

Ordination Paper

Sara Ross

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COMING TO THIS MOMENT

My story is one of reclaiming Christian community and my inner calling to Christian ministry. That reclamation has led me to this moment, confident I have gifts to offer to the United Church of Christ because I know God's grace has developed and anchored those gifts. Of course, in order to reclaim something, you have to have claimed it in the first place, so allow me to start with the soil that encouraged that claim to take root.

My earliest memories were of my mom's faith. I was only an infant when she fought her first of three bouts with cancer. Circumstances surrounding my mother's health and the separation of my parents led to several years of financial struggle for our family when I was growing up. My mother depended on God to carry us during these hard times in very practical ways. From her perspective, God kept our lights on and food on our table, and worked through the people of our church to offer practical support to us in just the right moments. She made it clear to me and my siblings that we were sustained by a God who personally knew our situation.

Her day-to-day faithful witness helped open my eyes to a God I experienced as truly present and caring; and my faith began to grow. I spent my childhood and adolescence in the United Methodist Church and became involved in youth ministry, serving on my UMC District and Conference Youth Councils. Looking back, even then I sensed God calling me to minister to the young people around me, but at the time I would not have been able to identify the exact character of this nudging I experienced.

I attended Michigan State University for my undergraduate education. I received a bachelor's degree in biological science, and worked in the environmental conservation field for a number of years. This previous career has given me a greater awareness and appreciation for the miracle of creation that is the natural world. The amazing interconnected complexities and beauty displayed in God's creation testify to just how awesome the God is that we serve. This awe I experience in reflection of the natural world and our connection to it is an integral part of my Christian faith.

I discovered early on in life my own natural complexity. I was aware of my homosexual orientation, but had not expressed this particular piece of who I am for fear of rejection and harm. At the time I was not strong enough to face the secular world's rejection, let alone the rejection of a church that had been so instrumental in my upbringing. Despite my fear, I began to come out when I was nineteen, but not within my church. My growing sense of my lesbian identity became harder and harder to integrate with my sense of the expectations within my church community. I continued to feel it necessary to hide my emerging sense of self. Feeling the societal tension between these two important parts of myself, I eventually stopped attending church and pursued my Christianity in isolation from a church community. The faith I had claimed as a child had become fragmented.

However, my decision never quite felt resolved. I still longed to be a part of a church that seeks to expand its circle to the whole people of God, even with all the challenges a diverse community can bring about. I wanted to be among gay, straight, young, old, coupled, single, poor, rich, ethnically similar, and ethnically different. I imagined a church community so much more enriched by the presence of all this diversity that God has offered us in humanity. I found others who shared my vision in the UCC.

When I was 30, I began attending Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ in Lansing, and joined the congregation. I enjoyed my opportunities to be involved at Pilgrim in a wide array of church activities. My involvement in all these activities solidified my growing sense that God was calling me again to leadership in the church. I knew my next step would be going to seminary to prepare for what God had in store.

My classroom and field placement training in seminary, and especially my time serving as an interim student minister at the Peoples Church in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood have led me to a strong desire to minister within a parish setting. The experiences I gained in these settings were instrumental in my development as a pastor.

Carrying out these responsibilities week-to-week helped to confirm that local church ministry is the place to which God is calling me.

OUR CALL TO EXTEND CHRIST'S MINISTRY

The United Church of Christ recognizes that, “God calls the whole church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society.”¹ I understand my personal call within the context of this broader call to all those seeking to be Christ’s disciples. I feel God has called me specifically to a leadership role in the parish context, which includes the traditional responsibilities entrusted to a pastor: preaching and teaching the gospel, administering the sacraments and rites of the church, and exercising pastoral care and leadership in the church.

I view the fulfillment of these many pastoral responsibilities as a weaving together of many elements to create and maintain a sacred environment optimal for Christ’s continuing transformation of our hearts. This ongoing transformation in turn empowers the faith community to follow the unique calling God has placed upon each of our hearts as we seek to act upon being disciples of Christ in the world. I understand that the nature of my Christian call requires confirmation and authorization by the church, symbolized by the rite of ordination, as well as attention to ongoing accountability within our denomination.

Randi Jones Walker succinctly describes the Church this way, “The Church is the beloved community of followers of Christ, gathered by the Holy Spirit into covenant communion with each other and with Christ, for the purpose of carrying out God’s mission (such as we may understand in our finitude).”² Love must be the fuel placed in the Church’s engine in order for it to function properly in its activity. Following Christ means learning to walk in love. A commitment to be in covenant with Christ and one

¹ The United Church of Christ Constitution, Provision 20.

² Randi Jones Walker; *The Evolution of a UCC Style: History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ*. (Cleveland, United Church Press, 2005), p. 164.

another is a commitment of love. And being a part of God's mission means being a part of the ultimate Love.

Therefore, our first job as the Church is to love one another.³ No other pursuit we undertake will be effective unless we continually attend to this one as we go along. Yet, when we immerse ourselves into the thick of what it means to love one another, we realize this is no small task, and the love we naturally have in our hearts must be supplemented heavily with the love and wisdom Christ places there. Human sin and its resulting suffering point to the fact that we are truly in need of ongoing help in this endeavor. Thankfully, we can turn to the life of Christ, Son of the living God, for a model of what to shoot for when operating from a 'love first' mindset. Guidance is given in his teaching, his living example of that teaching, his offering of hope in redemption, healing and eternal life.

The Holy Spirit gathers the Church, and then provides wisdom, empowerment, and accompaniment as we seek to take love-filled action in the world in response to God's call. As it has meant to some degree in every century, answering God's call to the Church in the 21st Century will undoubtedly mean following the Holy Spirit into uncharted ecclesiastical territory. The very future of life on our planet is threatened by humans' inability to live respectfully as part of the natural world we inhabit. Wars and oppression are so often fueled by the unwillingness of people of different faiths to coexist and value each other. Human rights efforts are too often thwarted by the tide of our blindness to economic, social and political disparities between us. These are just some of today's daunting concerns that beg for the love-filled action of the Church.

INHERITANCE FROM OUR DENOMINATION'S ANCESTORS

I was once tempted to think of the UCC as a new, more liberal sort of Christian movement, as if we are doing something never considered before in the long line of

³ My friend and colleague Rev. Ruth Moerdyk introduced me to this simple yet vital idea.

Christian tradition. But we aren't doing something totally new. We are building on the rich and varied foundation of the four major denominational movements that have converged by the power of Christ, the central focus and head of the Church, to comprise the UCC.

We can be thankful for our inheritance of the spiritual and intellectual gifts, and the hard-earned experience of generations of the faithful struggling to determine how to best live out the call to be the Church together. This inheritance serves as a tremendous resource as we still live in the questions our denominational ancestors faced in previous times. As we follow the Holy Spirit into uncharted ecclesiastical territory in the 21st Century we can be comforted in knowing our denominational ancestors also navigated the shifting ecclesiastical landscapes of changing geographic, social, political, and theological circumstances in their own times. Their varied experiences and answers to these questions speak to the appropriateness of the rich and varied textures that still coexist in the United Church of Christ. Looking at our denominational heritage will serve us well as we continue to claim our rich identity in the UCC.

For example, the UCC can find the theme of convergence and a unifying spirit in its Christian Church denominational roots. The Christian Church found its beginnings in the theological convergence of three geographically isolated movements along the western frontier of the settling United States of the early 1800's. Their similar circumstances along the frontier led them to a similar sense of identity. This was best symbolized in the fact that each separately came to the same conclusion that the best name for their movement was simply Christian, countering the narrow sectarianism they perceived in other denominations. This convergence brought these groups to an awareness of each other and eventual union.

The American Revolution influenced the central ideas resident in the Christian Church: freedom, passion, and unity. Balancing freedom and unity was tricky, as it still is for the UCC. For the sake of a unified identity they determined to agree upon a list of

denominational principles. It took decades of much deliberation to settle on the following principles, which still find voice in the UCC today:

1. Christ is the only head of the church.
2. Christian is a sufficient name for the church.
3. The Holy Bible is a sufficient rule of faith and practice.
4. Christian character is the only requirement for membership.
5. The right of private judgment and liberty of conscience are rights and privileges for all.
6. Union of all Christ's followers is sought.⁴

In 1931, the Christian Church united with the Congregational Church, a denomination with a history of its own similar balancing act--balancing autonomy and covenant.

Congregationalism in America started with the English Puritans' migration to New England in the early 1600's in hopes of starting a purified version of the Anglican Church of their homeland. Congregationalism insisted on the scriptural authority and autonomy of individually gathered churches, resulting in the local church as the church's basic governmental unit. This is another aspect of the UCC, traceable to the insights of our ancestors.

The UCC's keen attention to social issues can find ancestral support in Congregational Church history. Elizabeth Nordbeck states:

“Today the Puritans are remembered for their moral rigidity rather than for anything like social awareness. Yet the Bay settlers' conviction that they were in covenant with God habitually directed their attention outward, linked up the public and private dimensions of faith, and gave their movement a combination of pragmatism and missionary passion that remained typical of later generation of Congregationalists. In a community 'knit together as one man [sic],' the welfare of individual and society must be vitally linked.”⁵

The Reformed Church line of ancestry of the UCC found its American beginnings with the vast immigration of Germans to America in the early 1700's, and was known as the German Reformed Church prior to 1863. The Reformed Church, more doctrinal in its history than the other UCC strands has brought with them through time certain principal

⁴ Richard H. Taylor, Christian Church Perspectives, in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*; Eds. Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe; (Cleveland, United Church Press, 1990), p. 34.

⁵ Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, Theological Tradition of Congregationalism, in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*; Eds. Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe; (Cleveland, United Church Press, 1990), p. 7.

liturgies. The process of creating such doctrinal resources reveals an already resident UCC-like process in our Reformed Church ancestors—different theological traditions coming together in Christ-centered collaboration resulting in a richer theological expression.

For example, the Reformed crafters of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) found a way to combine Calvin’s rigorous concepts of the true church with Luther’s concept of grace to produce a theological expression richer than its parts. “The Heidelberg Catechism’s emphasis on justification by faith through the free grace of God in Christ, and its heavy use of scriptural texts, proclaimed that the Reformed tradition is truly evangelical and biblical.”⁶ This document offered itself as such a resource to the Reformed Church that it continued to be used even when the Reformed Church united with the Evangelical Synod in 1934.

The Evangelical Synod of North America began in 1840 with folks from Reformed and Congregational traditions attempting to expand English-speaking Protestantism in the U.S. western frontier of the period. It too was a denomination finding its beginnings in changing geographic, social, political, and theological circumstances. When they were tempted to become overwhelmed with the details of how to apply their faith to their daily lives in unfamiliar circumstances, they responded by finding their anchor in the centrality of Christ to their endeavor:

“Christian unity is found not in individual decisions, nor in the proliferation of creeds, but rather in the basis of confession of faith in a crucified Christ...The common ground on which all may stand with Christ is at the heart of the Evangelical Church.”⁷

I believe the Evangelical Synod’s ability to anchor themselves in the common ground of the centrality of Christ to the Church made it possible for them to unite with the Reformed Church in 1934. I believe we can focus the same commitment, inherited from our Evangelical ancestors, to anchor ourselves in Christ when we struggle to find

⁶ John C. Shetler, Reformed Church Theological Tradition, in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*; Eds. Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe; (Cleveland, United Church Press, 1990), p. 19.

⁷ Ralph C. Quellhorst, Evangelical Synod Theology, in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*; Eds. Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe; (Cleveland, United Church Press, 1990), p. 27.

common ground in the living out of our faith together within the Church. Christ is the one who makes it possible for our theologies and denominational histories to converge. We come from richly varied places, but we converge toward Christ as our center, the one who united these four traditions into the United Church of Christ in 1957, and who continues to help us live into the richness of that unity without a need for uniformity.

A THIRD OPTION

Our Congregational ancestors knew and passed down to us the importance of covenantal relationships within the Church. In response to God's covenantal relationship with us, the Church calls also for a commitment to covenantal relationship among its people. However, balancing our call to unite in covenantal relationship with our call to follow new, sometimes divergent individual or congregational paths can be challenging. We live in an age of dichotomy between those who would further separate church bodies based on the distinctions of our histories, cultures, and practices of faith, and those who would seek to focus primarily on our commonalities, claiming those distinctions not critically important. Neither of these two options is optimal for the health of faith communities.

Drawing on the insights of our denominational ancestors, the UCC is poised to offer a third option able to hold these two in tension wisely. When we seek to ignore neither our commonalities nor our individual distinctions or paths, a faith community develops that can be enriched and united by both. Combining local church body autonomy with covenantal commitment positions us to slowly reshape/renew ourselves as we seek to live out God's call for the church in changing times. We are able to listen closely and respond individually/locally to God's still-speaking voice while continuing to operate together around the center of our purpose for being a Christian Church in the first place-- pursuing the example and life offered through Jesus Christ as central to who we are.

I am inspired by the United Church of Christ's commitment to such covenantal unity in the church, a unity that is possible because it does not demand uniformity of belief, background, or way of life. Unity is not achieved by conformity, but is enriched by sharing our diverse experiences with each other and committing to be in solidarity with each other.

THE BIBLE & OTHER SACRED TEXTS

Standing within the Christian tradition means engaging with texts our faith tradition has deemed to have special religious revelatory value. The texts of the Bible are a sacred gift to the Church through the centuries. I see the Bible as a site of ongoing revelation as the reader intersects the old and the new. As such, the Bible provides a source of spiritual inspiration for us to visit again and again, often finding new insights when we do. The Bible provides examples of our spiritual ancestors engaging with God; some are examples that result in greater harmony and some are not. Some exhibit the best of faithful engagement, while others exhibit our human limitations in faithful engagement.

Being a Christian minister calls for me to diligently engage with the Bible as my primary sacred text, as well as to facilitate our faith community's engagement with the Bible. Of course, this sacred gift is not always a simple one to unwrap, given the challenges that portions of the biblical text may present to interpretation and application in the 21st Century. Challenging pieces of scripture may actually be the most important sites of faithful engagement for me to tackle with my faith community, not to bury them under the rug, but to openly acknowledge their existence then attempt to faithfully reconcile the damage done by potentially abusive usage of such texts.

I don't limit my definition of sacred texts solely to the Bible. I have found religious revelatory value in other non-biblical texts. For example: poetry, accounts of natural history, lyrics from hymns, and children's literature are just a few of the various types of

texts outside of the Bible that have enriched my experience of God and I believe can be a part of God's means of delivering a revelatory word to us in due season.

I believe that a revelation from God can be confirmed by whether or not it produces or has the potential to produce "good fruit." Good fruit will be that which manages to feed our hopes, encourages love in community, provides inner and outer peace, deepens our relationship with God, and that which encourages us to continue to exercise our faith in a God whose mystery we don't fully comprehend.

SACRAMENTS

Our attempts to get our arms around God's mystery lead us to acknowledge our need for something tangible, something we can feel in our bodies, and something that allows God's mystery to touch us. In response to this need, God offers us another sacred gift in the form of the Holy Spirit's presence in the sacraments. Our own participation in the sacraments actively connects us to our faith tradition's history, our communal present and our hopes for the future fulfillment of God's kingdom.

In my administering of the sacraments in the church, I will view my role as one of setting the stage/opening up space for the Holy Spirit to reveal its presence to us and touch us in tangible, yet mysterious ways. Much like the dynamics of covenant, we do our part, the Holy Spirit does its part, and we experience something more for having joined together. We do our part through our openness to experience the Holy Spirit's presence, our desire to be part of God's mystery and grace, and our physical participation in a symbolic ritual. The boundary between God's mystery and our humanity then becomes less rigid, and we are able to connect to God in ways not always easily explained with human words. Our active engagement and openness to God's action within the sacraments opens the door for us to experience the variety of the Holy Spirit's revelations to us through these rituals.

The gift of Communion offers us an opportunity to have an ongoing encounter with Christ. That encounter can take a variety of forms. It contains an overarching element of thanksgiving in: our remembrance of Christ's crucifixion and subsequent victory over the death that threatens us all; our desire for spiritual sustenance as disciples of Christ; our connection to others who partake and have partaken of this sacrament through the centuries since Christ resurrection; and a looking ahead to the fulfillment of God's kingdom where we will all drink it anew. Of course, my list is not complete—God is never limited to a list, and always maintains the option to reveal something new or unique in due season to the participant in this sacrament.

Baptism is the one-time Christian rite of passage into the Christian community. The sacramental heart of this rite allows individuals to experience not only human acceptance into Christ's Church, and the Church's commitment to nurturing their Christian development, but also God's acceptance of us as sons and daughters into the household of God, made possible by God's reconciling forgiveness. We celebrate our participation in this divine reconciliation which makes possible the existence of Christian community and our participation in it.

Once welcomed into the community of faith, that welcome should never go away. The father in the story of the prodigal son did not require an additional act of his son upon his return in order to be welcomed back into the family; he simply acted within the already existent and ongoing welcome. Thus, when moments arise in the once-baptized individual's life calling for a revisiting of this rite of passage, I characterize such experiences as an active acknowledgment, reclamation and celebration of something that is already existent.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

The UCC Statement of Faith is a witness to the gracious actions of God toward humankind throughout history.⁸ I look to the Statement as a tool in centering the church in its continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ, as we respond to these gracious actions of God. The statement is intended as a collective testimony of the United Church of Christ. Individual members aren't required to subscribe to every part of this statement in order to be participants in the UCC, but the statement offers a tremendous resource for individuals to engage with the heart of the Church tradition as they refine their own evolving faith walk. I expect the Statement will require modification over time as God continues to speak in our time and as evolving circumstances require the church to pay attention to different societal and theological emphases, and respond faithfully without changing the heart of the affirmation.

One way the Statement helps to center the Church is in its description of God's activity in direct relation to the formation of the Church and its ongoing purpose for being. The Statement reminds us that the Holy Spirit creates the Church, and supplies its ongoing power, working continually with us toward reforming the Church. As such, the church remains a work in progress as we anticipate the fulfillment of God's Kingdom.

ETHICS

As a minister, I will commit to actively uphold standards of ethics and boundaries as part of my responsibility to my parishioners. A critical aspect of this commitment involves actively nurturing a safe environment within the church for people to experience spiritual transformation and carry out Christ's mission. For me to do this successfully I must first acknowledge the tremendous ethical responsibility inherent in the role of one considered to be called by God as a minister. People bestow trust and power upon such a person over and above their own individual merit as a consequence of simply inhabiting

⁸ I am indebted to Roger L. Shinn who opened up for me the richness of the Statement of Faith in his book: *Confessing Our Faith: An Interpretation of the Statement of Faith of The United Church of Christ*, (Cleveland, United Church Press; 1990).

this role. Because of this, I believe it is important to plan for appropriate behavior before issues arise by building in systems of accountability. I take very seriously the weight of the statement in The Ordained Minister's Code, "I will not use my position, power, or authority to exploit any person."

RELYING ON GOD'S GRACE

I am passionate about doing ministry focused on making way for Christ to continue to transform our hearts toward wholeness, empowering us to loving action in the world. I seek to do what I can to help foster an optimal environment for Christ to meet and transform peoples' lives. God is empowering me to use what I've learned and am learning to proclaim the good news of the Gospel, to engage proactively in Christian reflection with others toward new insights, and to inspire parishioners to undertake loving action. What sustains me is a deep knowledge that God has indeed called me, regardless of my human frailty, perhaps especially because of my human frailty. I am inspired by those moments when I feel that God is working through me, using my uniqueness to inspire others to keep moving along their own life path in a more and more faithful manner.

The last statement in The Ordained Minister's Code is, "Relying on the grace of God, I will lead a life worthy of the calling to which I have been called." I find the two parts of this statement to be inseparable. I cannot lead such a life, nor can I attend to carrying out the other vows in this Code without relying on the grace of God. I also note this inseparability as I consider the examination portion of the order of service for ordination to ministry. "I will, relying on God's grace," is the appropriate answer to all these vows. With that in mind, I bring my request before this body of the United Church of Christ, relying on God's grace knowing that within God's grace is exactly where I need to be in this endeavor.