

ORDINATION PAPER

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Introduction

I offer this paper as a Member In Discernment as part of the process in seeking ordination through the United Church of Christ (UCC), in which you will find the following sections:

- I. “My Spiritual Autobiography,” in which I address the route by which I come to apply for ordination. Here I’ve also sought to weave throughout reflections on my growth and development in the *Marks for Faithful and Effective Ministers* as they have manifested throughout my formation process.
 - II. “Theological Grounding,” in which I address UCC doctrinal beliefs as well as my theological perspective. I do this by using the UCC Statement of Faith as an outline.
 - III. “Historical Roots and Current Practice,” in which I address the diverse ‘tributaries’ of the UCC, how they continue to challenge and enrich the denomination, and how they inform our continued understanding and engagement of covenant and autonomy.
 - IV. “The Work of Ministry,” in which I begin with a discussion on lay and ordained ministry and their importance for the healthy growth within the church. I reflect on the various responsibilities of ordained ministers, and my understanding of the sacraments. I also offer a statement of my own understanding of my call to ministry in the UCC and particularly to St Andrew UCC at this time.
- Finally, I will conclude with how I see the church’s witness in the world today, and how I imagine the church living the world in the future.

I. My Spiritual Autobiography

My life has been blessed with countless experiences of family, discovery and learning. I have traveled to many parts of the world and I have been exposed to communities of many kinds, and yet I retain a strong sense of home and the importance of family (whether family of origin or family of choice). I grew up in a stable two-parent home on a farm in the west of Northern Ireland with my two younger brothers. I was given a quality primary (elementary school) and secondary (middle and high school) public education in Northern Ireland, and when I left home at 18, I spent a gap year working for the Methodist Church in Ireland as an itinerant Youth and Children's Worker.

Throughout this wonderful year, I had the privilege to work with over 75 different pastors in over 90 different congregational and ministry contexts. The team I was a part of taught Religious Education classes, conducted assemblies, and spoke with Christian student Fellowships in over 100 schools. We were also heavily engaged in the visitation routines of whatever pastor and congregation we were with. In any given week, we were tasked with conducting training and resourcing workshops for multiple youth and children's volunteers. This GAP-year experience was particularly formative in nurturing and building skills in leadership and pastoral care. Skills that I continue to return to in every ministry-setting that I've served in since. It solidified my sense of call to the work of ministry. It was because of this experience that I was paired with mentors that were invaluable to me as I moved on to university. Two women in particular, Helen Sweeney and Carol Foster, have been hugely influential in helping me navigate my expanding and ever-questioning faith. These two women mentored me as I was beginning my journey of discovering my sexuality, and how it fit with my life as a Christian woman. A

Christian woman who sensed a call to ministry. Their approach was direct but loving, which I needed and have tried to emulate in my own way in the ministries with youth and college students I have been involved with since then. As far I was concerned, Helen and Carol were fearless, unapologetic and brilliant. They didn't shy away from leadership opportunities within the church and without. They stood tall and with authority. They were smart and taught me to lean into my gifts, my personality, to own my abilities and master many skills. They very much demonstrated to me how women in ministry can and should support one another and be vital to the life and vitality of any faith community.

After that, I moved to Scotland to attend the University of St Andrews and study for a BSc (Hons) in Geography. I also continued my involvement in Christian leadership with the university Christian Union and in youth ministry through working with new Vineyard church plant. It was during my time in St Andrews that I was able to travel extensively, in Europe in particular but also to Sri Lanka and Brazil. Those times spent backpacking, seeing new things and meeting people of different cultures and languages was incredible. I discovered so much about myself through those experiences. Extended stays in countries and with families poorer than mine opened my eyes to the many ways in which I lived a life of privilege. The relative ease with which I was able to live, move and have access to medical, educational, and civic services and resources came into clear focus when I traveled. Those daily advantages were things that before then just faded into the background and were virtually invisible to me until I encountered others for whom daily life meant navigating poverty, discrimination (on the basis of language, perceived race or religion, or political loyalty) and the devastating effects of natural disasters and environmental degradation. However, as I look back now, my hunger to live a life of faith in the real world, was kindled through these experiences. I longed for the tools to break open scripture

and prayer, mission and worship in ways that met the tangible needs of others and not simply satisfy some personal sense of piety or expectation.

Once I completed my undergraduate degree in 2008, I moved to the United States of America. I started working as a Director of Youth Ministries in a new United Methodist church-plant in Middle Tennessee. I also audited a few classes at Vanderbilt Divinity School, and shortly afterward enrolled in a new and developing Masters course in Youth Ministry and Practical Theology through the Center of Youth Ministry Training (CYMT) and Memphis Theological Seminary (MTS). I didn't pursue ordination within the UMC at that time when other members of my class did, for fear that such a process would "out" me before I was ready. Though unable to articulate it until after graduation I was eventually able to accept that I'm gay. But, despite being incredibly liberating, 'coming out' posed new and unforeseen challenges when it came to living out my call in the ecclesial context in which I was ministering in.

I graduated from MTS and accepted a full-time youth ministry position in Newburgh, IN. My time serving on the ministry staff at Newburgh United Methodist Church was filled with amazing highs in ministry as well as much personal and professional growth but was not without its challenges. I remain indebted to a number of gifted and insightful adult volunteers in the youth ministry. They were both my encouragers as well as the ones that I trusted enough to hear their words of disagreement, advice and ideas. Engaging in youth ministry with this team of leaders was a joy, and one that I continue to be blessed by as I go through seminary. The final year I spent at this church was perhaps one of most painful 12 months in Christian leadership I had experiences to date, but looking back, it was one of the more pivotal ones in helping me refine what kind of leader I want to be. Ministering in a denomination that neither supports nor

celebrates my covenant of marriage was incredibly stressful and deeply hurtful at times. Leading youth and families in their faith development from a place of vulnerability and fear became the norm in 2017 and it has instilled in me the importance of strong supportive relationships and the hidden value of leading from a place of woundedness. My vulnerability seemed to open new avenues of empathy and connection that I had been unaware of before and is something I now consider an asset rather than a liability in ministry.

Since then, I have transferred denominations from UMC to UCC. I've come into my third and final year of study at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS) in the Master of Divinity program, and I've had the distinct joy of serving as Pastoral Associate at St Andrew UCC in Louisville, KY. Over the past 4 years my sense of call to ministry in the UCC has only strengthened. I continue to learn and become more informed about this specific diverse expression of beloved community. I'm grateful to expand my vision and feel out these new contours of covenantal life looks like and feel like to be a part of. I'm excited and committed to the future of this church as it learns what it means to embrace the holistic, justice-focused work that God is already doing in our midst. I think we are positioned to be uniquely relevant for the challenges that our world faces today, and although it will not be an easy ride, I'm thrilled to be a part of this legacy of God's work.

II. Theological Grounding

My own theological perspectives have been greatly shaped by the contexts, experiences, and relationships that have made me who I am today. My faith continues to move, shift and grow as I do. However, it is simultaneously grounded in the tradition of which I now count myself a part. With that tradition in mind, I have organized this portion of my paper by using the UCC Statement of Faith as an outline.¹ I do this with the understanding that the UCC places emphasis on *testimonies* of faith rather than *tests* of faith.

**We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in
Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:**

The proclamation that “*We* believe...” is a communal one and that fact has become increasingly comforting and empowering as I live and learn through this journey of faith. I believe that this connects each individual with one another. My faith is strengthened and uplifted by your faith, and my doubt feels less overwhelming when we all share our questions. I have come to believe that God is Ultimate Reality, Breath of Life, and Source of Love. I believe that God is the power and purpose through which all life coheres. Therefore, *we* can (and need to) learn from and be enriched by sharing our search and devotion of God in dialogue with others.

**God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the
divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.**

I believe that God’s act of creation is ongoing in this world. God creates humanity in the image of God,² sets eternity in our hearts,³ and places kingdom-life within us.⁴ In doing so, the Bible teaches us that in every mortal there is something *immortal*. The claim that God creates

¹ The words directly from the UCC Statement of Faith will be in single-spaced, bold-type, and any bible references will be in the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

² Genesis 1:26

³ Ecclesiastes 3:11

⁴ Luke 17:21

humankind in the divine image is central to my theology of inclusion and belonging. It's a theology that draws its ethical foundation from the *imago dei*. Therefore, any act, word or thought that by intention or impact strips another human of their dignity and worth, not only strips them (and us) of our shared humanity, but also defaces the holy image of God in that person. The practice of extravagant welcome, of open and affirming inclusion, is one that remembers and honors the *immortal's* presence within the mortal.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

We live in a world where people suffer, many times at the hands of other people. People suffer neglect, hatred, cruelty and exploitation and yet I believe that their Creator is wholly loving, and in holy, perfect love desires and is motivated to save *all* people. We are in need of saving because our attempt at being God has consistently undercut and undermined God's vision for a just and abundant life for all. Our actions and inactions have only increased the suffering of ourselves and others, adding to aimlessness as we remain disconnected from our Source. Since humanity universally *needs* salvation,⁵ the salvation God enacts *is* universal.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

I believe that God is just and good, therefore when I consider God's judgement on our propensity to distort or neglect love, justice and mercy, I believe that God judges all humanity and all nations justly and in truth. The "will of righteousness," testified to in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament is the will of God. This "will of righteousness" has always been characterized by compassionate solidarity, steadfast love and service to others, particularly those who have been most adversely impacted by our "aimlessness and sin," rather than a personal quest for goodness. There have been and continue to be prophets and apostles who speak the

⁵ Romans 3:23

truth of God will. Holding up a mirror to ourselves and the world, posing the question: Is this what God has created you for? God is still speaking through such prophets and apostles, and calls on his followers to discern divine will from human claims to power and authority.

**In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord,
God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and
death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.**

I don't purport to know how or why the brutal execution of Jesus by Empirical forces in the 1st-century works to reconcile all creation again with their Creator. The Bible use many different images and metaphors to explain what Christ's death means for us, the poetic language of Isaiah 53:5 stands out: "...he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that *made us whole*, and by his bruises we are healed." If sin is our vain attempt at self-governance and control, and if the result of that attempt is increased suffering and death (which is undoubtedly is), then Christ in surrendering control and succumbing to death *only* to rise again reveals the sheer futility and destructiveness of efforts to be our own God. But by being broken and rising again to wholeness, God has invited us to share in that gift.

**God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the
church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all
ages, tongues, and races.**

I believe that the Holy Spirit moved women to preach in a time when it was unheard of. I believe that it brought people of different races together to worship and pray in the midst of segregation. I believe that the spirit of courage empowered LGBTQ+ people to continue to preach and teach despite those who called them abominations. As with the Pentecost moment in Acts, when people of different parts of the world who spoke different languages were able to communicate and understand each other, the Holy Spirit breaks down barriers that the world builds in often unsettling and unpredictable ways. The Holy Spirit reminds us we are a covenant people, connected with a vast "cloud of witnesses" that stretches back through the ages. That we

are not to merely seek comfort with like-minded people, but continue to strive to be in authentic, sometimes messy relationships with each other and our God.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

I believe that God has called us to live a life of discipleship, based on humility and trust. We trust that in God we are made whole and that is the basis of our true self. It is in response to God's grace, love, and goodness that we give freely of ourselves in all our imperfection, entering into communities of other imperfect people. These communities are together the church which through God's power are tasked to "proclaim the gospel to all the world" and "resist the powers of evil" in ways and to an extent that we cannot do as individuals. The sacraments of baptism and holy communion ground us and remind us that we are joined in faith with Jesus and accepted into the fellowship and work of the church.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

I believe in the faithfulness of God to continue to expand the good news of forgiveness, grace, justice and peace. The Holy Spirit empowers us to engage in the struggle to humanize 'abundant life' every day and devote ourselves to dismantling death-dealing systems in our world of which we are so often complicit in maintaining. We can do this individually, though by working together we multiply our effort to seek healthcare for the sick, advocate for the poor, challenge systems and policies that contribute to oppression, in such a way as to transform our communities.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God. Amen.

III. Historical Roots and Current Practice

The story of the UCC is the journey of Christians serving God through the church and pursuing unity within difference. Four major and diverse denominations merged to become the UCC, each carrying values and traditions that continue to enrich our denomination today. From our Congregational Churches (beginning in the 1600's) we receive a spirit of covenant, theological liberty, desire for genuine faith, and a strong sense of local congregational autonomy. From our Reformed Churches (beginning in the early 1700's) we receive spiritual zeal, presbyteral governance, an appreciation of liturgy, and pietistic leanings. From our Christian churches (beginning in the early 1800's) we receive a sense of fellowship, ingenuity in synthesizing spiritual gifts that emerge in political, social, and religious movements, and an ability to keep our minds open for new insights. From our Evangelical Church (starting in the mid-1800's) we receive ecumenical impulses and appreciation for a Pietistic, mystical, Christian spirituality not dependent upon a confessional approach. Ministry and mission with the UCC reflect these traits and values and much more. The UCC today is much broader and more inclusive than any of its predecessor bodies.⁶ This is in increasingly diverse denomination which was formed around a commitment to visible church unity locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally, and that aim remains its challenge and its promise in 2021.

The adoption of the 'comma' in the "God is Still Speaking" campaign launched in 2004, was one of the first symbols that I recognized as uniquely UCC. The "never place a period where

⁶ Reuben A. Sheares II, "A Covenant Policy," in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, ed. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1990), 70.

God has put a comma” is a statement that characterizes my own spiritual journey and expanding theology in ways that I continuing experience as enriching as well as challenging. Yet, this ever-broadening vision of church life and faith is what makes UCC polity and theology so relevant for our current moment in time. Difficult conversations at the Local Church level and ambitious resolutions at the National Church level are how I understand a “covenanted relationship of autonomous units”⁷ to work. It’s messy and frustrating, uncomfortable and demanding, but it seems to me that all relationships, particularly between those who disagree are like that.

In the discussion on ‘covenant’ and ‘autonomy’ it is of preeminent importance to note that our covenanted relationship between and among the various settings of the church is itself within the covenanted relationship that God has established and maintains in Jesus Christ, the head of the body, and the head of the church. By invoking the body metaphor from Paul’s writings, to the Corinthians⁸ and also the Ephesians,⁹ we have insight as to how autonomy and covenant at to function together. This biblical metaphor is intentionally woven into the various articles of the Constitution¹⁰ that define the respective rights and responsibilities of all the autonomous units within the church. The work of ministry is divided and assigned, just as within the human body the digestive system is responsible for processing food, and the respiratory system is responsible for processing the air we breathe. However, once the Constitution and Bylaws tells us who is responsible for what, it is transparent about the expectations placed upon each unit for its delegated tasks as well as it’s responsibilities towards the other units. Each

⁷ Louis H. Gunnemann, “Order and Identity in the United Church of Christ,” in *New Conversations*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fall 1979), 15.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

⁹ Ephesians 4:1-16

¹⁰ Especially IV (Local Churches), VI (Associations and Conferences), VII (General Synod), VIII (Instrumentalities), and IX (Bodies other than Instrumentalities).

setting of the church, just as within the human anatomy is a member of the whole, the body. The Constitution and Bylaws is a covenantal document. One in which we freely and voluntarily participate in, and one that invariably calls us to grow in grace and mercy towards one another.

Our covenantal relationship within and between the various settings of the UCC is a storehouse replete with the tools of collaboration, innovation and build-building. These, I believe, are and will be the tools needed to reawake and re-energize the people of God for the work of God now and in the years to come. Courageous community engagement, enthusiastic participation in civil life, bold efforts for liberation and equality, and unapologetic calls for justice will all simultaneously stretch our dual commitments to autonomy and to covenant, while also, I believe provide opportunity. Our historical aim remains as true today as it did at our conception, to make visible the kingdom-work that God is doing all around us. That work is one that indeed benefits from congregations and agencies that practice bold autonomy in their respective contexts, but it also is work that is made coherent and transformative by our covenantal unity, witnessing to the just will of God.

IV. The Work of Ministry

The United Church of Christ states in its constitution that every member is called to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the gospel in church and society.¹¹ This commitment is a witness that reaches beyond the denomination. The UCC is known for laypeople and clergy partnering as equals in ministry and mission, each having their own gifts for the Body of Christ. Lay participation in liturgy, governance, and social justice movements is crucial. There is no one person or office claiming sole authority to interpret scripture or speak infallibly for UCC churches. UCC expressions of leadership are at their best when clergy and lay partner with each other in accordance with their callings and gifts. However, the constitution also states that the UCC recognizes that “God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required by the church.”¹² The constitution goes on to describe how authorization for ordained ministry uniquely sets a member apart “by prayer and laying on of hands”¹³ to “preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership.”¹⁴ Although the UCC refuses to embrace a single unified justification for authorized ministry,¹⁵ these tasks form the functional character of ordained ministry.¹⁶

Preaching and teaching are powerful and profoundly sacred aspects of how I understand my call to ministry in a congregational setting and something that I believe God is continuing to

¹¹ Paragraph 20.

¹² Paragraph 21.

¹³ Paragraph 22.

¹⁴ Paragraph 23.

¹⁵ Barbara Brown Zikmund, “Empowerment and Embodiment: Ministry in the UCC,” in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, ed. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1990), 87.

¹⁶ Barbara Brown Zikmund also describes the “representational character of ordained ministry.” 87.

nurture a passion for. Through the study of scripture, biblical languages and exegesis, I am indebted to my time at Louisville Seminary in equipping me with tools that have enriched my sermon preparation. Preparing to preach during the dual crises facing our country today, that of the global pandemic and police-brutality towards black people, demands that the preacher be deeply attuned to the needs of the congregation, listening and hearing from their experiences as well as contemporary social and political events. This is the nature of leadership and pastoral care. Pastoral care takes its shape from the God of work in the community of faith, in the individual, as well as in the world. It is a holy collaboration that affirms both the joy and the sorrow of life, the challenges and the opportunities for growth. Shared symbols and shared actions are instrumental in the bonding of the community as well as our focus on our holy collaborator, God.

The UCC recognize two sacraments instituted in scripture, that of baptism and holy communion. Both are invitational and endorse the unity of all believers. The sacrament of baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. Through baptism a person is joined with the universal church, the body of Christ and in baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always. Within the UCC, the baptized infant, youth or adult are gathered into a community of love and belonging regardless of where their journey of faith may take them. Water is an essential element of baptism and a symbol of cleansing and life in the Bible—the water of creation, the great flood, the liberation of Israel through the sea, the water of Mary's womb, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, the woman at the well, and Jesus' washing of the feet of the disciples. That is why water is visibly present in the service. In the UCC, the mode of baptism is a matter of choice, some use sprinkling, some pouring, and some immersion. No matter the mode, this is a covenant

relationship between the community of faith and the newly baptized to walk in the way of Jesus as co-travelers.

In holy communion we not only remember Jesus' life, death and resurrection, but also recognize Jesus' continual presence with us. We proclaim Christ's resurrection and his relationship to us as living Lord. In the UCC the communion table is also a symbol of the inclusive nature of our God. Communion is a joyous act of thanksgiving for all God has done, is doing, and will do for the redeeming of creation. It is an earnest prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit to unite all those who share at the open table with the risen Christ and with each other. For me it is a living sign of love and an intimate experience of fellowship in which the whole church in every time and place is present.

Through the practice of baptism and of holy communion we publicly affirm our faith and our connection to God and to one another, a reminder of the openness of God to receive all people. This openness and humility pervade all the rites of Christian community, from the joy of new birth or the hope of marriage, to the peace found in grieving a loved one, or the promise of healing and reconciliation. The church through the power of Christ seeks to create welcoming and safe spaces that teach, support, and nurture each other in this often-challenging life on earth. It is through these rites and rituals that we recognize that God is still speaking, moving and creating something new, and that the community itself continues to change and grow as the diversity of understanding and experience collects and opens us to hear God's gracious voice.

To be ordained in the UCC is to be asked to represent the UCC in the Christian community and Christ in the wider world. It is to make oneself available to enter into a

covenantal relationship,¹⁷ responding to the needs of the Body of Christ,¹⁸ and to serve in mutuality with the members of the community of faith.¹⁹ I am indebted for the opportunity to serve at present the community of St Andrew UCC in Louisville, KY alongside Rev. Lori Miller-Price. To say that this season in which we minister has been challenging would be an understatement. This is true to for the task of discerning the changing needs of the Body of Christ during this time of crises. This discernment however led to the necessary shift in my role and responsibilities from when I was a student pastor, during my Field Education placement. Coronavirus has forced us to carry out the responsibilities of ministry in new and untested ways and I have been honored to be a part of the decision-making regarding worship during this time when we cannot be together in person. Despite having to navigate multiple funerals and centenary-birthdays during this time, the members of this congregation have been ever-willing to share in the work of pastoral care. This has been a true testament to the central belief of the UCC that every member of the church is called to minister. I've been heavily involved in worship planning during this period including preaching monthly and leading adult book studies. I have been primarily responsible for receiving, editing and preparing multiple worship and devotional videos a week, as well as finding ways to extend worship opportunities for those without technology and creativity engaging our children and youth. The strong relationships between the leadership team, congregation and senior pastor have ministered to me and I'm excited and privileged to continue ministering alongside them.

¹⁷ MOM, 2:5, p.83.

¹⁸ MOM, 2:5, p.84.

¹⁹ MOM, 2:5, p.85.

Conclusion (1 page)

As we enter a new decade, one that has opened within the unprecedented challenges of not one pandemic but two, that of coronavirus but also of racism and white supremacy. Our church, at every level and in every setting, must draw on its historical and theological commitments to autonomy and covenant. It has been made clearer than ever over the past 12 months that we are all bound together in a web of mutuality. Yes, we are free to make choices that benefit ourselves, our families and our own communities of faith, but we are not disconnected from others.

I am interested in the new and emerging shape of Christian community at this time in history. I'm fascinated by the experiences people have of God outside of our church buildings, a move that our current circumstances have forced us to make. I am deeply convicted that the role of the Christian leader must be more than dispensing truth from the pulpit. People of all ages are hungry to see how their faith can engage and offer answers for the evil and hurt they see in the world. Serving in a Louisville congregation during this summer's Black Lives Matter protests has only emboldened me to this holy call to preach and teach the good news of Christ that extends beyond our walls. Proving once more that the church is not where we meet but who we are. I'm encouraged by the recent resolution passed by IKC to address issues of racism, this is a necessary and difficult realization. Yet, I believe that when the Body of Christ moves with intention to repent and reform, then the transformation of our churches and communities will follow. I want to be a part of this and all moves that seek to radically witness to the God of love and justice within and beyond the church.