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Final Ordination Paper

This paper is being offered as part of the process in seeking ordination through the United Church of Christ. In the first portion of this paper, I present my theological perspective by responding to portions of the UCC Statement of Faith. A friend of mine once commented that it may be more accurate to refer to this document as '**A** UCC Statement of Faith' rather than '**The** UCC Statement of Faith'. This observation is accurate, as our denomination not only welcomes, but invites discussion and questions from many voices in the process of discernment. While I believe that vital faith is seldom static, this paper reflects my current understanding and perspective.

All text that appears in italics in this section is directly quoted from the Statement of Faith itself, and all scripture references cited in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, are from the NRSV.

PART ONE

Response to the UCC Statement of Faith

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

I believe in God. I believe God is, was, and will be; the Word eternal; the Ineffable Presence that is beyond our understanding, our Holy Parent and the Source of all life.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. (John 14:1)

I believe in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's love, and that through his life, death, and resurrection we see the face of Godly love; the Word made flesh.

“...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. (John 14:26)

I believe in the Holy Spirit, sent to the world to guide and comfort, and that it is through the Holy Spirit's acting, that God's redemptive and creative activity occurs; the Word ever-present.

Within the relationship of these three, God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, we find God who is ever present, ever able, and ever understanding, apart from, and yet part of humanity, offering wholeness and healing, while suffering with humanity. In this relationship of trinity we find an example and understanding of what relationship among all of humanity might be; The three in one, a 'community' that is interrelated and giving to each other, each sharing itself, without any part experiencing loss through the act of sharing and relationship.

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death. God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

I believe that God has been, and continues to be, a creative God whose ineffable presence called the worlds into being in ways and through means that we may understand and know in part, and that through all of creation, God reveals. It is through this creative nature that God has, does, and will continue to speak, inviting all people into relationship with Him and each other. In this creative revealing, God calls us to join alongside Her in the divine mission of resurrection and redemption. By the sharing and extending of God's extravagant welcome of loving and giving, we all may receive the promise and gift of God's grace and mercy when we are broken and most in need of wholeness.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

I believe in Jesus Christ, the Human One, God's love Incarnate. In his birth into this world, ministry and life among us, death at the hands of the systemic evil of empire, and that in the resurrection power, Jesus modeled for us a life lived for and with others; the joy, the suffering, the humor, the loving action, and the compassion God wishes for all of humanity to live out with one another. In Jesus' ministry and life we see God's mission of reconciliation, healing, teaching, and caring

for the outcast, and the active opposition and confrontation of the marginalizing and exploitation of others. In Jesus I find the example of the incarnation as an important word in God's identity and vision for the world, one worthy of modeling my life after and settling my beliefs around.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Guide in this life of faith, bestowing spiritual gifts upon us individually to more fully participate in God's mission in the world. The Spirit's creative fire burns within us, individually and corporately, igniting our communities and continuing revelation to see God and God's work in challenging and exciting ways and inviting us to hear and discern this revealing and to participate fully in the work of God in this world and in the joy and suffering of others.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, 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.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

In our culture and context, a great deal of the emphasis and understanding of 'things spiritual' has become focused exclusively on the unique actions and thoughts of the individual. Personal study, meditation, and reflection are crucial in our spiritual life, however if we practice them in isolation and neglect corporate spiritual disciplines we become insulated us from voices that challenge our individual experience and insight as the sole source of understanding.

I believe that God has called us to live a life of discipleship, based on a life of trust. We trust that in God we are made whole and that is the basis of our true self. It is in response to God's grace, love, and goodness that we give freely of ourselves and seek to enter into communities of others walking this pilgrim's path of discipleship. Through this joining together as faith communities, we are

able to live into the role of God's Church.

That we, as we are inspired and empowered through God's workings, create welcoming and safe spaces that teach, support, and nurture each other in this life. And that we recognize that God values all those in the community, and that the community itself continues to change and grow as the diversity of understanding and experience collects and opens us to hear God's voice.

By gathering to worship together and celebrate the rites, rituals, and spontaneous loving acts of worship, we connect with God and the church. This 'communion' is not just with those in our immediate communities, but with the faith communities across the globe and across the ages, those that have come before us and with those who will come after us.

Through the practice of baptism and of feasting at the Lord's Table we publicly affirm our faith and our connection to God and to one another, a reminder of the openness of God to receive all who seek. By recognizing that the Church is God's, we are called to join in God's mission in the world and by serving the Gospel, in word and deed, we are seeking to enter into the now and not yet of God's kinship and God's in-breaking into creation.

PART TWO

In the second portion of this paper, I will review the unique ways in which I see the United Church of Christ 'doing ministry'. By providing a brief overview of our history and by exploring three basic concepts and terms found within our governance and polity, I will illustrate my reasoning for believing that the UCC is the community with whom I believe I am called to serve.

Historical Overview

While the history of the United Church of Christ can be known by considering the history of the four major groups that have merged and merged again to make up the denomination, a dry recitation of facts and dates falls short in its efforts to tell our story. Within our history we find the zeal to preserve the history and theology, the passion and faith, as well as the discernment and willingness to listen and question as we move toward a 'united and uniting church'. The faith, history, and traditions of the Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed churches are seen, as well as the willingness to continue to talk and listen and prayerfully seek to discern God's way in the twenty-six years of discussion that resulted in the 1957 merger of the Congregational Christians and the Evangelical-Reformed churches forming the United Church of Christ with its unique combination of history, polity, and governance.

In exploring the history, polity, and governance of the United Church of Christ, we find some key terms and concepts that continue to emerge as prominent in the way we live out the life of the church. This work will seek to more clearly define and explore the key concepts of:

- covenant
- autonomy
- individual conscience

We will also consider how these potentially contradictory ideas are held in balance within our

polity. This balance, as reflected by the relationships between the individual believer, the local congregation, and the other settings of the church (such as the Association, the Conference, and other various expressions) are reflected in our polity and, more practically, in how we 'do church'.

This understanding results in the unique way that we, as the UCC, who as theologian Roger Shinn noted are “...an improbable collection of exceedingly diverse people”¹ continue to strive toward our call to be a united and uniting church.

Terms and Concepts

The first term we will explore is that of 'Individual Conscience', a concept that is prominent among our historical roots. The Christian Church, at its first United General Conference in 1820, affirmed among its six principles, 'The right of private judgment, interpretation of the scripture, and liberty of conscience.'² Additionally, the 1848 document, *The Bekenntnisparagraph*, it is clearly stated that the Evangelical Church would avail themselves of the liberty of conscience.”³

This individual conscience however is not license to live without regard for any rule of faith or practice. It is always under the umbrella of recognition that Christ is the head of the church and is based on living with Christian character. This relationship of the individual believer with God carries with it 'weight and expectation' and as Jane Fissler Hoffman notes “...we are to live our lives in ways that show we are indeed God's people, covenant partners with the God of love, justice, and peace.”⁴

The next concept that we will examine will be that of congregational or local autonomy, meaning each local congregation is free to discern its own way of believing and being. This concept

1 Gunnermann, Louis H. *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*. Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, p. 111

2 "The Christian Church." UCC.org. <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/the-christian-churches.html> (accessed December 3, 2013).

3 "The Bekenntnisparagraph." UCC.org. <http://www.ucc.org/education/polity/pdf-folder/bekenntnisparagraph-lth-6.pdf> (accessed December 3, 2013).

4 Fissler Hoffman, Jane. *Covenant*. Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 2008. p.28.

also can be found in the roots of our history, such as the 'Privye Church movement' in England in 1567 and Robert Browne's assertion that the only true church was a local body of believers who experienced together the Christian life"⁵ This local autonomy is fiercely guarded within UCC polity and is different than many mainline Protestant churches. The Constitution of the UCC clearly defines and preserves the local church's ability to make its own determinations concerning leadership, giving, and participation in resolutions passed through the General Synod. While autonomy is often viewed as the freedom from being told what to do, within the context of our polity, it is more accurately understood as the freedom and responsibility to determine and choose to do what is right.

The third concept we will seek to understand is that of covenant. The term covenant implies an agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action"⁶ This concept of covenant is modeled throughout scripture, such as God's covenantal relationship with Noah and with Abraham in Original Testament narratives, and the new covenant which is referenced in Paul's epistles.

This concept within the UCC is reflected both in the vertical relationships between us and God, as well as the horizontal relationship between individuals in a congregation, and between the various expressions of the church.

How do they work together?

These individual terms can in some ways seem in tension with each other. By recognizing the individual conscience of the believer, we see that there is an individual relationship between the person and God. The believer seeks to discern God's will in their life and acts based on this personal and

5 "The Short Course.UCC.org. <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/shortcourse.pdf> (accessed December 3, 2013).

6 Hulteen, Bill. "United Church of Christ Covenantal Polity." (1997): p.1.

individual relationship, a relationship that can best be characterized as a relationship of covenant. As Hoffman reminds us, "God initiates the covenantal relationship with humanity; God goes to great lengths to stay in covenantal relationship, even to sharing our common human life in Jesus, creating a new covenant."⁷

However, we find that throughout scripture and the history of humanity's encounters with God; we are not just called, but gathered. We are called to be in fellowship not just with God, but with others as well. As stated in the third article of *The Constitution of the United Church of Christ*, "Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights...to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. But these relationships are not solely based on a horizontal relationship between individuals, because wherever there is a genuine covenant, it is with God as third party. We covenant with the Lord and with one another."⁸

This relationship most often is found in the local church setting and brings us to the concept of local autonomy. The polity of the United Church of Christ informs us that as individuals we live in a covenant relationship with God and we also enter into a covenant relationship with our faith community. This local church functions as an autonomous body, but is bound in its relationship first with God and with each other in a commitment to God's love, justice, and peace.

These local congregations then enter into a voluntary covenantal relationship with a variety of settings within the UCC. Together these local churches combine their time, talent, and treasure to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed through the work of Local Churches; Associations; Conferences; national expressions; and global, ecumenical, and interfaith

7 Fissler Hoffman p.31

8 Hulteen p.3

relationships.”⁹ These various settings are however, themselves formed by members of local congregations who enter into relationship in these settings.

As Donald Freeman offers, “Every unit of the church, while in covenant with other units, has a non-transferable responsibility to discern and respond to the call of God to it-god's will and way for it-in its time and place.”¹⁰

While the concepts of individual conscience, local autonomy, and covenantal relationship may appear to be in conflict with each other, the governance of the United Church of Christ seeks to find ways to hold this tension in balance. It is through this balance of individual and corporate relationship, accountability and discernment that we strive to do church and to live as a church that is united and uniting. It is with this lens that I aspire to serve in ministry, working to maintain the balance between relational commitment and individual autonomy as we live into a life of service, peace, love, and discipleship.

9 Ibid p.2

10 Ibid p.5

PART THREE

The third portion of this paper will reflect on my own personal faith journey and how my experiences and the insight I have gained continue to enable me to serve in God's call to ministry.

My Faith Journey

My life has been blessed by God's patience. Throughout my life I have pursued my desire to serve God and His people with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and at each stage of the journey, God has rushed to meet me at my level of willingness and commitment. This wide array of experiences has given me the opportunity to learn from many people in many situations, and has prepared me to more clearly discern God's call for my life and ministry.

I was born in a Redfield, South Dakota, the youngest of three boys. I grew up in a modest home with a close family who worked hard at balancing the concepts of God, school, family, and community, making sure each was accommodated, and none of them were offended. I was baptized, confirmed, and can't remember a time I didn't know that God was real and God loved me. As I grew older, my interest in school, music, friends, and work overshadowed my interest in the church, but while my involvement in the church waned, I knew that there had to be more to life than what I was experiencing.

As a teenager, I was introduced to some people that talked about God and the Bible, but didn't meet in a church; instead they met in each other's homes. They spoke of the kind of spirituality that was lived out every day. It appealed to my desire to know God on a daily basis, and as a teenager, I was attracted to them because they weren't part of the mainstream church.

I began attending a home based fellowship, and became more and more involved. Two months after I graduated from high school, while most of my classmates were preparing to leave for college, I

packed my bags and headed for the mission field.

I was sent to the city of New Orleans, Louisiana and spent the next year working part time in a variety of jobs and spending my free time studying, praying, exploring the city, and sharing the Bible with anyone who would listen. During this time, I became more and more convinced that God had a plan for my life, and that ministry and service were a big part of it. I saw the deliverance that God made available to people, and became more aware of people around me with real needs longing for someone to help them develop a more vital spiritual relationship with God. I also saw that, while I was growing in my relationship with God, I knew that there was more I wanted to do, so at the end of that year, I entered the leadership training program that they offered.

For the next four years I received theological and practical ministry training, met and married my wife Carol, and together we prepared for service and ministry. Upon graduation we led home fellowships in North Dakota and then in Indiana, working part-time to support ourselves and leading services, ministering to the members of our fellowship, sharing with others the greatness of God, and building and growing our home church.

Our family grew as well, when in 1989 our son Robby was born, and then two years later our daughter Katie joined our clan. I felt I was right where God had always intended me to be, and when we began to see some issues with the ministry's leadership, I approached them assuming that by drawing attention to the inconsistencies I was observing there would be an opportunity for explanation, reform, and change. To my surprise, I was soon told that the issues I was raising were not going to be changed. We were then asked to resign our positions, informed that we were no longer welcome in the ministry, and the rest of the membership was told to sever all contact with us.

We were left hurt and disillusioned about any organized church and, while vowing not to blame God, we quit attending any organized church services and became cynical about organized religion.

The struggle to maintain daily study and prayer was less than successful, and I began to refer to myself as 'spiritual but not religious'.

I devoted myself to family and work, moving to Mason, Ohio to take a job designing broadcast radio facilities. While I was seeing success in my career and had a good family life, I knew there was something missing. I had experienced a real relationship with God on a daily basis, and nothing was filling that missing piece, so we began to search for another church, this time with a great deal of caution and far more reservations.

In the spring of 2006, we attended worship services at Lakeview UCC; after receiving a warm welcome and invitation to be part of the family, and after some frank conversations with the pastor regarding theology, practices, and beliefs, we knew we had found a new church home.

God has continued to provide me with opportunities to serve and grow; as a member of Lakeview I served and participated in a variety of roles including the worship team and the leadership team. I have also completed SONKA's Lay School program, served as the Moderator for the Association, and have earned my Master of Divinity degree from Bethany Theological Seminary.

Along the way there continue to be defeats and deliverance, joys and concerns, faith and fear, and I have had an opportunity to meet and learn from some wonderful people who have helped me to discern God's call in my life. I have found over the past years that I have a great passion and call to serve in congregational ministry.

In my role as a Licensed Minister, I have had the chance to grow and learn, as well as serve. During my years in seminary I had the chance to provide regular pulpit supply for a number of churches within SONKA. At one point during my time in seminary, I was planning and leading worship and preaching alternating weeks at Lakeview UCC and at Concord UCC near Eaton. This experience was very enlightening, as it provided me the chance to work with different congregations,

seeing two unique faith communities with their own gifts, talents, and passions as they seek to discern God's way for their communities.

The changes that have taken place at Lakeview have continued to provide opportunities to expand my role in leadership and service as a Licensed Minister, as I have been serving as the Pastor in a part-time capacity.

After a lengthy period of prayer, discernment, and discussion, Lakeview extended to me the call to be the full time settled pastor, based upon my completion of seminary and the ordination process, and after a time of prayer, discernment, and discussion on my part, I have accepted this call.

In this role, I continue to find that my desire is not just to know about God, but to know God in a personal spiritual relationship; and I have a greater understanding that my call isn't focused just on my relationship with God, but to help others develop that relationship as well, enhancing my ability to serve God and God's people, locally, in the wider church, and beyond.