

Ubi Caritas et Amor, Deus Ibi Est
“Where There is Charity and Love, God is There.”

**Paper in Support of the Request of Josiah F. Accola to the Illinois South Conference of
the United Church of Christ for Authorization to Ordained Ministry**

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INVOCATION

“May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.” Amen.

-Ephesians 1:2-4 (New Living Translation)

Loving and eternal God, I pray that you open our eyes to see you in the world, open our ears to hear your still-speaking voice, and open our hearts to feel your presence within and amongst us. May these words and this meditation from my heart be pleasing to you; for you alone are all our love, all our hope, and all our strength. All honor and glory be unto you, now and forevermore. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Friends of God, I wanted to begin this paper by thanking you for taking the time to read my ordination paper. I am deeply honored and humbled by this opportunity to share with you my life’s journey, the ways I have experienced the Triune God at work in my life, my theological beliefs, and my understanding of the history and practices of the United Church of Christ. I hope that through this paper, I will be able to share with you my journey of discernment, and how I believe that God has called me to become a servant of God and all of God’s children through ordained ministry.

In my time of discernment, I have come to understand that the act of ordaining someone to be a minister of the Word and Sacraments is a tradition that can be traced back to the Early Christian Church. In the Book of Acts, Luke the Evangelist tells us that the early disciples of Christ “called a meeting of all the believers,” where they chose seven people

from their congregation and “prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.” Every time that I read these verses from the Book of Acts, I am reminded that the ancient act of calling someone to ordained ministry is a sacred and communal experience. It is through ordination that a person answers God’s call to completely devote themselves and consecrate their life to work as a servant of God. It is through ordination that a person makes a divine covenant with God and the Family of God that they are willing to “go and make disciples of all the nations,” to baptize people “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” and to remind all people that Jesus is always with us, “even to the end of the age.”

Although I believe that God calls some people to ordained ministry, I also strongly believe that God calls all those who follow in the footsteps of Christ to use their own spiritual gifts to be servants of the universal church and the world, no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey. I believe that the work of sharing the Good News, spreading love, and ministering to the needs of all of God’s children is not just for those who are ordained. We ALL are called by Jesus to “go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.”

And so, dear friends, it is in this spirit that I invite you to join me on this journey as I share my faith journey and beliefs with you. Although I am writing this paper for the purposes of seeking authorization for ordained ministry, I am writing this paper for you. I pray more than anything else that God will speak to you through these words and this meditation from my heart. I pray that after reading this paper, you will be inspired to take a moment or two out of your busy life to sit in God’s presence and consider all the ways that you can serve God through your own kind of ministry, whether that is ordained ministry or lay ministry. After all, the work of spreading God’s kingdom here on earth is not just for those who are ordained. And so, our journey begins

PART ONE
Theological Perspective and Beliefs

The God of Creation

“All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all
 things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.”

–“All Things Bright and Beautiful” by Cecil Frances Alexander

I believe... that God spoke and there was light, that God saw potential where there was nothing, and that God created humankind in his/her divine image... I believe that God created “all things bright and beautiful.”

When I think of God as the creator of all things, I am instantly reminded of the hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, by Cecil Frances Alexander. In that hymn, the lyricist describes all the wonderful things that she sees in nature, from the smallest of flowers to the mighty mountains. I believe that God created gargantuan planets and stars that paint the night sky, but I also believe that God also created every atom and particle that is hidden to our eyes. I believe that God created all things seen and unseen, all things bright and beautiful.

When I think of the magnitude and complexity of God’s creation, I constantly find myself in awe of God’s omnipotence and might. When I was younger, I worked at a Boy Scout camp each summer; every now and then, I would look up at the clear night sky and I would look with wonder and fascination at the stars and the cosmos that God placed in the heavens. I would sit in silence, and ask myself the same question: how is it that the same God who created the heavens and the cosmos found time to create me, a speck of dust in comparison? That question still crosses my mind every now and then. I think that the Psalmist said it best in Psalm 8: “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care

for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.”

I believe that the same God who made heaven and earth created us in his/her reflection; if we want to see God’s face, we only need to look at the face of the person sitting across from us. We can see God’s face when we look at the face of the man standing outside of the grocery store asking for our spare change, or in the face of a flustered mother of a newborn who is trying to avoid the harsh glares of others when her baby is inconsolable. We can see God’s when we look in the mirror. When I look into the mirror, I see a pair of eyes staring back at me, and those are the eyes which Cecil Frances Alexander said were made by God to see. I look into the mirror and I see a mouth, the same mouth that Cecil Frances Alexander said was given to me by God so that I might *tell how great is God Almighty, who has made all things well*. I believe that God made *all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small...*

The God of Grace

“Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I
once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

–“Amazing Grace” by John Newton

I believe... that no one amongst us is free of sin, that our sins separate us from God, that the burden of our sins is too heavy for us to bear alone, and that God has redeemed us through the sacrifice of his only Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross for our sins... I believe that God saves us through the gift of his everlasting and “amazing grace.”

I believe that grace is mercy which is freely given and wholly undeserved; it is God’s redeeming love in action. When I think of what it means to receive the gift of God’s grace, I am reminded of the story of John Newton, the author of the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*.

Newton was a man of sin and depravity; he was an active participant in one of the greatest evils known to humankind, the Atlantic Slave Trade.¹ One day, while at sea, Newton's ship was engulfed by a terrible storm. Newton's life was perched on the precipice between life and death. Newton cried out to God for rescue, and his life was spared.² When Newton looked back at his experience during the storm, he realized that he had done nothing in his life up to that point to deserve God's rescue.³ Newton realized that when God rescued him despite his life of sin, Newton experienced the amazing grace of God, and it was that experience which led him to write the hymn *Amazing Grace*.

Sin is costly... The Prophet Isaiah tells us that when we sin, the price we pay is separation from God our creator.⁴ As reflections of God, without God, we are without purpose or direction. The cost of sin may be high, but the price for our redemption is even higher... The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God told the Israelites that if they wanted to atone for their sins, then the price was the blood of an innocent animal.⁵ And so, when Jesus Christ, a man who was innocent of all sin,⁶ shed his blood on the cross, it was his blood which saved us and paid the full price our sins and iniquities.⁷ Because Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and because we have done absolutely nothing to deserve God's gift of Jesus Christ as atonement for our sins, when God sent Jesus to earth, God showed us grace. I believe that... when God sent his only Son down to earth to pay the price of our sins, God showed us the meaning of *Amazing Grace*.

¹ *Be Still My Soul*, Randy Peterson, (Tyndale, 2013), Pg. 27

² *Be Still My Soul*, Randy Peterson, (Tyndale, 2013), Pg. 27

³ *Be Still My Soul*, Randy Peterson, (Tyndale, 2013), Pg. 27

⁴ Is. 59:2

⁵ Lev. 17:11

⁶ 1 Pet. 2:22

⁷ Eph. 1:7

The God of Love

“O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me! Underneath me, all
around me, is the current of thy love—leading onward, leading
homeward, to thy glorious rest above!”

“O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus” by Thomas J. Williams

I believe... that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, that Jesus was sent to heal the world, that Jesus is the embodiment of radical and boundless love, and that through Jesus’ ministry and lessons we are born to new life... I believe that we can change this world if we share *the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*.

When I think of Jesus, I think of the word “love...” God loved humankind so deeply that he/she was willing to take on human flesh and come down to us. Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to lay down his life for us. I believe that Jesus is the incarnation of the vast love that God has for us.

When I think about Jesus’ life and the miracles that he performed while on earth, I am reminded that he was fully human and fully divine. Jesus was fully human... he experienced the same feelings and emotions that we feel every day: tiredness, weakness, exhaustion, frustration, joy, grief, hunger, and thirst. Jesus was tempted when he was in the wilderness for forty days. And, just like all humans, Jesus experienced the physical pangs of death... At the same time though, Jesus was fully divine... Jesus healed the sick, he gave sight to the blind, and he helped the deaf to hear. Jesus conquered the forces of nature when he walked on water and calmed stormy seas. But perhaps the ultimate sign of Jesus’ divinity was his sovereignty over the forces of life and death. Jesus raised the dead, but Jesus conquered death through his resurrection. Jesus was the ultimate convergence of humanity and the divine.

I believe that the constant throughout all of Jesus' life was love. In his song *O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*, Thomas J. Williams describes Jesus' love as being vast, unmeasured, boundless, and free. Jesus loved all people, no matter who they were or where they were. Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, he stood up for the oppressed, and he stood with the outcasts and the misfits. Although God gives us a new and eternal life through Jesus' passion and resurrection, Jesus gave us new life through his teaching, ministry, and lessons of radical love and inclusivity.

When I was younger, I remember seeing bumper stickers, buttons, and bracelets everywhere with the acronym "W.W.J.D.?" on them. The message was simple: before we do anything, we should first ask ourselves: what would Jesus do? Now, as I look back at those times when I saw the WWJD stickers and buttons everywhere, I wonder where we went wrong... Do people still ask themselves "what would Jesus Do?"?

According to the FBI, In 2022, more than 13,500 people were the victims of a hate crime in the United States. Of the people affected, 59.1% were targeted because of their race, 17.3% were targeted because of their religion, and 17.2% were targeted because of their sexual orientation... We live in a society where we are building walls instead of bridges. We live in a society where we see each other as a label rather than as people who reflect God's divine image. Do we need more WWJD bumper stickers? Do we need larger WWJD buttons? I believe that if we want to change the world, then we should challenge ourselves to be an example to the world of love... a love that is vast, unmeasured, boundless, and free (*from "O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus"*).

I believe that our identities as followers of Christ are rooted in love. God loved us into being. God loved us enough to send Jesus to be our guide. Jesus loved us enough to sacrifice himself for our redemption. And Jesus commands us to love God and love one another. I

believe that God has a *Deep, Deep Unending Love* for us, and we are called by Jesus to go out into the world and share a *Deep, Deep, Unending Love* with all people, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey.

The Still-Speaking God

“Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love the way you love, and do what you would do... Breathe on me, Breath of God, until my heart is pure, until my will is one with yours, to do and to endure.”

“Breathe On Me, Breath of God” by Edwin Hatch

I believe... that the Holy Spirit is God's voice in the world, that the Holy Spirit helps us to endure, and that the Holy Spirit is God's creating spirit at work in the world... I believe that the Holy Spirit is the [...] *Breath of God*.

In July, 2023, I was honored to be a delegate at the UCC General Synod. The days that I spent at General Synod were fueled by gallons of coffee, but there was another kind of energy present... I saw it in the musician's faces as they played their instruments, I felt it when I walked into each meeting, and I felt it when we sang the Doxology together... the Holy Spirit was with us. The Holy Spirit spoke through us as we discussed and debated the future of our denomination. The Holy Spirit invigorated us and inspired us to be open to change and new experiences. The Holy Spirit guided our footsteps and sustained us more than coffee ever could.

I wholeheartedly believe that God's Holy Spirit is God at work in the world. The Holy Spirit stands with us in the face of adversity. The Holy Spirit whispers in our ears, and it is the Holy Spirit that calls us to continue God's work of creating new things in the world. The Holy Spirit is God's breath, carried on the winds of change. The Holy Spirit is the voice within us which urges us to stand up against oppression and fight for the radical love that

Jesus inspires us to embody. The revered leader of India and advocate for social justice, Mahatma Gandhi, once said “be the change you wish to see in the world.” When I think of the power of the Holy Spirit, I think of this quote. The Holy Spirit is the voice of the Still-Speaking God.

I believe that God created the world, Jesus redeemed the world, but it is the Holy Spirit that represents God’s ongoing presence and work in the world. I believe that the Holy Spirit is the *Breath of God*, working within and amongst us.

The God in Three Persons

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you”

–“All Things Bright and Beautiful” by Cecil Frances Alexander

I believe... that the Holy Trinity is the representation of the three divine attributes of God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Each are separate from the other but cannot be separated from one another ... I believe that the Trinity represents the mystery and wonder of God; God transcends all human comprehension and cannot be confined to a box or an orderly set of rules.

I believe that our God is a God of mysteries. There are simply some attributes about God that we may never fully understand. I believe that the complexity that is inherent in our attempts to understand or explain the Doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that God cannot be confined to an orderly set of rules or explanations; God transcends all human understanding and cannot be placed in a box or confined. No matter how hard we might try to understand the full nature of God, I believe that there will always be some mysteries that we are not intended to understand. And that is okay. Life is full of wonder and mystery, and so is God.

Here is what we do know: The Trinity is composed of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They each exist separate from one another, but they can never be separated from each other. The three entities together represent one united, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God. God is, God was, and God will be.

I believe that in the sacrament of Baptism, by invoking the Trinity, we are inviting the complete and eternal God of all things to claim us as his/her own. Anytime that we ask for the intercession of the Holy Trinity, the complete persona of God, we acknowledge that we completely belong to God.

The God of Knowledge

“Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path... when I
feel afraid, think I’ve lost my way, still you’re there right beside me.
And nothing will I fear, as long as you are near, please be near me to
the end”

–“Thy Word” by Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith

I believe... that the Holy Bible is God’s word, and that when we interpret scripture, it should be done so as to promote love for God and love for one another... I believe that we are called to look for our knowledge of the Living God in scripture, but also through our own life experiences.

Many years ago, when I was experiencing a dark time in my life, I looked to the story of Job for guidance. The story of Job offered me strength and the encouragement that I needed to carry on in the face of adversity. During that time, I also prayed to God for guidance and mercy. When I emerged on the other side of that dark time, I realized that God had always been with me... I still go through dark times, but now I look for hope and guidance in the story of Job and all the times that God was previously at work in my life... I believe that

our knowledge of the Living God comes from the Bible, but it also comes from lived experiences.

I believe that when we read the Bible, our focus should be on how God speaks to us through the text rather than a literal word-for-word interpretation... I believe in the Word of God, but I also believe in science and evolution... Anytime that I read through the creation story in the book of Genesis, I am reminded that God created the world and everything in it; my focus is on God's work of creating new things from nothing rather than whether God created the world in exactly seven days... And, when I consider the implications of evolution, I am reminded that the ways of God cannot be fully contained within a single book. God transcends the confines of human reasoning and understanding. I believe that the Bible should be read with an open mind and an open heart.

I believe that when we interpret holy scripture for others, our focus should be on whether our interpretation encourages our audience to love God and love one another. If our interpretation does not outwardly encourage one of those types of love, then our next question should be whether our interpretation could be used to support the oppression or alienation of others. If that is the case, then we should look for how God shows love and compassion through that particular text.

I believe that God is knowledge, but God cannot be confined within a single book. Our knowledge of the Living God comes from the Bible and from lived experiences of faith.

The God of Grape and Grain

“Let us break bread together on our knees... Let us drink wine
together on our knees... Let us praise God together on our knees...
when I fall down on my knees, with my face to the rising sun, Oh,
Lord, have mercy on me.”

“Let Us Break Bread Together,” African American Spiritual

I believe... that communion is a time to remember Jesus’ life and sacrifice, that all people are welcome at the communion table, and that it is a time to praise God... I believe that we gather at the communion table to *break bread [and] drink wine together on our knees*.

During my Confirmation Service in eighth grade, I remember standing on the altar and looking out at the congregation as I prepared to take communion for the first time. I remember feeling an immense sense of belonging as I sipped the wine and ate the bread for the first time; when I see pictures of that moment, I remember that I was grinning from ear to ear. To me, being confirmed and taking communion for the first time was the proudest moment of my life... If I could go back to that time in my life, I would like to take that energy and excitement that I felt at the communion table and bottle it up to distribute to others as we get ready to take communion. Communion is a special time for us to gather as a community to remember Christ’s sacrifice and atonement for our sins. It is a time to celebrate God’s redeeming work in the world. But, like anything else that we do often enough, over time, we run the risk of communion becoming part of our routine, something that we just do... On the third Saturday of each month we have book club, on the fourth Sunday we have dinner with friends, and on the first Sunday we go to church for communion... I believe that when we gather at the communion table, God wants us to approach with the same energy as a thirteen year old kid who is taking communion for the first time. Communion should be special to us, because Christ’s meal in the Upper Room with his disciples was anything but

ordinary. At the communion table, we get to be ourselves. We approach Jesus warts and all, and we remember that to God, we are more precious than gold and silver.

When I think of Jesus' Christ's Last Supper, I remember that Christ invited all people to the table. Jesus ate with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, outcasts, misfits, fishermen, and revolutionaries. All people were welcome to the communion table because all people belonged... When I was in college, I would go with my friend to his church every Ash Wednesday. Every year, my friend would get up and go to the altar for communion while I sat in the pew by myself. In that moment, I felt different, I felt like I did not belong. I felt like an outsider... I believe that if we truly want to remember Christ's Last Supper at the communion table, then we too should practice hospitality for all people. Our table should not be open for only the people who belong; it should be open to all who are willing to remember and celebrate the ultimate outpouring of God's love.

I believe that communion is a time to remember, but it is a time to celebrate Christ's redeeming work in the world. Every time we approach the communion table, we should do so with the same excitement and wonder as someone who is taking communion for the first time. I believe that Christ's table was open to all people; Christ suffered on the cross to take away the sins of the entire world, so our communion tables should be opened to all who Christ sacrificed his life for... everyone.

The God of the Living Waters

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory
divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of his Spirit, washed
in his blood.”

“Blessed Assurance,” Fanny Crosby

I believe... that through Baptism we are united with Christ and one another, that we proclaim that we wholly belong to God, and that through Christ our sins are washed away...

I believe that Baptism is our chance to declare our belief in the *Blessed Assurance* of Christ's atonement for our sins.

I was baptized as an infant, so I don't remember what it was like to have the living waters of God sprinkled on my head. When I grew up though, I noticed that the baptism of a child was a cause for great celebration. During each baptism, the pastor of my church would carry the child around the sanctuary while the organist played the song *Jesus Loves Me*. In that moment, the child was welcomed into the community of believers, which was a cause for celebration... Although many churches practice different kinds of baptism, I believe that the feelings are the same. The water of baptism is sprinkled on a person's head in front of the entire church family, and they are welcomed into the family of believers.

I believe that baptism is when we celebrate the fact that we are united with one another and with Christ through our baptism. We announce to the world our belief in the God who unites, and we proclaim that we are wholly God's. Through baptism, we remember the *blessed assurance* that Christ washes away all sin and makes us brand new.

The God of Worship, Pastors, and the Church

I believe that our God is the God of worship... I believe that we worship God when we approach God in reverence and adoration, that we worship God with our full being, and that worship, pastors, and the church go hand in hand. I believe that the Pastor worships God by serving the Church and the community, and I believe that the Church worships God by serving the world. I believe that worship can take any form... It can be through music, quiet prayer, but it can also be through serving God. I believe that we worship God anytime that we spread love, compassion, and work to care for the needs of another.

PART TWO
The History, Polity, and Practices of the United Church of Christ

History: United and Uniting

When I look at our history, which begins well before 1957,, I believe that the UCC has consistently proven time and time again that we are a church that listens for the still-speaking voice of God. We are a church that is both united and uniting.

Although it may seem like our denomination is relatively new, we can trace our roots back to the Reformation. Guided by the teachings of John Calvin, the Puritans and the Congregationalists split from the Anglican Church and moved to America. The Puritans settled in New England, and as they spread across New England, they set up numerous Congregationalist churches which were independent from one another. The UCC's belief in individual church polity can be traced back to these Congregational Churches, which emerged from the Puritan movement.

The Christian Church, on the other hand, sprung up on the American Frontier during the time of the Great Awakening and tent revivals. The Christian Church focused their attention on promoting unity between the all of the followers of Christ. They also believed that Christ was the only head of the church.

In the Mid-19th Century, two groups came over from Germany: the Evangelical Movement and the Reformed Movement. The hallmarks of the Reformed Movement were their beliefs that the Lord's Supper was an act of remembrance, laypeople and clergy should practice religious discipline, and individuals should be encouraged to think for themselves

and search for knowledge. After the Napoleonic Wars, the German Evangelical Movement crossed over to America. (this is the tradition I am from). The Evangelical Movement promoted unity, piety, and spreading the Gospel of Christ to all people. Over time, the German Evangelical Movement and the German Reformed Movement joined together to form the German Evangelical and Reformed Church (one of the denominations that existed at the time the UCC formed).

The fifth and final church that should be mentioned was the Afro-Christian Convention; only just recently was the Afro-Christian Convention recognized as one of the precursor denominations to the United Church of Christ.

And so, the United Church of Christ was formed on June 25, 1957 when five churches joined together as one: the Congregationalist Movement (the Puritans), the Christian Church (from the American Frontier), the German Reformed Church, the German Evangelical Church, and the Afro-Christian Convention.

When I reflect upon the history and the theological roots of the United Church of Christ, I am reminded of the two phrases that have come to define the UCC: (1) “That they may all be one”; and (2) “God is Still Speaking.”

When we think about the phrase “That they may all be one,” we see that our history reflects just that, we are identified by our sense of unity. Five seemingly different groups of followers of Christ put their differences aside and came together. They united as one group, but their legacies live on in the UCC of today.

The UCC inherited its polity from the Congregational churches: Christ is the head of the church, and for that reason, every individual church in our denomination is autonomous and free to make their own decisions. The UCC inherited its theology from the Christian

Church; we continue to believe that Christ is the head of the church, that the Bible is a guide for the church and society, and that there is an ongoing need to continue searching for Christian unity. The UCC inherited its sense of Mission from the Evangelical Church; we continue to support missions across the world that help improve the lives of others. The UCC inherited its sense for advocacy and social justice work from the Afro-Christian convention; the UCC continues to fight for issues of racial equality and justice. And, finally, the UCC inherited its deepest sense of history from the Reformed Church.

Because all of the different movements within the UCC come from the Reformation, our shared history comes from the thoughts and ideas from the Reformation movement. The history of the United Church of Christ is grounded in the belief “that they may all be one.”

When we look at the more recent history of the UCC, we see that God is Still Speaking to the UCC. The UCC is a church of firsts, but the UCC has also historically been a church that is not afraid to break the Protestant mold by continuing to listen to the voice of God within and among us. God was speaking to the General Synod in Atlanta in 2005 when the UCC became the first mainline Protestant denominations to recognize marriage equality. God was speaking to the pastors of the UCC when they responded to the frontlines of the Ferguson Uprising. God was speaking to the General Synod in 2021 when the UCC called for the abolition of conversion therapy and declared racism to be a public health issue. And, God was speaking to the General Synod in 2023 when it continued its efforts to make amends for the damage that was done to the Native People of Hawaii by its missionaries and for neglecting to acknowledge the historic contributions of the Afro-Christian Convention.

Polity and Practices of the UCC

The UCC recognizes Jesus Christ to be the ultimate authority in the Church. Because Christ is recognized as the head of the church, each individual congregation within the

United Church of Christ is independent from one another, not bound by a single creed or statement of faith, nor are individual churches bound by the edicts of a national body. While the General Synod is a gathering of different congregations and churches, it does not speak for all of our churches, but it does speak to our churches. This concept of individual church polity is one of the defining features of our denomination.

The most important governing unit in the UCC is the individual churches and congregations. Individual churches and congregations come together to form associations; associations come together to form conferences; and conferences come together to form the national body. Congregational polity is acknowledged and respected at each level of structure within the UCC. Each individual church and congregation is always free to make their own decisions, independent of the guidance it may receive from the National, Conference, or Association levels.

I believe that leaders and clergy in our church should encourage UCC churches and congregations to think for themselves, make their own decisions, and encourage them to create their own sense of identity that they can claim as their own. Because a church calls their pastor, I believe that one of the essential duties of clergy within the UCC is to preserve the traditions of the UCC; this covenantal relationship must always be acknowledged, protected, and respected at all costs.

When we look at the unique practices of the United Church of Christ, I believe that the author Sidney D. Fowler sums up the UCC practices best in her book *What Matters to You? Matters to Us* (2007)... As members of the UCC... (1) We are people of God's extravagant welcome; (2) We belong to Christ; (3) We are a people of covenant, a united and united church; (4) We are one at baptism and the table; (5) We thank God by working for a

just and loving world; and (6) We listen for the still-speaking God.⁸ I believe that each of these six practices are what uniquely define who we are in a modern world.

<p><u>PART THREE</u></p> <p>My Faith Journey and Time of Discernment</p>
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When I look at the current practices of the UCC, I am filled with joy. The UCC is a welcoming church where all people are one through Christ's love. Even a gay man like myself is not only welcomed but embraced in spaces where I would traditionally not otherwise be welcome. The UCC is a church of firsts, a church that is not hypocritical, but who actively chooses to practice what it preaches. The UCC has done a lot of work to further its beliefs through its current practices, but there is still work to be done in this world. Our practices are what define us, and they will help the world know that we are Christians by our love, our mission, and our charity.

I believe that God chooses the unlikeliest of people to do God's work in the world. When I was younger, I never imagined that I would be where I am now. If you told my younger self that I would one day be seeking ordination as a pastor in the United Church of Christ, I would have thought that you were crazy. But now, at this point in my life, as I reflect on my own faith pilgrimage, I see that God has always been speaking to me, calling me to serve him through ordained ministry.

As a young child, I always loved going to church on Sunday mornings. I looked forward to attending Sunday School each week, and I had a passion for learning more about

⁸ Fowler, Sidney D. *What Matters to You? Matters to Us – Engaging Six Vital Themes of Our Faith*. Cleveland, OH, United Church Press, 2008.

God and Christ Jesus. In the first part of my life, it was through music that I began to relate to God. When I was three years old, my parents chuckled amongst themselves when I would place myself between two of the chairs in the sanctuary and pretend that one of the chairs was a piano. As I sat at my imaginary piano on those Sunday mornings, I pretended that I was playing hymns and singing to God. It was amusing to many people in the congregation to see me pretend to play hymns on an imaginary piano in the middle of church, but everyone soon realized that I was a creative child who would go on to have a unique relationship with God.

As I grew up, I traded in the sanctuary chairs for a real piano. I began to take piano and cello lessons, and that love of music continued to strengthen my faith in God. I would play special music on Sunday mornings, and it was through my love of music that I found an outlet for my innate desire to worship and serve God. Over time, my faith in God began to mature. In confirmation, I began to study the Bible, and I slowly began to understand God's love for me. Confirmation Sunday was the proudest day of my life at that time; the moment that I took communion for the first time and renewed my baptismal vows, I knew that from that moment on, I had chosen to live a life that was dedicated to God.

After confirmation, I began High School. Like most teenagers, I became distracted. Boy Scout Camping trips, orchestra concerts, and piano recitals took center stage in my life. I was still a follower of Christ, but I did not go to church as often. In my last years of High School, my family experienced tragedies that we had never known before. My older brother was diagnosed with brain cancer, and when that happened, our faith and trust in God was significantly weakened. At that time, I struggled to try and understand why there was pain and suffering in the world. I emerged from that experience strong, and my faith was once again restored as my brother began to heal.

After high school, I went straight to college. In those first years of college, I began going to church once again, and I found a faith community at college that I thought would help me grow in my relationship with God. Near the end of my third year in college though, I began the process of claiming my identity as a Gay man. I continued to go to church each Sunday, but on one Sunday in particular, I entered the church sanctuary and listened to a sermon that discussed how homosexual love and attraction was a sin and went against God's plan in creation. That one sermon damaged me. I left the church that Sunday feeling that God did not love me, and that my existence was an abomination. A few months went by, and as I continued to struggle with claiming my identity as a gay man, and as I began to consider coming out, I felt that there was no purpose in living if I was not loved by God. That was a very dark period in my life, and it was at that point that I chose to leave the church and disassociate with Christianity.

For three years, I did not identify myself as a Christian, and I continued to believe that God had abandoned me. Although I felt alone in the world, I did come out to my family and friends as a gay man. Slowly, I began to rebuild my life. I sought help from professionals, and I was at a stable place where I was able to fully embrace my sexuality. I then started law school, and continued living with the belief that I did not need God in my life.

Near the end of my first year of law school, I realized that something was missing in my life. I had a boyfriend, I was a law student, and I had supportive friends, but there was something missing that I could not identify. One day, I began to reflect on my childhood memories of going to church, and the joy that I felt in Sunday School, and when I would praise God through music. I was still angry with the Christian Church at that time, but something deep within me spoke to me, urging me to look for churches that would teach love and acceptance of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation.

I did some digging, and I discovered the UCC Opening and Affirming Coalition. I read more and more, and I slowly realized that the church that I was raised in was part of a denomination that was open and affirming of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. I then discovered that there was an Open and Affirming Church close by, and I began thinking about visiting the church to see if they truly were accepting of all people. I sent an email to the local pastor, and we set up a meeting. On a Saturday morning, I walked into First Congregational United Church of Christ in DeKalb, Illinois. I found my way to the pastor's study, and I sat down in one of the chairs. When I sat down in one of the chairs, I was overwhelmed with feelings of fear and uncertainty. Was the pastor going to tell me that I was going to hell? Would the pastor tell me that I was living a life of sin? Was the pastor going to tell me that they are a church that "hates the sin but loves the sinner?" I almost got up and left, but a voice within me said that everything would be alright, and I was meant to be there in that place and listen to what the pastor had to say.

As I sat in that chair, I began to listen, and for the first time in a long time, I heard a Christian Pastor tell me that God loved me exactly as I was. The pastor told me that my sexual orientation was not a sin, but it was part of God's plan for my life. I was made by God to spread love with the world; in that moment, as I sat in that chair, I felt the Holy Spirit's presence. I then realized that the voice within me that had urged me to look for churches that accepted gay people, that same voice that urged me to walk into the church building and stay to listen to what the pastor had to say was the Holy Spirit at work within me.

I made a decision in that moment to join the church. I began to sing in the choir, I attended services and events, and I began to find my faith in God. Over time, I once again had a desire to learn and understand the Bible; I wanted to know what the Bible had to say,

and I wanted to understand its relevance in the world. For three years, I continued to be an active member of the church, and I learned to listen for God's voice in my life.

In my final year of law school, I heard God's voice again in my life. I discovered through my legal advocacy that I had the ability to show compassion and mercy to people; I learned that I had the ability to explain God's purpose in the world; I discovered that I could explain Jesus' teachings to other believers in a way that was relevant; and, most of all, I felt that God was calling me to share the Good News of God's love with the world. When I discovered that I had a passion for helping people and teaching the Bible, I realized that although I could serve God as an attorney and as a member in a local church, the best way for me to serve God would be through ordained ministry. Teaching the Bible would be accomplished through preaching, spreading God's love would be through evangelization, and caring for God's people would be accomplished through pastoral care.

I then began to study at Eden Theological Seminary, and through faithful discernment and study, I have come to a fuller understanding of how God has called me to begin the work of ordained ministry.

My faith pilgrimage is a story of renewed faith, healing, and redemption. But most of all, my faith pilgrimage is a story of God's grace; although I have done nothing to deserve God's love or call to ministry, God has offered it freely to me. By attending seminary, and because of my time of discernment, I have gained the ability to look back now and see how my gifts can be used. In my discernment, I have come to understand that my love of music as a child has taught me that all of God's creation has an innate desire to sing and praise God; it is through my ministry that I am called by God to encourage others to praise and worship God. In my discernment, I have come to realize that my family's experiences of pain and loss have taught me how to find God in the midst of our fears; it is through my ministry

that I am called by God to lend a hand of encouragement and support to lighten the burden of others. In my discernment, I have come to realize that when I sat and listened to that hateful sermon condemning my sexual orientation, God taught me that what we say and do can impact others; it is through my ministry that I am called by God to preach love and acceptance of all people. In my discernment, I have come to realize that I am beloved by God and made in God's image, regardless of my sexual orientation; it is through my ministry that I am called by God to spread the Good News that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are a beloved child of God. And finally, in my discernment, I have come to realize that the lessons I learned in law school of statutory interpretation and public speaking were a gift from God to prepare me to preach God's love from a pulpit; it is through my ministry that I am called by God to help interpret the holy scriptures and teach God's love through sermons and preaching.

Although I am one of the unlikeliest of people that God would call to ministry, just like Moses and David, I believe that God has spoken to me, and through the voice of the Holy Spirit, God has challenged me to be a pastor and teacher of God's flock.

(2) My call to ordained ministry, the challenges I anticipate for my ministry, and the vision I have for my ministry

I believe that God has truly called me to ordained ministry. God has given me many gifts, and it is through ordained ministry that I will truly be able to use all of the gifts that God has given me.

Although I believe that I am called to ordained ministry, I know that I have some challenges that I need to overcome. Through working with local churches as a student pastor, I have realized that the biggest obstacle that I need to overcome is my responsiveness and timeliness. Because I have a tendency towards being untimely and failing to meet deadlines,

I have let others down. In my time of discernment, I have come to realize that work in a ministerial role requires meeting deadlines, being proactive, and maintaining open lines of communication. To overcome these obstacles, I need to work towards establishing organization systems that work for me. I also need to be open to working with others to find best practices for staying on top of my responsibilities. I have these issues, but I pray for God's guidance and continual support. I also know that through my potential colleagues, I have wonderful resources available to help overcome my shortcomings.

As I have stated multiple times, I make mistakes, but through the grace of God, I am willing to do my best, work hard, and ask for help to find the best way to serve God's people.

In my time of discernment, I have had an opportunity to reflect on the vision that I believe God has for my ministry. The main mission of my ministry is to spread love to the world, and seek justice and righteousness for the oppressed. I believe that I will spread love in my ministry through preaching sermons that advocate for equality and acceptance of all people. By using sermons and classes to teach the importance of love, my hope is that my congregants will be prepared to go out into the world and be the church. I believe that through pastoral care visits, I will spread love by standing with people through my gift of empathy, offering encouragement and support. And, I believe that by trying to live a virtuous life, I will spread God's love through my daily interactions with others. Finally, I believe that because I have a unique understanding of the Law, and I am able to practice in a courtroom, I will be able to work with a local church to advocate for the oppressed. I will be able to advocate for justice and righteousness through weekly sermons, but I will also be able to volunteer my time and talents as an attorney to confront injustice in a legal setting.

In conclusion, although I am imperfect and have my challenges to overcome, I believe that God has called me to serve through ordained ministry, teaching love and acceptance

from the pulpit, practicing love and compassion through pastoral visits, and working towards establishing justice and righteousness through continued advocacy in the local community.

(3) My call to serve as a Local Church Pastor

I believe that God has called me to serve as a local pastor. In my time of discernment, I have come to realize that because of my unique talents and affinity towards preaching and teaching the Gospel, a local church is where I will be able to fully serve God and answer God's call in my life. In a local church setting, I will be able to advocate for the oppressed through community organizing. It is also through the local church setting that I will be able to share compassion and empathy with others. I believe that if we are to change the world, it begins at a local level. If a local church embraces the teachings of Jesus, and spreads the message of love and acceptance, we will see a society that is more like Christ.

I hope that within the next five years, I will be working full-time at a local church. I would like to be settled at a church, volunteering in the community, working as a Pro Bono Attorney, and raising a family. I have learned in my life that God puts us exactly where we are needed. I may not always know God's plans, but I am sure that he does have some sort of plan. In the next five years, I may not know how many kids I will have, but what I do know is that I see myself serving God through ordained ministry in a church parish.

It was in the local church setting that I found God, and it was in the local church setting that I learned the meaning of Grace. I believe that if I am to serve God fully, I am best equipped to serve God in the place that I am most familiar with.

(4) My call to serve as an ordained minister in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ

I believe that God has called me to serve as an ordained minister in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. In the UCC, we are a united and uniting church. I believe in the power of the Word of God, and I believe that it has the potential to change the world. In the United Church of Christ, I see myself as embodying the UCC's goal of extravagant welcome and unity of all people.

I also believe that God loves all people, no matter who they are, no matter who they love, and no matter where they are on life's journey. As an openly gay man who is devoted to serving God, I believe that UCC embodies my belief in the acceptance and love of all people.

<u>CONCLUSION</u>

Friends, I give thanks to God for you. I give thanks that you took time to read through my paper, and I give thanks that for your consideration. I pray that some part of this paper spoke to you, and I pray that you too will feel the Spirit of God speaking to you, urging you to work for the good of all people. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

May God bless you and keep you, May God smile down upon you, and May God grant you all peace and love. Amen.