

# ORDINATION PAPER

For

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## **Part I: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

*(The purpose of part I of the ordination paper is to provide a way for the student to share her present grasp and understanding of the teaching and traditions of the Christian Church down through the ages and to relate this to her own theological perspective.)*

My own theology, as any particular theology, has been significantly shaped by the contexts, experiences, and relationships which have also molded my very identity. As these factors are constantly in flux – ever changing and growing, adding new layers and dimensions – so is my theology. It is not a static, fixed, dogmatic system. Nor is it an ephemeral vapor, without substance or consistency. Rather, it is something concrete, but ever unfolding.

Metaphorically, I see my faith and my theology much like a garden. There are roots, perhaps best representative of **Tradition**. They go down deep and provide for nourishment and continuation of the plants. However, the roots and plants cannot produce fruit in and of themselves. They are significantly affected by the soil in which they grow. I liken the soil to **Community**. In addition to needing healthy soil and a strong root system, plants need sunlight and pure water to grow. Likewise, my faith and theology, along with their ability to sprout, are strongly influenced by **Experience**. Each season brings a different stage of growth, different blooms and harvests, and different challenges. My understanding of my task as a theologian, and as a gardener, is to allow and encourage the growing process and cycles while attempting to minimize the threat of factors that inhibit growth.

My goal in this paper is to expand upon these themes as a response to the ordination questions, and to relate them to my current theological understandings. Part I will express my understandings of theology and Church history as *Tradition*, Part II will

discuss UCC polity through the lens of *Community*, and Part III will outline my spiritual journey, as I understand it, in terms of *Experience*.

My favorite definition of “Theology” is “faith seeking understanding.” As I see it, this is what the Church has been about from the very beginning. Where understanding has been discovered, it has been passed down. This is the basis for **Tradition**. We have received Scripture, commentaries, creeds, doctrines, tomes, orders for worship and other services, even particular theologies, all because somebody somewhere found them to be illuminating of these mysteries we call *God* and *faith*, and felt that they were worthy of being shared with others. Certainly, the ways in which they were shared varied greatly. Some spread like wildfire, quickly and voluntarily, while others were forcibly instituted by political governments or Church authorities with severe consequences (including death, physical and social exile, and others!) for non-adherents. But, despite the violent underbelly of its history, at its best the Church has attempted to preserve and develop meaningful tools and practices for understanding God and faith throughout the ages.

This is true for all denominations, creeds, and traditions. However, my own theological journey of meaning making has brought me to explore, join, and come to love the United Church of Christ, which I now consider my theological home. The theology expressed in the United Church of Christ is open, diverse, united, and unique. One manifestation of this living paradox is found in the U.C.C. Statement of Faith, which succinctly and beautifully expresses much of my own understandings of faith. It is a document rich in history, full of theology, and pregnant with opportunities for a wide variety of interpretations. Personally, I like it as much for what it *doesn't* say, as for what

it does.

The U.C.C. Statement of Faith begins by asserting belief in the understanding of God that we have inherited from generations before us as Eternal – that is never ending, infinite, beyond measure. This comes out of the understanding that God does not die, will not end. God’s very existence defies our rational capacities. God is beyond us, greater than us, different from us. But it doesn’t end there. God is not *just* Eternal. We believe in God, the Eternal *Spirit* — a Presence like us, but yet also unlike us. Recognizable, but not easily definable. Breath, Wind, Being, and so much more. Infinite Mystery.

Given this understanding of the Divine, the age-old question arises, “How do we know God?” The answer, as given in the Statement of Faith, is through God’s deeds – creation of the worlds, creation of humanity in the likeness of God, holy love, righteous judgment, reconciliation of the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – man of Nazareth and son of God, covenant, forgiveness, grace, justice, presence, and eternal life. Each one of these “deeds” comes to us through the filtration process of declaration, debate, schisms, councils, and finally Church consensus and formal acceptance throughout the centuries. Each one is open to interpretation by individuals, congregations, and the Church itself.

These are the roots of Tradition. They are my roots, and they go deep in my understandings of God. I do believe that “*God calls worlds into beings, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.*” (And I affirm the need and beauty of expressing this belief through inclusive language!) In my explorations and understandings of this, I am deeply influenced by the work of Matthew Fox and his understanding of Original Blessing – God saw what had been created and

declared it and us GOOD from the start! I believe that creation did occur as a result of God's holy love – for us, for all the world, and for each creature in it. I also believe God calls humankind to be stewards of this good creation. Responding to this call, I believe, is one of the “*ways of life*” set before us. We are called to see the original blessedness in each person, including ourselves.

There are many additional influences which inform my understandings of God and of Creation. In these various branches of my Traditional roots, I have discovered a love for the environment, a celebration of Sabbath, an abiding respect for the intrinsic value in all forms of life, and an appreciation for the power of God. Here, I am greatly indebted to a variety of Jewish theologians such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Buber, and Rabbi Irving Greenberg, as well as Christian thinkers such as Rob Bell and Rosemary Radford Reuther.

My understanding of God is both personal and mystery -- imminent and transcendent. I am ever mindful of the fact that even what we claim to know about God is partial knowledge, at best, and can never effectively be reduced to a particular set of propositions or rules. With these limitations in mind, one metaphor I, personally, find helpful in my faith is God as a divine parent figure -- I tread carefully here knowing that image can set us up for projecting all kinds of negative and abusive (human) parental attributes onto God, and with full recognition that this metaphor is certainly not helpful to all. However, I believe that when at its best, the parent-child relationship serves as one of the most profound embodiments imaginable of unconditional love, loving judgment/correction, covenant, and grace. I also find that God, as divine parent, transcends all of the limitations and shortcomings of our human parents. I find my own understandings of

God (and myself!) have taken on entirely new dimensions since becoming a mom!

While I have inherited and cultivated a strong belief in God the Eternal Spirit, my faith and roots have also come to depend upon a strong Christology. I affirm the traditional doctrinal understandings of Jesus Christ: fully human, fully divine, conceived miraculously, birthed humbly, raised in the Jewish faith, prophet, son of God, Savior. Yet, these formulaic phrases do not do justice to my faith in and experience of Jesus. Jesus is at the front and center of my faith. For me, he is The Way, The Truth, and The Life. He is the example of our calling to be fully alive, fully human, and fully engaged in God's work (and play!) in the world.

I do not glorify his death and suffering, though I do believe they provide a tremendous source of strength, hope, and connection for multitudes of people as they seek to endure and make meaning out of their own pain and suffering. I believe we have as much, if not more, to learn from Jesus' life as we do from his death. Yet, I am also able to affirm that through his life and death, Jesus did assume human form, "*share our common lot, conquer sin and death, and reconcile all of creation to its Creator.*" I do believe in his bodily resurrection and his triumph over sin and evil. I confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, though I cannot accept the traditional understanding found in sacrificial atonement theology, as I find it presents a God foreign to my experience and understanding of God's love, grace, and mercy. I never cease to learn and wonder at the Gospels, their stories about Jesus, the words and parables we attribute to him. And my life and ministry are centered around trying to get closer to Jesus -- to understanding who he was and is, to living and loving like he did, to listening and learning from him.

In addition to my faith in God and Jesus, another key component in my theological root

structure is the Holy Spirit. It is this aspect of the Divine which breathes life into many things which are foundational for my faith: prayer, social justice, creation/life, feminist/womanist/liberation theologies, wisdom, mysticism, renewal, sustenance, unity, covenant, and so much more. For me, the Holy Spirit represents the feminine aspect of God (as the Greek and Hebrew words for spirit, *pneuma* and *ruah* are feminine in gender.) This is the center of our belief, the very presence which knits us together as a family of believers and allows us to be the body of Christ.

Although there is an infinite amount of theological history and material not covered in this paper, in the interest of space, I will include one final root. A love of Scripture is at the core of my Tradition. I am constantly awed, challenged, refreshed, amazed, and confused by reading the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. I do believe Scripture is holy and divinely inspired, though I am far from being a literalist or a believer in scriptural inerrancy. I frequently find myself asking, “How did this get in here, how did it stay in here, and what does it mean for us today?” as I reflect upon the tremendous compiling and editing processes which produced the Bible, as we know it. I find meaning, depth, and truth in its pages, as well as unlimited opportunities to connect with almost any human situation imaginable. I look forward to a lifetime of wrestling with these texts, seeking my own blessings.

## **Part II: UCC Polity**

*(Part two of the ordination paper is intended to provide an opportunity for the student to demonstrate her knowledge and understanding of the history, theological roots, polity, and practice of the United Church of Christ.)*

My understandings of the United Church of Christ come from the perspective of an

outsider – a “refugee.” I did not grow up in the UCC, and frankly, was unaware of its existence until I met some wonderful UCC folks in seminary. As I became disillusioned with the call process of the United Methodist Church, and increasingly felt as if the denomination in which I was raised was becoming practically and theologically unrecognizable to me, I sought community elsewhere. After much Spirit-led exploration, prayer, and discernment, I joined Barrington United Church of Christ in Barrington, Rhode Island in December of 2000. Since then, I have only grown in appreciation, admiration, and amazement for this denomination which I call home. I hope to nurture and tend to its care and growth as much as it has tended to mine. If theology and history represent my theological roots, the UCC represents my **Community**, or the soil in which I have planted myself.

Looking at its history, the purpose behind the creation and development of the UCC can be likened to attempts to construct a new, healthy garden bed. First, there were the New England Congregationalists – 16<sup>th</sup> century English folks who were disillusioned and dissatisfied with the Anglican Church. They came as Pilgrims (separatists) and Puritans (seeking to establish an exemplary religious & civil “City upon a Hill”), and by the end of the century, the two had merged. They sought to create a new garden free from the pollutants and regulations they found in England. As they tilled the soil together, key components to the American Congregational garden were: **a covenanted community** – local and universal in covenant with God and with each other, **autonomy** – each parish valued as an autonomous unit in relationship with others, **unity and diversity** – with a reasonably cohesive theology, stable institutions, and a mistrust of set denominational structure. They valued educated pastors, but left the hiring and firing of

them up to each congregation.

The Christian Church also sought to till a new garden. Their ground work lay in the broadly defined Appalachian region of North America following the American Revolution. As a frontier movement, comprised of a mishmash of Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, their needs were very different from the New England Congregationalists. They were less established, less educated and much more practically oriented. The key elements in their soil seeking were: **freedom** – especially from particular catechisms, platforms, religious trappings, education, even a name other than Christian!, **religious emotion** – especially warmth, rather than philosophical reason, **unity in diversity**, and the **Bible**. Because of their focus on task-oriented ministry, this group became increasingly inclusive and diverse. They were among the very first to affirm and encourage women as well as African Americans in the ministry. They also welcomed theological diversity, as Unitarians and Trinitarians worshipped together.

In other parts of the country, German refugees fleeing political, religious, and social turmoil in Europe came seeking a place to plant their own garden. The German Reformed tradition, comprised primarily of poor, immigrant, non-English speaking folks, was rooted in the European Continental Reformation. As such, it tended to be much more creedal and connectional than the Christians or the Congregationalists. **Sound doctrine** (as found in the Heidelberg Catechism), **right preaching**, and **right administration of sacraments** were tenets found in Calvinist soil which the German Reformers transplanted into their American gardens. As such, this tradition valued structure and consistency in its administration. Synods, classis, and consistories for governance and connection were formed, and in 1825, they formed their own American

seminary to train pastors.

In years following the arrival and assimilation of the German Reformers into American life, other Germans created settlements along the river systems in the Midwest. Their religious and cultural experiences differed significantly from that of their German Reformed cousins. They came to form what was known as the Evangelical Synod. Whereas the Reformed adherents tended to emphasize sacramental importance in the life of the church, Evangelicals embodied an older, "Continental" perspective which stressed ***disciplined living***. Evangelicals emphasized ***preaching, education, "warm hearted faith that is spent in the world," personal piety, pastoral care, and healing*** as they built their garden beds. They provided a unique blending of orthodoxy and flexibility. Although piety was central to their shared communal life and faith experience, rigidity was not. It is from this tradition that the UCC inherited the phrase, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials freedom, in all things charity."

On June 25, 1957, these four traditions merged to form the United Church of Christ. This tendency to join gardens together is a larger theological theme and motto of the UCC, found in the words of Jesus Christ, "That they may all be one." Our further ecumenical partnership with the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ in 1985 is another example of this partnering practice. As I understand it, the creation and assimilation of these different soils and plots into one expanded garden rests on the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as the head of the church, the belief in one God, the importance of Scripture, the belief in the priesthood of all believers, and the principles of freedom, autonomy, unity in diversity, and covenant.

This history of the foundation of the UCC garden bed plays out in the polity and

practice of the United Church of Christ today. The importance of the local church in the structure and administration of the UCC carries over from our Christian and Congregationalist heritage. It is covenantal in nature – with God, with each other, and with the denomination as a whole. This is how we understand ourselves and our sacred work of being the Body of Christ; Autonomous, as individual parts, but always a part of a larger whole. It also explains the great variety and diversity of gifts, perspectives and peoples which comprise our denomination today. It has the blessing and the challenge of being, what Oliver Powell called, “a beautiful, heady, exasperating, hopeful mix” in his essay by the same name.

While local church autonomy is at the forefront of our denominational structure, the emphasis on unity, inherited from all four founding traditions, remains. We are, after all, the **United** Church of Christ. This complex interplay between individuality and unity is accommodated and honored in the UCC’s Constitution, administrative oversight, and day-to-day practice.

The basic structure of the UCC is outlined in our Constitution. The church is comprised of four non-hierarchical bodies: the local church, Associations, Conferences, and the national church. The local church is the primary body in the UCC. Local churches are bound together regionally in “Associations.” Associations are a body within a conference composed of Local Churches and ordained, licensed, commissioned ministers within a geographical area. Associations exist to provide help and council to all Local Churches. Associations are also in charge of ordaining, licensing, and commissioning qualified candidates, and granting ministerial standing. Associations, in turn, comprise larger bodies known as Conferences.

Conferences are a body of the UCC which is composed of all Local Churches, ordained, licensed, and commissioned ministers in its Associations. Some Conferences may exercise the functions of an Association. (Such as Rhode Island, where the two are conflated.) A Conference deals more directly with the General Synod, electing officers and choosing delegates. The Conference also determines such of the fiscal stewardship for mission. Finally, the national church exists to facilitate the life of the other three bodies.

Our largest body is the General Synod (hailing from our German Reformed heritage). This body meets every two years to make resolutions and proclamations on behalf of the United Church of Christ. It is comprised of delegates from Conferences, voting members of Boards of Directors of Covenanted Ministries, and ex officio delegates. (The Executive Council makes up the ex officio delegates.) General Synod is the most representative voice of the UCC. However, its power is limited, out of respect to the local congregations, in that its resolutions and proclamations are only *recommendations* and not requirements for local church congregations, Conferences, and/or Associations. At the same time, these individual bodies are urged to hold Synod, Conference, or Association actions and decisions in the highest regard out of respect for the covenant and unity which, through the work of the Holy Spirit, serve as the glue holding us all together.

In addition to these four bodies, there exist four Covenanted Ministries, as well as Affiliated Ministries and Associated Ministries providing services to or for the UCC. The Covenanted Ministries are comprised of what used to be 13 instrumentalities prior to the UCC restructuring at General Synod 22 in 1999. They are now – the Office of General

Ministries (including the President and Associate General Minister), Local Church Ministries, Justice and Peace Ministries, and Wider Church Ministries. These Covenanted Ministries work together to guide the implementation of General Synod actions, as well as to provide leadership to the UCC.

In looking at the UCC, -- past, present, and future -- one can see the intentional, if perhaps halting and imperfect, construction of a beautifully diverse, wonderfully inclusive garden attentive to the health, growth, and autonomy of each member. The soil laid in the UCC garden is, in my experience, some of the richest, deepest, nutritious foundation for growth and exploration found in any denomination today. I look forward to sinking my own roots deep in its extravagant community of support.

### **Part III: My Journey Toward Ordination in the UCC**

*(Part three of the ordination paper is intended to be an integrating statement that invites the person to relate the faith & practice of the Church to her own pilgrimage of faith and understandings of and intentions for her ministry as a person ordained by the United Church of Christ.)*

As I stated earlier, although good soil and a healthy root structure are essential, plants need more in order to grow and thrive. Sunlight, clean air and water, careful gardeners and nurture provide the needed elements. In my own journey, religious **Experience** has played this role. This includes people, congregations, the Holy Spirit, and so much more. I would like to discuss this process through the lens of H. Richard Niebuhr's four-part understanding of the nature of call. This process includes: the Christian Call, the Secret Call, the Providential Call, and the Ecclesiastical Call.

According to Niebuhr's outline, the Christian Call comes to each of us through our baptism or incorporation into the church. This is consistent with our denominations

emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. My own baptism came, as an infant, into the United Methodist Church in Clifford, Michigan. True to their baptismal vows, my parents raised me in the church. I grew up with Sunday school, VBS, being present in worship, singing in the children's choir as well as belting out hymns in church, attending the church pre-school, creating elaborate works of art on my bulletins, and generally feeling comfortable with and invested in my church. Through these experiences much of my early Christian identity was formed.

Niebuhr's second call, the Secret Call, comes when we experience a time when we feel we're being led to ministry. I felt this secret call aching and elusively throughout my adolescence and young adulthood. I spent hours alternatively seeking it desperately and frenetically running from it.

My teen years were spent in an intense spiritual quest. Through a couple of United Methodist sponsored events during my sophomore year in high school, I had a "conversion" process. First, a Lay Witness Mission team came to our church to share their testimonies of what God was doing in their lives. My family hosted a young married couple, and I saw in them an indescribable "something" that I knew I wanted for myself. It was an inner peace and warmth, a confidence and gentleness I had not previously encountered. I spent a lot of time reflecting on what made them different and why I wanted to be like them. A few months later I attended a teen "Walk to Emmaus." Throughout the weekend, I felt "my heart was strangely warmed" – to use Wesleyan terminology. It felt like the completion of the process begun by the mission. I felt different. I saw the world through an entirely new set of eyes. I felt God's presence in a real, powerful, and personal way. I remember thinking how much BIGGER and closer

God felt to me. I was a bit overwhelmed by it all. In trying to describe it, I am reminded

the Annie Dillard quote,

Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we all should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

I remember being awestruck. I wanted to draw closer to God and Jesus. I wanted to explore this newfound love of the Lord privately. But it seemed the more I sought God, the more people sought me for public leadership positions. I had no desire to be a Christian leader. My faith felt very new and fragile. I did not feel I had enough Biblical knowledge, self-sacrificial tendencies, or maturity to consider ministry. In my experience, ministers were settled old men who did very little discernable wrestling with their faith or culture, or angry unapproachable crones. I had certainly never encountered any hip young women who discussed or pursued a call to ministry.

I went out of my way to escape situations which would put me in a leadership role. I attended evangelical churches and youth events that met my need for developing my relationship with Jesus. What I found was that these organizations only accepted male ministers. I loved the praise and worship, but I found it increasingly difficult to stomach the theology. I was unsure how I felt about women in ministry, but I knew I didn't want to be one! I wanted to be an "ordinary" wife, mother, and teacher more than anything. I did not want to give up having a life in order to be a minister.

I spent years running from this call. But God did not give up. I tried to pursue professions -- always with someone telling me I would make an excellent minister. So, I

half-heartedly tried ministry. I attended a summer of service for college students considering ministry, where I met, fell in love with, and eventually married Dan McQuown. We began seminary together at Princeton Theological Seminary. For many reasons, it was not the place for me to pursue my MDiv. I had not received the lightning bolt confirmation that I so desperately sought. And, I was terrified of becoming trapped in the church after witnessing some very broken congregations. I became a Christian Educator, and shrugged off the call to ordained ministry.

Over the course of 10 years, we lived in 6 different states and attended different congregations. I had different jobs. Still, every place we lived *people* ordained me. Whether it was seeking me out to provide pastoral care, inviting me into the most spiritually intimate and vulnerable spaces in their lives, asking me to do weddings, inviting me to preach, or some other priestly function, I could not escape the role of minister. Finally, I remembered someone had told me, “If you can do anything other than be a minister, do it.” I realized that I couldn’t. I was a minister, whether I wanted to be one or not. (And I was surprised to find out that I did in fact want to be!) Other people had recognized this call in me before I had accepted it myself.

This is Niebuhr’s third call – the Providential Call – when people recognize the skills, gifts, and education that we have, which allows us into another dimension of our vocation. Throughout my life people have recognized the gifts, graces, and vocation of ministry in me. They have smiled at me when I ran from this call and knowingly shared, “It’s just a matter of time.” From mentors to peers, professors to strangers, (with a few family members sprinkled in between) there have been no shortage of others recognizing God’s call in my life. It’s been a bit disconcerting, and I’ve frequently found myself asking God,

“Why is it so clear to them and not to me?” What I found was that perhaps God was speaking to me THROUGH these other folks. I found tremendous affirmation for my ministerial abilities through CPE, parish field education settings, my academic pursuits, and pulpit supply preaching. Others frequently comment on my abilities to be a prophetic voice, to engage in active listening, to make room for the holy, to create sacred space, to pray, to preach, and to love. What I came to realize was that I didn’t have to be someone else in order to be a minister. People saw ME as a minister, and that was something I could live with.

The lessons and insights I gained throughout this journey inform my understandings of ordained ministry today. I have come to liken ministry to midwifery, gardening, and being a reference librarian. I see myself helping others birth their own faith. I am present with them through their journey, celebrating the moments of anticipation and joy, and sitting with them in pain as their pain increases. In this state of being, I am not a remedy for the pain, but a “channel of comfort.” As a gardener, it is crucial to discern the seasons; planting, waiting patiently for growth, weeding, harvesting, and celebrating the fruits of labor. As a reference librarian, I point to resources and Scriptures that nurture faith. I rely on my education and experience to help others.

My experience has shown me that the Spirit moves – in the midst of joy and celebration, as well as in times of confusion and pain. I have felt God’s presence pursuing me and being patient with me when I resisted this call in the past and now as I accept this call for the present and future. And now I open myself to the fourth call in Niebuhr’s system, the Ecclesiastical Call, to confirm what I feel in my heart. This call is when a body of the church recognizes one’s ministry. I am ready, with the help of God,

to enter the ordained ministry and to serve faithfully in it. Although I do not have a specific call at present, I look forward to learning what God has in store for me next. I am open to the moving of the Spirit, and can see myself being equally happy and fulfilled doing God's work in a parish position, a chaplaincy context, or something completely new to my thinking. I do believe I am called to share the Word of God through preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments in whatever ministry context God ordains for me. I have received this confirmation from my local church, and now seek the prayerful endorsement of the Committee on Ministry and the Covenant Association.

*"fides quaerens intellectum"* Anselm

It is my hope that the Church & Ministry does not engage in such extreme forms of "correction!"

And each one could have a lengthy paper describing its origin, history, development through the ages, denominational differences in understandings and practice, etc! But in the interest of time, space, and sanity, I'll forego those endeavors in this paper.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from the UCC Statement of Faith.

It should be noted that prior to the 1957 merger, these four groups had already combined to form two denominations known as the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical & Reformed Church. As cited in paragraph 38 of the Constitution.

Paragraph 46 of the Constitution.

Browne Barr, "Ministry as Midwifery" in *The Christian Century*, vol. 104, 1990, 625-626