

A Theology of Questions

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Why questions?

Questions drive my theology; they energize me and give me shape and direction. They under gird the two most important parts of my current professional identity, that of theologian and that of pastoral caregiver. Theologians thrive on questions; they are energized by the mysteries, driven to devour, explore, and explain. They seek answers to questions like “How does a loving God permit economic injustice?” and “What are the ramifications of an incarnational theology?” and they inevitably find more questions. This game of ideas captivates me: as a former English major and linguistics minor, I cannot help but get caught up in language and ponder the imponderables.

At the same time, I have little use for armchair theologians who will not immerse themselves in the experience of theology. Pastoral caregivers live questions. They dance on the line between the unthinkable and the unanswerable. They go toe-to-toe with questions like “Why did my baby die?” and “Where is God in the midst of my pain?” and they too find more questions. This reality of existence captivates me as well: as a human being, I cannot help but plunge into the stories of my fellow questioners.

Two other sources inform my attachment to questions. The first comes from the rabbinic tradition of interpreting Scripture, which says that the best interpretation opens up the most possibilities. In other words, the best question spawns more questions. The second comes from the context of pastoral counseling, where Christie Cozad Neuger defines “The Beautiful Question” as “the question to which no one knows the answer.”¹ The counselor is not prompting the counselee with a question she could answer herself, and the counselee cannot regurgitate a pat answer from previous interviews. The two parties must explore the question and the answer together. Presuming the value of diverse interpretations and unique experiences, I seek to pose open questions that have multiple layers and answers.

There is tremendous power in asking questions, an agential nature that implies both the right to question and the right to an answer. For me it has a great deal to do with claiming my theological power and finding a theological voice. Before attending United I struggled against my call; seminary seemed too far outside my realm of the understandable and containable. In the beginning of my studies at United I was reluctant to engage the texts or issues too deeply—words like *sin* and *eschatology* were interesting in an intellectual way but I didn’t grapple with

them in my heart. I participated in class conversations but kept myself at an internal arm's distance. The more I read, though, the less I was able to keep myself separate from the issues and the words and the real-life implications of theology. *Sin* became not just a moralistic stick with which to beat people, but a way to describe brokenness in the world; *eschatology* became less a vague academic term than a real question about how we live simultaneously in the not-yet and the now.

This paper, then, represents my best, most intentional, and most prolonged engagement with my own theology thus far. It looks at my personal roots and the roots of the United Church of Christ, braiding together the threads of tradition and experience. It dwells on the intersections of stories: Christianity's, the United Church of Christ, and my own. I have immersed myself in the questions, struggled with the issues, and forged my theology in the crucible of myself.

Where did the questions start?

This question asks me to pull together my earliest memories of God's presence, which took shape at Midland United Church of Christ. The congregation nourished and taught me through children's choir, youth group, confirmation, mission trips, Sunday school, and its ministry of presence. From them I learned incarnational theology, or how to make faith a verb instead of a noun. Midland UCC, as one member put it, "focuses much more on acting out our faith than shouting it from the rooftops." Thus they nurtured my call by building a firm foundation of trust, faith, and God's presence.

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Listening to the call and taking the initiative to attend United Theological Seminary were only the first steps, of course. The real work came in seminary from my interactions with colleagues, professors, friends, and other theologians, and it was not the work I expected. In fact, it was not what the curriculum anticipated either. Many of my friends and colleagues started seminary with a mature, working faith, so the confrontation with academia produced awkward or painful results. Reading the Creation stories as multi-vocal works that emerged over long periods of time can threaten someone's heart-felt grasp. The curriculum at United anticipates this and strives to make that transition easier.

I on the other hand, was only too willing to embrace the academic answers. I had a liberal arts education, a

skeptical acquiescence to my call, and several years of separation from the church. Moreover, at the beginning of that separation I'd only had an adolescent faith—well-grounded, yes, but still in the process of maturing. Consequently, the curriculum initially served to reinforce my head-centered approach to theology. To United's unending credit, however, I could not stay there. Eventually I had to look at myself below the neck and integrate. It wasn't that I'd had no experiences of God, it was that I didn't have a framework for fitting together my head and heart. My classes and experiences at United gave me multiple examples of integrated theologies and encouraged me to find my own place of integration.

All of my professors helped move me from my starting framework to a more developed theology, but two in particular stand out. Christie Cozad Neuger, professor of pastoral care and counseling, gave me practical tools for working in pastoral situations. Her personal integrity and her deep commitment to people's stories showed me how to respectfully meet others where they are and walk with them in a theological context. Carolyn Pressler, my Older Testament professor, gave me a zest for Scripture and insisted on its application in real-life settings. Her passion for academic study, coupled with her deep and joyful faith, showed me how to listen with my head *and* my heart. These two dimensions of my identity, pastoral caregiver and theologian, persist today and allow me to move with confidence into larger theological questions.

Where is God?

I begin with God's location instead of God's nature because I come from an intellectual, economically privileged culture that sees itself as free to choose between the existence and non-existence of God. First, then, I affirm the presence of God, but I recognize that I cannot have a meaningful discussion about God's action or presence in the world until God has a context. I have also found that in the midst of crisis even the most inertia-bound agnostics will ask questions about God, but I frequently disagree with their questions and responses.

In the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands and destroyed so much, the questions posed about God frequently ran along the lines of: How could God do that?, or Were the people being punished? These questions betray as much about the askers as mine do. They demonstrate belief in a God who punishes through seemingly arbitrary natural events, who exacts retribution from humankind when they stray from an appointed path. They also serve to elevate the askers above the sufferers: since the askers did not suffer, they must be blameless. These seem both harmful and dangerous to our relationship with God and humankind. I do agree with them on one point, though. God was, and is, intimately involved with the events of the world. I don't

place God as the agent behind the tsunami, however. I place God in the midst of the suffering Creation, struggling with it to make meaning and new life out of destruction and devastation.

This God is consonant with the God found in process theology. This God is located in the relationship and possibility of every moment and every entity, which leads to an image of transcendent immanence. If God is relational then God must be connected to and involved with every rock, tear, hibiscus, newborn, and farmer in the world, working immanently with each according to its potential. In order for God to relate to each of them, though, God must also transcend their individual boundaries. For me, then, God is in, around, through, above, below, in front of, and behind all of Creation. God is inextricably knit up into the stuff of the world without being exhausted by it.

Where is humankind?

Now that I have located God, I want to place humankind on the map and begin to talk about the particular aspects of humans. The God of process theology works with the world as it is, so I must know at least part of that world before I can talk about what God does in it. To do that, however, I need to explain why I privilege humanity over other parts of Creation in my paper. Theologians like Sallie McFague have mounted profound and important arguments for de-centering humans from the discussion and putting them back into the context of the whole world. Indeed, in the Western world, the tradition of humans' dominion over the earth has produced a radical alienation from and devastation of our fellow creatures. At the same time, humankind is the species I am the most acquainted with and one that has a particular relationship with God. I write about humans, then, while placing us in the midst of a relational Creation and taking seriously both our interconnectedness and our unique position in relationship to God.

What does it mean to be human?

This question begins to address the particularities of humankind in contrast to God and the rest of Creation. One of the most helpful theologians I've found in my studies is Friedrich Schleiermacher, who wrote about pairs of opposites in what he called a "minimum-maximum ontology." He said that these pairs are not so much diametrically opposed as they are on a continuum. We then place ourselves along that continuum in relationship to either extreme. In that sense, some of each exists in the other—even if the existence is only potential. In other words, nothing is "pure" or singular, because it can always be defined in terms of something else.

The modernist drive to isolate elements into a "pure" or "natural" state seems unhelpful, since all Creation exists in beautiful, messy convergence, in unremitting alloy with all the elements around it. Restricting our selves to one definition of anything denies the rest of the self, since one description can only take up such a small

percentage of a person. I aim for wholeness, and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

The messiness of individual humans can be useful in thinking about the messiness of humanity as a whole. The total of humankind represents unimaginable diversity, diversity that is sometimes harmonious and more often existentially conflicting. At the same time, humans do not exist in a vacuum; as I mentioned before, we are profoundly relational creatures. Western culture, and American culture in particular, places a great deal of emphasis on the individual, but this largely serves to break the world into pieces and does not promote wholeness. I do find it helpful to talk about the agential nature of humans, though, since I believe in free will. Being human, then, means combining the conflicted parts of the self and trying to live in relationship with the rest of the world, which will likely conflict with different parts of the individual.

How does God relate to Creation in general and humankind in particular?

This question refers to the existential and ontological nature of God. In giving it primacy over God's action in the world I seek to lay further groundwork against which God's movement will show. For me, God is first and foremost a relational being. Eleazar Fernandez says that "the very essence of God is 'to be in relation.' God is the term we use to refer to that source and power of life-giving relation. God is the web of life-giving relation."² In a more concrete manner, Sallie McFague uses the word *embodied* to denote the relationship of God to the world; she suggests the metaphor of the world as God's body and God as "the spirit that is the breath, the life, of the universe."³

The God of process theology ties together this relationality and spiritedness by positing God as Creativity, Wisdom, Power, and Presence. This God contains all that the world is, ever has been, and ever could be. The two natures of God, consequent and primordial, take on two different aspects of God's being. The consequent nature changes with the world, since all events that have concresced and *happened* are enfolded and incorporated into God here. This part takes the world as it is and alters itself, which some may see as a threat to God's immutability. I am not threatened by this, since I have no use for a God who cannot change and react. I do, however see a need for a lasting, faithful, complete aspect to God. The primordial nature contains all possibilities for the world and in this way embodies the wholeness that humankind strives for, the dynamic perfection that gets translated so messily in our world. As I will discuss later, however, God is not neutral; this is no complacent vessel that merely holds Creation impassively. God interacts with Creation in general and humankind in particular by offering the possibility for healing and wholeness in every context.

How does humankind relate to God?

In asking this I want to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of the Divine-human relationship. Though we are still talking about an existential piece rather than an active one, it can be viewed from more than one perspective and this question addresses the plurality of views here. At the core of humans' relationship to God, I affirm the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. To be made in the image of God implies a relationship. Fernandez writes, "If being in relation constitutes who we are, then it is also what makes us truly an image of God. Relationship is the primary lens through which we interpret the notion of the image of God."⁴

If we take it as seriously as I intend it, the relationship raises another issue that Western culture frequently struggles with: dependence. For us to be in such deep existential relationship with God means that we are utterly dependent on God. In our culture, however, we strive for independence, to be able to do it on our own. To say that we are dependent on God conjures up images of helplessness and disability, two qualities we fear deeply. The word doesn't have to create such strong reactions, though, since I intend it as part of the definition of humanity. We depend on God because we *cannot exist* without God. No God, no humankind. Each is integral to the definition of the other.

What does God do?

This question betrays my position that God is an active presence in the world; I do not subscribe to the deist model of the Great Clockmaker who set the world in motion and left it to its own devices. It also implies that God is a force in the universe that can be distinguished from other impulses, forces, or actions.

In James Cone's compelling essay, "God is Black," he asserts that God dwells in particularity and takes sides, always coming down on behalf of the oppressed. This God cannot exist in gray neutrality, this God requires both love *and* wrath to provide contrast and produce action. An inert, benevolent, status quo God is useless precisely because that God is either powerless or interested only in maintaining rather than creating, resolving, and healing.

As a liberation theologian, Cone understandably talks about people in either-or terms: they're either oppressors or oppressed. I cannot take such a dualistic stance, though, because I see elements of everyone that cross over and back from both sides of oppression. It seems more helpful to talk about people in all their messiness. If I drive my car to a job at a non-profit agency that seeks equal protection under the law for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered) persons, I am not only seeking just relationships within society, I am also purchasing gas at artificially low prices and emitting toxic fumes into an already fragile environment. As I see it, God's divine wrath can blast the parts of me that contribute to the fragmentation of Creation without having to incinerate the whole of my being.

God's holy fire and righteous wrath are only part of God's nature, though. As I mentioned, no one stands in a pure position: we all have pieces of ourselves that could stand to be incinerated in a blast from the divine forge, but we equally have parts that need healing and reconciliation, especially after passing through ordeals and traumas. Here again I find the God of process theology useful, since this God always contains the possibility for new life. In order to take seriously the notion of free will I have to believe in a God who doesn't bend every detail to fit a Divine Plan, but who is aware of said details and works with the world as it is. This God allows humankind the freedom to make choices, but draws us into richness and wholeness.

In light of this God and this God's relationship with humanity, what are sin and evil?

In asking this question I acknowledge the presence and reality of sin and evil in our world. God may draw us toward wholeness, but we are not there yet. To be true to my previously expressed theological points I must allow for free will, and this frequently results in brokenness and pain. I also make a distinction between the two, drawing on Mary Potter Engel's helpful essay "Evil, Sin, and Violation of the Vulnerable." She writes,

Evil ... is systemic. It is not superpersonal forces but structures of oppression, patterns larger than individuals and groups, ... social, political, and economic arrangements that distort our perceptions or restrain our abilities to such an extent that we find it difficult to choose or do good. By contrast, sin refers to those free, discrete acts of responsible individuals that create or reinforce these structures of oppression. Neither causes the other; evil and sin are mutually reinforcing.⁵

Engel also notes the difference in emphasis in talking about sin and evil: those who have more power, those who are free enough to augment or perpetuate evil, these are the people to whom we must speak of sin. Those who are affected by evil but who have relatively little (or no) power to affect the structures, these are the people to whom we must speak of evil. The context determines whether we indict or liberate.

With this distinction in mind, I can move into a fuller discussion. The traditional doctrine of sin has posited it as a rebellion against God and an alienation from the divine, but Marjorie Suchocki and Eleazar Fernandez have made powerful arguments for a reformation of the doctrine as such. They cite the inherent dangers in the old definition, including that it "levels all distinctions between sins ... makes the direct victims of sin invisible ... promotes the devaluation of creation and encourages its exploitation ... [and] isolates as well as elevates the individual from the rest of creation."⁶ The old way makes for a vague, contrast-less, abstract notion committed against an absent, transcendent deity, rather than revealing the concrete, painful realities of sin and its systemic sister evil. It defines the relationship between God and humanity as a one-to-one relationship, wherein one is accountable only to God, not others in the web of life. I agree with Suchocki and Fernandez that this is not only unhelpful, it is

destructive and paralyzing. We need a new definition—or perhaps a new perspective.

The best way I've found to do this is to change from an idea of individual sin to collective evil and then examine individuals' responsibility to that system. Sallie McFague's metaphor of the world as God's body allows for some consonance between the old doctrine and its reformation. If we truly see God in all the world around us, we cannot ignore the consequences of our actions, because we cannot ignore the elements of God's body. We will need to take very seriously the ways we construct institutions and relationships, because when we damage them we damage God's very self and consequently our own selves.

Damage comes in a variety of forms, but can be generalized as wrong relationship. It is easiest when we pretend (or actually believe) that we are not harming anything or are in fact doing good. This distortion of truth causes damage. Betrayal of trust, misuse of power, apathy, inertia, and violence also fall into this category, depending on the context. One advantage to reconstructing the doctrines of sin and evil is that we are released from some of the old perspective's paralysis. We *can* claim power to reject the structures, and most importantly, we can do it *together*.

How do we and God respond to sin and evil?

Having examined the reality of sin and evil I now turn to salvation and redemption, two traditional terms for mending the damage done by sinful individuals and evil structures. I assume here that *both* God and humanity have responded and continue to respond; we are neither off the hook nor entirely responsible for the healing process, and must keep on striving for wholeness. This also starts to get into the question of theodicy, since I choose to include God's response as well.

God does not respond to sin or evil by reaching into the world and changing the structures in manners outside the natural order; this much we know by common experience. In fact, this expectation or metaphor comes from an anthropomorphic view of God which seems as unrealistic as it is unhelpful. If God is the spirit that pervades and enlivens the world, as I believe, then God responds to sin and evil in two ways: first, by grieving the pain and loss with each creature as the creature itself experiences it, and second, by offering the possibility for healing in every moment. Depending on the weight of past decisions in each occasion, the possibility may be proportionally small—but it is always there.

Humankind, therefore, responds to sin and evil by making individual and collective decisions to listen to and act on God's initial aim, or the possibility for healing. In my opinion, Christianity has been far too focused on sin and salvation as individual processes and ends, and we need to start examining institutional evil and collective

salvation. This can only happen when we begin to take seriously the *relatedness* of the world, which happens when we look to communities and societies rather than fracturing ourselves further into individual selves. *Salvation* and *redemption* are healing words, words that seek wholeness and the alleviation of pain and loss. Contextualizing these words in the world as God's body means that we start to take seriously the web of life that is the fabric of existence. Once we can look at that and see it more clearly, we will also see the rips and tears more clearly and begin the work of mending them.

Who is Jesus the Christ?

I phrase this question particularly to show the difference between *Jesus* and *the Christ*. In my theology, *Jesus* is the historical man of Nazareth who lived, taught, healed, and was crucified by the political authorities of his day. *The Christ* is the enduring Spirit of God first incarnated in Jesus that has continued to have power through the centuries. They are linked in the person of Jesus and may be teased out to answer different questions. In traditional language, perhaps, *Jesus* would refer to his human nature and *the Christ* would refer to the divine nature, though the latter is not limited to that first incarnation.

Marjorie Suchocki places Jesus the Christ in the context of process theology by defining Jesus (the human) as completely aligned with and open to God's initial aims: "God's full communication of the divine nature in the initial aim would have to be met by a full acceptance of that nature in the subjective aim of the finite occasion."⁷ This acceptance could not occur just once, either, but continuously over Jesus' life and ministry. "There would have to be an assent to incarnation in every moment of existence."⁸ The Christ is then the incarnational piece.

I don't choose to spend much time on the divine-human debate, since it falls out fairly neatly for me, but I do find John Polkinghorne's physics metaphor useful. In *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity*, he draws a parallel between Jesus and light. We cannot tell whether light is a particle or a wave, because it behaves in some particle-type ways and some wave-type ways, depending on the experiment and what behavior the scientist is looking for. It's the same with Jesus, as Barbara Brown Taylor sums up Polkinghorne's argument: "Ask a human-like question and you get a human-like answer. Ask a divine-like question and you get a divine-like answer. As different as they may be, both languages are necessary. The deep truth is not either but both."⁹ My next questions, therefore, are designed to elicit either "human-like" or "divine-like" answers.

How was Jesus efficacious? Does he have any power now?

Both of these questions betray my bias of Jesus' historicity and my desire to let him remain an historical

figure rather than forcing him to fit contemporary times. They also assume, however, that he was a significant figure in the past and may continue to be today. For me, the most important part of Jesus' life was just that: his *life*. In his context, he worked against the systemic powers of evil and oppression to liberate the poor and oppressed. He taught, he healed, and most importantly, he gathered community around him. Without his community and its continuity in history, he would not be any kind of figure today; instead, he is a person with stories that persist today. Therefore, the fact that he lived and breathed and made a unique difference in other people's lives is of utmost significance to my theology.

Many Christian theologians, however, place the locus on his death and resurrection. The biggest problem I have with tradition's emphasis on atonement is that it consequently places emphasis on Jesus' death as his most important function, as if he were born to die and God planned it. Since the God of my theology does not foreordain anything, this becomes useless in my theology. I am entirely willing to find meaning in Jesus' death *after* the fact, but I will not say that he was meant to die. As Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock write, "We will not say we are grateful or glad that someone was tortured and murdered on our behalf."¹⁰ This does not mean I find the resurrection useless, but I place its importance in questions about the Christ, not Jesus.

I still give Jesus importance today in three ways, however. First, in the fact that his life and death actually occurred in history. This places him in the consequent nature of God and allows for possibilities that would not be present without his existence. Second, his life and ministry have been preserved (albeit in a filtered way) in the Scriptures, giving us a kind of access to him as a human. This record gives those of us removed in time and space a way to remember him, and the memory is vital to the Christian community because it is the memory of God's incarnational nature. Finally, Jesus' life and ministry inspired the Church, a whole new web of relationships that seek to follow his teachings and patterns of relationship.

How is the Christ efficacious today?

Without the enduring power of the Christ, however, Jesus' efficacy would be severely limited. In fact, it is only too likely that though his existence would be preserved in the memory of God, it would have long since perished from the collective human memory. The Christ thus offers an active, eternal aspect to Jesus, since even memory is not enough. As Vitor Westhelle writes, "Memory is a road that brings you to a river. Although necessary and indispensable, it is not enough to enable you to build a bridge or a boat to cross the river."¹¹ For me, then, the Christ is efficacious in two important ways: first, in the resurrection, and second, in the creation and preservation of the Church.

In the resurrection, Jesus the Christ moved beyond a simply historical figure to an historical figure with a lasting impact on the world. Resurrection becomes a healing tool in the process of redemption, since it affirms a God who is larger than death and who transcends our finite natures. Resurrection speaks to a continuation of life, in a form that is both meaningful and *recognizable* to us. Without it, we either have a messiah who was thwarted by the powers of the world or a God who extends promises of life but cannot follow to the areas of deepest pain. The resurrection neither ignores the reality of death nor allows us to become stuck there. The resurrected Christ offers us possibilities for life after death, which is a powerful metaphor for those grieving the physical death of loved ones or the metaphorical deaths we suffer daily.

As the Spirit that incarnation Jesus' particular human life, the Christ is also responsible for the Church that continued after Jesus' physical death. Jesus the human gathered and fostered community, and the Christ kept that community alive and flourishing in the absence of the original leader. For me, the Christ is very similar to the Holy Spirit (the Spirit who inflamed those present at the first Pentecost), but is a more particular version of it. The Holy Spirit pervades and sustains all life; the Christ manifests itself in specific contexts in specific ways. The Church as an institution is the best and most likely context for its manifestation, since it can be the most open to it, but I will not limit God by presuming to prescribe the conditions for incarnation.

What can the Church be?

I begin with the catholic Church, since I do believe that we are one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The United Church of Christ, to which I will turn in a moment, is a specific manifestation of the Church as a whole. I also deliberately phrase this question hypothetically, because the physical manifestation of the Church frequently falls short of its potential. Like all human constructions, it is flawed, and like many institutions, it participates in and perpetuates evil in the world. It does not have to be so, however, and so I focus on the ways in which it can promote healing and wholeness.

The Church's most powerful mandate, I believe, is to be a healthy community working to manifest God's presence in the world. This may sound simple, but is in fact one of the most difficult goals possible. Healthy communities, for me, are diverse, flexible, and nurturing; they maintain a balance between the needs of individuals and the needs of the group. Churches in particular have a mission to carry out God's love and justice. That involves reading the context of the specific environment in which the specific church finds itself situated and working to be a

healing presence in that environment. Just as the Christ became embodied in a particular human context, so too the Church must seek to work in *this* time and space.

How does the United Church of Christ live into this mandate?

I turn now to the United Church of Christ, since it is through this denomination that I seek ordination. This is also the denomination that has nurtured my faith and supported my call, and I believe it has a unique way of listening for God's will and embodying God's intention. We cannot claim to do everything, but we do have gifts that make us special. Our ears are particularly tuned to hear God's calls to unity and justice. *Justice* means that we seek to redress inequities; *unity* means that we seek to heal brokenness.

These commitments are not modern inventions; they are firmly embedded in our history. One root of unity comes from our ancestors in the Christian Church, who eschewed denominationalism by affirming their identity as Christians rather than any other title. They also brought together groups of people from distant geographical areas through their theological journals. As I will discuss below, our pietistic heritage, largely from the German Evangelicals, allows us to come together as diverse people with freedom of conscience. Of course, the call to unity did not begin with our most recent predecessors: we draw our motto, "That they may all be one," from the Gospel of John.

In the same way, our commitment to social justice dates back as far as the earliest Hebrew Scriptures. Torah sets out clear laws for righteous societies; Jesus and his followers interpreted and fulfilled those laws in their time; we too seek justice in the world around us. In the UCC specifically, we proudly claim the American Missionary Association as part of our historical work. The AMA most famously worked to free the slaves from the *Amistad* who had tried to regain control of their lives and found themselves crushed in the wheels of an oppressive, evil system. The AMA's work did not end with the famous *Amistad* case, it continued long after to found schools and dismantle racism's barriers. The Deaconess movement on the German Evangelical side made health care accessible and affordable.

Our response to God's call does not end in the past, nor is our social justice limited to humanistic activism. As a denomination we continue to discern and act on God's word in the present, grounding ourselves thoroughly in Scripture and experience, seeking ways to open ourselves and engage our wider contexts with integrity. We belong to the World Council of Churches and participated in creating the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM) document, a huge ecumenical undertaking. Despite the current political climate, the 2005 General Synod passed a resolution in support of equal marriage rights. The decisions and actions to unite with fellow Christians or to speak

up on behalf of people with less political power allow us to make similar decisions now; in process theology terms, we continue to stay open to God's aim for our highest good.

But isn't this the church where you can believe anything you want?

This question comes from a discussion and assignment in my UCC History class; it's an important question, I believe, because it gives us an opportunity to claim an identity as a denomination and define both our beliefs and our positions. The quick answer is "No, you can't believe anything you want in the UCC." The *true* answer is "No, and..." While I affirm the diversity of our denomination and our historical commitment to freedom of conscience, we do have a common set of values, both as a denomination and as part of the larger Christian tradition.

As William C. Placher notes, "Tradition ... is an ongoing *argument*."¹² In that sense the United Church of Christ engages the Christian tradition with zestful integrity. Another metaphor for tradition is that of a multi-fibered braid. We locate our threads of agreement in the tradition and braid them into a theology, incorporating new strands as we find them or they are lifted up by the Spirit.

So what are these common threads, then? As Christians, we recognize Jesus the Christ as the head of the church and the Trinity as part of the nature of God. We locate ourselves in the middle of the braid of tradition by affirming the creeds and other historical statements of faith. We draw on the common stories and writings of the Bible, giving them a central place in worship and discernment. We believe in a God whose Creation is both good and still unfolding. We often take a grain of historical criticism with our devotional reading of the Bible, but we see this as enriching and enlivening our faith rather than pulling us away from it. We practice the sacraments of baptism and communion. We are drawn to the social justice aspect of the Scriptures and look for ways to live out that mandate in contemporary times.

One of the beautiful parts of the UCC, though, is that we have all of that *and*. We are in many ways a postmodern church, lending credence to a multiplicity of voices and lifting up some specific ones who have been oppressed. Postmodernism can stagnate in relativism, though, and the UCC is not stagnating. We live and work and act out our ecclesiastical call in the middle of conversation, pressing onward without getting too bogged down in the process—or at least we strive for that.

We are granted that grace by a tradition of freedom of conscience, which allows for diversity of thought and theology within community. This tradition stems especially from the German Evangelicals, whose pietistic roots and history of religious persecution gave them a unique perspective on harmony and consensus. Consensus doesn't

have to mean homogeneity or conformity; it is a spirit of willing engagement that allows us to transcend differences to accomplish greater things. The UCC continues in this vein by allowing delegates to speak on the floor of General Synod and by discerning the will of the Spirit before voting, especially on controversial issues like the Resolution on Marriage Equality. Our polity also requires each local congregation to make decisions for itself

People can believe *many* things in the UCC, as long as they work with the community in the general spirit and with the braid that defines it. Neither a single church's nor a single denomination's braid will stand any test. In allowing ourselves to be braided together we find community and commonality, and ultimately strengthen the entire braid. We must use others' strands and offer them ours, since it is only in relationship that we can move in the process toward healing and wholeness.

Given all this, where are we headed?

I've articulated a number of theological issues dealing with the past and present, but that still leaves the future. This question is the most open and vague I've asked so far, because the future is such a big unknown. It deals with eschatology, the catch-all phrase for unresolved questions in our realm of existence, questions with which all cultures and religions struggle. I have no more clear answers than anyone else, but as my header question indicates, I can take pieces of the theology I've already laid out and fit more affirmations into it.

The discoveries of modern physics indicate that the universe will likely end in one of two ways: either in a gradual expansion that will cool down to inhospitably low temperatures or in a Big Crunch that will heat up to inhospitably high temperatures. Neither of these is compatible with the Christian assertion of the ultimate preservation and continuation of life, unless one counts some fundamentalists' belief in a destructive apocalypse where the physical realm as we know it must come to a cataclysmic end before God begins the new creation. None of this will take place in any of our lifetimes, but the two claims do seem to be antagonistically opposite. For those like me who seek integration and conversation between science and theology, however, there are points of common ground. For instance, no one knows any of this for sure. All models, whether scientific or theological are just that: models. Ideas, if you will.

Next, and most importantly for my understanding, comes the idea of process and evolution. Not evolution in the strict scientific sense of the word, but evolution as in the unfolding and dynamic movement of the world. It is difficult for me to divorce the notions of *process* and *progress*, since the latter is so powerfully present in the modernist viewpoint of the Western world. *Progress* became a theological term in the eighteenth century, as William C. Placher notes: "After all, missionaries were spreading Christianity around the world, and humankind

seemed to be getting beyond the worst sins of barbarism. If things kept getting better, eventually the kind of world God wanted would gradually emerge.”¹³ World events of the twentieth century proved the naïve certainty of such beliefs gravely wrong, but our culture still holds on to the notion of progress and improvement. As a postmodernist, I want to affirm the notion of *process*, though. *Process* can imply moving ahead and getting better, but does not have the inevitability that *progress* does. For me, the former implies a great deal more responsibility on the part of humankind than the fatalistic latter term: we must engage intentionally and with integrity in our processes in order to progress in a fashion that is life-giving and healing.

This deals with eschatology and end times because I believe that our world is already in the process of moving into God’s realized realm. The greater the levels of complexity, the more delighted the creator; the more developed the potential, the more possibilities emerge. Thus the end times for me do not come after we cross a mystical threshold and drastically change realities. We live in liminality.¹⁴ As John Polkinghorne writes about heaven, “What awaits us is the unending exploration of the inexhaustible riches of God, a pilgrim journey into deepest reality that will always be thrilling and life-enhancing.”¹⁵ This process is both exciting and dangerous, because the possibilities that develop are not always life-enhancing. Still, as we live forward into Creation, seeking right relationship with the body of God, the process will continue.

Where are the questions leading?

All these questions must ultimately be able to serve me professionally, though. They cannot remain lodged in the realm of ideas, or they will never serve the bone-deep needs of real people with real lives. Pastors, as it happens, are uniquely equipped to dwell in questions. Ethicist Sondra Ely Wheeler speaks of ministers “not as those who have mastered the ‘answers’ to uncertainty and conflict and grief, but as those who are able to withstand the questions, and to create the space in which Christians can face the questions.”¹⁶ In allowing space for questions rather than rushing through the process of change to arrive at an answer, ministers create a place for God.

Thus I see my pastoral identity as that of question-asker and question-joiner. Whether in the context of a hospital room as a chaplain or in a parish as a pastor, I can bring my questions to others’ stories and join them in the questions they already have. This grants me pastoral authority to pose questions to those in destructive relationships, either from a bedside chair or a pulpit; it also gives me permission to say, “I don’t know, but I’d like to wonder with you.” I don’t have all the answers. I do have some ideas, though, ideas I will continue to braid together with others in the process of living out my story.

- ¹ Class notes. *Introduction to Narrative Counseling*. United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Fall 2004.
- ² Fernandez, Eleazar. *Reimagining the Human*. Chalice Press: St. Louis, Missouri. 2004. p. 188.
- ³ McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis. 1993. p. 144.
- ⁴ Fernandez, p. 188.
- ⁵ Engel, Mary Potter. "Evil, Sin, and Violation of the Vulnerable." *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, editors. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY. 2004. p. 162.
- ⁶ Suchocki's argument, as cited and rephrased by Fernandez. *Reimagining*. p. 56.
- ⁷ Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt. *God-Christ-Church*. Crossroad: New York. 1989. p. 91.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Theology*. Cowley Publications: Boston, Massachusetts. 2000. p. 70.
- ¹⁰ Brock, Rita Nakashima and Parker, Rebecca Ann. *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Beacon Press: Boston. 2001. p. 49.
- ¹¹ Westhelle, Vitor. "Creation Motifs in the Search for a Vital Space." *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, editors. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY. 2004. p. 154.
- ¹² Placher, p. 6.
- ¹³ Placher, William C. "Where are we going?" *Essentials of Christian Theology*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky. 2003. p. 333.
- ¹⁴ Liminality deals with the concept of in-between times. It comes from the Latin *limen* (threshold) and was first used in anthropologic circles to describe of rites of passage.
- ¹⁵ Polkinghorne, John. *The God of Hope and the End of the World*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London. 2002. p. 135.
- ¹⁶ Wheeler, Sondra Ely. *Stewards of Life: Bioethics and Pastoral Care*. Abingdon Press: Nashville. 1996. p. 15.