

In 1 Corinthians 12:7 we read, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." This is how Spirit is manifesting in me, for the common good. I know that I am whole, I am holy, I am wholly loved. I know that I am equipped to serve in ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ. May it be so.