

ORDINATION PAPER

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Introduction

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43: 9a¹

To graduate from seminary at 61 years of age is a sign that with God there is always something new and in that newness lies a kernel of hope. Writing this ordination paper brings with it yet another new opportunity, a chance for me to reflect in a very focused way on my faith journey, my theology, and the importance of my ordination into the United Church of Christ.

Part I: Personal Journey

The Formative Years

I come from a long line of faithful people who “pitch their tents in the land of hope” (*The Message*, Acts 2: 26).² Church is what my people do and our faith defines us. My grandmother used to gather her grandchildren around her to sing the old hymns. Every night of my parents’ married life they said the Lord’s Prayer together. At the end of her life, my mother awoke from what our family thought was a deep coma, to pray this beloved prayer with us one more time. I stand on the shoulders of faithful people and it is upon this faithfulness that I build my ministry.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was my hometown for thirty plus years. Although it was once a booming steel mill town that later lost most of its steel mills, it never lost hope. Over the years, it reinvented itself and now has the distinction of being named “most livable city in the United States” not once but twice.³ It was into this city of hope that I was born on September 24, 1949,

¹ All scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1989).

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2003).

³ Sally Kalson, “Pittsburgh named Most Livable City again,” <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10124/1055313-53.stm> (Accessed on September 14, 2011).

the oldest of the three children of Richard and Alice Schmidt. My parents were Pittsburghers, born and bred so they carried the “hope” gene too. My sister, Candice was born in 1953 and my brother, Richard in 1959.

My father’s family owned bakeries and in 1959 my dad ventured to Monroeville to relocate the family baking operations. He opened one of the first businesses in this soon-to-be-bustling post-World War II suburb. My folks bought a home in Monroeville and we joined the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church (GSLC). GSLC held the promise of growing from a small mission parish to a rapidly-growing congregation under the tutelage of Rev. Dr. John T. Braughler. And grow it did! With that growth came encouragement to participate in all things Lutheran, such as Luther League, Lutherlyn (summer camp) and an extremely rigorous three-year Catechism program. (Our confirmation certificates were purchased in Germany while Pastor Braughler was on study leave there, learning about Luther, of course!)

Even though Pastor Braughler was a no-nonsense teacher when it came to catechism class, he instilled in me a love of learning about the church and what it meant to be a Christian as well as the nuances of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). My confirmation was a significant event for me and I remember feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit at the time I was confirmed. I was active in Luther League which provided me some of my earliest leadership experiences.

My years at Camp Lutherlyn had, and continue to have, a profound impact on my faith. My experiences there often bubble up while I journal or prepare a sermon. Debbie Ross, a fellow camp staff member, is still my close friend today. It was at camp that I came to know God in a deeper way through morning watch and in fellowship with other campers. I felt closest to God in the simple worship services at camp. It is no surprise to me that I have moved away

from a "high" church to the United Church of Christ (UCC) which, at least at my local congregation, is less formal in its worship style.

My parents were people who modeled living lives of hope and trusting in God's providence. My father had surgery for a significant stomach ulcer when he was 35. For the sake of his health, my father decided to sell the family bakeries and begin a new career. This was a huge leap of faith but my folks believed that God would make a path where one was not obvious. God opened the door to a position at Pittsburgh Plate Glass, where my father worked until he retired. My parents were not wealthy people but they found a way to tithe to their church, to provide hospitality whenever the opportunity presented itself and to send each of their children to college.

My mother worked for the municipality of Monroeville. Her job required her to be an excellent networker and she excelled at connecting people. She believed that we each have gifts that were to be used in helping one another and she instilled this belief in her children. Again and again, I experienced my mother's ability to seek out people who could encourage and bless each other. She did this at work, at church, and within her circle of friends and family. I see this ability to connect and to reach out to one another as one of the unique gifts that the church has to offer. I experienced this first hand when I was a college student.

The College and Career Start-up Years

During my sophomore year in college, I was seriously dating a young man named Bob. We had been dating since high school and fully intended to marry; but an almost fatal accident that left Bob partially paralyzed changed all that. On the night of Bob's accident, which happened on my college campus, my mother called her pastor whose father pastored a church near my college. She asked him if his father could come to the hospital and support me. I remember that my college pastor (who was also my camp pastor), the Rev. James Tipton also

came to my aid. It was during this period that I learned the importance of church connections, the power of the ministry of presence, and how part of our call as Christians (humans for that matter) is to be present for one another. I also experienced first hand the anguish of watching a loved one suffer and what it means to “hold the hope for another.”

When I graduated from college with an English degree, I did what many young women of my generation did, I taught school. My teaching assignments were at a traditional junior high and an outdoor school in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. My long term goal was to be a guidance counselor which required five years of teaching experience and a master’s degree in counseling. While I taught, I also worked on my counseling degree. When I completed my master’s, there were few counseling jobs in the public schools. I used my counseling skills as the Director of Career Planning and Placement at the college level and from there moved to industry. My teaching and counseling training proved helpful in the corporate world as I managed communications, training, employment, and human resources. While I was working full-time in industry, I earned what I thought was my last degree, a Ph.D. in education.

The Moving Years

During my 30’s and 40’s, I moved three times with my career. Moving as a single person was never easy but each time I found a church that lovingly welcomed me. The church was where I made my connections. My church became my support system since my family of origin was always at least a four-hour drive away from where I lived. During this time I witnessed how God’s love is manifested through the people of the church.

Each move found me church shopping. Always, I started with what I knew best, the Lutheran Church, and when that did not work I visited other denominations. In 1983, I moved from Pittsburgh to Buffalo, New York. The Rev. Dr. David Persons of the Wayside Presbyterian Church in Hamburg, New York introduced me to the early Eastern roots of Christian spirituality.

When I moved from Buffalo to Cincinnati in 1986, the Reverend Fred Shaw, who was pastor of Deerfield United Methodist Church and the chief storyteller for the remnant band of the Shawnee tribe of Ohio, introduced me to Native American spirituality. Both of these men greatly expanded my understanding of Christianity.

My last major geographical move was from Cincinnati to the Washington, D.C. area in 1990. My last church shopping trip ended at the United Church of Christ of Seneca Valley (UCCSV) in August of 1990. The Rev. Doug Hunt, then an In-Care candidate, preached about Rosa Parks. As he spoke, my friend who was visiting with me leaned over and whispered, “This is the church for you.” And indeed it was and continues to be. It makes me proud to be part of a church that is committed to radical hospitality and believes in a Still-Speaking-God.

My pastors at UCCSV have each nurtured and guided me. Rev. David B. Keller introduced me to the concept of spiritual direction and suggested that I use my gifts of facilitation and team building in churches. Rev. John Wineman, our interim pastor, modeled beautifully what it means to lead by example. Rev. Carolyn Roberts, my current pastor, has been generous and gracious with her guidance and resources as I have explored my new call to seminary and ministry.

In 1994, Faith at Work, now known as Lumunos, became an integral part of my faith formation and in the refinement of my call. I was invited to attend one of their leadership retreats and my life has never been the same. I felt as if I had found my long-lost Camp Lutherlyn days. At Faith at Work retreats, we took time to journal, listen for God's call, and share our stories. It was Marjory Bankson, author and former Executive Director of Faith at Work who expanded my understanding of call. It was in the Faith at Work magazine where I first read about workplace chaplaincy in 1994, which piqued my interest in seminary.

1994 also found me attending my first spiritual retreat led for a week by my favorite modern day “mystic,” Parker Palmer, at Kirkridge in Pennsylvania. Parker created the space where I could claim my birthright gifts of hospitality and building a sense of safe community where people could be themselves. Rev. Jane Quinn Gray who was later to become my spiritual director attended the same retreat. For over fifteen years, I have worked with Jane. She has seen me through many a spiritual challenge including the deaths of my brother, mother, and father as well as my first marriage (at age 51)...all within a three-year period! Jane stood beside me as I recovered from two major surgeries. She helped me to discern a new direction when my business partner had to exit our business because of a serious illness. She stood beside me as I gained clarity about the call to attend seminary. She continues to accompany me on the journey of discerning my emerging call. Drawing on the Hebrew Bible, she is my Eli as I, much like Samuel, listen for God’s call. In terms of the Christian Biblical story, I am Timothy and she is my mentor, Paul.

There are others, non pastor types, who have seen and affirmed my gifts. Two are close friends who affirm and encourage my call, Judith Benkendorf and Krista Kurth. Neither of these women is a practicing Christian, but they see in me gifts for ministry, a strong faith and spirituality. Never a week went by during my seminary studies that they did not offer me an encouraging word.

The Challenging Years

In 1998, my life was full of ups and downs. My mother and sister were both diagnosed with cancer within a month of one another. It seemed as if my brother was self destructing. I started a new business and took on a business partner. The love of my life, Daniel Davis appeared in just the place where a single woman is told to meet a man...in church.

Over the next three years, my sister and mother both had chemo at the same time with differing results. My mother's life was extended three and a half years. My sister is still a cancer overcomer to this day. My business partner, Krista Kurth and I successfully launched Renewal Resources, our own website, and E-zine. We even began thinking about writing a book. My brother went to a rehab program but it was too little too late. He died two months before Dan and I were married. A few months after the wedding, when I had sold my home of 11 ½ years, Dan and I went on our honeymoon. The day we returned home an email was waiting for me from my sister, Candice. The message line read simply, "Mother's Health." My mother was in her last days and I left for Pittsburgh immediately so Candice and I could care for our mother, allowing her to die at home, which was her wish.

Always willing to find humor in the midst of difficulties, when my mother called us together she said, "I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that I have only a short time to live. The good news is that I won't have to Christmas shop this year. Let's get hospice called. I don't plan to linger." (She didn't. She died two weeks later on her 55th wedding anniversary, November 9, 2001.) My mother taught us that it is possible to die the way you lived. In her case, she died graciously.

Dan and I quickly settled into our calling as a couple. We are fiercely committed to providing hospitality. Before we married, we decided that our house would be modeled on that old poem, "The House by the Side of the Road." As one line of this poem reads, we want to "rejoice when travelers rejoice and weep with the strangers that moan."⁴ We seek to provide a place of rest and welcome par excellence. In fact, we have a lock box on our front door so guests can stop by and stay even if we are not home.

⁴ Sam Walter Foss, "The House by the Side of the Road," <http://www.essentia.com/book/poems/Roadhouse.htm> (Accessed September 13, 2011).

Dan has three grown children by a previous marriage. My blended family has taught me many new lessons. Communication patterns and world views differ greatly in each of our family circles. My only living sibling and her family are quite traditional and fairly conservative in their political and religious outlook. Our three adult children are less traditional and more progressive. There have been plenty of opportunities to figure out strategies for keeping the peace, especially since our grandchildren, Frances and Henry have joined the family circle.

The year after Dan and I married, my niece and her husband sold their home and moved to my dad's home to care for him. Eventually he required 24-hour care and we hired round-the-clock caretakers for him. Once a month every month for the next three years, I drove to Pittsburgh to spend time with Dad. Often Dan would join me. It was touching to see the bond grow between Dad and Dan. Even though Dad had physical limitations that made it difficult for him to get out of the house, he was of service right in his own home. Dad was a great cook and could repair anything, which meant people were always calling for advice. Additionally, he was the unofficial counselor for his caretakers because he was a good listener and compassionate person.

During all these tumultuous years, I learned that God is faithful and does not leave us alone in our grief. It is common when one loses both parents to feel like an orphan. That feeling was magnified for me, when one year after my dad's death I had my right hip replaced in 2005. Although Dan, Krista who was my business partner at the time, and the Called to Care Committee at our local church took excellent care of me after my surgery, I missed my folks as well as my brother. I felt a deep sadness but also sensed the closeness of God who never abandoned me. Out of that valley of loss and through God's mercies, came the small voice that nudged me to respond to the call to go to seminary, something that I had considered in the 1970's.

The Seminary Years

Upon hearing me speak about my call to attend seminary, my beloved Daniel replied, “Why not? You preach enough around here. Might as well make it official.” Armed with this well-intentioned and humorous support, I enrolled in the summer of 2005 as a “special student” at Wesley Theological Seminary. I entered with an interest in workplace ministry. That interest expanded and evolved over time. It is difficult to put into words the profound impact seminary has had upon me. Every class brought something new to ponder on my faith journey. Although Wesley is a Methodist Seminary, I flew the banner of the United Church of Christ (UCC) each time I could. (In retrospect, more times than I should have, but I am shameless when it comes to my enthusiasm for the UCC.)

I found my interaction with the variety of students and teachers invigorating. I loved getting lost in the stacks at the seminary library. I sought out opportunities to learn about the culture of younger generations in my Cross Cultural Counseling Course and as part of my independent studies, which focused on Intergenerational Dialogue. I also sought to understand more fully possibilities for dialogue among people of different belief systems and researched the topic of Interbelief Dialogue for my World Religions course. In the vast majority of classes, I was engaged, and classmates could always count on me to ask questions about how the class content applied to the real world.

Because I am an application learner, it is no surprise that the experiential aspect of seminary was the most amazing part of the journey for me. My intercultural experience involved spending two weeks with the Trucker-Traveler Ministry in Breezewood, Pennsylvania, where I served alongside of Chaplain Bruce Maxwell. What a man of God and what a learning experience. It was a blessing to work with a variety of people in this ministry. One of my favorite memories was talking with Bill, a twice-divorced truck driver from Cincinnati who lived

in his truck. It was difficult to imagine what Bill and I might have in common. It didn't take long to discover that we both loved rock and roll music. So we sat singing lines from rock and roll songs at 4:00 AM at Denny's breakfast bar. After singing, I asked how things were with Bill and God. He went on to share the most amazing story. Several months before, Bill had fallen asleep at the wheel but felt God touch his cheek and awaken him. Bill said that God was not his co-pilot as some truckers like to say. God was Bill's pilot.

The Trucker-Traveler Ministry prepared me for my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Shady Grove Hospital where I was assigned to the Intensive Care Unit. My second week as chaplain intern at the hospital, I worked with the family of a dying woman. Her sisters, their husbands and adult children were all Harley Davidson folks, laborers who came into the ICU with paint and dirt on their overalls. Because of the Trucker/Traveler Ministry, I already knew people like these folks. One night when a new nurse came on duty, she looked like she was overwhelmed by this group. I was able to assure her that they were a lovely family who needed support just like the rest of us when a loved one is in the valley of the shadow of death. My experiences during the two units of CPE provided me with numerous opportunities to practice the ministry of presence.

As part of my discernment process, I choose to complete my two-year placement during seminary at Evangelical Reformed United Church of Christ in Frederick, Maryland. Everything about this internship was amazing from working with two outstanding women clergy in the Rev. Dr. Barbara Kershner and the Rev. Jan Daffern, to a creative staff, and a caring teaching congregation. Each Sunday from September 2008 to May 2009 and September 2009 to May 2010 found me involved in worship leadership and facilitating the Faith Matters Class for a group of adult participants. ERUCC included me in staff meetings, consistory meetings, and many church-wide activities.

On May 9, 2011 at 2:00 pm in the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., I stepped forward to accept my Masters in Divinity diploma with honors! My family and friends gathered to support me as they had done throughout the five years of seminary. This graduate degree means more to me than my others because it represents an evolving covenant forged many years ago between God and me.

Mae West, who may not be the typical person one would quote in an ordination paper, is credited with saying something that I have found to be the absolute truth. She said, “As one grows older, one grows neither better nor worse. Just more like one’s self.” Seminary has allowed me to grow into who I am in a deeper way and has given me courage to claim my birthright gifts of ministry.

My Evolving Call

Looking back on it, I see my confirmation as a defining moment in my call story. It was then that I knew that I was God’s and God was mine. This is what I refer to as the “umbrella call” of God. It was not a call to a specific career or even to full-time ministry. It was simply God calling me *by name* to be part of God’s flock. Of note, it was about this same time that Janet Gustafson, a close family friend told my mother, “Someday that girl is going to be a preacher.” “Aunt Jan,” who is now 87 years old, likes to say it took me long enough to realize that she was right.

Although I toyed with the idea of going to seminary and parish ministry in the early 1970’s, I followed the more traditional path of teaching. Teaching and learning are my passions. I have had numerous opportunities to do both. Nothing is ever wasted in God’s economy; my approach to preaching draws upon my years of learning and teaching.

Throughout my career, the recurring call in my work has been that of a facilitator of learning, tender of souls, and builder of community. I have taught in traditional junior high

schools and graduate schools, at outdoor schools and camps, in airplane hangers and hockey rinks, and in churches and cathedrals. I have worked in truck stops as an intern chaplain to a variety of folks. I have served as a hospital chaplain to Muslims and atheists. I have conducted team building sessions with Russian women entrepreneurs (who did not speak English) and folks who were working in toxic workplaces. I like to think that my work has been as a midwife, assisting with the birth of newness and hope in people's lives.

I have spent my life preparing for a time such as this. My studies in education and theology influence my approach to ministry, which draws on a variety of disciplines for teaching, preaching, and leading. My roles as teacher, organizational consultant, speaker, and writer have all been aimed at encouragement of others. At this time, I see God's call on my life expanding to a new venue. I stand ready to bring my experience to a church or a faith based organization, places where people are encouraged to use their gifts to God's glory, places for all God's people, and places that offer hope.

I began this section of my paper with thoughts about being born into a city of hope and a family who trusted in God's faithfulness. The hope that lives in me is more than blind optimism. Henri Nouwen said it best in his book *Bread for the Journey*⁵,

“Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes. Optimism is the expectation that things---the weather, human relationship, the economy, the political situation, and so on---will get better. Hope is trust that God will fulfill God's promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands.

All the great spiritual leaders in history were people of hope. Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Mary, Jesus, Rumi, Gandhi, and Dorothy Day all lived with a promise in their hearts that guided them toward the future without the need to know exactly what it would look like. Let's live with hope.”

⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), January 16.

Part II: My Theology

Introduction

As previously mentioned, I am the product of two mainline Protestant traditions, the LCA (now the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) and the UCC. Many of my beliefs are influenced by Lutheran theology, summed up beautifully by the simple phrase “grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone.”⁶ I also claim and adore (yes, *adore*, as in adoration) the first paragraph of the Preamble to the UCC Constitution,

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.⁷

I read these words and my heart overflows with gratitude that I am part of the UCC! Some might argue with the UCC's positions on certain matters but they would be hard pressed to find fault with our core beliefs. I am particularly drawn to the line of the preamble that reads, *“It [the UCC] affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.”* That phrase describes a denomination that never grows old!

If my faith journey up to this point is any indication, what I state in this paper about my beliefs will continue to evolve over time. I embrace the UCC's tag line “God is

⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “What We Believe,” www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/The-Basics/What-Lutherans-Believe.aspx (Accessed September 6, 2011).

⁷ *The Constitution and Bylaws, United Church of Christ* (Executive Council of the United Church of Christ, 2005), 2.

still speaking.” Undoubtedly, I will continue to draw upon the words attributed to the Rev. John Robinson as the pilgrims departed for the new world, “the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word.”⁸ The Holy Spirit continues to work a new thing in my life again and again. I believe that God’s call on my life has evolved. Each time that my call has been refined or expanded, my beliefs have been transformed too. I expect that they will be again.

As a confirmand in the LCA, I studied both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. They were the go-to testimonies of faith. I repeated them over a thirty-five year period on many Sundays. At forty-one, I became a member of the United Church of Christ and became familiar with the UCC Statement of Faith. Although the UCC uses the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds, it does not consider itself to be a creedal church. The church views historical creeds as testimonies of faith rather than tests of faith.

For purposes of this paper, I will draw upon the UCC Statement of Faith in the form of a doxology⁹ for clarifying my beliefs and my personal understanding of the UCC’s theology. I am drawn to this version of the statement because it is gender inclusive. I also find the language of the statement contemporary, compassionate, challenging, and inspiring. The statement captures the openness that drew me to the UCC. I never tire of repeating it and each time I do, I find some new inspiration in its words.

Reflections on the UCC Statement of Faith

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

The opening line of the Statement of Faith suggests to me the notion of the Trinity. For me, the Trinity is a complex concept and one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith, yet I

⁸ Margaret Rowland Post, *History and Program: Revised and Updated* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2007), 19.

⁹ Arthur G. Clyde, *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 885.

am a Trinitarian. I relish the interconnectedness of each entity of the Trinity. Elizabeth Johnson's description of the Trinity through the lens of perichoresis (the mutual inter-penetration and indwelling within the threefold nature of the Trinity) speaks to me. Johnson wrote in *She Who Is*,

each person [of the Trinity] encompasses the others, is coinherent with the others in a joyous movement of shared life...there is a clasping of hands, a pervading exchange of life, a genuine circling around together...¹⁰

Whether or not the Statement of Faith is implicitly Trinitarian is open to debate.

Concerning this matter, Shinn writes in *Prism*,

When I am asked whether or not the Statement of Faith is Trinitarian, I reply that it is as Trinitarian as the New Testament. I accept the judgment of *The Encyclopedia of Religion* that the New Testament "does not contain an explicit doctrine of the Trinity." The New Testament, of course, tells of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is one legitimate and time-honored interpretation of the belief. The Statement of Faith even in the revisions that omit the language of the Father and Son is consistent with the Augustinian, if not Cappadocian, trinitarianism.¹¹

The opening to the Statement of Faith calls to mind words that Jurgen Moltmann penned in *The Way of Jesus Christ*. Moltmann writes, "God is with us and God is for us."¹² I believe that "God, Eternal Spirit" is with us always and goes before us in all things. God is there not only for people in our time but for people throughout the ages. Not only is God with us but God dwells within us. Through the gift of our Savior Jesus Christ, God is for us. In the words of Romans 8:31b, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" With the assurance that God is both with and for us, this affirmation suggests to me that I am to praise the Almighty by testifying to all that the Holy One has done. I see the line, "to your deeds we testify" as an invitation to speak a word about God's faithfulness in my life and encourage others to do the same.

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: The Crossword Publishing Company, 2007), 230.

¹¹ Roger L. Shinn, "Revisiting the Statement of Faith," *Prism*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 10.

¹² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1993), 181.

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

The question of creation, who did the creating and how has never been one with which I have struggled. My years spent at church camp in the midst of God's great outdoors are where I knew God first and best. There was and still is no doubt for me that creation was wrought of God, who had and still has a master plan. My belief in God is not dependent upon my understanding of exactly how creation happened or my ability to crack God's code of creation.

As persons created in God's image, we are called to act on God's behalf in relating to God's creation. My Systematic Theology Professor, Dr. Josiah Young, focusing on Jurgen Moltmann's ideas, discussed our responsibility and response to the ecological crisis as follows:

Our role is not domination of the earth in the classical sense. We can not separate ourselves from other creatures. Moltmann suggests that we have a double role as *imago Dei* and *imago mundi*. This double role means that: 1) We represent the earth to God and 2) We represent God to the earth.¹³

After studying Moltmann and becoming a grandparent, the concept of representing God to the earth is one that has caught my attention. As a result, I decided on the topics of stewardship of the earth and the accumulation of material possessions as the major foci for my Faith Matters class at my placement church. This is a case of the teacher teaching what she most needs to learn. I also made a commitment to follow the Great American Clothes Diet for one year and preach about it. Essentially this meant no clothes purchases for one year. Not an easy thing for a woman who enjoys fashion and whose middle name was chosen based on her mother's favorite dress shop, "Adele's." In that year, I came to understand "how much is enough" and became sensitive to my own and other's consuming habits.

I am still living into this learning. What is emerging for me is the realization that when we choose to desecrate the earth rather than cherish God's creation, that when we choose greed

¹³ Josiah Young III, Systematic Theology Class Lecture, Wesley Theological Seminary, February 22, 2010.

over generosity, and that when we do not choose to live simply so others may simply live, we are choosing the ways of death over life.

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

For me, sin is a reality. Although my definition of sin is perhaps broader than traditional Christianity defines it, I do not like to “dance around” the issue of sin. In *The Way of Jesus*, Moltmann defined sin in a way that makes sense to me. He wrote,

We understand by 'sin' the condition in which a person closes himself off from the source of life, from God. A closing of the self like this comes about when the purposes for which human beings are by nature destined are not discovered or not fulfilled, because of hubris, or depression, or the 'God complex', or because of a refusal to accept what human existence is about.¹⁴

I lean on my Lutheran roots when I claim that daily I fall from grace. If we are living, we are going to sin. According to Luther, we have to sin. Luther's words about sinning boldly have always resonated with me. He wrote,

Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly. For he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but, as Peter says, we look for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. . . . Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner.¹⁵

I believe that it is through God's grace and extravagant love that I am saved from aimlessness and sin. Thus, although daily I fall, and I am destined to fall like the prodigal, God “seeks to save me in holy love,” and like the Waiting Parent, the Almighty One runs out to meet me while I am still far off. God not only seeks to save me in holy love but God seeks to save all people. It is God who gives us the free will that allows us to make the decision to return to our waiting heavenly parent.

¹⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1993), 184.

¹⁵ Weimar ed. vol. 2, p. 371; Letters I, "Luther's Works," American Ed., Vol 48. p. 281- 282. <http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Luther-Sin-Boldly.html> (Accessed April 25, 2010).

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

In *Confessing our Faith*, Shinn made a simple but profound point about the order in which this declaration appears in the Statement of Faith. Shinn wrote, “The Statement of Faith does not tell us that God first judges us, then seeks to save. Rather, it is the saving God who judges.”¹⁶ As one who clings to that perennial favorite scripture verse, “We love, because God first loved us,” found in 1 John 4:19, I affirm Shinn’s point. It is a saving God who loves us first (I am taking liberty here with the scripture) and then judges us. In applying this declaration to myself, I believe that because daily I fall from grace, indeed I fall under God’s judgment. It is comforting to know that it is a loving and saving God that judges me with a righteous will. To borrow the words of an old hymn written by Frederick William Faber, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea; there’s a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.”¹⁷

Looking at this declaration in a larger sense, it speaks of the judgment of people and nations. To me this means that not only are individuals held accountable but also groups of people and nations fall under God’s judgment. This accountability implies that the Christian calling goes beyond the Great Commission (which was the scripture I chose when I was confirmed into the Lutheran faith tradition at thirteen years of age) found in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” We are also called, as Shinn wrote, “to correct institutions of injustice, to change laws, to redistribute power. God, we believe, judges people and nations.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Roger L. Shinn, *Confessing Our Faith* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 58.

¹⁷ Frederick William Farber, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,” www.oremus.org/hymnal/t/t490.html (Accessed on May 2, 2010).

¹⁸ Op. Cit., 61.

The reference in this declaration to “prophets and apostles” signifies for me a connection of the Jewish prophets with the Christian apostles. This reflects my belief that Christian theology is deeply tied to Jewish theology and, as such, careful attention needs to be paid to the Hebrew scriptures. The Hebrew scriptures are full of “signposts” that help inform and connect the dots of Christian theology.

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.

For me, this declaration makes clear that the UCC is a church at whose center is Christ. We invoke the name of Christ in our Statement of Faith. We recognize in our statement that “in this person, Jesus, a genuine human being, you, the true God, have entered into our midst.”¹⁹ In embracing that statement, I recognize that Christ suffered for us and like us. God suffers with us and like us. If I profess that the Statement of Faith represents my core beliefs, this declaration would alone stand the litmus test of whether or not the UCC is a Christian church.

Concerning Christ’s suffering and reconciliation, I believe that Moltmann expressed it precisely when he wrote in *The Coming of God*, “... in his suffering and dying Christ suffered the true and total hell of God-forsakenness for the reconciliation of the world, and experienced for us the true and total damnation of sin.”²⁰

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.

This declaration begins with the recognition of God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. The concept of the Holy Spirit is real to me. I take comfort in the presence of Holy Spirit in my life and the life of the church. I take Christ at his word when I read in John 14:16 and 26,

¹⁹ Op. Cit., 69.

²⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 2004), 251.

¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

My belief is that the Holy Spirit is at work in the church, if only we make room for the spirit. It has been my experience that the church, both individual members and the corporate body, can be quick to discount or overlook the power of the Holy Spirit. In these days when the word on the street is that the mainline church is dying, the gift of the Holy Spirit is needed now more than ever. I say this somewhat tongue in cheek, because I am of the opinion that the church in every age has needed and will continue to need the Holy Spirit.

I am clear that the work of the Holy Spirit is not confined to the church. We read in John 3:8, “the wind [spirit] blows where it chooses.” God’s Holy Spirit is not the exclusive gift of the church. In my opinion, it is through the Holy Spirit that the people of the church are bound together in covenant. Left to their own devices it is unlikely that people of all ages, tongues, and races would be in covenant with one another.

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.

I have a great fondness for this declaration. The thought that God calls us fills me with joy. It brings to mind the Isaiah 43:1b scripture, “I have called you by name, you are mine.” Not only does God call us but God calls us into God’s *church*. Living in post Christian times, it is easy to disregard our calling to the church, to give it short shrift, or to find fault with this church to which God calls us.

God’s calling into the church is a call to “accept the cost and joy of discipleship.” Of all of the phrases of the Statement of Faith, the “cost of discipleship” is the greatest stretch for me. I believe that the call that God has put on me brings with it a cost and yet I do not feel that I am living my life in a way that reflects a sacrificial cost of discipleship. My life is one of comfort. I

have certainly made some sacrifices along the way, such as paying seminary tuition instead of buying a new car and living less extravagantly so that I can donate a portion of my resources to the church. My life circumstances have allowed me to give of my time and talents to the work of the church. However, I do not consider these contributions sacrificial in terms of the “cost of discipleship.”

To me, the phrase “to be your servants in the service of others” seems directly tied to the cost of discipleship. This phrase calls me to love those who may be deemed unlovable by some people. Something that Lee Camp wrote in *Mere Discipleship* speaks directly to me about the matter of service to others. Camp wrote, “There, on the path with Christ, we are called to love those about us who do not deserved to be loved. On the pilgrimage with Christ, we are forgiven with an extravagant love—he washes our feet, even when we would betray him. And there, on the path with Christ, we too are called to forgive with such extravagance.”²¹ Implicit in the service of others is God’s forgiveness of us and our willingness to demonstrate extravagant forgiveness of others.

God’s gracious love and forgiveness are that which people seek and the chance to proclaim them is part of God’s call on us. We are God’s instruments of proclamation, be it in words or in actions. The proclamation of the Gospel through social action is a strong strand of the UCC’s DNA. It is one of the reasons that I am proud to be associated with this denomination.

To me, the opportunity to be baptized into the Christian faith is a symbol of the resistance to the powers of evil and of remembering “whose we are.” As tradition has it, whenever Martin Luther felt his energy flagging, his doubt growing, or his fear strengthening, he would cry out, “I

²¹ Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, 2003), 24.

am baptized!” In that cry would be the renewal of strength to go forward on whatever journey he faced.²²

To eat at Christ’s table suggests to me the extravagant hospitality that God offers us. The invitation to feast calls to mind an old camp grace that begins with the words, “Come and dine the Master calleth, come and dine. He is present at our table all the time.” I believe that the invitation to dine extends beyond joining God at the table. As the Statement of Faith reminds us, we are also invited to join in Christ’s passion and victory.

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

This declaration begins with two simple but powerful words “You [God] promise.” This promise is made for all who trust God. We are promised forgiveness of our sins and fullness of grace. Although God’s forgives, our forgiveness does not come without our repentance. I find that I (and perhaps others) am sometimes too quick to claim grace. On this matter, Bonhoeffer’s words come to mind,

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.²³

Rather than cheap grace, Bonhoeffer suggested that Christians live lives of “costly grace” which he described in these terms,

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot

²² Rochelle A. Stackhouse, *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 2003 – January 2004, 51.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoffer.html (Accessed on May 2, 2010).

be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.²⁴

My personal commitment to justice and peace is informed through personal relationships. For instance, it is my granddaughter and her two mommies who are my motivation to be involved in Maryland Equality. It is my friendship with a formerly homeless addict that moves me to learn more about and begin to confront the issues of homelessness and mental illness. Swinging wide open the doors of my heart is how I find courage in the struggle for justice and peace.

At times, my views on justice and peace have made me the “different one” in my family of origin. That I have gone to seminary and am going to be ordained also make me unusual within my family circle. My sister’s family belongs to a church that does not ordain women. In spite of the fact that I am following a path dissimilar to my family of origin’s understanding of ordained ministry, I am convinced that I am following God’s call on my life at this time. I trust the Holy One to be present and faithful as I claim my call.

The words “eternal life which has no end” are difficult for me to explain in terms of human experience. I am uncertain as to what the experience of eternal life will be but I believe in eternal life. Moltmann’s ideas in *God in Creation* intrigue me. He writes,

human beings are not created to end in death; rather we are made for transformation through and beyond death. Hope for the resurrection of the body and a life everlasting in redemption corresponds to the bodily creation of the human being by God, and perfects that. The hope of the resurrection is belief in creation that gazes forward to what is ahead.²⁵

Conclusion

Using the UCC Statement of Faith as the guiding principle for organizing my beliefs has reinforced that the UCC is the church where I belong. I am grateful that there is room in the Statement of Faith for many renderings. The Statement of Faith provides fertile soil in which hope can live and grow.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1993), 275.

Part III: My Reflections on the UCC History and Polity

Introduction

When I joined the UCC, I found the UCC polity to be very confusing in comparison to the Lutheran polity. (Polity is simply the way a church is governed or organized.) Now that I have had a chance to live into and study the polity of the UCC, I see great beauty and power in it. As a church, we have seen new ways such as the ordination of women and gays open for us that may never have opened or taken much longer to open without our polity.

The Polity and Spirit of the UCC

The polity most often associated with the UCC is congregational which means that local churches have autonomy and authority to make their own decisions. *Toward an Understanding of Local Autonomy (1969)* states, “A local church, turning away from all selfish and introverted ideas, uses its freedom to make itself one in love and service with the total church...”²⁶ What I believe this means is that in all of the settings of the UCC, accountability and responsibility toward one another are understood. To me, our polity contributes to the trustworthiness and spaciousness that are hallmarks of the UCC.

In my opinion, our polity allows and makes room for the working of the people of individual congregations to listen for and to the “still small voice.” For instance, when the UCC General Synod takes an action, that setting of the church is “speaking to but not for the people.” Local churches are free to act upon and respond to UCC General Synod resolutions as they see fit or as the Spirit calls them.

Confounding Covenantal Relationships of the UCC

The concept of covenant in the UCC is on one hand an attraction to me and, on the other

²⁶ Theological Commission of the United Church of Christ, “*Toward an Understanding of Local Autonomy (1969)*,” <http://www.ucc.org/education/polity/pdf-folder/toward-an-understanding-of-local-autonomy.pdf> (Accessed September 14, 2011).

hand, it is a distraction. It pervades who the UCC has been and who the UCC is today. It makes things simple, and at the same time, it makes things complicated. To add to the confusion is the fact that the concept of covenant seems connected to UCC polity, UCC ecclesiology, and UCC theology which have grown out of several traditions. As Randi Walker Jones states in her book *Evolution of a UCC Style*, "...the dilemmas posed by a covenant ecclesiology expressed in a congregational form affect both the way we define ourselves and how we live."²⁷

When I joined the UCC, I knew very little about our polity or what it means to be a covenantal church. I first learned about covenantal relationships within the UCC and congregational autonomy the hard way. When I was fairly new to the UCC, I was asked to facilitate a conflicted situation between the pastor and the congregation within a UCC church. I was used to systems where congregations had a "reporting" relationship to a hierarchy with a bishop who provided guidance *and* made decisions on these kinds of matters. So I called CAC Conference Minister John Deckenback and Associate Conference Minister, Kwame Osei Reed, to discuss the situation and their role in it at the Conference level (that's probably what I called it then). They informed me that in the UCC they did not tell congregations what to do. Rather, the congregation had the power to make decisions as to next steps in the resolution of the situation, and that the congregation and the pastor were in a covenantal relationship. However, both the Conference Minister and the Associate Conference Minister were present to this congregation "to pastor the beloved community" as Jones describes in her book.²⁸

The UCC's polity and its commitment to covenant do not always make it easy to be a unified church. I am reminded of John Thomas's speech entitled "A United Church that Stands for Something" in which he stated, "A church in conflict that stands for something is better than

²⁷ Randi Jones Walker, *Evolution of a UCC Style* (Cleveland, United Church Press, 2005), 130.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

a happy and comfortable church that stands for nothing."²⁹ The covenantal nature of the UCC in combination with the polity and history of the UCC often creates a tension within the UCC. But I am convinced that being in covenant with one another allows us to be the church that stands for something, albeit each congregation defines what that something is and sometimes those unique definitions are sources of conflict. What freedom this brings to the various settings of the UCC to know who and whose we are!

The Many Strands

The congregation to which I belong was chartered in 1984, almost 30 years after the formation of the UCC. To me, the history of the UCC seemed like a patchwork quilt with no particular pattern until Barbara Brown Zikmund, my UCC Polity professor, gave me new ways of thinking about and understanding the wondrous church which is the UCC.

Louis Gunnemann wrote in *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, "The formation of the UCC was a venture of faith, a response to vision created out of the heritage of the past and the context of new responsibilities. To know the beliefs, movements, and events comprising that history is to begin to accept ownership and be shaped by it."³⁰

The fact that our roots are deep and go all the way back to the Pilgrims pleases me. The Pilgrim pastor, John Robinson is attributed with saying that "God still has more truth and light to break forth from God's Holy Word." This idea, which seems to be part of our DNA, appears to be one of our touchstones. It explains a great deal about us. It forms our bedrock (well, bedrock for me) belief that "the Bible, though written in specific historical times and places, still speaks to us in our present condition because God is a still speaking God. It declares that the study of

²⁹ John Thomas, "A United Church That Stands for Something," June 12, 2006, <http://www.ucc.org/news/john-thomasa-unite.html> (Accessed June 10, 2011).

³⁰ Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church Press, 1977), p. 162.

scripture is not limited by past interpretations but is to be pursued with expectancy of new insights and help for living for today."³¹

The United Church of Christ was created in 1957. The strands of faithful churches that were woven together to form the UCC consisted of: 1) the Congregational Church, 2) the Christian church, 3) the Evangelical Synod of North America, and 4) the Reformed Church in the United States. This tapestry includes in its warp and weft historical threads from the four churches including: 1) the Heidelberg Catechism and “Mercersburg Theology” movement from the Reformed and Evangelical tradition; 2) The Evangelical Catechism, Hymnal, and Worship book and the Bekenntnisparagraph Confessional Statement of 1848 from the Evangelical Synod of North America; 3) countless churches in New England and churches elsewhere where New Englanders settled as well as many colleges from the Congregational Church; and 4) a brief but to the point document entitled Principles of the Christian Church from, as the document title clearly states, the Christian Church.

Individual Churches and the Church Today

Just as there are many strands which came together to form the UCC in 1957, there is a great diversity among UCC churches today. Because our polity is congregational, individual congregations possess their own unique vision for how they manifest God’s mission in the world. This means how God’s mission gets carried out in my home congregation, UCCSV in Germantown, Maryland may look different from my internship church, ERUCC in Frederick, Maryland. However, each church exists to serve God’s mission.

In his presentation entitled *Becoming the Vital Churches and Disciples that Tomorrow Requires*, David Schoen quotes from the *Mission as Missio Dei*, UCC Committee on Structure, 1992 which contains the statement, “The Church exists to serve God’s Mission.” In his

³¹ United Church Resources, *Who We Are, What We Believe Brochure* (Cleveland, United Church of Christ).

presentation, Schoen expands upon this idea by offering these two statements: 1) The church of Jesus Christ is the instrument and sign of God's mission and realm and 2) God's mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in our own societies, in the cultures in which we find ourselves.³²

Traditional Training of Ordained Clergy

Prior to coming to seminary, I wondered after many years as a local lay leader how important or valuable theological education would be in preparing me to serve the church in an ordained capacity. My bias was that it would not be, but theological education was required in order to be ordained. I am now among the converted who sees the value in formal training for clergy. But it is more than the book learning that has prepared me to lead. The opportunity to reflect on my own beliefs and my own spirituality has proven crucial to my development as a future clergy person. I believe that this kind of reflection has shown me ways that I, as a formally trained clergy, can encourage others to grow spiritually as well.

Ordained ministers are often referred to as those "set-apart." This brings up the question of "set-apart for what"? My thinking about this concept draws partially upon what I have seen the Rev. Carolyn Roberts model. Each week Rev. Roberts sits with and studies the lectionary to prepare the upcoming Sunday sermon. She speaks a prophetic word to us. She spends time in prayer for the members of our flock. She meets with those struggling with illness or questions of faith. She has been "set-apart" for addressing spiritual needs and tending to the souls of others. Those who are ordained take the lead for "things spiritual" and they are involved on a fulltime basis with matters of faith.

People often view ordained clergy as the ones "set-apart" for offering comfort and guidance for baptisms, marriages, and funerals. I look forward to providing leadership for the

³² David Shoen, "Becoming the Vital Churches and Disciples that Tomorrow Requires." www.ucc.org/vitality/retreat.../vital-congregations-Western-Assoc.ppt (Accessed on June 10, 2011).

rituals of the church. I have had an opportunity to do premarital counseling for a young couple, to help plan their wedding with them, and co-officiate at their ceremony (including offering the homily). During this time, I sensed that my gift of ministering to people in transition was being used in helpful ways. A few years later I had the opportunity to practice the ministry of presence with this young couple as they welcomed their first child and at the same time grieved the passing of the groom's 29 year old brother.

Those who are ordained in the UCC tradition also administer communion. The first time that I served communion as a pastoral intern I experienced what can only be explained as a transcendent moment. I remember wanting to linger with each person and feeling such compassion and gratitude for the life of Christ. I consider presiding over communion to be among the most sacred of privileges.

Leadership within the Church

I resonate with Martin Luther's concept of "the priesthood of all believers" and Faith at Work's mantra that "the gifts are in the people." At the same time, I believe that in the current model of most mainline Protestant churches, clergy are essential in helping to identify, call forth, encourage, and lift up the gifts and the call of the people in their congregations. In doing so, the priesthood of all believers will be equipped to build up the kingdom of God.

As one whose background includes the study and practice of organizational leadership, I am convinced that without strong leadership organizations perish. I believe that this leadership is to be shared between the clergy and the laity. It seems to me that the pastor working in partnership with lay leaders brings a consistency to a system in which lay leaders are constantly changing.

I also believe that the church is on the verge of something new in terms of leadership. Recently Rev. Gregg Carlson of the Center for Progressive Renewal shared a statistic with me.

He said that over 60% of UCC ministers will be 65 years old within the next 5 years (telephone conversation, July 14, 2011). This fact suggests that the church will be looking at different leadership models in the days to come.

My Hope

The Potomac Association's Higher Education Committee, which I chair, is in the process of exploring Lay Ministry programs throughout the UCC. It has been exciting to learn about some of the new and innovative approaches to lay leadership that are on the horizon, especially Theology among the People (TAP), which is an amazing new leadership training model of the Southeast Conference of the UCC.

Ordained ministers, lay leaders and churches as we know them are being called to new forms of being together in faith communities. What that is going to look like is unknown. I am reminded of something that my friend and colleague Marjory Bankson, former Executive Director of Faith at Work shared when I started seminary, "You may be called to something that does not yet exist." My prayer is that she is right because I want to partner with others "to make this faith [our] own." Being part of a new thing which furthers God's kingdom is my deepest hope for my ministry.

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