

Ordination Paper Part One:

My Calling and the Church

“The air seemed to wreak with the smell of apathy and bleach. A weight, like the weight of the world, must have been placed on my head, shoulders, and chest as I stepped over the threshold into the cell. Four walls painted some type of beige, a ceiling of the same indistinct color and a steel gray concrete floor seemed to push in around me as I was thrust into my new home. My senses cried out for a sense of belonging, of warmth, or the smallest, most minute speck of comfort in which I could curl into and hide, but none was found. The ancient green vinyl mat full of lumps, bumps, and valleys of overuse would serve as my bed, the white industrial sheet stained from multiple others my cover, and there would be no pillow to lay my head. As my eyes continued to survey my room, my cell, my new home, I noticed a television encased in a protective plexiglass box....at least there might be some escape from the hell I had made for myself. The toilet, as I gasped, was directly under the television, in plain sight for all to see. How pleasant it must be to watch your favorite show and cellmate shit at the same time! I wondered, exactly, how long I could endure without having to undergo the humiliation of public urination and defecation. A shower, without a curtain, stood in the corner of the room. My life was gone. My family was gone. My basic privacy was taken away abruptly. Just before my composure starts to break, a meal tray was passed through the hole in the door. The “chuckhole” as it was termed, and I now knew how I was to be fed, like the dangerous animals at a zoo. It was at this point I discovered that I had lost my humanity”:. (Reed)

The scenario above is indeed true. I pen my own experiences as one of a common occurrence for those who are facing internment in our justice system. The loss of self, the loss of family, and the loss of basic privacy to complete simple bodily processes is overwhelming to the inmate. Dealing with the logistics of

life incarcerated can be daunting and sometimes insurmountable for the person who has been charged with a crime, dealing with the emotional ramifications of those losses and actions committed, unimaginable. The inmate often faces grieving, suffering, and while the story expressed above deals only with the physical attributes of internment, the mental struggle of a crime committed and dealing with that suffering and brokenness is the mountain in the distance; the mountain we must climb not only while we are incarcerated, but also when searching for a space where comfort can be found once we have been deemed worthy of reentering humanity. The question raised for me was, “Is your church hospitable enough to be that space?” I found that space within the UCC.

I am queer. Bold statement to make and many would find it a bit off topic, but I share this point to emphatically state the lens in which these words are shared. I am a queer and I have been incarcerated. These two items, while seemingly dissimilar, can often bind one in self-hate, depression, and anxiety. Through therapy and spiritual growth, I no longer find myself consumed with these things, rather I am becoming the me in which God intended, fully authentic and wonderfully made.

Incarceration, to me, comes in many forms. While I faced the physical incarceration of time spent in jail, growing up in a heteronormative environment, left my sense of self and sexuality captive. These experiences can leave any person searching for a space where comfort can be found; where a sense of humanity can be regained after having one’s sense of humanness stripped away from the hate and judgement from a heteronormative society. Insight is gained when acknowledging the voice with which one speaks. I must allow my voice to engage and join the chorus of voices of the queer and felon communities.

I was first called into ministry at the age of sixteen. I was an active member of the Pleasant Hill General Baptist Church, and also an active member of the Ohio Association General Baptist Youth Ministry Team. During that time, I traveled not only all over Illinois and Kentucky, but also to National Conferences to perform with my youth ministry team and lead people to Christ. This time for me was thick with resentment and confusion. While I was still called by Christ to spread the word of God through evangelism, I also felt ashamed for my sexuality. I was conflicted and chose to hide my unhappiness with activity and action. I knew God was calling me to be a minister and so I answered that call as a Baptist youth.

I was ordained in the fall of 1993 as a senior in college. This was a very tumultuous time for me as I continued to hide my sexuality from the world and try to accept my calling to follow Christ. This ordination was revoked years later. I could not hold true to the teaching of the General Baptist denomination.

In the fall of 1994, I was married. This marriage was to last 21 years. I converted to my spouse's faith of Catholicism when I was asked to do so. So, I hide once again as I joined the Catholic faith. I continued to hide my authentic self, something today I refuse to do. This time in my life left me delving into the catechism and faith of the catholic church but still left me empty and alone in my fight with who I was and whom God intended me to be. Anxiety and depression took hold, and I made some bad choices. It was during this time that I developed a spending problem which led to poor financial choices and ultimately my interment in the county jail.

During my interment in the county jail, I found the UCC through the amazing presence of Rev. Lori Schafer. I found that I no longer had to hide my sexuality within a denomination, and I believed, through much discernment and prayer, that I could answer the call that God once had given me all those years ago. But I had a long road ahead of me as I dealt with the choices I had made and the ramifications of those poor choices.

Upon release from my nine-month interment, I was divorced and I was estranged from my immediate family. They had chosen not to support me as I became more of my authentic self. The truth hurt them deeply and I still pray for a reconciliation with my family. While some of my family members have accepted who I am today, which is a grounded, vibrant, and vocal Christian pansexual, others have not.

The time after my internment is filled with therapy, service and growth. For the next two years I was on probation, I would find the Church of the Good Shepherd in Carbondale, Illinois. This church would become my home church and I would drive over one hour one way to worship with others who accepted me as a queer man and as a formerly incarcerated person. Rev. Kim Magwire would kickstart my spiritual growth once again with her meaningful and thought provoking messages on Sunday morning. I would start to share my story and battle with depression, anxiety, and incarceration with others and even spoke at UCC churches about my story. This sharing of testimony led me to seminary. Sharing my testimony was not enough, I felt called to do more.

In the fall of 2018, I received permission from the State of Illinois to leave the state to attend seminary at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. I would be relieved of probationary meetings during the fall of my first semester of seminary which would allow me to spread my wings and focus solely on my discernment to what God was calling me to do and to deconstruct my embedded theology of growing

up in an conservative, homophobic denomination. I grew greatly during my seminary years in my walk with God. My relationship with our creator solidified into a coupling that I would never dissolve. It was during this time that I became pulpit supply for the Illinois South Conference and after leading worship at several churches, was led to a position at Trinity UCC Belleville.

My time at Trinity UCC Belleville has been transformative when paired with seminary. Under the supervision of Rev. Thomas Ressler and Rev. Ivan Horn, I grew as a pastor, and then as a licensed pastor of the church. My commitment to being my authentic self led me to share my own story with the congregation as well as my battle with mental health issues. This sharing inspired the congregation to develop a concern for the mental health of their congregation and eventually a WISE covenant within the church. We now host members from an assisted living facility during worship and attendance on Sunday mornings had doubled over the past three years. Trinity has a new hope for the future.

I continue as the licensed pastor of Trinity UCC Belleville as I attend Eden Theological Seminary to obtain a Doctorate of Ministry degree which will assist me in seeking ordination but more importantly, empower me through God's divine Spirit with the skills to assist God's people, reaching out to the hurting and marginalized, and ministering to those who may not believe that they have been made in God's image.

I am in love with life. Last year I was hospitalized with blood clots throughout my body. Three times I was almost born into eternal life, yet three times I came back from the brink of death to live in this world again. This experience might have caused others to falter, instead it inspired me to live a life that is precious; to live a life that is without regret; to live a life of authenticity. I love God and the life I have

been given even though I live with an autoimmune disorder. I love my family, friends, and congregates. I love humanity with all of its flaws among all of its wonder.

I bring with me many God given talents. I have previously obtained a Master of Arts in Teaching and over twenty years of teaching experience. God's gifts still amaze me, and I have been able to teach and coach students in public speaking even though as a child I battled a speech impediment and stutter. I have learned resilience amid adversity. I am a childhood sexual assault survivor. I am the child of a parent who was disabled. I have learned that it is not my strength, but God's that I must rely on and I hope to share that with the rest of humankind.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my story and my calling.

#### Ordination Paper Part Two:

#### The United Church of Christ

“What matters to you?” The question was stated quietly and affirming. “Tim, what matters to you?” Tears filled my eyes as I found it difficult to answer the question that was presented before me. I struggled with the answer aside from what one might identify as the standard answers of faith and family. Yet the conversation continued as Rev. Lori Schaefer, a United Church of Christ minister and friend pursued the discussion in a very loving and pastoral tone. “What matters to you, matters to me.” She stated. “And what matters to you, matters to the church.” So, as an incarcerated man, who had no idea of what the future would hold, I began to study and determine through prayer and discernment the answer to the question, “What matters to you?”

One might first think that my understanding of the United Church of Christ and my own story of answering the call to the ministry are similar and integral to one another; that person and that assumption would be correct. While my calling into ministry happened while I was but a teenager, the acceptance of that calling and discernment of my own beliefs were substantiated and guided through spiritual counseling received while incarcerated in a local county jail with the guidance of a beautiful soul, Reverend Lori Ann Schafer. My own faith journey and the heart of the faith of the United Church of Christ seem to coincide with the question, “What matters to me?”

Sidney D. Fowler, author of *What matters to you? Matters to us; Engaging Six Vital Themes of Our Faith*, provides essential reflection on the United Church of Christ and provides an excellent framework for sharing of knowledge about a denomination that saved my life and gave me purpose once again. By engaging the six vital themes of the United Church of Christ, one can understand some of the history and polity of a very unique and diverse denomination.

**We are a people of God’s extravagant welcome.** After experiencing the darkest point of my life, I can easily say that not all churches are those of extravagant welcome. Jesus lived and breathed hospitality. John 13:20 states, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” This sentiment embraces the extravagant welcome offered by Jesus and by Church of the Good Shepherd, a church I am so blessed to call home. When I heard the words, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” I knew I had found my denominational home. The UCC is a denomination that works hard to cast the nets wide, welcoming and developing a place for those who have often been discounted by the world, but still precious to God. Since its formation in 1957, when two very different and diverse denominations

merged to form the UCC, the UCC has continued to be a blessed, diverse, group of strangers held together by the grace of God and of a common belief, that we belong to Christ.

**We belong to Christ.** An early teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism, part of our German Reformed heritage, asked individuals: “What is your only comfort in life and death?” Thus, one can say the statement, “We belong to Christ” is a complicated yet simple phrase. Wider Christian history can be seen as dark chapters of conquest and colonialism, and not all of our past is free from complication and prejudice. Yet, the heart of the United Church of Christ today beats with comfort, challenges, and diversity. I find comfort that I am not alone in my belief of Christ as my savior. This relationship with those of the denomination allows me to encounter God through wonder and discernment. Though challenges exist in our diversity, such challenges were also evident in our rich history of Congregational, Christian, Evangelical and Reformed members joining together in the belief that God is not an object to be contained, but a holy mystery to encounter together. Christ is the primary lens in which we as UCC’ers view God, yet not the only way. Christ as liberator, savior and friend is affirmed in the Bible and allows members to experience the diversity of belief while “belonging, body and soul, in life and death, not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ”. (Heidelberg Catechism)

**We are a people of covenant, a united and uniting church.** God has always been making promises to God’s people. God’s promises reveal to us God’s loving ways, God’s grace, and God’s relationship with us. This is the foundation for the belief of covenant within the United Church of Christ. Covenant is an agreement or arrangement between two individuals or parties. Covenant speaks of the relationship God has with each one of us and the relationship that we not only have with each other but also the relationship that each congregation has with the denomination of the United Church of Christ. Our

denomination was built by mergers of denominations, of bodies of Christ, coming together to worship, to serve, to do church, together. The constitution of the United Church of Christ puts it this way, “Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the UCC walk together in all God’s ways.” While each congregation has “autonomy”, meaning it’s free to discern it’s own way of being and believing, this is not a control issue, but a testimony of a coming together or covenant instead of a conformity that is mandated. Each and every church may call their own clergy, follow their own self-created constitutions, and make their own decisions concerning worship practices on an individual basis.

**We are one at baptism and the table.** For many years, I was a member of a church denomination that practiced closed communion. This was always a problem for me. Throughout the biblical narrative, Jesus sat at the table and shared simple meals with people from all walks of life. I think of the diversity of those with whom Jesus ate and the diversity of those baptized in his name. So many diverse people from all walks of life, neither Jew nor gentile turned away. These sacraments are indeed special moments in our walk with Christ. Through baptism, we experience God’s embrace and we are brought into the church. As this time the church promises to love, support and care for you. What greater example of covenant can there be for the relational aspect of members in the church with each other? Through Holy Communion, we share a simple meal with a profound meaning. In this sharing of the meal, we experience the presence of Christ! Through these two sacraments, all the themes of our faith combine in a glorious blessing!

**We thank God for working for a just and loving world.** Some often asked me why I drove over an hour to attend Church of the Good Shepherd in Carbondale, Illinois. I simply say, Church of the Good

Shepherd is a church where peace can be found and where the work begins. I find hope in the people of the UCC and especially those of my home church. The New Testaments if filled with so many accounts of people coming together. Jesus often brought people of diverse backgrounds together to have some very hard discussions about their society and about their own lives. This is what the United Church of Christ has done for me. The question of what exactly a “just and loving world” would resemble is answered in the activities of not only the member of my home church, but also in the members of the Illinois South Conference as I listened to testimonies of what made their Church “hearts” sing recently at our annual meeting. I see congregations making an intentional effort to care for every one of God’s people and this is why I am proud to be a member of the UCC.

**We listen for the still-speaking God.** God is still speaking. It’s that simple. I hear God’s voice in the actions of UCC’ers as they work for social justice. I hear God’s voice as I work in housing challenged ministry. I hear God’s voice in the testimonies of people shunned by churches due to sexuality, gender identity, criminal offenses, and the list goes on... and on... I hear God’ voice in the sunset, in music, in creation. God is still speaking to the church and if we listen, we can hear it. I love the UCC slogan, “Our faith is over 2000 years old. Our thinking is not!” Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the Bible is living and active. How encouraging. This tells me to live into the questions! Live into the questions I have about life, about love, about God and about the diversity of creation! By listening and living into the question, we can celebrate and learn from our history and move forward, together, in covenant with one another and with our Creator!

### **Bibliography**

**Fowler, S. D. (2008). what matters to you? matter to us. engaging six vital themes of our faith. Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press.**

Ordination Paper Part Three:

My Theology

**Nature of God.** It is challenging to describe God given the limitations of human language and given that God's abilities and capacities are greater than human imagination. God is eternal – God was, God is, and God will be into eternity, as is implied in the tetragrammaton. God brings being into being. As such, God is within all of existence, and all that has been created is a divine expression of God. God was present before time as we understand it began – God is with us in our living and dying – and God will continue to create and love long after creation as we know it has passed into eternity. Classical Christian doctrine describes our God as Triune, or three in one, beginning with the personage of the Father (Heine, 2013). However, one of my favorite descriptions of the nature of God is found in Brian Wren's hymn, "Bring Many Names," which expands upon ways of perceiving our relationship with God in our lives. Most simply stated, I believe we worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, proclaimed in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This is the God who created the world and the universe (Genesis 1) and who delivered Israel from the land of Egypt (Exodus 6).

In John 1, we are told that God had the logos (the word, logic, or reason) from the dawn of time, and the logos became flesh and dwelt among us. God sent us Jesus Christ to clarify, teach, and empower humanity when we had gone astray. God sent us Jesus as a sacred model because of God's love for humanity, fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah. God continues working in and with humanity through the Holy Spirit (John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:10; Acts 20:28). The God who was, the God who is, and the God who ever more will be is greater and more profound than any name or description we can apply to God.

**Who is Christ?** Jesus is our best, most complete way for understanding how God wants us to live with others and nurture creation. Christ is our sacred model: He is the most complete, best demonstration of how we are to live with each other as children of God. Jesus, the Son of God, is “the way, and the truth, and the life,” and following his path is the way to God (John 14: 6). It is from Jesus that we grew to understand God as Father (John 5: 17-19), as Jesus spoke with and about God as a loving parent. Christ is the fullest revelation of God’s love for us; Christ is the exemplar of human potential to live as expressions of God’s love. Jesus, as fully human and divine, was with God in the beginning (John 1: 1-2) and was born to a human mother, Mary, who fully recognized the gifts her son would bring to humanity (Luke 1: 46-55). Jesus came to turn the world order around – to raise up the poor and the afflicted, heal the sick, and save us from our worst human tendencies. Jesus taught that humanity needed a transformation of religious and social order. That Jesus is fully human and fully divine is not a contradiction, the way many interpret it to be. Because Jesus was able to live as a human and act out of divinity really demonstrates how possible it is. Jesus’ humanity takes away any excuses, empowering us to act as expressions of the divine.

Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God in human form that we have seen and known. As his followers, we have a responsibility to strive toward his model of care for each other and all of creation.

**The Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit has been the source of action since the beginning of time. The ancient Hebrew traditions reference the Spirit of God’s action in creation. In Genesis 1: 2, the ruach (Spirit or Wind) set creation into motion and brought order. Psalm 104: 30 sings about renewal and re-creation through the Spirit. The Spirit appeared at Christ’s Baptism by John (Luke 3: 22). Jesus, as he prepared to return to the Father during the events of Holy Week, indicated that the Spirit would come to help guide his followers (John 14: 15-31). The nature of the Holy Spirit became more fully revealed at Pentecost

when a sound of great wind came and enabled those gathered Apostles to preach the word across all languages (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit is present in our lives today, compelling us to act out of love for God and one another. We can experience the Spirit both in the ordered work of the church and formal congregational life, as well as in spontaneous moments of generosity and grace that occur in our daily lives.

**The Trinity.** The gift of the Trinity is that we can understand God through multiple lenses and witness God's presence in our lives in different ways. We can understand the Trinity in many ways: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Christ, and Sustainer; Creator, Teacher, Empowerer, etc. These expressions of the Trinity are valid because God is working in and through our lives in different ways. Rather than limiting our view of God, Trinitarian language provides a strong foundation for building a relationship with God. Understanding God as loving parent and creator, through the divine teachings of Jesus Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit, we may all join to build and nurture God's kingdom. Guided by Christ and the Holy Spirit, we can raise up the poor and downtrodden and be good stewards for creation, as God intends us to live together.

**What is Salvation?** Fortunately, God has never given up on God's creation, including humanity. Because God believes that we can do better, God sent Jesus, the Son, to show us a better way (John 3: 16). Jesus shows us, through word and example, that we do not have to be bound by our worst instincts – through his way, we are empowered to live as we are called to live. We are not condemned to live separated from God and humanity, driven by fear and want, and suffering from the ravages of violence. God overlooks our shortcomings when we choose to return to full relationship with God (metaphorically described in Hosea). When we follow the path of Jesus, as we care for the sick and the hungry, welcome the stranger, and visit those who are imprisoned, we find salvation and eternal life (Matthew 25:31-46).

The promise of God’s salvation is liberating. This promise frees us from judging our own self-worth through earthly values – in Jesus Christ, our worth is not judged by our bank account size, our attractiveness, our power in society, nor any other factor by which humans assign social status. Rather, we are all worthy of God’s love and grace. In reaction to the gift of salvation, we have a responsibility to serve and care for all of creation. Acting out of gratitude for God’s gift of salvation helps shape us more in image of God as God created us to be.

**Eschatology.** Throughout history, human beings have been preoccupied with “the end.” From multiple millennial predictions to televangelists proclaiming dates of Jesus return, to the dire secular predictions of global catastrophe, humanity is aware of the temporary nature of our time on earth. Many view eschatology as branch of theology as simply about prediction about the return of Christ and an ultimate Armageddon. However, as Phelan asserts, “There is much more to eschatology than mere prediction. Eschatology is not about the end only, but also about the beginning and middle of faith and life as well” (2013, p. 17). Jesus indicated that no one could predict the day of his return, so my personal theology is less concerned with whether our collective end is inevitably coming. Rather, I have faith in the ever creating ever-resourceful God who sees that nothing and no one is ever lost or wasted. The God of the resurrection is with us in our beginnings, our being, and our ends. God takes the energy and mass of all of creation and builds anew out of what has passed. Similarly, the laws of Thermodynamics hold that matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed, only transformed. The promise of the resurrection, God’s promise of creation and renewal, brings hope.

**The Authority of Scripture.** For a written document, authority is defined as “the power to influence others, especially because of one's commanding manner or one's recognized knowledge about something” (dictionary.com, 2018). Authority is a term assigned to books that supply reliable evidence.

In this regard, the Bible authoritatively tells us about God, teaches us about God's wishes for humanity, and witnesses to the power of God acting in human lives. "Biblical Passages do not have authority for faith and life in isolation from one another. Individual texts must be interpreted in light of other biblical texts" (Fretheim, 2009, p. 140). To be clear, the Bible is not God; God is too big and powerful to be contained within the confines of paper and binding. The words of Jesus hold central authority in the Bible – Jesus' words provide the most comprehensive guide to understanding God's love of creation and how God wants us to understand and work for the Kingdom of God. The other books contain important context to understanding Jesus' role in revealing God's intentions for creation. In addition, the passages contain priceless witness to how humanity has perceived and understood God in their lives over time. Beyond this, the Bible provides ample opportunity to explore our understanding of God through metaphor and analogy, long considered effective teaching tools for developing a thorough understanding. The Bible has authority as a central teaching tool about God; it contains rules, guidance, and examples as well as cultural contexts from which all can learn. Scripture provides a strong, divinely inspired foundation for shaping our beliefs and resulting actions as individuals and as the church.

**Communion and Baptism.** The UCC recognizes the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion because they are grounded in Scripture. Both are invitational and endorse the unity of all believers. The cleansing ritual of Baptism in the ancient Jewish tradition was symbolic of purity and repentance. The notion of ritual cleanliness was an integral part of orienting one's life toward God. The same can be said of Jesus' baptism before he began his public ministry as noted in (Matt 3:13-17, Mk 1:9-11, Lk 3:21-22). Within the UCC, the baptized are gathered into a community of love and belonging regardless of where their journey of faith may take them. This is a covenant relationship between the community of faith and the newly baptized. The concept of belonging is foundational to what it means to be human.

Baptism always affirms our belonging to God and to one another within the Christian faith community. While that is true, it is also important to note that those who haven't been baptized belong to God as well. No one is excluded from the love of God, nor God's desire to bless them.

In Matthew 3:17, the Spirit of God blessed Jesus by saying "This is my son, Beloved with whom I am well pleased." The Spirit of God blessed and affirmed Jesus as God's beloved son. Through the Sacrament of Baptism, people are blessed and named as beloved children of God. With respect to pastoral ministry, the act of blessing those who may never have been blessed is a tangible way to acknowledge their life experience and worth. To be "seen" and "claimed as worthy" is an important aspect of spiritual and emotional healing. Many have never received the blessing of validation or the hope that comes from knowing they are God's beloved.

As for the sacrament of Communion, Jesus instituted a covenant with his disciples to which we as his followers are also invited. "Jesus took a loaf of bread, and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." He did the same with the cup after supper saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:19-20). The UCC welcomes all people of faith to the table. There is room enough for everyone. This practice is deeply meaningful for me because I also come from the Catholic tradition where many of the faithful are excluded from receiving Communion. This has been very troubling for me because I can't imagine Jesus banishing anyone from the table. It is hurtful to see people of faith excluded based upon their "life style," or because they're not Catholic, or because of their beliefs. This is unjust. I am reminded of a married gay couple, one a former priest, who attended a funeral mass that was presided over by the bishop and many priests from the diocese. The couple received Communion directly from the bishop, and then walked quietly back to their pew. I couldn't help but smile as I silently cheered this couple on. I was also saddened by the fact that they had to be discreet in order to receive Jesus. This was and

continues to be heartbreaking. Through the Holy Spirit and community, we receive Jesus in the bread and wine (grape juice). The community of the faithful includes those present as well as those who have lived before us. This is a sacrament of our unity with God and one another.