

Ordination Paper of Erin Heisler

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How I have experienced my call:

I find myself wishing that I had experienced my call to ordained ministry on a linear timeline; instead it has come to me as more of a swirling vortex, like a hurricane viewed from above. Just as a vortex of water or wind draws everything that surrounds it into its powerful current so I am drawn into the power that is God's call for my life. Even amidst the chaos and confusion, God is at work, enabling all to flow and hold together giving my life meaning and direction. This is how I come to this paper.

Church has always had a prominent role in my life and in the life of my family. A great many of my childhood memories are of church events and involve members of my church family. My family moved from Oklahoma when I was seven and the first memories I have of life in Michigan involve my experiences with Haslett Community Church. The children's choir was my introduction to HCC. Through singing songs and performing cantatas I saw the bible come to life. I was moved by the power of the Scriptures and I knew that I wanted to be involved in telling that story and in sharing that message.

As I grew, so did my involvement in church. Joining the middle school youth group felt like a rite of passage for me. By middle school I felt old enough for my faith to truly begin. I continued youth group all the way through college, I joined a Bible Study, continued youth choir, went through Confirmation and I went on 10 mission trips. Participating in these experiences deepened my faith, but more than these, the people of HCC have had the greater impact. My journey and call has been like a piece of clay with every member of HCC leaving their fingerprints on it. It was taking on the leadership of the youth ministry at HCC that solidified my call. Just as the disciples in Luke 5 dropped everything to follow Jesus after witnessing the miracle of an abundance of fish, so do I feel called to the ministry, specifically to youth ministry, after witnessing the abundance of Christ's love through the community of Haslett Community Church. The stories of Jesus calling his disciples are some of my favorite gospel stories. Jesus calls the disciples out of their comfort zones; a call that meant leaving everything, their homes, families and everything they knew. Answering my call took me 600 miles away from my comfort zone of home to Princeton; to a new state, a new institution and a new program of study. I have found myself in new churches and in new roles, including that of preacher. Entering the pulpit felt like being catapulted out of my comfort zone, but what I found once there was a strong voice and message to share. I was afraid to leave the steady and sure ground of what I knew and understood. When I did I found that God was there alongside me, showing the way, offering me strength, giving me a voice and a message.

It has not been an easy call to answer, but it is an important call, it is The call. The importance of this call is in the frequency with which Jesus says, "follow me." It is a continual call as well. We do not just answer it once and it is done. Rather it stakes a claim in our life everyday. We listen and respond everyday. The call and the fact that we are all called is the center of my vision of ministry.

In seeking to make disciples of Christ, I am increasingly aware that part of my call is to work to create and nurture an environment that is safe. I mean physically safe, where boundaries and rules exist to protect everyone as well as emotionally and spiritually safe for exploration as well. I am

aware that inherent in the role of minister is power; a power that can be taken advantage of. I emerge from seminary more aware of the boundaries that are necessary in the ministry and within the church so that it truly can be a place that is safe for all.

When I entered the In-Care process I was questioned about feeling called to youth ministry. Specifically I was asked what role the Sacraments would play in my ministry. I took both questions to heart and I have spent the last 3 ½ years working very hard to find answers to them. I have been intentional about shaping my seminary education around this issue because I feel the call so deeply. I have used classes, church experience, worship, work, spiritual friendships, conferences and personal time in prayer and study to further discern my call. With God's help throughout this process of discernment I feel as though I am now equipped with a vision of ordained ministry that answers the questions of why youth ministry and the role of the sacraments in youth ministry? For me the question is not how do we use the Sacraments in youth ministry, but rather why would any ministry not include the Sacraments?

The time of adolescence is a crucial time in identity formation and in the church the Sacraments play a key role in defining our Christian identity. Through baptism we are welcomed into the Christian community and are reminded of our identity as children of God. At the table we remember not only the great gift of grace, but that we receive it as the people of God. Through the Sacraments we are reminded not only of who we are but also whose we are, the people of God gathered together and sent forth.

Our identity is not just found at the baptismal font or at the communion table, but it is found in the sacraments in the midst of a community. The experience of the community gathering around the font and the table reveals our identity in a powerful way. In the Sacraments we not only remember our identity but put our identity into action through physical participation in discipleship. In the Sacraments we remember and live out our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I do not see my ministry to and with youth as being separate from my ministry within the greater church. The UCC Statement of Faith acknowledges that God calls us into [the] church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in service, to proclaim the gospel, resist evil, and to share in the Sacraments. Ministry lays the foundations and prepares youth for the journeys they will face as disciples. This is a journey that we are all on. It is a common journey and God calls us into communities to share this journey. We journey with one another. We meet at the baptismal font and at the communion table with one another and then we walk with one another out of the sanctuary, out of the church and into the world. One primary form ministry takes is that of presence. There is power in offering your presence to another. There is power in love that emulates the love Jesus had for those who followed him, love that comes from a God who is love. God knows the power that there is in community and that is why the church is gathered by God so that together, young and old together, men and women together, united with those like us and with those different from us, so that together we may learn, remember and grow.

The language of growth brings to mind garden imagery for me, which I believe is such an appropriate metaphor for ministry. A thriving garden would be one full of life, thick with growing vines and plants, blooming flowers and trees bountiful with fruit. A thriving ministry would be one with blooming members whose branches are reaching up and out into the world and where the fruit that is grown can be shared with others in love and service to one another. Thriving ministry plants the seeds for people to become lifelong, always growing, disciples of Christ. Thriving ministry must recognize and teach that discipleship is not easy. Just as gardens face droughts, insects and storms that threaten the life of the plants, so too will there be times throughout our spiritual journeys when we will face challenges and threats to our faith as well. In times of trial and turmoil plants become dependent upon the sturdiness of their roots; so too is the longevity of one's faith dependent upon how securely the roots are planted in a soil rich and solid enough to sustain spiritual life. I am grateful for all those who helped me plant my seeds of faith and those who nurtured me as I grew. I praise God who sustained me and sustains me still. No matter what direction my call may take, I am confident that God is with me through the seeming chaos, giving me direction and helping me to find meaning in it all.

My theological beliefs & how they inform my ministry:

My understanding and experience of theology is similar to the vortex I described in my call. Even

when approached systematically, theological beliefs, concepts and ideas all swirl and encircle this ultimately incomprehensible center that is God. That being said for me, the revelation of God is the only logical starting point because it is only through revelation that I know anything of God. We as finite beings are incapable of fully comprehending God. In revelation God accommodates to our human limitations and reveals God's self to us. Scripture as the Word of God is one of the means through which God reveals God's self, but it is not the only place revelation occurs. I believe that we see the revelation of God in creation and we are able to hear it through the church. In revelation God breaks into our world and offers us glimpses of this radically and wholly Other God. We are only given glimpses though because God is never fully revealed. The biblical figure of Moses is a perfect example of this. Moses is the recipient of numerous revelations of God but not even he gets to see God face to face.ⁱⁱ There is a divide between Creator and creation. We are separated from God because of our sin and as a result of this God is beyond our comprehension and understanding. If God were to be fully revealed there would be no need for faith that requires trusting in what has not yet been revealed.ⁱⁱⁱ I believe it is in faith that we respond to God's revelation. We respond with faithful witness full of hope that someday our knowledge of God will be made complete; someday we will see God face to face.

As I mentioned before, Scripture is an authoritative source of God's revelation recounting the amazing, miraculous and transformative acts of God. It is through Scripture that we learn of God's hand in creation and God's revelation and faithfulness to the people of God. It is through the revelation of God in Scripture that I have come to believe that God is the source of all that exists and God continually creates and preserves creation. It is because of Scripture that I believe and worship a God who is love, who is faithful, ever present and who in love seeks salvation for God's people.

Scripture is not inerrant. I believe that it is the revelation of God, but I understand that it was written by humans who were not perfect. Human writers found themselves in a specific time and place, and their historical context is important to consider in one's Scriptural interpretation. However, the Bible is not limited by historical context. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Scripture is made a Living Word that continues to have meaning today.

At the center of my theology is the doctrine of the Incarnation. The incarnation is rooted deeply in all four gospels. We are given countless stories of Jesus, the man from Nazareth; from birth narratives to miracle stories, sayings attributed to him, and stories of his passion, death and resurrection. The miracles of Jesus speak to the power of God, a power that can only come from God. It is the same power that conquers death and brings salvation through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The declarations from the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon also greatly inform my understanding of the Incarnation. The Nicene Creed declares that Jesus was not created by God at some point in time, but is eternally present; connected to both God and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. The purpose of Christ was salvation, which was achieved through his life of suffering and death on a cross but was then exalted in the resurrection. The Council of Chalcedon built onto the Nicene Creed. It defined further that Christ was both fully human and fully divine where both natures exist without confusion, without changing one into the other. Both natures are inseparably joined, indivisible, and indistinguishable in accordance to area or function. The Incarnation is God taking on fully humanity while maintaining full divinity in the single person of Jesus Christ.

The UCC Statement of Faith attests to my own doctrine of the Incarnation. It states that, ⁱIn Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.^{iv} It was essential that Christ was fully human and fully divine because in being fully human he truly shared in our humanity, but it was through his full divinity that he was able to be overcome sin and death. I believe that it was through Christ's death and resurrection that God overcame sin and death and we were given the gift of grace and salvation. I used to believe that salvation was only attainable through one's acknowledgement of Christ as Savior, but this belief was one I came to question this past summer when doing CPE.

Through my experiences with people of many faith backgrounds I found a tension in my beliefs. I believe, as stated in Scripture, that God is love, so this summer when I found myself caring for the

Muslim family of a young man who had died in a motorcycle accident I wondered how a God who is love could condemn this child to hell. It is a tension I faced numerous times over the summer as I ministered to a mother who had never been to church and had lost her child during birth. I wondered about the wife of an older Jewish man who had died from cancer. I thought of my own childhood friend who died at age 8 having never gone to church. The issue of how salvation works is an issue that I have decided that I do not know the answer to. I know that I believe in a God who is love. I know that I believe that the salvation and grace that resulted from the cross and the resurrection is so powerful it could only have come from God. I believe grace is given freely to the people of God. What I do not know is if the people of God can only receive this gift through knowing Jesus Christ, as I have come to receive it.

Turning again to the UCC Statement of Faith, I affirm and appreciate the way in which the Statement of Faith ties the ideas of forgiveness, discipleship, service, mission and the Sacraments to the Incarnation, witnessing to the life of Jesus and setting forth the church's mission to serve in the name of Christ.

I believe that the Sacraments speak to the calling of the church as well. Sacraments are acts that are found in Scripture and were initiated by Jesus, acts that the community comes together to practice. They embody the grace that we have been so freely given by God, through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. In being concrete acts, they meet us in our humanity, giving us a tangible translation of the gift of grace. In baptism, the water signifies the new life that we all have in Christ as well as marking our initiation into the Christian community.

As an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ, I would fully support and perform both adult and infant baptisms. Through infant baptism we are reminded of the gift of God's unconditional love and grace, even when we are helpless. The community receives the child as one created and loved by God, promising their nurture, support and love. Through the public expression of one's faith in adult baptism we are reminded of the importance of our response to the gift of God. By celebrating both infant and adult baptisms we remember and celebrate the fullness of God's love and mercy in the past and the present, representing the true depth of the sacrament.

The Eucharist is also about remembrance. At the table we remember the selfless love of Christ and his reaching out to people on the margins, serving them in whatever way he could. We remember the pain and torture of Christ's life and death but also Christ's love. Christ's life, death and resurrection blend beauty and suffering, a combination still pervasive throughout the world. Hearing the words, "This is my body, broken for you," and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" Do this, in remembrance of me," helps us to remember that the torture and suffering of Christ was not the end, that the torture and suffering we see and experience is not the end. In the resurrection God overcame death, sin and separation. Through the resurrection we are given the gift of new life and abundant grace. The Sacrament of Communion is more than remembering the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is remembering the resurrection and the gift of grace and forgiveness that comes with that. More than that, every time we receive the elements of bread and wine, the Holy Spirit is at work to remind us and offer us the gift of Christian hope. We gather in thanksgiving for the new life we have in Christ, the gift of grace and forgiveness and together we celebrate our incorporation into the body of Christ. Through this Sacrament, as with baptism, the church is strengthened in its mission by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is central to the Sacraments. Though never mentioned explicitly in Scripture the Trinity certainly derives from Scriptural interpretation. The Trinity is the relationship of God in Christ connected by the power of the Holy Spirit. From the mutual indwelling, the relationship between the members of the Trinity, we learn that God is relational in God's very nature. Each of the members of the Trinity exists within and for the others. (I use the language of "members" of the Trinity cautiously, not in a way that separates them or their acts.) God's love for us flows out of the very essence of God. The Trinity is necessary because it is only through this context of God in relation to and within God's self that we are able to understand God in relation to us. The Trinity helps us to understand and experience closeness with God because through the Trinity we can view God as relational. I believe that the Trinity has implications for how the church is called to come together to carry out the mission of the church.

The members of the Trinity are distinct but not separate. The church should be united in a way that

leaves room for difference. The church should be a place where difference does not divide.^{vii} I believe that just as we are created in the image of God so is the church in its calling to life in communion with one another, created in the image of the Trinity. The church should be a reflection of the Trinity in being an open and welcoming community of mutual love united for the common purpose of proclaiming the gospel and serving others. I feel called to ministry within the United Church of Christ because I see this reflection of the Trinity as being at the core of the UCC. My understanding of the history, structure and polity of the United Church of Christ:

At the General Synod of 1960, just three years after the birth of the UCC, James Wagner asked, "What provision, what formulation will enable the UCC to best express and serve the mind and purpose of her Lord in this generation?"^{viii} I believe that this question is answered in the way that the UCC established the structure and polity of the denomination; in a way that paints a picture of the denomination's history through an intricate weaving together of the ideas of church, covenant and autonomy.

Though the denomination known as the United Church of Christ dates back only to 1957, it is rooted much deeper in history. The Christian Church, the German Reformed Church, the Congregationalists and the Evangelicals were four churches that all held the principles of the reformation in high regard. In the early 20th Century conversations between these streams of belief began. The Christian Church and the Congregationalists both held to the autonomy of the local church and saw it as the expression of the body of Christ. The Evangelicals and German Reformers disagreed in that they saw the larger church, the structure of the denomination, as the body of Christ as well. The debate between autonomy and structure began and it was a debate that continued even after the first Basis of Union was reached in 1942. The question became how can we uphold the autonomy of the local congregations which was important to the Congregationalists and the Christian Churches, while at the same time laying out a structure that would support the denomination which was important to the Evangelical and Reformed churches? The answer came through much discussion, 10 Basis of Union documents for example, and lasted many years. One thing that I find so interesting is that the joining churches found the best course of action was to gather and write the denomination's statement of faith before addressing the constitution or the by-laws. It seems that through writing the Statement of Faith they were able to find the common ground needed to later reach the compromises necessary to outline the structure and polity of the denomination.^{ix} In this way our name holds true, we were first united in beliefs, united in Christ before then being united in structure.

Church, as derived from Greek, *ekklesia*, means an assembly, or those gathered. The UCC specifies that the church is called out by God, which brings with it implications for what this assembly is to do. The church has a mission according to the will of God, and the aim or purpose of the church is to live according to and for the furtherance of such a mission. In the UCC every local congregation may interpret or reflect that mission in various ways. The work does not end with the local congregations living out God's mission. The founders of the UCC recognized that every setting of the church has a different mission to fulfill. Local congregations need to meet the needs of their communities in different ways; just as the church in a regional or national setting also has a different mission to fulfill.

The four churches that came together to form the UCC had many differences, but all brought with them a common belief about what it means to be the people of God and what it means to be church. It is clear that the founders of the denomination were intentional about discerning and matching the denomination's structure to the mission that they felt the church was being called by God to carry-out. Church, in the UCC, is a covenant community in which we seek to walk together in all of God's ways.^{ix}

Our denomination's Constitution states that we are united in covenant with one another. The Latin root for covenant means to come together.ⁱ The word's very core is unity. Our churches are in covenant with others churches, associations, and conferences, but as members we are in covenant with one another as well. Being in covenant not only unites us to one another but first unites us with God.

Throughout Scripture God initiated covenants with people. Through such covenants individuals were brought into relationship with God. The new covenant that Jeremiah prophesies of teaches us what

God's action in initiating covenants truly means. This new covenant is final, unconditional and irreversible. This covenant cannot be broken because it has been sealed with Jesus' blood and has washed away our sin. The God who is love reached out to us in love and formed an un-ending relationship with us. This covenant models for us what covenantal relationships with others look like.

Perhaps the most common analogy for faith is that of the journey. I think the same analogy can be applied to what it means to be in covenant with one another. Covenant is a journey. The journey is different for everyone, but the blessing of the covenant is that we are all present together; just as all the branches of the UCC are in covenant with one another, united in this journey as a denomination. Covenant brings with it an individual component because we are all first united with God, but then through our shared experience we are united communally as well. We accompany one another, support, and lead and follow one another. Through covenants every person becomes a minister to those around them. We are a church united in covenant with one another so we are all involved in mutual ministry together in every setting of the church.

I believe that John Baillie described this relationship best when he said that when we are kneeling at the foot of the cross, we arise to find new relationship with all those who were kneeling with us.^{ixi} I think this describes the beautiful relationship that we find with others in the UCC. That does not mean the covenantal relationship will be one without conflict. When we enter into this covenantal community we do so as the imperfect humans that we are, bringing all of our flaws with us. This will inevitably lead to times of conflict. At such times we remember that we are united in Christ, brought together as those loved by God, with a common purpose of working toward God's vision. If we bring such an attitude to our covenantal communities they will be places where change and growth can occur. Covenants are not static or unchanging relationships entered into once as a single event. They are flexible, they grow and deepen. Just as the UCC is united and uniting, so do I believe it to be a covenantal people who are in covenant and are covenanting. The Manual on Church says that in covenant, we walk together in all God's ways trying to discern what those ways are.ⁱ Rather than rules or hierarchy of authority, the UCC in all of its settings is a balance of covenantal relationships built between autonomous units.

From our denomination's conception, autonomy has been an essentially important issue. Holding strong to those congregational roots the autonomy of the local congregation is preserved and protected from the rules of the Associations, Conferences, the General Synod and the national offices. The rights of the Local Church are protected and cannot now nor can they ever be taken away. Autonomy in this sense is freedom to be self-governing, self-defining, and self-managing. Local Churches are given the authority to make their own decisions, to have their own by-laws and to define their own beliefs. It is important to remember that autonomy is more than just independence. In the UCC autonomy comes with being part of the covenantal community where independence balances with interdependence. Autonomous units are in relation with one another and are given the freedom to rely on that relationship, turning to one another for consultation and collaboration. The ideas of covenant and autonomy in the UCC are held in a tight balance and in essential tension. Both were necessary when the denomination was formed to fully express the beliefs of the churches that united to form the UCC and both are necessary still today as we seek to be church. We are called as the church, to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,ⁱ and for me, the balance of covenant and autonomy offers the greatest joy of being a disciple. I rejoice because I know I will not be told what to believe. We all come to the UCC from different backgrounds and theological stances and when we join in covenant we proclaim that such differences will not prevent us from worshipping God together. When we are even in our differences we truly embody what it means for the church to be the body of Christ. Differences offer UCC churches diversity in cultures, backgrounds, practices, beliefs, and in styles of worship. It is because of the inclusive and radically accepting nature of this denomination that we seek to live out our calling from Jesus' prayer, that they may all be one.^{ixii}