

# Ordination Paper

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## Part I: Theological Perspective

The preamble of the *United Church of Christ Constitution* declares that our church “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.” Having been nurtured in the Presbyterian tradition, coming to new home in the United Church of Christ, and further exposed to the riches of both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions since entering seminary, I find my own theological perspectives deeply shaped by this Reformation heritage.

### *The Gospel and the person and work of Jesus Christ*

Standing at the core of my perspective, in accord with the faith of the Reformation, is the conviction that in the person of Jesus Christ, God has proclaimed the liberation of the whole creation from brokenness and sin and freed us into the ability to embody the true humanity God intends for us. Our *Statement of Faith*<sup>1</sup> proclaims this gospel message at its center, saying that “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.”

Some assumptions about our existence as human beings lie at the foundation of this ‘good news’. As we observe our world and ourselves, I am convinced that we cannot deny our brokenness and captivity to the forces of evil and sin. And yet, even with this realization, we also affirm as Christians the worth and dignity of all humanity, our ‘goodness’ as creations of a good and loving God. The ancient Israelite people (as well as centuries of Christians) understood this duality in terms of a humanity created good but fallen through our unfaithfulness to God’s covenant, as told in the creation and fall story of Genesis 2 and 3. While I understand this story as a narrative told to give meaning to our human reality, rather than as a historical factual ‘cause’, this insight about our good but broken nature nonetheless rings true.

In the face of our human reality, God chose to come to us, to take our nature onto God’s-self, bringing God into new communion with humanity. That God has “come to us and shared our common lot” in a concrete real human being is crucial to the gospel message for me, for by

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<sup>1</sup> In referring to the *Statement of Faith*, I will primarily use the 1977 inclusive language edition, commonly known as the “Robert V. Moss version”, although with certain adaptations taken from the 1981 “Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology”.

this we know that God is not distant nor abstract, but has taken on our full human existence in its brokenness. As the Psalmist writes, “[God] has searched [us] and knows [us],” and knows us in no other way than that God has *been* us.<sup>2</sup> The Reformers often took the incarnation a bit for granted, but I believe the incarnation holds a key to our faith in the comfort, reassurance, and love of God.

In the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I believe not only that God has known us but also that we have known God. In the incarnation, we know the God who takes us on even in our brokenness. In the life and ministry of Jesus, we know the God who proclaims release to the captives and liberation for the oppressed, the God who works for this healing and liberation, and the God who calls us as disciples to join in this work. In Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, we know the God who takes on the depths of evil and the forces of death and claims victory in their midst.

The issue of the ‘work’ of the crucifixion and resurrection has generated a variety of interpretations through the history of Christianity. Some would claim that this part of the Christ narrative has no significance other than as a story of the imperial powers of oppression seeking to get rid of a radical political revolutionary. I firmly believe in the importance of Jesus’ message of social-political revolution and that this ministry was quite likely the this-worldly ‘cause’ of his execution, and furthermore recognize the importance of this part of the narrative to those fighting the oppression of today’s imperial powers. It is important that we do not lose sight of this aspect of the story, as so many have done in the history of Christian theology. However, I also believe that limiting the crucifixion’s significance *only* to this aspect denies part of the good news of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ—that this was God undertaking even death out of love for humanity. I also believe in the importance of considering the crucifixion and resurrection to be intimately *for us*, and not only a violent political act—a piety that expressed in a verse of Johann Heerman’s passion hymn “Ah, Holy Jesus”:

For me, kind Jesus, was Thy incarnation,  
Thy mortal sorrow, and Thy life’s oblation;  
Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter passion,  
For my salvation.

On the other hand, there are those in the Christian tradition who have asserted not that Christ

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<sup>2</sup> Some today would argue that such Christological interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures do injustice to the original intent of their authors. From a Christian perspective, though, I am not sure there is a clear answer one way or the other on this matter.

was crucified *for* us, but rather crucified *in place* of us as a payment for our sin. This viewpoint, known as the substitutionary atonement, is a view I cannot abide, with its view of God as an angry judge requiring ‘repayment’ by death for the sins of humanity. Truly, such a God provides little redemption and respite from the violence of this world.

In my own attempt to understand the ‘work’ of the passion events, I am attracted to the view that in the crucifixion and resurrection, God took on the forces of evil and death and overcame them. Often called the *Cristus victor* viewpoint, this belief was often emphasized by Martin Luther (although he held some of the substitutionary atonement view as well) and more recently championed by Gustav Aulen. I believe that the redemption proclaimed by the gospel is a release from these powers of evil and death, and in Jesus Christ this redemption and the accompanying reign of God breaks into our world. Furthermore, in the mystery of the cross, we find the paradox that the very being of our glorious God is most vividly revealed in midst of the hidden, broken, and un-glorious.

The mystery and paradox of both the incarnation and the cross calls us to a faith not in a system of belief that will ‘win’ us the reward of heaven, but rather to an active trust in the knowledge and promise of God proclaimed in Christ, and an active discipleship to the *person* of Christ, “join[ing] him in his passion and victory.”<sup>3</sup>

### *God, the Trinity, the Holy Spirit*

The God revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ cannot be ‘boxed in’ by our attempts to describe and define. Through the work of faithful people who have put expression to their experience and understanding of the God who claims us, we are blessed with countless lenses through which we see at least a part of God—and, undoubtedly, a few lenses I believe we must in our own faithfulness reject.

One lens that persists from some of the earliest Christian thinkers is our concept of God as Trinity. I believe this metaphor for God’s being still remains core to our Christian belief, even as in these times we acknowledge that it too is an incomplete and limited metaphor. We believe that the God who created and creates the world and stands as that source in which we “live and move and have our being” is the same God that walked this earth in Jesus Christ, and is the same God

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<sup>3</sup> From the fifth paragraph of the *Statement of Faith*.

that moves among us as the Holy Spirit, sustaining us and empowering us for faith and discipleship. In the sacrament of Baptism, we proclaim the gift of new life and welcome persons into the church in the name of this Triune God. The relationship among the persons of the Trinity also provides an image of the relationality inherent to the ultimate reality and thus the possibility and hope of communion-in-grace among humankind. Nonetheless, the Trinity metaphor can sometimes serve to unnecessarily limit our understanding of God. To say that God is only known in the three forms of Creator/Source-of-Being/“Father”, Redeemer/Christ/“Son”, and Sustainer/Empowerer/“Spirit” constrains God into a system that God refuses to be constrained by. The scriptures’ richness of imagery for God and diverse testimony of God’s deeds only begins to illustrate the boundlessness of God.

One of the beauties of the United Church of Christ *Statement of Faith* rests in its approach that recounts the “deeds” of God instead of attempting to describe God’s being. This firmly accords with the Reformation belief that our knowledge of God lies only in our experience of how God relates to us—that is, God’s “deeds” in our world. In our testimony to the deeds of God, though, we begin to see a window into God’s essence.

The first deed to which our statement testifies reveals God as Creator: “God calls the worlds into being, [and] creates humankind in the divine image.” The debates over religious viewpoints on creation have raged for over a century now, with public discourse pitting scientific evolution against the belief in God as Creator. I believe this dichotomy to be unnecessary; the goals of science to explain the mechanics of the world and the aim of religion to provide meaning to those mechanics do not necessarily have to be at odds with one another. By testifying to God as creator, we affirm that all life and all creation is a gift from God and that God is that in which all creation has meaning.

The idea of God’s providence is often connected to God’s creative being—the God who creates the world also sustains and provides for that world. While some in the history of Christian thought have come to see God as ‘absent’, setting the worlds in motion and then stepping back, I agree with the mainstream of Christian belief that asserts that God remains active in the world and human history. As we recognize the brokenness of our world, though, I prefer to place faith in God’s providence as the hope of humanity for ultimate reality. In the face of profound suffering and evil in the world, it is fair for us to ask “why doesn’t God *do* something about this,” thus

betraying our hope in God's providence—and yet I believe we must avoid too hasty an answer to such a question. Rightly, our *Statement of Faith* makes cautious claims about God's providence, affirming that God “sets before us the ways of life and death” and “promises the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing.”

As Christians, we also affirm God's identity as a divine lover of humanity. The *Statement of Faith* asserts that “God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin,” but also, I believe, affirms God's love for humanity in its claims about Jesus Christ. Out of God's love for humanity, we also believe in God's judgment, for a God who does not “judge people and nations” against evil and sin is not truly loving and righteous. Our faith and discipleship finds life in the tension between God's love and God's judgment.

Another way by which we know God is through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the presence of the Holy Spirit, God sustains us in life's journey and continues to open us to the voice that still speaks the “more truth and light [that is] yet to break forth out of [God's] holy word.”<sup>4</sup> As John Calvin affirmed, it is God's presence through the Spirit that enables us to hear the Word of God in the witness of the scriptures and, I would add, in the witness of the community and world around us. The call and power of the Spirit gathers people together as the church and equips them for ministry, as the *Statement of Faith* attests. This gathering and binding presence enables the church to become the body of Christ in the world.

Opened ever anew by the power of this Spirit, we continually experience new ways of understanding the being and presence of the God who claims and calls us. In addition to the images I have explored of creator, provider, lover, judge, and Spirit, we know God in the person of Jesus Christ as a liberator, redeemer, healer, and companion. As I indicated earlier, though, there are some images of God that we must reject out of faithfulness to the God made known in Jesus Christ. For instance, even as I strongly believe God judges evil and sin, I do not accept an image of God as an angry, wrathful despot or an unrelenting rule-maker, nor can I accept images of God that claim that God uses suffering and evil in the furtherance of some divine plan. These images simply do not accord with the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> From John Robinson's admonition to the Pilgrims leaving Leiden, The Netherlands, on their way to found Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts.

*The Church, Worship and the Sacraments, Discipleship*

At its essence, the Church is the gathering together of people by the Holy Spirit in the faith of the gospel and in discipleship to Christ. Three symbols stand out in this claim: gathering, gospel, and discipleship. I understand the image of gathering—assembly, community—as central to the Church out of the conviction that our God calls us into faith, discipleship, and relationship with God not only as individuals, but also as community and as the whole humanity. Even as the gospel is rightly understood as hope, redemption, and liberation *for me*, it is most fully understood as hope, redemption, and liberation *for us*. “For God so loved *the world...*”<sup>5</sup> witnesses the Evangelist. The church, though, is not just any gathering; it is that gathering marked at its core by the gospel. This gathering’s identity is fundamentally shaped by its faith in the good news that God came to us in love, reigns victorious over the powers of evil and death, and remains present to us in the Spirit. The community shaped by this gospel by its nature is also oriented in discipleship to the God known in Jesus Christ. Christianity holds that the Spirit forms the Church into the Body of Christ, and so the Church is called to embody for others the redemption and liberation embodied in Jesus Christ for us.

Over the course of the history of Christian thought, many have pondered the question of the ‘marks’ of the church: how do we know this church when we see it? Martin Luther discussed seven things he believed ‘marked’ the church, marks that I believe the other reformers would readily agree with: the Word, Baptism, Holy Communion, the forgiveness of sins<sup>6</sup>, the office of ministry, prayer, and the Cross. Word, Baptism, Communion, and the forgiveness of sins all point to a communal gathering and its gospel faith: through the proclamation of the Word in community, the gathering is reconfirmed in the gospel, and in Baptism, Communion, and the forgiveness of sins the gathering receives the signs of this gospel and models for itself the grace-filled invitation and open table it is to do and be for the world. In ministry, prayer, and the way of the cross, the community enacts this gospel in discipleship. My affirmation of these marks accords with the vision of the church put forth by the *Statement of Faith*, namely that “God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be 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

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<sup>5</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes called the “office of the keys” by Luther and others of his period.

table, to join him in his passion and victory.” Moreover, marked by these things, this vision also accords with the other, more ancient description of the Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The gatherings that engage in this work are part of the One church of God and even in its different forms and embodiments share in the universal (catholic) faith in accordance with the witness of the apostles. Even as this Church is fully human and thus subject to the brokenness of humanity, through these marks the Spirit enables this Church to be the Holy gathering of God—*simul justus et peccator*, a gathering that is at the same time broken and justified, sinner and saint.

As that which shapes and forms the Church, worship is at the center of our identity and work. More clearly than in anything else the Church does, in worship we are reconfirmed in the faith of the gospel and reshaped by the patterns of sharing story, praying for others, being washed in the flood of grace, and partaking of the bread of life broken open at the welcome table—and thus empowered for the life of discipleship that cannot be separated from these gifts. As one of my mentors and teachers, Dow Edgerton, asserts, “The whole of Christian faith and practice can be accessed from the font and the table.”<sup>7</sup> The waters of Baptism proclaim welcome into the community of God’s people and a sharing of new life in Christ. When received as an infant, Baptism further affirms that the gifts of God’s grace and love are offered to us even before we can ask—a belief I much affirm myself. At the table of Holy Communion, Christ’s body broken open for us moves beyond just story and becomes a tangible reality.<sup>8</sup> This sacrament also gives us a foretaste of the eternal realm in which all shall eat freely at the banquet table of God, and thus models for us a different reality in a world plagued by the unjust distribution of resources.

As I hope is already evident, I believe that discipleship and working for justice in such a world is inseparable from the gift of the gospel and thus our identity as the church. As our *Statement of Faith* affirms, God calls us “to accept the cost and joy of discipleship” and promises “courage in the struggle for justice and peace.” Even as he was steeped in Lutheran orthodoxy, 20<sup>th</sup> century German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer questioned whether the grace offered in Christ

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<sup>7</sup> Paraphrased from a class lecture.

<sup>8</sup> Different communities in Christianity have developed different views on how Christ is made present in the sacrament. In particular, the biggest division between the Calvinist/Reformed and Lutheran traditions concerns whether the ‘real presence’ of Christ is ‘spiritual’ or ‘physical’. In the United Church of Christ, we allow for different interpretations—most often affirming that Christ is made present in the sacrament but not seeking to define precisely how. In my own thought, I am in much accord with this position; not that these distinctions are meaningless, rather there are certain gifts in the emphases of each. (I do not, however, see the sacrament as “merely a remembrance” as posited by reformer Ulrich Zwingli and generally held by Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and conservative evangelicals.)

could be separated from the call to discipleship issued by Christ. The relevance of Bonhoeffer's words continues profoundly today, as the Church ministers in a world utterly plagued by dehumanizing injustice. The church unwilling to go where Christ would go, minister to whom Christ would minister, and even to be persecuted onto its own cross can hardly be considered the Body of Christ. As Bonhoeffer wrote, the Christ in whom we know God's grace is the Christ who when he "bids [us], he bids [us] come and die."<sup>9</sup>

Blessing and Honor, Glory and Power be unto the God of this Christ, now and forever.

AMEN.

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<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959; reprint New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 89. The more recent *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* translation reads "Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death"; *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 87.

## **Part II: United Church of Christ History, Traditions, Polity, and Practices**

We in the United Church of Christ inherit and embody a rich, but rather complex, constellation of theological roots, traditions, and practices. In the midst of this inherent complexity within our church, I find it useful to view our history and practice through two conceptual lenses: first, a tension (or perhaps a dialectic) between unity and diversity, and second, the concept of covenant. As I describe my understanding of United Church of Christ history and practice, I will first explore these two lenses and then discuss their embodiment in our historical roots and current life.

### **Unity and Diversity**

The tension between unity and diversity stands as one of the most recognizable factors of our life together as a church. As quoted in the title of one of Louis Gunnemann’s books about the United Church of Christ, we like to describe ourselves as a “united and uniting” church. Born out of the strong ecumenical impulses of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism, the United Church of Christ story begins by bringing together a number of distinct traditions in the belief that diversity is not an irreconcilable barrier to unity, and continues striving toward greater “uniting” as we fully participate in the ecumenical community and welcome members and congregations from other traditions into our fellowship.

I describe this concept as a ‘tension’, though, because I believe it is an oversimplification—and a dangerous one, at that—to see our diversity as the only thing that unites us. Instead, a visual image that I find helpful in understanding this tension is that of an assembly room with strong centers of action but also with wide, open doors. Our “room” and our life inside that room is oriented toward these centers—our unity—but the doors to our assembly are open, welcoming amongst us others without making them pass through barriers—our diversity. I find this image useful because it illustrates our church as open to diversity and difference while not relativizing the core centers around which we gather.<sup>10</sup> I see an analogy between this image and our view of the creeds and confessions as “testimonies, not tests” of faith in the United Church of Christ. This is how the United Church of Christ authentically “claims as its own the faith of the historic Church

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<sup>10</sup> My thanks to liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop for this image of the assembly with strong centers and open doors, an image he has used in many of his writings.

expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers”<sup>11</sup> without enforcing a creedal-level adherence to those ancient creeds and Reformation confessional documents. (Some in the United Church of Christ, on this basis, claim that we *are* in fact a “confessional” church even though we are not a “creedal” church.)

*What do I understand the “centers” in our room to be?* The first is that we are explicitly a Christian and—at least implicitly—a Trinitarian church. Our constitution begins by claiming “Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior”<sup>12</sup> as the head of our church. Acknowledging the variety of perspectives about Jesus Christ held within our denomination, we nevertheless look to Jesus Christ and the Christian story as the center of our identity and proclamation. The language our constitution uses of Jesus Christ as “Son of God”, its references to the Holy Spirit, the structure and language of our *United Church of Christ Statement of Faith*, and even the retention of the historical baptismal formula in our *Book of Worship* (“...in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit”) betray a Trinitarian identity as well—an identity we share with the Church catholic,<sup>13</sup> a piece of the foundation for our ecumenical work. Discussing this Trinitarian identity as a “center” in the United Church of Christ makes clear the strength of the strong centers, open doors image: there are certainly those in the United Church of Christ whose theological perspective is not primarily Trinitarian, and our “assembly” is open to their voice and participation. A Trinitarian understanding of God, however, still stands as a “center” around which we orient.

A second center around which we gather is our conviction that the church must work *in the world*. The proper ordering of society and involvement in social action and responsibility were core to our Congregationalist and Reformed ancestors. Our Evangelical Synod forebears found themselves called to provide aid in the world through institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, and elder communities, as well as through benevolences. This shared heritage persisted in our founding, as the authors of our constitution asserted that we look to the Word and to the Holy Spirit to “prosper [the church’s] creative and redemptive work *in the world*,”<sup>14</sup> and continues today as we stand at the forefront of American denominations in working for social justice, mercy, and

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<sup>11</sup> *United Church of Christ Constitution and Bylaws*, paragraph 2.

<sup>12</sup> *United Church of Christ Constitution and Bylaws*, paragraph 2.

<sup>13</sup> universal

<sup>14</sup> *United Church of Christ Constitution and Bylaws*, paragraph 2; emphasis added.

peace through both advocacy and social service.

Finally, a third center around which we gather—at least from my perspective—is our identity as a church of the Reformation. This is not to say that we all need to sing “A Mighty Fortress” or start memorizing John Calvin’s *Institutes*<sup>15</sup>—rather, our life as a church embodies many of the key themes and insights of the Reformation. We place at least our hope in the sovereignty of God and God’s involvement in the world, even when that hope leaves us with difficult and unanswerable questions. We retain a healthy suspicion of idolatry that places worldly things ahead of God.<sup>16</sup> We understand the power and embrace of God’s grace and love made known in Christ—grace and love that comes to us in our brokenness and despair and comes “as a gift” (Romans 3:24) before we can even ask or respond. Furthermore, we attempt to embody the “*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda est*” vision of the church—the church Reformed, yet always reforming—the vision that empowers us to be open to new and diverse voices in our midst and challenges us to be responsive to our times and our world.

Around these three strong centers we gather as the United Church of Christ—a constellation that still shows forth a cacophony of different embodiments. We gather as austere Puritan Congregationalist people, as warm-hearted pietistic Lutheran Evangelical people, and as devout high-church Calvinist Reformed people. We gather speaking and singing English, Spanish, Samoan, German, Japanese, Magyar, Tagalog, Hawaiian, and Armenian. We gather in grand liturgical processions and in African ring shouts, in eco-feminist liturgies and contemporary Pentecostal services. In all of these different forms, our church gathers together and orients itself around the Christian story, our responsibility to work in and for the world, and the insights of the Reformation. This variety of ways congregations and settings of the United Church of Christ live out their life together and yet gather together as one: our diversity together with our unity.

## **Covenant**

One of the primary reasons we are able to embody this unity-and-diversity tension in the United Church of Christ, successfully at times and less successfully at others, lies in our

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<sup>15</sup> Not that either of these activities are necessarily *bad* things to do!

<sup>16</sup> Thankfully, for most of us, our suspicion has shifted away from stained glass, ritual, the arts, and song lyrics not taken from the Psalms and more appropriately focuses on the idolization of such false ‘gods’ as money, individualism, and patriotic idealism.

understanding of covenant. Covenant is a tricky concept to attempt to define; it describes a way of relating to one another that has neither complete “autonomy” nor highly developed structures of “authority”. As we examine our own United Church of Christ polity and structures, we can see the in-between nature of covenant at play. Each setting of the church—whether a congregation, association, conference, covenanted ministry, affiliated ministry, associated ministry, or the General Synod—has relative freedom in its internal affairs and yet is called to live in relationships of community, responsibility, mutuality, and (in a sense) accountability to the other settings of the church. We do not live in a system of complete autonomy, as we commit ourselves to live in relationship to the other settings of the church, and we do not live in an “authoritarian” system, as relative freedom is given for each setting’s internal life and as our system is open to different interpretations of the responsibilities of covenant.

From a historical view, our covenant polity is a melding of the more congregational polity of our Congregational Christian heritage and the more presbyterian polity of the Evangelical and Reformed Church.<sup>17</sup> The melding of these two systems can still be seen in United Church of Christ polity to this day. For instance, the almost complete freedom congregations have in ordering their own governance and worship, as well as the representation of each congregation at *both* association and conference levels reflects a more congregationalist understanding. On the other hand, a presbyterian understanding shows forth as we assert that it is the association—and not the individual congregation—that ordains clergy and holds their standing, as well as in our practice of having General Synod delegations from *conferences* rather than individual *congregations*. In light of these and many other possible examples, it is clear that the United Church of Christ is neither truly congregationalist nor truly presbyterian, and I believe we oversimplify the dynamic when we try to say we’re “closer” to one or the other. Thus, many have employed the use of this term “covenant” to describe our polity, as I do now.

Our covenant polity has, in my view, been both a strength and a weakness in our life as a denomination. An asset of the covenant polity is how it enables diversity within our body, while we attempt to maintain a sense of unity—truly it creates and enables the unity-diversity tension I

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<sup>17</sup> An often overlooked fact, though, is that the polity of the Evangelical Synod prior to its merger with the Reformed Church was not presbyterian. The Evangelical Synod polity was congregationalist in essence, although with an understanding of pastoral authority stemming from their German Lutheran roots that would seem strange in Puritan/New England Congregationalism.

discussed above. In theory, the covenant polity means that different settings of the church can move in different directions without threatening the unity of the church. As an example, I believe this dynamic of the polity significantly contributed to our early inclusion of LGBT persons into ordained ministry—the various settings of the church could move in that direction at different rates. This same strength of our polity, though, means that our church must constantly work at creating and maintaining a sense of unity and common identity within the denomination. While all mainline Protestants struggle to some degree with maintaining their identity in today’s religious landscape, the United Church of Christ will by its nature always have this burden to a significantly greater degree. Also, although our system allows the settings of the church to ‘move’ freely, and in some cases before or faster than other settings, this same dynamic gives a certain inertia to moving the church as a whole. Finally, as our covenant system relies on upholding mutual responsibility in covenant, we still do not have a fully developed understanding of what should happen when those mutual covenant responsibilities are betrayed.<sup>18</sup> I have no easy answers for these concerns. Every church polity has strengths and weaknesses and each different interpretation of a particular polity, including United Church of Christ covenant polity, generates strengths and weaknesses in its implications. That said, though, my bias is clear: I believe we must conceive of United Church of Christ polity in terms of covenant and mutual covenantal responsibilities rather than in terms of autonomy (as some would instead emphasize).

### **The Heritages: the Congregational churches**

Turning now to discussion of our United Church of Christ history and antecedent traditions, these themes of unity-and-diversity and covenant will show themselves to varying degrees throughout our heritage.

Speaking of our history in North America, the Congregational churches stand as the oldest of our major ancestors. The people known in North America as Congregationalists began as part of the Calvinist wing of the English Reformation. Under the Roman Catholic Queen Mary in the mid-16<sup>th</sup>-century, many English Protestant leaders took refuge in Protestant centers on the European continent, particularly in Reformed areas such as Switzerland, the Rhineland region

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<sup>18</sup> One notable exception would be cases of severe misconduct by clergy, for which disciplinary procedures are established.

spanning the French-German border, and the Netherlands. Returning to England under Queen Elizabeth I, these Protestant Reformers brought differing perspectives on the degree of reform needed in the Church of England and whether or not such reform was possible in the established church. One group advocated very mild reforms that kept in place much of the existing episcopal structure of the church and demanded only minor liturgical changes; this group by the end became the Anglican mainstream. On the other side of the debate was a group united behind their more highly Calvinist/Reformed theology that were known collectively as the ‘Puritans’. While united for the most part theologically, the Puritans found themselves divided between those advocating a Presbyterian ecclesial structure and those advocating a Congregationalist one. While the Anglicans and the Presbyterians variously rose power within the English church over the 150 year English Reformation (with the eventual dominance by the Anglicans), the Congregationalists never found themselves in official favor. The most ardent portions of this group, therefore, sought out a new place to create their ideal church and society, eventually landing in North America in a couple of distinct groups. The more highly separatist group moved first to the Netherlands and eventually to the Plymouth Colony of Massachusetts in 1620. A less separatist group came slightly later to New England, establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629. The two groups influenced each other—both in Europe and in the New England colonies—and eventually united in 1648 under the *Cambridge Platform*, a Congregationalist adaptation of the Presbyterians’ 1646 *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

The concept of membership by covenant stands as perhaps the most important contribution early Congregationalism made to Christian theology and ecclesiology, a concept formalized in the writing of the *Cambridge Platform*. Together with the insistence that the local congregation—and not any larger body—is the visible church in its whole essence, a unique belief in Congregationalism that separates the tradition from other Reformed denominations is the idea that the church is a local gathering of people united around a mutual covenanting. (To this day, in many United Church of Christ congregations descended from Congregationalist roots, new members join by incorporation into the particular covenant of that congregation, rather than a more general profession of Christian faith as in other parts of the United Church and much of the rest of the Reformed tradition).

Soon after this formal establishment of the “Congregational way” in the *Cambridge*

*Platform*, the Congregationalists again struggled with the unity-diversity tension as they debated baptismal requirements, leading to the establishment of the “Half-Way Covenant” in 1662, and subsequently called for a return to the stricter theological notions of the *Cambridge Platform* at the Reforming Synod in 1679. While the tradition had a firm grasp on covenant at the local level, by the early 1700s, they began a long struggle over the role of covenant and connection *among* congregations. In Connecticut, connectional structures known as ‘consociations’ developed, although these were derided by critics as ‘Presbyterianizing’. At the same time, unity among the Massachusetts churches was challenged by the struggle between Enlightenment-influenced liberalism and more conservative viewpoints. The Massachusetts churches did not at this point adopt the stronger connectionalism present in Connecticut, however.

Entering the 1700s, the New England churches continued to wrestle with theological diversity, now split among three factions: Great Awakening inspired revivalism, Enlightenment grounded liberalism, and the more conservative established forms of Calvinist thought. Particularly in the articulations of Jonathan Edwards, the more experiential Calvinism of the Great Awakening made a significant mark on the Congregational tradition and American Protestantism as a whole. (This turn from orthodox confessionality paralleled a similar turn taking place throughout the Protestant world, as observed by the rise of Methodism in England and America and the rise of Pietism in the European continental traditions.) The turn also enlarged the acceptable diversity of thought and practice within the Congregational tradition and strengthened the impulse toward work in the world, as expressed by Edward’s vision of “the social redemption of humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

As the United States moved into the 1800s, the both the struggle to understand their covenant tradition in new times and the tension between unity and diversity continued in crucial ways for the Congregationalists. The ongoing theological debates, particularly in Massachusetts, came to head in the 1825 break-away of churches of Unitarian perspective. Ultimately for the Unitarians, the insistence by the greater part of the Congregationalist tradition of the Trinitarian core to their faith became too large a barrier to unity. The Unitarian split had a large impact, as the Unitarian group dominated every congregation in Boston but one (Old South Church) and

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Edwards as quoted by Louis Gunneman, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity*, expanded by Charles Shelby Rooks (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1999), p. 149.

took with them Harvard College, one of the two major Congregationalist schools.

While the Massachusetts churches were struggling with major division, the Connecticut churches attempted to work together with their theological siblings, the Presbyterian churches, for church development in the expanding American West. The *Plan of Union* of 1801, which established this working relationship, eventually failed from the Congregational perspective—the stronger connectionalism of the Presbyterian system resulted in a disproportionate share of new congregations forming lasting relationships to the Presbyterians. Although formal agreement broke down between the two groups by the 1850s, some cooperation continued at least at local levels; for example, an examination of congregations' histories in the Midwest shows many instances of clergy of one tradition serving churches of the other or even whole congregations switching back and forth between the two.<sup>20</sup>

These two circumstances, the Unitarian break and the *Plan of Union*, are credited with pushing the Congregational churches to consider more seriously their life together as a denomination. As said earlier, the tradition struggled with how they could extend their practice of covenant to relationships among churches while still lifting up the primacy and autonomy of those local churches. In the changing situations of the 1800s, though, the growing self-consciousness of Congregationalism as a distinct tradition and the growing need for missionary work in places outside New England eventually led to the creation of more formal regional and national organizations. At first, many churches began supporting autonomous missionary organizations such as the American Home Missionary Association. By the latter half of the century, particularly as the state/regional associations in 'the West' grew in strength, the final push was made toward forming a national body, culminating in the organization of the National Council of Congregational Churches at Oberlin, Ohio, in 1871. Significantly, in forming the National Council in 1871 a statement on the 'unity of the church' was adopted, beginning to pave the way (at least ideologically) toward the eventual incorporation of the Christian Churches and the union with the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Under the influence of this statement and the growing ecumenism that resulted from the Second Great Awakening (or at times as a reaction to it), the Congregational churches began

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<sup>20</sup> The history of some of the older Congregational and Presbyterian churches in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a great example of this latter phenomenon.

welcoming others into their communion. The early 1900s saw the incorporation of the Evangelical Protestant Conference in Pennsylvania (a relative of the Evangelical Synod) and the German Congregational Churches of the Midwest. Most importantly, in 1931 the National Council merged with the General Convention of Christian Churches, bringing together two of our four major United Church of Christ heritages.

As the Congregationalist tradition re-examined itself in light of this denominational union and under the influence of the growing ecumenical momentum of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they began heading down the road to further union. This road would not prove easy, though, when discussions materialized with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in the 1940s. While there was much interest in the *idea* of Christian unity, some in the Congregational Christian churches believed that an attempt to come together with a denomination with presbyterian polity would sacrifice the basic principles of their tradition. This struggle to discern this possibility eventually resulted in civil court battles (specifically in New York, initiated by Cadman Memorial Church and Congregational Society) and a small, but significant minority of congregations choosing not to enter into this new form of covenant that would be the United Church of Christ. Although the polity issue would not in the end prevent the union, the attempt to address the concerns of the most staunchly Congregationalist faction resulted in the particular form of “covenant polity”—with its very specific strengths and weaknesses—that I discussed above.

### **The Heritages: the Reformed Church in the United States**

Begun by German immigration in the early 1700s, the German Reformed tradition was the second of our four major heritages to establish itself in North America. German immigrants to North America in the 1700s hailed from a land besieged by numerous wars and other armed conflicts. Particularly in the Rhineland and Palatinate regions of western Germany residents lived in the middle of a constant tension between German and French forces—adding to the fatigue already endured by most German lands from over 150 years of religious conflict among Lutheranism, the Reformed tradition, and the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, this area fell victim some of the usual patterns of poverty and famine that often spurred immigration to the Americas.

German immigration in the 1700s and early 1800s was particularly strong in Pennsylvania and northern Maryland, because of the tolerance of the William Penn colony, but also brought

immigrants to areas in the Carolinas, Virginia, and upstate New York. These immigrants came from both Reformed and Lutheran traditions, achieving a level of cooperation between the two groups not possible in their native lands. The Reformed tradition was particularly strong in this period of immigration, though, because of the predominance of immigration from regions in western Germany where the Reformed churches had official support (the Palatinate and Rhineland areas).

The roots of this German Reformed tradition laid in the same theological movement that influenced the Congregationalist and Presbyterian groups in Britain. As noted above, the British Puritans sought refuge in this region of Europe around Switzerland, western Germany, and eastern France during their persecution under Queen Mary. These German Reformed people, however, did not experience the highly polemical environment of the English Reformation and so were not forced to adopt the reactionary Puritanism in liturgy and polity of their English cousins. Furthermore, the German Reformed tradition was unique among Reformed churches in its attempt to forge a middle ground with their Lutheran neighbors. While not successful at uniting the traditions, the German Reformed churches were nonetheless influenced by the attempt and by figures such as Martin Luther's trusted colleague Philip Melancthon.<sup>21</sup> The primary confession of the German Reformed tradition, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, was originally conceived as an attempt to write a catechism that both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions could agree upon (again, an attempt that ultimately failed).

The German Reformed people struggled for a while to organize church life in the Americas since there were few pastors or authorities among their ranks; because their immigration was encouraged more by war and economics than religious mission, few clergy or civil authorities accompanied them. At first, they received some support and pastoral services from the Dutch Reformed communities centered in New York. Among the German Reformed churches, though, John Philip Boehm began providing pastoral services as a layperson. Eventually in 1728, he sought ordination through the Dutch Reformed Church, establishing a relationship between the two communities. Aside from the language barrier, the German churches resisted a more formal relationship to the Dutch church due to distance the Dutch church's more rigid

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<sup>21</sup> Notably, Melancthon was the author of the Augsburg Confession, the primary document among the Lutheran confessional writings.

temperament. The Dutch church did, however, appeal to the Reformed Church in the Palatinate to send a German-speaking clergyperson. As a result, Michael Schlatter came to America with the mission to organize a German Reformed coetus.<sup>22</sup> Together, Boehm and Schlatter organized such a coetus in 1748. Following the United States' independence from Britain, a cause the German Reformed communities supported, the German Reformed coetus sought independence from the still Europe-based authorities of the Dutch Reformed Church. This independence was formalized with the adoption of a Synodical *Ordnung* (constitution) in 1793.

In the 1800s, the influence in the United States of revivalism posed perhaps the largest challenge for the German Reformed Church. The focus of American revivalism on individual subjective “experience” as the confirmation of salvation was somewhat alien to the German Reformed tradition, where reassurance was claimed in the more communal and objective location of God's promises proclaimed by Word and Sacrament in the context of the church. This tension, similar to the struggles seen particularly in Congregational and Presbyterian circles at this time, prompted the German Reformed Church's most significant contribution to American Protestant thought, known as the Mercersburg Theology. John Nevin, a Presbyterian, and Phillip Schaff, from the Reformed church in Switzerland, led the movement toward a recovery of Reformation roots from their teaching positions at the German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Their thought stressed the ‘catholic’ nature of the Reformed tradition in the face of the sectarianism of American Protestantism and called for a recovery of the church-centered theology of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in the face of the individualism of the revival movement. Nevin's work included a returned emphasis on John Calvin's idea of the ‘mystical presence’ (sometimes called the ‘spiritual’ real presence) of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion. He combined this emphasis into a renewed “high church” liturgical form, known as the Mercersburg Liturgy, which sparked a vicious worship debate throughout the German Reformed Church. In a modified form, the “high church” liturgy prevailed in receiving official sanction and later provided a basis for the liturgy of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and was influential in the preparation of the United Church of Christ *Book of Worship*. Significantly, the work of both Nevin and Schaff in sculpting an “evangelical catholic” perspective for the church—along with

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<sup>22</sup> A coetus was a regional body of clergy and congregations analogous to the ‘classis’ in the current (Dutch) Reformed Church in America or the ‘presbytery’ in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—and in some ways similar to a United Church of Christ association.

similar work in other denominations—partly inspired the 20<sup>th</sup> century ecumenical movement both in and beyond the Reformed church.

Also during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the German Reformed Church was affected by continued German immigration and the westward expansion of the United States. The theological and liturgical tensions in the east were also present in the west, where older generations of immigrants were less influenced by the Mercersburg movement but newly arriving Germans brought their European perspective that was closer to that of the Mercersburg supporters. Continued German immigration also raised the language question, as older generations switched to English while newer ones felt tied more strongly to their German roots. The *Heidelberg Catechism*, and its typically Reformed covenant theology, continued to provide a uniting force amidst the diversity and divergences of the period.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “evangelical catholic” influence of the Mercersburg movement combined with the growing ecumenism of American Protestantism, pushing the Reformed Church toward seeking union with other bodies. By 1928, discussions materialized with the Evangelical Synod of North America (discussed below) and the United Brethren, who would drop out by 1930. The discussions moved quickly, resulting in the 1934 union of the Reformed Church with the Evangelical Synod to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church. This union would foreshadow the coming union with the Congregational Christian churches to form the United Church of Christ—complete with the need to create the appropriate polity, as this union brought together the presbyterian Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod with its Lutheran-style congregationalism. The particular style of this form of congregationalism together with the Evangelical tradition’s flexibility to different polities meant the new polity would more closely resemble the presbyterian workings of the Reformed Church.

### **The Heritages: the Christian churches**

The next of our four major traditions to develop in the United States would be the group of churches collectively known as the ‘Christian churches’. While occupying a significant place in American church history as the first truly American church tradition, the influence the tradition of the Christian churches has on the United Church of Christ is comparatively smaller than our other predecessors. The number of United Church of Christ congregations from the Christian

churches background is relatively small compared to the other three traditions. Furthermore, the much looser traditions, theology, and polity of the Christian churches (even in contrast to the Congregationalists) served to weaken their impact on the overall development of the United Church of Christ as a whole.

As the United States began to expand in the late 1700s and early 1800s into the “frontier” areas of the country, people in these areas became increasingly frustrated with the rigidity of the established Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist denominations in theology and polity. Increasingly, some desired to form a tradition that broke out of this rigidity. Arising in separate movements in areas such as Kentucky, Vermont, and Virginia, this group formed churches that claimed “no creed but Christ” and looked to the Bible as their sole standard for faith and practice. This movement, led by James O’Kelly in Virginia, Abner Jones in New England, and Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell in Kentucky, is known collectively as the “Restorationist” movement.

Even with geographic separation and heritages coming from a number of denominational traditions, these churches developed a similar identity. They held to a congregational organization, rejected all forms of creedalism and tests for church membership, and turned to the practice of ‘believers’ baptism. These groups remained separate for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and resulted in a number of descendents—for instance, a significant portion of the Stone-Campbell movement in Kentucky developed into the denomination known today as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and others in this movement formed the various Churches of Christ. As the century went forward, however, the groups began to recognize their commonality of faith and practice and began moving toward a broader organization. By 1890, the portions of this movement that would eventually enter the United Church of Christ joined together as the General Convention of Christian Churches. This General Convention was based in an even looser congregationalism than the Congregational churches, establishing only patterns of collaboration rather than a central organization.

### **The Heritages: the Evangelical Synod of North America**

The Evangelical Synod of North America stands as the youngest on American soil of our predecessor traditions, but also the oldest in its European roots. Their tradition brings the

heritages of the entire magisterial Reformation,<sup>23</sup> both Lutheran and Reformed strains, and so dates to the very earliest reformers such as Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. Churches of the German Evangelical tradition began forming in the Midwest in the mid-1800s from later waves of German immigration, immigration originating in different parts of Germany than fed the creation of the Reformed Church.

The Evangelical tradition, in both Germany and the United States, stands as perhaps the most significant early attempts at interconfessional unity. Angered by the inability of him and his wife to commune at each other's churches, King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia ordered the Lutheran and Reformed churches in his territory to unite. Reflecting European usage wherein "Evangelical" was synonymous with "Protestant", this united church adopted Evangelical for their name. While consummated by this act of civil authority, this union reflected the desires of the growing liberal and Pietist movements in Germany as well as the long-unachieved dreams of the original Protestant reformers. This union was not without controversy, though, as strongly confessional factions (particularly on the Lutheran side) refused to join.<sup>24</sup> The union movement spread to other parts of Germany over the course of the 1800s.

As German immigration moved toward the Midwest by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, these immigrants brought with them their orientation toward this united, or "Evangelical", faith. The established Lutheran and Reformed denominations of the American East completely understand this group's united faith; significant cultural differences between these newer German immigrants and the older, second and third generation Germans of the east also divided them. Thus, the immigrants began forming their own Evangelical congregations, with the first such congregation believed to be Bethlehem Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, formed in 1833.

While the Evangelical churches were confessionally open by their nature, the Lutheran tradition tended to be more strongly represented. A majority of the Evangelical immigrants came from areas in Germany where the Lutheran church had been predominant prior to the union movement. Furthermore, they were attracted to the more congregationalist (but also more clergy-centered) character of German Lutheranism in contrast to the more bureaucratic church structures

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<sup>23</sup> That is, the mainstream of the Reformation and not the "radical" traditions such as the Anabaptists.

<sup>24</sup> This split strongly played out in church development in the Midwest, as Lutherans happy with the union formed Evangelical congregations and Lutherans upset with the union formed congregations in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

typical of the Reformed tradition.

The influence of the Basel and Barmen missionary societies on the German Evangelical churches cannot be understated. These societies developed out of the German Pietist movement that crossed confessional lines and did not favor either the confessionalism or ecclesiastical structures of either tradition. Under their influence, especially as represented by Joseph Rieger and George Wall, the Evangelical churches of Missouri and southern Illinois first organized into a loose “church society”—the *Kirchenverein*—in order to provide support and unity necessary under the frontier conditions. Under the *Kirchenverein*, the Evangelical churches formalized their recognition of both Luther’s Small Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism, but also developed their own Evangelical Catechism to express their united faith.

Like our other heritages, the Evangelical churches headed down the path of more formal denominationalism in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1872, the *Kirchenverein*—now identifying as a Synod—came together with the much smaller Evangelical synods in New York, Ohio, Michigan, northern Illinois, and Indiana to form the German Evangelical Synod of North America. Further following the church union trends, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Evangelical Synod began seeking unions with other church bodies. Their earlier attempts were to unite with other Lutheran synods in the Midwest and other areas, but those churches saw their Evangelical faith as ‘not Lutheran enough’. Thus by the 1920s they began conversations with their German cousins to the east, the Reformed Church in the United States. While the Reformed Church was decidedly more Calvinist than the Evangelical Synod, the ecumenical “evangelical catholic” impulse in the Reformed Church combined with their common ethnic identity made such a union possible.

### **The Union and life as the United Church**

As already alluded to in the histories of the predecessor traditions, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century these two churches—the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches—were under a continued impulse toward ecumenical unity. Beginning by efforts in the less tradition-bound Midwest, the two churches started conversations toward union in the 1940s. Formal procedures began with the *Basis for Union* in 1943. Over the following 14 years, the process would continue despite Congregationalist dissent, resulting in the

consummation of the United Church of Christ in 1957 at Cleveland, Ohio. Much has been written about the mechanics of how this union finally came to be; these details are an interesting study in church polity and provide some clues to the particulars of our polity. However, they are becoming less important as the United Church of Christ enters its sixth decade and diversity in the denomination has moved beyond Congregational Christian versus Evangelical and Reformed distinctions. More important than the details are how the process reflected the struggles of unity-diversity tension and the continual re-definition of covenant that continue their importance in the church today.

In looking at the tension of unity and diversity, some would emphasize theological and liturgical differences between the two churches: The Evangelical and Reformed Church strongly identified with their confessional writings (although with differing approaches between the Evangelical tradition and the Reformed tradition) and their more highly liturgical and sacramental worshipping traditions. The Congregational Christians, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, took a primarily non-creedal approach theologically and usually worshipped in a lower church Puritan tradition. It can be easy to overemphasize the theological differences, though, since both churches had strong roots within the same Reformed heritage. Alternately, many would emphasize the differences between the congregational and presbyterian polities. As shown in their respective stories, though, both denominations already had a history of some movement between the more autonomous and more connectional poles of this spectrum.

Perhaps more significantly, some have point out the cultural differences between the two denominations. The Congregational Christian churches, being English in heritage and centered in the urban centers of the East, held an establishment-class position in American society. Their tradition was particularly accustomed to high involvement and influence in society and politics. Alternately, the Evangelical and Reformed Church, as a working-class German church centered in the more rural areas of Pennsylvania and the Midwest, focused more strongly on church and local community and less on social activism.

This diversity of relationships to society and the establishment is important as we consider the life of the United Church of Christ following its 1957 formation. As the various social movements of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to head, not the least of which was the Civil Rights Movement, the United Church of Christ would be challenged to respond even as it was still

forming its own internal identity. In the end, the revolutions in American society would be formative for the United Church of Christ, as it adopted a strong orientation toward social justice and activism as core to its identity as a denomination. Congruence with this identity at the local church, association, and conference levels varies, as one might expect with the nature of both polity and unity within our church.

The themes of unity-and-diversity and covenant continue their importance in the United Church of Christ today. Covenant at the denomination-wide level was rethought as the national setting drastically restructured itself in the late 1990s and early 2000s, creating a system of ‘covenanted ministries’ and a collegium of national officers. The inclusion of LBGT persons in the life and ministry of the church has tested the denominations ability to live with diversity of viewpoints. Most recently, the God Is Still Speaking identity campaign has made an impact on our sense of common mission and identity—a campaign that has seen support even in circles that had not to this time bought into some of the major stances and movements supported at the national level. And perhaps most significantly, our welcome and incorporation of persons and local churches from outside our four historical heritages has increased our diversity and widened the circle of our covenanting.

With the complex constellation of heritages and current identity of the United Church of Christ, ministry within our church must continually live in the ambiguities of covenant and unity-with-diversity. All of us are called to continue to bear witness to the gospel out of the gifts of our theological and historical heritages. As our constitution asserts, though, we are also called in each new time and context to “make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.”<sup>25</sup> My own conception of ministry in such a tradition looks much like the image I used earlier of strong centers and wide open doors. Ministry is most faithful as it holds to the strong gifts at the core of our faith while being profoundly open to all of God’s creation in its diversity. I believe our national leaders are on target as they call for a church with both ‘evangelical courage’ and ‘radical hospitality’.

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<sup>25</sup> *United Church of Christ Constitution*, paragraph 2.

### **Part III: Faith Pilgrimage and Position on Ministry**

#### *Faith Pilgrimage and Sense of Call*

As I reflect on the beginnings of my faith pilgrimage, I must give due credit to my upbringing in the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca, Michigan. As is typical of many old mainline churches in small-town America, First Presbyterian is a small but proud church that is fairly middle-of-the-road moderate theologically—this, of course, making it more toward the liberal end of the spectrum in the broader scope of American Christianity. (As an example of this latter observation, First Presbyterian is still the only congregation in my hometown that has had a female pastor; she was, in fact, the pastor who baptized me.) In this congregation, I was brought up believing in the loving God whose grace embraced all of us, despite our weaknesses or brokenness—a continuing core of my faith today. Lest I paint too idyllic a picture, this congregation certainly modeled the very human ups-and-downs of parish life, too, as we endured painful conflict through some pastoral transitions.

For better or worse, First Presbyterian grounded me in both the strengths and weaknesses of moderate-to-liberal mainline Reformed theology. Ours was an intellectually learned faith, open to the insights of education and non-dogmatic in its temperament. While open in this way to the educated faith, like many mainline Protestants in society, we did not overly emphasize Biblical literacy. My own knowledge of the witness of scripture was certainly broadened, though, through ten years of summer vacation Bible School at my neighbors' Mennonite church.<sup>26</sup> My upbringing at First Presbyterian also gave me a deep inculturation in and appreciation for the dignity of worship in the semi-liturgical to liturgical tradition, an influence that has only grown in importance in my faith pilgrimage.

Another significant way my upbringing in this church has shaped my pilgrimage and sense of call comes out of its moderate-to-liberal theological orientation. As I neared the end of high school, I was beginning to acknowledge my identity as a gay male. I consider myself privileged (and lucky) to have been raised in a congregation where I never once heard condemnation of homosexuality, or for that matter, of any of the diversity of humanity. I cannot say with honesty where this congregation might stand on the matter of sexual orientation if the issue were raised; I

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<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that this was a congregation of the "Church of God in Christ (Mennonite)," a strand of the Mennonite faith that might be considered 'old-order' or almost-Amish when viewed by outsiders.

did not ‘come out’ until after I entered college and was no longer regularly attending.

Nonetheless, being raised in this non-condemning, non-discriminatory community meant that I would never seriously question my worth as a child of God and member of the church because of my sexuality. I cherish the fact that First Presbyterian’s current pastor—my pastor since junior high school—fully supports my call to seminary and ministry and has expressed his regret that I will not be a colleague of his in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).<sup>27</sup>

My move to East Lansing to begin studies at Michigan State University brought me to participation in the life of The Peoples Church of East Lansing, a congregation affiliated not only with the United Church of Christ, but also the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, and the American Baptist Churches USA. Even at more than ten times the size of First Presbyterian, I immediately felt at home at The Peoples Church, so much so that I never tried another East Lansing church. I quickly became involved with the Sanctuary Choir, a close-knit group that kept alive my commitment to the congregation in times of doubt and dissatisfaction. My initial attraction to the congregation was rooted partly in its Presbyterian affiliation, partly in the welcome and participation offered by the Choir, but also in the majestic liturgical worship practiced by the congregation at that time in its life (of which the choir, and music in general, was an important piece). My own faith was fed by these patterns of ritual and music in ways I would only come to fully recognize and understand theologically after entering seminary.

As many people seemingly experience, my early years in college brought a certain degree of religious curiosity and questioning. In a strange coincidence of timing, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s infamous “Amendment B” rule that prohibits the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons was officially adopted in the spring of 1998 (as presbyteries voted following the 1997 General Assembly) as I was preparing to start at Michigan State University in the fall. I am certain that some of my curiosity was fed by this decision. I very briefly flirted with the idea of exploring Unitarian Universalism, attracted by its inclusivity and humanity-affirming ‘guiding principles.’ My commitment to the Sanctuary Choir at The Peoples Church, though, encouraged me to stay with The Peoples Church, and I began more fully exploring that cousin of the

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<sup>27</sup> At his invitation, I have even had the opportunity to preach and lead worship at this church a number of times since starting seminary.

Presbyterians, our United Church of Christ. Around the same time, we called our new campus minister, The Reverend Kelly Sprinkle, who had a high affinity for the United Church of Christ even as an American Baptist (he entered the United Church of Christ through the Privilege of Call process shortly into his tenure at The Peoples Church). Even with my positive experience in the church of my upbringing, my frustration with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) grew as an attempt to repeal “Amendment B” failed. Now in the midst of coming out, by my junior year of college I felt called to transfer my church membership to The Peoples Church as a way of transitioning to the United Church of Christ (even if this was, in some sense, a ‘silent’ transition since I was not *officially* leaving the Presbyterian Church). While I was not yet sensing the call toward seminary and ordained ministry, my sense of connection to the United Church of Christ quickly grew as I became involved in Covenant Association meetings and as an association committee member under Pastor Sprinkle’s encouragement.

Kelly Sprinkle’s influence also continued to shape my own faith perspective and eventual call to ministry. My horizons were broadened and my perspective shaped by his witness and commitment to the social justice orientation of Christian faith and the inclusivity to which the church is called. Also, as a gay man himself, he tangibly confirmed what I already knew about the rightful place we have as LBGT persons in the life and ministry of the church.

Not until after I had officially joined The Peoples Church did I begin to struggle with feeling called toward seminary and ministry in the church. To this point, I felt confident in my chosen field of computer science and fully intended to pursue graduate studies in order to teach at the college level. In the latter half of my junior year, though, I simultaneously began to question my continued interest in the field and began to have an inexplicable interest in pursuing seminary studies. I fought these on-and-off feelings for almost a year until finally admitting to myself this sense of call—a calling confirmed by those around me both in the church and among my close college friends. Also, in the fall of my senior year I was thankfully able to distinguish between the disinterest in computer science and the call toward seminary, now able to answer those questions separately. With my growing involvement in and affinity for the United Church of Christ (and admittedly with the practices of discrimination against LBGT persons in most other denominations), I naturally began the Student In-Care process with the United Church of Christ. Recognizing that I was not raised in this tradition, I specifically sought out United Church of

Christ related seminaries, applying to the Yale University Divinity School and the Chicago Theological Seminary—with my eventual entrance, obviously, at the latter.

My faith journey since entering seminary has been transformed and transformative in many ways. One of the earliest transformations in the journey was a clarification and solidification of my sense of call. Originally, I attempted to make the decision to go to seminary more ‘palatable’ amidst my doubts by telling myself that this could be the road to academia and not just parish ministry—somehow academia seemed ‘less scary’ at the time. However, immersion in the seminary environment during my first semester not only confirmed that seminary was indeed the right path for me, but also gave me a much deeper sense of call to parish ministry. Moving to Chicago also gave me the opportunity to experience a broader diversity of United Church of Christ congregations, including the opportunity to be active in officially Open and Affirming ones.

My time at seminary has also given me the opportunity to mature in my personal faith. My theological studies, beginning with Ted Jennings’ introductory course in the history of Christian thought, deepened my appreciation for the gifts and insights of the Reformed roots of my upbringing, roots that many of our United Church of Christ traditions share. Classes in worship introduced me to the work of liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop, whose writings—along with friendships with colleagues at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago—have informed my faith with the particular emphases of the Lutheran theological tradition. Lathrop’s work, along with others’, also gave me a deeper theological grounding for my own viewpoints on liturgy and worship.

Just as the seminary experience has matured my own faith and piety, the journey has also broadened and matured my understandings of the social justice aspects of Christian faith. While the Chicago Theological Seminary environment itself provides an opportunity for real interaction and encounter with a level of diversity in background and perspective inaccessible in most congregations, I have perhaps been most profoundly impacted by my participation in the seminary’s Center for Community Transformation. That year, a total of fifteen students completed part-time field placements in one of three United Church of Christ congregations in the city of Chicago (and/or related community organizations) and took two out of four classes each semester together, rotating class locations among the three churches. My own fieldwork was split between La Primera Iglesia Congregacional, a predominately Puerto Rican inner-city

congregation, and the Near Northwest Neighborhood Network community organization. In working at Primera Iglesia, I came to more deeply understand the importance of accompaniment and solidarity-presence as a white person among a community of color. I also saw how the depth of their core Christian commitments—very traditional faith expressions in many “liberal” people’s eyes—were intimately connected to their passion for social and communal transformation. In the context of the class work, I was for the first time in a majority African-American academic environment—an experience many of my ten African-American colleagues had not had before either. In the tense and tumultuous moments that arose, I experienced deep respect and affirmation from these classmates for entering true dialogue while remaining authentic in my own identity and commitments—something for which I am indebted to the work of the Spirit.

I also credit the Center for Community Transformation program for driving me to seek out the full-time internship year I completed at Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ in Arlington, Virginia. While I have come to greatly appreciate my experiences in the Center for Community Transformation, in the early parts of that year I struggled to understand whether my field work was providing the sort of preparation I wanted in pursuing my strong call to parish ministry. At the encouragement of our academic dean Dow Edgerton, I decided to seek out a parish internship year—a decision that made me more open to the experiences the Center for Community Transformation *was* able to provide, rather than allow me to be stuck on what it could not.

My internship year at Rock Spring Church was truly transformative in providing a place where I could truly occupy and be recognized in the pastoral role in the environment to which I feel called (CPE provided the opportunity to be recognized in the pastoral role as well, but in a much different environment). Over the course of that year, I had the opportunity to engage in the wide range of parish pastor roles: preacher, teacher, worship leader and planner, youth leader, administrator, wider-church liaison, and, of course, pastoral caregiver. My ability to accompany and care for a community was challenged and affirmed as I walked with the congregation through significant staff transition, including a summer during which I functioned essentially as co-pastor with a temporary summer supply pastor. My sense of call to parish ministry was deeply affirmed as, even on the most challenging and over-worked of days, I found myself saying ‘I am really lucky, because I get to do work that I really love and feel truly called to.’ As I left Rock Spring Church to

return for my last year of seminary, I left in profound appreciation for an active, committed community of people that opened themselves to me as their pastor, and they left me with strong affirmation of my gifts for parish ministry.

In telling the story of my faith pilgrimage, I would be remiss to leave out the nurture and witness of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns. I have had the privilege of gathering with this group for our annual National Gathering each year since beginning seminary. In a society where being Christian and being gay are often seen as contradictory, the Coalition provides a sanctuary and spiritual fountain for many of us who occupy both of these worlds. Even with the affirming environments of my seminary and of the United Church of Christ, the opportunities I have had each year to come together with such a community have proven some of the most spiritually rich moments of my life.

As I journey this final year toward ordination, it is not without some fear and trepidation. Even as I feel strongly called to parish ministry and recognize in myself many gifts for that work, I also am keenly aware that we are never, in a sense, prepared for everything that God or the world will send our way. I also recognize that as a young, first-career seminary graduate—and also, in some cases, as a gay male—I may experience extra challenges in forging the bonds of confidence and trust that provide a foundation to much pastoral work. In this, though, I must rest in the faith that the God who claims and calls us all has called me to this ministry and remains present to us all as we journey together.

### *Ministry and Ordination*

As I wrote earlier in my Theological Perspective, I believe the church to be the gathering together of people in the faith of the gospel and in discipleship to Christ. Thus, working with the Spirit to enable this gathering, this faith, and this discipleship stands as the ministry to which all the baptized are called. Our Protestant belief in the “priesthood of all believers” means that regardless of our ‘vocation’, all of us are called to witness to the gospel and the coming reign of God in word and deed—the ongoing presence of Christ in the world.

That said, there are certain forms of ministry—certain vocations—that are central to the identity of the church and thus should be under the care of the whole church through its forms of authorization. Following the impulse of both our Congregationalist and our Lutheran roots, in

the United Church of Christ we recognize one “order” of ministry, that of pastor.<sup>28</sup> The particular forms of ministry to which pastors are called align with some of the major “marks” of the church: “to preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the Church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership.”<sup>29</sup> It is not, I believe, that the ordained are the only persons who can or even should do these forms of ministry. However, because these are the things that most assuredly form us in the faith of the gospel and empower us in the work of discipleship, the church has an interest in the authorization and oversight of people to be responsible for the carrying-out of this work in the church. Furthermore, as these things each mutually build up and support each other, it is appropriate that the pastoral office be charged with this broad picture of its vocation.

As is likely apparent from my understanding of my faith pilgrimage, I have experienced my journey through preparation for ministry as a strengthening, clarification, and affirmation of my call to ordained ministry. The ministries of proclamation and formation in the faith of the gospel and of empowering justice-seeking discipleship meet some of the most profound needs of our world and, as Frederick Buechner has famously asserted, God calls us to that place where our “deepest gladness and the world’s deepest needs meet.”<sup>30</sup> Even with the unglorious times of challenge that meet all endeavors, I have found great joy in the work of ministry that I have already engaged in, and look forward—cautiously but excitedly, fearfully but joyfully—to the path that lies ahead of me.

I am also grateful for the gifts I have been graced with, gifts I feel suit me particularly to the work of ministry in the local church. Foremost, by the grace of God, I seem well equipped to enter new communities with authenticity and build bonds of trust with diverse groups of people. I hope that my warm, caring reception by many reflects a warm, caring reflection I have extended to them. Additionally, I bring a strong interest in the work of theology, which I feel is critically needed for the renewal of the mainline churches in today’s religious landscape. Also needed in our churches, I have great passion for the worship life of the church, including preaching, and am committed to

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<sup>28</sup> Recent General Synod actions have re-affirmed that, while differing in authorization, ordained and licensed ministry are forms of the same order of ministry. This view of the one office differs from the traditional Reformed understanding, where people are ordained into the three orders of minister, elder, and deacon, and from the Episcopal and Roman Catholic three orders of bishop, priest, and deacon.

<sup>29</sup> *United Church of Christ Constitution*, paragraph 23.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1992), pp. 185-186.

making use of the diverse gifts of ritual, art, story and song from many traditions to meet the deep needs of God's people in service to the gospel.

Ministry in the local church requires commitment to equipping and enabling all people for the ministries to which they are called as well as strong vision and the willingness to *appropriately* claim one's own authority. The Church has often struggled in a supposed dichotomy between styles emphasizing pastoral authority and those emphasizing "enabling"; as I think about my own approach to ministry, I believe both have necessary strengths when used appropriately. Without vision and leadership, the church becomes stagnant, and without enabling and the sharing of power, we idolize ourselves and deny the voice and gifts God has given all people. Ultimately, we must in all things work for the enabling of the gathering, faith, and discipleship that constitute the Church, using the tools and gifts we have been given for this mission.

As I look ahead at my time in ministry, I hesitate to assume I know where the entire path will lead. At this point in the journey, I am strongly committed to local church ministry and hope to bring my gifts to bear in the parish for many years. Some of my mentors have commented on my strong academic gifts and, while affirming my call to the local church at this time, encourage me to remain open to the possibilities of further study at some point in the future. I am certainly open to this possibility, or perhaps some other, and pray that I will have the discerning mind at the appropriate time to lead me where God may be calling.

I am excited for the future of the United Church of Christ and my own ministry within it. In attending a United Church of Christ seminary, being active in the life of a number of local congregations, participating at association and conference levels, being a member of the Coalition, and attending two General Synods, my primary faith and ministry identity has been formed and nurtured profoundly by the United Church of Christ. I appreciate the witness of other traditions, particularly some of our closer denominational kin, but also believe that we have a unique witness to offer. As a "uniting and united" church, we have a particular calling to reach out to the Church universal in openness but also self-authenticity—ministry for which I feel an affinity through my exposure to other traditions and my relationships with colleagues and classmates in other churches. Even as I stand firm in my own faith perspective, I am shaped by and committed to the United Church of Christ's traditions of theological inquiry and freedom of conscience. Finally, I treasure the ways that the United Church of Christ attempts to live out the unity between the faith

of the gospel and the justice-seeking discipleship of Christ. I pray that God may continue to empower me—and us all—to live into both of these callings.

SOLI DEO GLORIA