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## I. My Pilgrimage of Faith and Path Towards Ordination

I open this reflection on my faith journey thinking of it as a tapestry with many threads and colors that grew out of what I consider my “call scripture”—words that God has etched on my heart and that resonate in my deepest being.

*And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’ (Isaiah 30:21, NRSV)*

God has placed a kaleidoscope of opportunities before me. I have turned to the left, and turned to the right, and stepped across many edges that have challenged me. I have stories to tell. Scriptural stories, ancient stories, my stories. Years ago, at a Native American storytelling festival, one of the speakers ended her narrative by encouraging the audience to “find your voice, find your story.” That comment has captivated me and I have spent my adult years not only honing my own narrative, but providing others with the communication tools that they need to tell their story. To become self-advocates. To share the Good News of who God created them to be.

My faith story in the life of the church begins with my baptism at six months of age at the First Presbyterian Church in Lake Forest, Illinois. My parents were raised Presbyterian and met each other through the church’s youth group. When I was eight, we moved from the Chicago area to Dodgeville, Wisconsin. There was not a Presbyterian church in town, so my family began attending Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ. The Rev. Dave Roberts was my pastor and presented me with my first Bible when I was ten years old. The passage he highlighted for me was:

*...in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence. (1 Peter 3:15, RSV)*

Through the years I often pondered “what does this scripture mean for me?” How am I to give voice to the Good News of the transformative love I have experienced in my relationship with God? Several decades later, God’s answer to that question is becoming clear.

I grew up and was confirmed within the UCC. The first strands of my life’s texture are embedded with the love, respect, and self-advocacy my parents intertwined in my life. From my father, I received the

mentorship of a teacher, Chicago Cub fan, and tennis enthusiast mixed with his leadership as the director of the Southwest Community Action Program (CAP). His involvement in the local community, writing grants for home winterization projects, the local food pantry and women's clinic, merged his passion into the dusty layers of the community's hard reality. From my mother, I was immersed in the creativity of a poet, the colors of a painter, the endless traveling of a wanderer, and the observant eyes of one who sees everyday events through a unique perspective. I write as an individual whose life experiences are shaped through my lens as a heterosexual, white, female, with a chronic neurological condition. I self-identify as a Christian whose faith is informed and enriched through engaging with biblical and historical narratives of the past, infused with remembering where God is drawing us into the future. Process theologian Marjorie Suchocki writes that "...the rhythm of the universe is in the mystery of the dance between past, present, and future."<sup>1</sup> This interplay of past and future leads me to follow Jesus out onto the streets of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As a youth, one of the great gifts Rev. Roberts gave to me was an interest in interreligious engagement. I specifically remember the movement of the Spirit I experienced when we attended a Shabbat service at the Beth Israel Center in Madison. As an adult, I have continued to participate in retreats and worship services in interreligious settings. As a seminary student I completed two courses in interreligious engagement and Just Peace practices, including a two-week study tour in Israel and Palestine in which we met with faith leaders who were Muslim, Jewish, and Christian. In addition, my field placement through the Chicago Theological Seminary was supervised by the Rabbi Bonnie Margulis at Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice (WVJ) and John Thomas, the past General Minister and President of the UCC. Over the course of that year, I had an opportunity to participate in leading community events such as a Poverty Simulation, an advocacy workshop in multiple UCC congregations, an economic justice film festival, and developing WVJ's social media presence. During my internship, I joined with faith leaders at rallies, county board meetings, and engaged in conversation with state government officials, giving witness to the justice issues through which our biblical ancestors spoke God's Word.

As a young adult, this passion for exploring God across faith and place boundaries manifested in a variety of ways. My husband, Steve, and I met in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and were in the same graduating class at Dodgeville High School. We have two adult children, a son-in-law, and two granddaughters who live in the Madison area. Steve was raised Roman Catholic. Since I am an individual interested in encountering new religious experiences, and my husband's family was deeply centered in their Roman Catholic faith, during college and the first 10 years of our marriage we attended Mass together. I became active in the

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 21.

congregation, learning about the history of the Roman Catholic faith and teaching first Communion. The rituals of the liturgy and historical traditions fascinated me. Yet, over time, Steve and I each experienced epiphanies in our personal relationships with God—in two different places, at two different times. Steve’s experience led him away from the church. I respect and learn from his life’s journey. In contrast, in a transformative split second, I had an encounter with God shook me to the core, initiated my call to serve the Church, and led me back to the UCC.

Fifteen years ago I experienced an “ah-ha” moment as God revealed God’s self in a most unexpected moment at Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian retreat center in New Mexico. It was perched on a high, flat desert ledge in northern New Mexico, that God vividly and intimately revealed God’s self to me. In that moment of Holiness I was connected fully with the endlessness of time and the expanses of the universe. I “understood” beyond understanding without hearing a spoken word. After mountain climbing with a small group to this scared place, we sat together with a red sandstone wall jutting towards the most tranquil blue sky. On the wall, centuries ago, a holy person had hand carved footprints of deer, raccoons, bears and human creatures. All the prints “walked” upwards, through the natural red canvas, towards the hope and love promised above. There were more images: a shaman dancing, a river, and a reclining Kokopelli. As Kokopelli lay on his back playing his flute, our guide described the formation of these living rocks from a time before dinosaurs, through the reign of those great creatures, to modern human beings. When she was done with her storytelling, she took out her Native American flute and began to play with the wind on the ledge. As the notes rose in the breeze, swallows danced before us, fluently soaring with God’s message. God’s call in my life is rooted in that moment. The rest is wordless, complete, and deeply known in my soul. At the end of the week in New Mexico I sat in an airplane on the tarmac waiting to fly home. As the sun began to glow in the east over the hazy mountains, I clearly heard the word “remember” spoken in my ears. No one on the plane uttered the word. It was another God moment. To this day I continue to feel the vibrations of the word in my heart and soul – *and remember*.

In the midst of this shift, the peoples and land of southwestern Wisconsin began to stir my theological interests. Over the years I have been intrigued by “place” theology and how our interactions with the land shape our faith journeys and our relations with God. The experience at Ghost Ranch set in motion a new set of observations for me between these two very different environments and the similar, yet different, human experiences in each place that arise from God’s earth. For, in both the arid land of New Mexico and the lush green, driftless Ocooch Mountains of southwestern Wisconsin, the land has had a significant impact on the people since before recorded times. Even as the conveniences of modern technology and the excesses of commercialism swirl in our busyness today, this interaction between the land and its peoples – and God -

continues. I endlessly seek experiences where encounters with that “thin place” with God are palatable and wonder at the presence of the Spirit that draws other faiths to these same places. At Ghost Ranch, this concept of “place theology” has resonated deeply within me. The week-long retreats that I have participated in have included visits to Christ in the Desert Monastery, Dar al Islam, an Eastern Orthodox Skeet, an Apache Two Spirit Sweat lodge, and several sites previously inhabited by ancestral Pueblo peoples.

The theologian Howard Thurman suggests that love functions through “the ability to put oneself in the life of another and to look out upon the world through the other’s eyes...”<sup>2</sup> My spiritual mentor, Belden Lane echoes this embodiment of our relational experiences with God and each other writing that the “...mystics all insisted that knowing God is a matter of ‘tasting,’ ‘savoring,’ and ‘relishing.’ It isn’t an intellectual apprehension of something *outside* their experience, but a full-bodied encounter... *Everything* in creation is hungry for relationship. All bodies yearn for connectedness with each other and with the Source of their energy and life.”<sup>3</sup> This is where I encounter the multi-ness of God. There are moments of unexpected revelation in relationship with the earth, other creatures, and other people that God has carefully woven into the fabric of my Christian faith. I find myself deeply connected to the Holy as I wander in the coolness of the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. I have returned to Ghost Ranch for interreligious spiritual retreats. In the unglaciated lanes of southwestern Wisconsin, I reconnect with God as frequently as I can.

My life story is also immersed in learning about communication. I obtained my undergraduate degree in Communication Arts, with an emphasis in broadcasting and film. Expanding my interests, I pursued a master’s degree in Communicative Disorders. For over twenty years I worked with children and adults that could not use speech as their primary mode of communication. As an Assistive Technology and Augmentative/Alternative Communication specialist, I worked with individuals in their homes, school, places of work, and the community, providing them with the tools they needed to engage in relationships and teaching them strategies so that their voices could be heard.

In my relationship with the Divine, there have been the manmade boundaries God has beckoned me to cross. Professionally, working in healthcare with individuals with physical, cognitive, sensory, and psychological challenges, I witnessed how welcoming those with a range of abilities in our local communities enriched the diversity of God’s image present in our midst. I believe that the ways in which a society recognizes and respects individuals of all abilities is a reflection of our humanity. As the Director of Faith Formation, I

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (New York: Harper, 1954; reprint, Richmond, Indiana, Friends United Press, 1972), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Belden C. Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 12.

have listened to individuals and families, and implemented programs to make the congregation Accessible to All (A2A). We are, as process theologian Marjorie Suchocki writes, “Bound up with one another’s good, woven into one another’s welfare.”<sup>4</sup> Religious practices, the recognition of the presence of the Divine both in worship and in the community, as well as our responses as human creatures—shape our relationship with God and with all of creation.

In my ministry, this includes utilizing multi-modal communication strategies. As a “tech immigrant,” I am passionate about digital ministry. I enjoy exploring the sacred spaces in which those of us that did not grow up with computers and social media (tech immigrants) are being lead into God’s vision for the future by individuals who are tech natives. “Tech natives” are people who, like my two children and two granddaughters, have grown up in a globally-connected, digital world. Subsequently, I like to weave technology into all aspects of my faith journey. I have read books on how technology is changing culture and isolating people. I hear the concerns, but have also seen the flip side of the story—the ways in which God is working within this new, creative medium, and how God will be further revealed to us in digital places that are yet to be explored. For I have witnessed how technology can provide a “voice” for people that cannot use speech as their primary mode of communication. I have provided digital pastoral care. As a hospital chaplain I have joined families together in their greatest moments of despair, physically separated by hundreds of miles, using webcams. I have expanded a faith community’s presence into an online sacred space in which we gather for prayer, community, service, advocacy, and worship. As a hybrid seminary student, traveling to the Chicago Theological Seminary for half of my classes and taking the remaining courses online, I have personally experienced the community that can be built in these digital spaces. Over the past five years, my home church’s online community and Bible study have kept me connected when I was unable to be physically present while I was serving another church and attending seminary. This digital faith community has fed my soul when I have felt isolated. Communication, rooted in the Word, informs my theology.

As the Church intersects and engages with the culture and technology in which it is immersed, it is inevitably changed. Phyllis Tickle wrote about the changes that the Church is experiencing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the Great Emergence. She points to Mark Dyer, an Anglican bishop, who suggests that “about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity...must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”<sup>5</sup> Within the changes that mainline Protestant churches are experiencing in North America today, I agree with John Dorhauer when he states that, “whatever the Spirit is doing here—She can

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<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 105.

<sup>5</sup> Phyllis Tickle, “*The Great Emergence*,” *Sojourners*, November 6, 2015, accessed January 30, 2017, <https://sojo.net/magazine/august-2008/great-emergence>

be trusted. I have no doubt that what is emerging all over the Church is not only something new, but something authentic...a true response to a missional calling of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> I write these words in January of 2017, a week after I participated in the Women’s March in Washington, D.C., with 52 other people from the Wisconsin Conference UCC. I believe that the movement of the Spirit that congregations have been experiencing over the past 20+ years, particularly within the UCC, has placed us in a unique position to proclaim the Gospel in our own time, in our own place. We have a story, a God Story, to tell.

Whatever political, economic, cultural, and technological changes we are living into today, I see connections between the knowledge that science and technology are revealing in our context with the shift that occurred in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and led to the Reformation. For example, in 1440 C.E., the printing press opened up the opportunity for texts to be mass produced. Subsequently, Augustine was “rediscovered,”<sup>7</sup> and publishers began to create copies of the Bible in the languages of the people<sup>8</sup> (vs. Latin). At that time, there was a convergence between upheavals in systemic political and economic structures, and changes in technology. Alister E. McGrath reminds us that, “The crucial insight of the sixteenth-century Reformation was not “restoration” but continual renewal: the church re-formed and always re-forming.”<sup>9</sup> This understanding of continual rebirth is an aspect of my UCC faith journey and encounters with the Still Speaking God that I carry with me into my ministry.

## II. My Theological Perspective and Understanding of Historic Christian Faith

As a confirmation student, I memorized the UCC Statement of Faith. While I take my faith seriously, I also embrace holy folly. Theologian Belden Lane points out that “The Christian tradition of the sacred fool extends from the apostle Paul’s exhortation to be ‘fools for Christ’s sake’ to Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*...”<sup>10</sup> and states that, “in the tradition of holy folly, progress in the spiritual life is seldom what you expect. It brings an increase in foolishness, not sanctity; laughter at one’s failures, not gravity at one’s self-importance. Befuddled, you end up discovering the holy in the last place you anticipated.”<sup>11</sup> I mention holy folly because I am going to suggest that in part, I encounter the Trinity as a prism. While this metaphor does not fully describe my mind-

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<sup>6</sup> John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2015), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Louis H. Gunnemann and Charles Shelby Rooks, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1999), 199.

<sup>10</sup> Belden C. Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 196.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 197

body-soul relationship with God, Christ, and Spirit, it provides a glimpse into my understanding. The Merriam Webster dictionary for kids defines a prism as “a transparent object that usually has three sides and bends light so that it breaks up into rainbow colors.”<sup>12</sup> My encounters with God, the living Christ, and the Spirit point to that Trinity that allows Light and Word to break forth through in a multitude of colorful metaphors that each reveal an aspect of who God is (Gen. 1:3, Job 29:3, Psalm 27:1, Psalm 119:105, Isa. 9:2, Matt. 4:16, Mark 4:14, Luke 1:79, John 1:1, John 1:5, John 1:7, John 8:12, Act 4:31, 2 Cor. 4:6, 1 John 1:5).

## a. God

The UCC Statement of Faith begins with these statements:

*We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify: You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death. You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.*<sup>13</sup>

In classical theology, God has often been understood as impassive—a God that does not feel. William Placher and Michael Welker describe this God as “derived from Greek philosophy...God as impassible and unchanging...much of the Christian tradition does seem to have portrayed God as unaffected and unaffected.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, throughout scripture I find God is consistently portrayed as a God in motion. A God with emotion. A God of the senses. A God that sees (Exod. 3:9, 1 Sam. 9:16, Psalm 31:7, Isaiah 38:5), and hears (Gen. 21:17, Exod. 2:24, Exod. 16:12, Num. 11:1, Psalm 18:6, Jer. 31:15), and touches (Jer. 1:9). God invites the human creature into multisensory experiences. Lane points out that “...when Moses and Joshua were told to take their shoes from their feet, so as to touch the holy ground on which they stood, the symbolic gesture was more than one of respect and fear (Ex. 3:5; Jos 5:15). It also signaled an occasion for receiving the divine presence with the fullness of their senses.”<sup>15</sup> The human creature touching, hearing, sensing the presence of the Holy. A fully integrated encounter with the Divine. Grounded on the soil from which they were created.

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<sup>12</sup> “Definition of Prism,” Merriam-Webster’s Student Dictionary, accessed January 25, 2017,

<http://www.wordcentral.com/cgi-bin/student?book=Student&va=prism>

<sup>13</sup> United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology, “Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ—La Declaración de Fe de la Iglesia Unida de Cristo,” United Church of Christ, accessed January 29, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/beliefs\\_statement-of-faith](http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_statement-of-faith).

<sup>14</sup> William Placher and Michael Welker, “The Vulnerability of God,” In *Towards the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis, 192-205 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 192.

<sup>15</sup> Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 79.

As postmodern thought emerges, I believe that our understanding of the Divine is shifting from that of a stagnant, distant God, to that of a God who is continuously active and present. I experience God as the incomprehensible Divine Mystery that is known to me in part through intersecting, interwoven modalities—from the infinitesimal to the cosmic. God is relational. A verb. A God on the move. An action that is birthed out of God’s transformational love and grace. An action that creates order out of chaos, comforts the suffering, and seeks justice for the oppressed. Lane notes that when, as individuals, we are immersed in “a spirituality of brokenness... (we are called) to reconsider the ways we’ve learned to picture God... This is the ‘scandal’ of the gospel that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians. God is not what we expect.”<sup>16</sup> It is here that we, both as individuals and as a church community, discover that the relationship between God and creation is horizontal.<sup>17</sup> For over two millennia, a vertical hierarchy has commonly been envisioned between God and the human creature, placing God in a status of “greater than” the relational human beings God created. This concept of a hierarchical relationship has in turn resulted in the human creature understanding itself as having dominion over other living things and the earth as a state of ultimate power and control. I believe that our relationships with one another, other creatures and living things, with the earth, and with God, have been negatively impacted by this vertical understanding of “power over”—versus God’s original intention of an interwoven universal well-being for all creation.<sup>18</sup> From seeing the Mystery revealed in creation (Genesis 1-2:4), to removing our shoes on Holy Ground (Exodus 5:5), hearing the presence of God in silence (1 Kings 19:12b), and feeling, smelling and tasting God’s new covenant in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, God communicates with us in multiple ways.

## **b. Jesus**

Continuing with the UCC Statement of Faith, I profess that:

*In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> Marjorie Suchocki, *The End of evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 130.

<sup>19</sup> United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology, “Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ—La Declaración de Fe de la Iglesia Unida de Cristo,” United Church of Christ, accessed January 29, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/beliefs\\_statement-of-faith](http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_statement-of-faith).

Jesus is Light and Word integrally present with God from beginning of time. Jesus is both fully human and fully Divine, whose humanity is integrated with—yet a unique aspect of—the Divine. Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection exposes the transformative and intimate nature of God’s love. Jesus continually leads us into relationship with people and places on the edge, at the margins of society, where full interdependence and God’s creative vision of universal well-being can be realized. Jesus’ life, as God With Us, transcended the fear that rises along those edges, crossing boundaries and shattering expectations. Jesus was continually on the move, particularly in the Gospel of Mark. He moved between geographical locations in Palestine, Jerusalem, and Gentile territory (Mark 5:21, 6:53, 8:10), as well as between people of different socioeconomic statuses: from religious elite (Mark 2:16, 5:38, 8:11) and those working for the empire (Mark 2:15), to women (Mark 5:25, 7:25), individuals with physical and/or sensory challenges (Mark 2:5, 8:22, 14:3), and children (Mark 5:42, 9:20, 10:14). In our place and time, Jesus continues to challenge us to step into the unexpected, cross boundaries, and envision a new world where love overcomes fear and life overcomes death. I believe that, as followers of Jesus, the narratives of our biblical ancestors point to norms of us being rooted:

1. **At the edges** – Our human tendency is to stay in our comfort zones. Yet as followers of Jesus, we are continually called into new places, beyond known edges and boundaries. There, in the thin space between despair and hope, the world can be transformed.
2. **In communion** – Nourished by the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Covenant, the living Christ draws us into God’s vision of universal well-being. Jesus invites us to—and meets us at—the Open Table, feeding and nourishing the Body of Christ. In turn we are to feed and nourish each other and our neighbors (John 21:15-17).
3. **As people of the resurrection**—We are a people of the resurrection. In each generation, we are called to retell the story of the cross in our own contexts, for we have heard Jesus’ story and know that life overcomes death. And this is Good News!

One of the ways we encounter Jesus in our own time and place is through the sacraments. In my understanding of God as a verb, and Jesus’ constant motion, I experience baptism and communion as a remembering of God’s ongoing covenant—the drawing together the Body of Christ throughout time, deeply enmeshed in our “now.” Ruth Duck, homiletics professor, writes that “To see the sacraments as connected with everyday life is also to relate them to lives of love, justice, and peace in the world...in the way we interact with one another not only in the church, but also in the world, thus showing the first fruits of life in God’s reign.”<sup>20</sup> I appreciate Theodore Jennings’ thought regarding the concept of bodily learning in that

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the whole people of God: vital worship for the 21st century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 147.

“ritual does not primarily teach us to see differently, but to act differently... (providing) a pattern of doing”<sup>21</sup>  
In his writings, Howard Thurman further explores the interconnectedness between the “inwardness” and the “outwardness” of religion. In this both/and of the human encounter with God through Christ and the Spirit, he suggests that as people come together in worship, there is both the potential for inner transformation at the level of the individual, and outer overall growth in faith as a Body of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

My understanding of baptism is one of welcoming and transformation. Jennings cautions against seeing baptism as a one-dimensional sacrament of welcome into the faith community. He points to baptism serving “...to make clear the unity of all who are participants in the messianic reality, or serves as a dramatic point of identification with the change from death to life the results in a radically altered form of life...Paul insists (that) the true meaning of dying with or in Christ, dying to the law, the flesh, the world, or the elemental spirits of the universe...a baptismal practice that substitutes rather than effecting, a radical change in our form of life is a reversal of the Pauline theology of the cross.”<sup>23</sup> Tom Driver, who was a Paul Tillich Professor of Theology and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, expands on the transformative experience that is revealed through the sacraments stating that, “...both Baptism and Eucharist include reminders of death and dying: To be baptized is to surrender one’s life to flooding waters... Christian sacraments celebrate something that is humanly absurd, something literally unbelievable and beyond all worldly expectation. The sacraments are about deliverance from oppression, including the grip of death.”<sup>24</sup> Baptism welcomes the child, or adult, who is being baptized into the faith community. It is also a reminder to all that God promises to be, and is, present. It is a retelling of the story of Jesus’ baptism and the other acts of baptism recorded in scripture. Baptism is the Word and Living Water in our own now, both for the individual being baptized, and the gathered witnesses who each recall their own baptism. Baptism is reliving our covenant with God and with one another—and reaffirming that we are called to live differently in and out of church as followers of Jesus.

In regard to communion Calvin reveals, “I indeed admit that the breaking of bread is a symbol; it is not the thing itself. But, having admitted this, we shall never the less duly infer that by the showing of the symbol the thing itself is also shown...the sacred mystery of the Supper consists in two things: physical signs...and spiritual truth...”<sup>25</sup> During an online discussion through the Chicago Theological Seminary, a

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<sup>21</sup> Theodore Jennings, “On Ritual Knowledge,” *The Journal of Religion*, April 1982, 117.

<sup>22</sup> Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> Theodore W. Jennings, *Transforming Atonement: A Political Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 194-95.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Faw Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2006), 202.

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, vol. XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 1371.

peer explained the experience of communion with these words: “We come together (presence) not to serve ourselves but to serve each other; not to build ourselves but to build the body of Christ; not to fill our bellies but to feed the hungry (purpose)—with the understanding that the core meaning of the Lord’s Supper is the self-giving of divinity into human history.”<sup>26</sup> The experience of communion is the self-giving of God into the human experience, past, present, and future.

I believe that we encounter Jesus in an embodied, cross-generational, sensory experience as we retell the stories of baptism and of the Last Supper. That said, I also believe that it is important for each congregation to understand the theological “why” behind the “how” of the administration of the sacraments and “where” we encounter the Living Christ in our current context. For is it and ongoing process to discern the best liturgical practices in our own particular time and place. The UCC’s Council for Health and Human Service Ministries states that:

“The Church’s mission in health and human service must reflect this holistic understanding of human personhood and of life itself. New scientific knowledge can be understood theologically as an expansion in human awareness of the elements of shalom. God’s Spirit is ever at work, inviting us to participate in God’s creative transformation of human need. Thus informed by scripture, tradition, and human experience, our faith compels us to seek new ways to enable the liberation of the oppressed and reconciliation of the alienated through new acts of love and justice.”<sup>27</sup>

I have a passion for cross-generational faith formation, inside the walls of the church, in the home, school, work, and community. Multiple scripture references point to the importance of including children in the rituals and traditions of the faith in order to pass the teaching on to future generations. In the Hebrew Bible, God instructed the Israelites as they prepared to leave Egypt and gathered for the first Passover to “...observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children...And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses’” (Exod. 12:1-28). This integration of God’s word into ordinary time and retelling the story over and over continues in Deuteronomy: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away...” (Deut. 6:4-9). In each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus says, “‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them’” (Matt. 19:14, Mark 10:13-14, Luke 18:16). The author of Matthew recorded that children were present on two separate

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<sup>26</sup> Fadi Diab, “Eating and Drinking with Jesus (discussion group, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, November 24, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> “Mission Statement on Health and Human Service United Church of Christ,” October 2006, accessed November 21, 2016, [http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy\\_url/1924/ucchealthhumanservice-missionstatement.pdf?1418425464](http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/1924/ucchealthhumanservice-missionstatement.pdf?1418425464)

occasions as 4,000- 5,000 men, women, *and children* who had gathered to hear Jesus teach were fed bread and fish (Matt. 14:21, Matt. 15:38). I would encourage faith communities, through bible study and conversations, to develop their own understanding of what Jesus' invitation to the Open Table means for them. Jennings writes that, "The human being, as male and female, is the image and likeness of God. No distinction of secular or ecclesiastical rank, no distinction between the sexes, no cultural or racial distinction can be permitted here. For if it is permitted, then the most basic principle of a theological anthropology is perverted and abandoned."<sup>28</sup> I believe that Jesus' radical welcome encourages all to partake of the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Promise regardless of age. For me, an understanding of Imago Dei extends across the lifespan.

### c. Spirit

UCC Statement of Faith further recognizes that God:

*Bestow(s) upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.*<sup>29</sup>

In the Light that is revealed in my relationship with the Holy, I identify as a mystic, deeply connected to the Spirit. I find that human language limits my ability to fully express my understanding, but this passage from the Acts of the Apostles comes close to describing what I experience both in places of wilderness, solitude, and community: "When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31, NRSV). I take solace in Lane's words suggesting that, "The great mystics, from Rumi to Julian of Norwich and Isaac Luria, knew there was no language for what they wanted most to say."<sup>30</sup>

I am a desert person, recognizing the power of the Spirit's presence in both parched places and celebratory revelries of the human experience. Yet as a "desert" person, I have lived my entire life in the lush greenness of southwestern and southcentral Wisconsin. I define "deserts" broadly as those dry places in our lives. Turning again to Lane, I find "Desert and mountain places, located on the margins of society, are locations of choice in luring God's people to a deeper understanding of who they are." Hospital rooms,

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<sup>28</sup> Jennings, Theodore, *Image of God* (part 1), MS, Chicago Theological Seminary, 17.

<sup>29</sup> United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology, "Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ—La Declaración de Fe de la Iglesia Unida de Cristo," United Church of Christ, accessed January 29, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/beliefs\\_statement-of-faith](http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_statement-of-faith).

<sup>30</sup> Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 109.

skilled care facilities, food pantries, college campuses, urban streets, at the graveside, are just a few of the “deserts” I identify and in which I have encountered the Holy Spirit. For me, God’s *ruach*, breath, is the Spirit that courses through the seen and unseen, creating order out of chaos (Gen 1:2). I sense the Spirit in Suchocki’s nod toward “...the rhythm of the universe (that) is in the mystery of the dance between past, present, and future.”<sup>31</sup> Great hope in the midst of despair is, as Suchocki notes, “...appropriately a component in all our efforts toward achieving our visions of justice. Hope is catalytic, and ultimately is the most important ingredient in the struggle for justice, insuring the perseverance that brings justice about.”<sup>32</sup> I believe that the Holy Spirit leads us to edges, to where people struggle to live at the margins of political, economic, and social powers of their time. Where prophetic voices are captured in scripture and historical records. And that this is where I am to share my pastoral gifts today.

#### **d. Sin**

All things are created by God within a criterion of universal well-being. The tendency of the human creature towards the sins of fear and forgetfulness turns us away from God’s intention the Holy Whole that exists in the interconnectness of all that God has created. Reinhold Niebuhr writes that the human creature “...is ignorant and involved in the limitations of a finite mind; but he pretends that he is not limited...All of his intellectual and cultural pursuits, therefore, become infected with the sin of pride...The religious dimension of sin is man’s rebellion against God...The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice.”<sup>33</sup> In contrast, my understanding of personal sin is reflected more fully in Suchocki’s suggestion that “When...one responds to relation by violating the well-being of another, one has lessened the richness of experience not only for the other, but also for all (including self)...Thus any single violation has communal effects.”<sup>34</sup> She further describes the nature of “sin as personal indicates a violation of relationships, resulting in a state of alienation from God, nature, one another, and the self.”<sup>35</sup> Thus it is my belief that personal sin is multidimensional and negatively impacts multiple relationships simultaneously.

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<sup>31</sup> Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, 89.

<sup>33</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: a Christian Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 179.

<sup>34</sup> Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, 23.

Thurman writes that while God's "...*intent* is for integration, for wholeness, for community within the limitations of the organism itself"<sup>36</sup> there is also "the potential for disharmony reside(ing) in man."<sup>37</sup> Paul Tillich noted that a shift in the understanding of sin began to emerge in the 18<sup>th</sup> century away from, "A term like 'original sin' (which) was considered as a shame and as ridiculous" to "the concept of estrangement: estrangement from oneself, from the other man, from the ground out of which we come to which we go... one of the fundamental expressions of sin is to make the other person into an object, into a thing."<sup>38</sup> I see our cultural need to avoid discomfort plaguing many of our Protestant churches today, particularly those that are historically white. In the process of evading the call of the Gospel to see and face our sins (James 5:15, 1 John 1:9-10), faith communities have turned away. In a world that is tormented by violence, fear, hate rhetoric and suffering, congregations avoid naming the systematic evils that oppress children and families in their own neighborhood. Systemic sins are manifest in a multitude of ways in the human condition—domestic violence, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, ableism, sexism, the raping the earth.

Another sin in our context are the systemic economic injustices from which those of us whom are white have benefitted. Yet the thought of delving into a conversation on White Privilege turns most of us of Northern European descent inward, away from where Jesus is leading. In fact, in many instances, I believe we are not even aware of the role we play in continuing the oppression. This hesitancy has led many congregations to become spiritually unwell. In my experience as a person that is white, living in the Midwest, discussions around "sin" and "confession" can cause individuals who consider themselves rational, scientific minded, postmodern people of faith to cringe. I believe that the aversion in naming our sins perpetuates the injustices and creates disharmony. It is challenging to acknowledge that, as a person who is white, I have participated in—and am continuing to benefit from—economic systems that oppress people of color. Engagement with my own White privilege is a place that I had not realized that I needed to go until I began doing economic justice advocacy work. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki writes that, "To hold to a criterion of *universal* well-being challenges every border we close, and ever raises before us the reality that in fact our interdependence is far wider than we can consciously know."<sup>39</sup> For our own well-being as a faith community I see us needing to cross that uncomfortable edge and give voice to our sins. We need to step beyond the doors of the church, to those boundaries beyond which Jesus is leading. Thurman reminds us that, "The

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<sup>36</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Tillich, "Communicating the Christian Message: A Question to Christian Ministers and Teachers," In *Theology of Culture*, 201-13. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

<sup>39</sup> Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 73.

*experience* of race...at any moment in time, is an acute awareness of the absence of harmony.”<sup>40</sup> Harmony is what God envisions for the universal well-being of all creation. Seeking harmony means following Jesus and traversing the edges of our fears.

#### **e. Church and Ministry**

As a follower of Jesus, I affirm the UCC Statement of Faith’s claim:

*You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.*<sup>41</sup>

Remembering the stories of our biblical ancestors and living into God’s vision for the future, the Church is a community where God’s transformative love overcomes fear. Created in the image of a relational, loving, ever present God, we as human beings are commissioned to creatively engage with God and all of creation in 1). Being present to, witnessing, and responding to brokenness and suffering, 2). Providing radical hospitality to reveal heaven on earth in our own time and place, 3). And seeking justice for all of creation. We are a people of God’s Story, the eternal narrative of past and future that informs our now. For the universal well-being of all, God has continually met the human creature at those thin edges between despair and hope. There, boundaries are shattered as Christ feeds us in the breaking of the Bread of Life and the sharing of the cup of the New Covenant. Throughout time, we as individuals and as community gather at the Table with the Divine to be in relationship with our neighbors. In feeding others, we in turn are spiritually fed. As Christians, as people of the resurrection, we are to tell the Good News that life overcomes death, and that love overcomes fear.

### **III. UCC History, Theological Roots, Polity, and Practice**

I believe that God is continually in the process of creating something new. Subsequently, our faith is one that is dynamic and ever evolving. Suchocki points out that “...the Christian faith has taken many diverse forms; no single mode of faith—not even one’s own—has been held unchangingly for two thousand

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<sup>40</sup> Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology, “Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ—La Declaración de Fe de la Iglesia Unida de Cristo,” United Church of Christ, accessed January 29, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/beliefs\\_statement-of-faith](http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_statement-of-faith).

years...”<sup>42</sup> That is true of the trajectory of the denomination within which I have found my faith home, the United Church of Christ.

There are multiple images that come to mind when I reflect on my own ministry to date in the UCC. I am a connector, or bridge builder. I am a weaver. But most of all, I have come to understand that I am a seed planter. My ministry has become rooted in planting seeds, tending to them, and then stepping back to witness their growth. The parable of the sower resonates (Matthew 13:1-23). Doug Pierce, who was the executive director of *The Crossing* an ecumenical ministry on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, referred to the engagement of the college students with the Word as “the research and development arm of Christianity.” As someone who was a researcher in my previous vocation, I have embraced this idea in the wider church, integrating not only evidence based best practices into my understanding of the multiple shifts occurring in faith communities today, but also the need to read the bible, listen, discern, pray, play, take risks, and be OK with both success and failure. For I do not know what the Spirit is planting in our midst.

Listening to the community that I serve and following the Spirit that bursts forth is one of the ways in which I put my theological education and denominational experiences into practice. An example grew out of a conversation at the Great Lake Regional Youth Event in 2014. There, discussions around the possibility of the Youth Group from Lake Edge UCC going General Synod 30 the following year emerged. The soil was prepared. Over the next 12 months, I facilitated multiple Youth Group meetings, fundraisers, and collaborated with the youth leaders at the McFarland UCC making plans for Youth @ Synod. Held in Cleveland, the location of UCC’s national headquarters, the teenagers with whom I traveled experienced the wider Church in all of its “good, bad, and ugly.” For, the schedule for Youth @ Synod in 2015 was not integrated with the General Synod sessions. Instead there was a separate space in the adjoining room for the youth. Breakouts sessions for the teenagers were scheduled separate from the adult activities—and the youth were frustrated with being excluded. In the midst of the unsettling, the Spirit was present. As the youth voiced their disappointment in the lack of opportunities to observe the resolution process and floor debates, the Wisconsin Conference and national leadership of the UCC heard—and responded. Several denominational leaders made the time to listen to the teenagers. Even the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, newly elected to his role as General Minister and President of the UCC, made it a point to show up at an evening youth group gathering. He talked directly to the teens about the importance of their voices. He affirmed the role they would each play in shaping the future of the Church.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 31.

After we returned home, the youth shared their story during a joint worship service with Lake Edge and McFarland UCC. With the pastors and other youth leaders, I played a role in talking to the teenagers and helping them to plan the service. That Sunday morning I was present and ready to step in as needed. However, I found myself standing in the back of the sanctuary giving witness to the leadership of the youth as they took charge. Through words and a video, they testified to unexpected places they encountered God during General Synod. Since the trip, I have watched these young people taking on roles as lay leaders and church council members, mentoring at youth retreats at the UCC's Pilgrim Center, and giving sermons. Several have taken on advocacy roles in college. Seeds continue to sprout. They have found their voice. This gives me great hope for the future of the Church.

#### **IV. Ordained Ministry**

As an individual that is engaged in inter-religious dialogue, the question could be asked of me is, in my pluralistic encounters with the Holy, "Why Christian?" Why UCC? Why not Quaker, Unitarian Universalist, Buddhist, or Nature Spirituality? For me, it has been a great privilege to be a part of the wider UCC, embracing the many ways that "God is still speaking." The UCC's testimonies of faith include the statement "that the UCC is called to be a prophetic church. As in the tradition of the prophets and apostles, God calls the church to speak truth to power, liberate the oppressed, care for the poor and comfort the afflicted."<sup>43</sup> I remember the first time I fully understood the distinctiveness of the UCC's radical hospitality and commitment to justice. It occurred during a conversation that I had with the Rev. John Fife, past Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). He led the spiritual retreat I participated in at Ghost Ranch. At the time, back home I was co-leading McFarland UCC's *Open and Affirming* (ONA) process. As we talked about the church's discernment, John noted that he appreciated UCC's ability to take risks and openly talk about challenging issues. These opportunities to come together as a church in caring conversations, even if the issue is "messy," is a part of the UCC's DNA that I treasure. I believe in the both/and of the autonomy of individual congregations, who are also covenanted with others in the wider denomination. This relational dynamic provides the UCC with a unique lens through which to hear the Spirit and faithfully respond.

I cherish the faith experiences that I have had within the UCC and feel strongly called by God to be an ordained minister, authorized to administer the sacraments. My response comes out of the "thin places" and relationships I have encountered in partaking of the sacraments—particularly the sacrament of communion,

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<sup>43</sup> "What We Believe," United Church of Christ, Accessed January 27, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/about-us\\_what-we-believe](http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-we-believe).

that one-on-one presence of Christ in my life. Every time that I have tried to avoid God's call in my life, it has been communion that persistently draws me back to Christ and community. The sensory revelation of God With Us in the relational tearing of the bread, the smell of the wine. The fullness of life embraced at the Open Table as I am welcomed into community with others on their own faith journey. In large halls, sanctuaries, in small circles, in the community, in the wilderness, with friends, with strangers, I am drawn to God, fed by Jesus, and moved outward by the Spirit. The unexplainable Great Mystery of the meal that is interwoven with the sun, wind, rain, earth, seeds, sprouts, and harvest. For me, this meal dissolves the barriers of time and place between all people, past, present, and future.

This is the narrative into which I am called to serve the Church. To enter into a covenantal relationship with the UCC, a local congregation, and myself, in response to God's presence in my life. Serving Lake Edge United Church of Christ the past five years, and having the privilege of being licensed by the Southwest Association on three separate occasions, has affirmed the Spirit's engagement in my work as preacher, teacher, administering the sacraments, providing pastoral care and leadership in the life of the church, and in the community.<sup>44</sup> I also value the opportunities that I will have to use my voice to represent the UCC. And of course, there is always the *remembering* of God's continual in-breaking into history as told in scripture and our contemporary contexts.

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<sup>44</sup> "UCC Constitution and Bylaws," United Church of Christ, accessed January 30, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/ucc\\_constitution\\_and\\_bylaws](http://www.ucc.org/ucc_constitution_and_bylaws)

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