

Ordination Paper

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Part 1. The Christian Faith

My Christian faith perspective is illustrated by the Trinity. *We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother.*¹ I understand God in three persons as reflecting unity in diversity: God, Jesus, Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. In the manyness of God I see a testament to the holiness of unity, many in one. The nature of unity maintains and honors the identity of each part of the whole. I see unity in diversity reflected in the rich diversity of God's creation and God's all-encompassing love. I see unity in diversity reflected in the both/and nature of Jesus Christ himself – the impossible possible of Jesus' humanity and divinity. I see unity in diversity reflected in the ceaseless movement and work of the Spirit. She takes many forms, she speaks in many voices, and she guides us all back to God and each other.

I also find the manyness of God at work in the Christian Church. We share creeds, scripture and sacraments. We testify together that Jesus Christ is Lord and the head of the Church and we are the manyness of the body. And in that same shared space we respond in an endless variety of ways to the call of discipleship and the doing of church. The Christian faith makes the most sense to me through a lens of unity in diversity – one made out of many and many becoming one.

God

In the unity of the Trinity I understand God's desire for our interconnectedness and wholeness. I am compelled by the God of the Hebrew Bible who seeks relationship with God's people; who relentlessly offers renewed covenant to God's people who relentlessly break it; who changes God's mind against the destruction of God's people; the same God of the Gospel who came to the people to walk with the people; who searches for the lost until they are found. I am compelled by the God who seeks wholeness for God's creation; who tried to protect the first people from the knowledge of suffering. The God who offers forgiveness, mercy, grace and peace no

¹ "Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ," United Church of Christ, http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_statement-of-faith

matter the multitude of our sins, the many ways we separate ourselves from God and each other. I understand the unity of the triune God to reflect God's desire for the unity of all people and the building and nurturing of community.

I understand the diversity of the triune God to reflect God's desire for inclusivity. I am compelled by the God who created humanity in God's image. I celebrate and embrace the multiple images and metaphors for God in the scriptures as evidence of the expansiveness of God's being and doing: Creator, Lord, Father, Mother, Shepherd, Fire, Light, Wisdom, Word. Expansive language for God helps us to know God and meet God anew and in unexpected places. When we limit our religious language we limit our religious imagination and we risk missing new invitations to dream God's dreams and share God's vision. "Never place a period where God has put a comma." Commas are instructive and invitational. I am compelled to follow.

Having memorized the Apostles' Creed and the UCC Statement of Faith for a confirmation assignment at the age of 12, I spent my teens and 20s reciting these testimonies confidently, but not really thinking about the words: Maker of Heaven and Earth. God calls the worlds into being. God creates humankind in the divine image. God makes. God calls. God creates. What does it mean that God is active in our world, in our lives? I believe we are each known by God, called by God, lead to wholeness and justice by God. I do not believe that God created once and then preset a line of dominoes to fall. The triune God embraces all the complex parts that make up each one of us: body, psycho-social, cultural and spiritual. At every stage, at every age, I believe God embraces who we are and who we are becoming and works in us: loving, healing, challenging, guiding.

Jesus

I am compelled by the whole story of Jesus Christ – his life, his death and his resurrection. Jesus is God made known as our brother; God who came to share our common lot. Jesus Christ's humanity and divinity is a complex theological mystery but together they manifest God's promises of forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace. As one of the three persons of God, Jesus connects humanity with God in a unique and restorative way.

I believe that the words and actions of Jesus model the mind of God and God's desire for human wholeness and relationship.² Jesus Christ – fully human, fully divine – is a radical testimony to the breaking in of God into this world in order to join humankind and help us dismantle all that gets in the way of human wholeness. If God is made known in Jesus, then the words and actions of Jesus become the words and actions of God. Jesus is a revolutionary, so God is revolutionary. Jesus loves the bullied, the marginalized, and the stranger, because God loves them too. Jesus speaks truth to power, because God speaks truth to power. Jesus suffered, so God suffered. I think that is one of the radical messages of the Christian faith. In Jesus, God is intimately connected to God's creation. Inseparable. Like Paul, I am convinced (Rom 8:38-39). If Jesus models the mind of God, then as a disciple of Jesus, I aim to have Jesus' mind in me.

In Jesus life, he called out the injustices of the social and political systems. He modeled the kingdom of God as a community open to all people. He interpreted the Hebrew scriptures to proclaim God's love in surprising ways. In the gospel narratives Jesus called people to change their hearts and lives and to seek forgiveness for their sins. Sin is a necessary faith concept for a follower of Jesus. Sin is that which separates people from God, each other and themselves. Sin is that which harms or deprives human wholeness. Salvation then is the work of making the person whole again. When so many believed they had no right to dignity, no right to dream, no power,

² Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, 82-83.

Jesus proclaimed the Good News that God desires God's people to be well, to be free and to be whole. Jesus proclaimed the Good News that no earthly authority or system determines who is worthy and who is dispensable.

In Jesus' death, God revealed a love for people so great that God chose the same path that the oppressed and marginalized, the abused and the forgotten are forced to take. Emmanuel ("God with us") suffered with us. In Jesus, God was victim to corrupted laws and politics, and God was executed unjustly. In Jesus, God died with those who loved him in hiding, afraid and powerless. And in Jesus resurrection, God made true everything that Jesus promised. Everything. The light shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:5). I believe all of Jesus' story – his life, his death, and his resurrection – his humanity and his divinity - makes the decisive difference in our relationship with God. The God of love and justice instructs us to build and restore community, knows our joy and our suffering, and is present to us in a new reality of reconciliation and reunion.

Spirit

As one of the three persons of God, the Spirit was also in the beginning. In the beginning was God, the Word, and a wind from God that swept over the face of the waters (Gen 1:2b). The Spirit has been moving ever since. The Spirit is the person of God that I have known from my beginning as well. Before I could name her, I could feel her. My earliest memory of God is the Spirit present to me, moving within me. I do not know why I first experienced the Spirit as feminine. Neither my family nor my church intentionally gendered the Spirit either way, so it was fascinating to learn that both Hebrew and Aramaic languages gendered the word Spirit as feminine and the Greek gendered the word Spirit as neutral. In the beginning She was with the Word and They were with God. The manyness of the triune God never ceases to amaze and inspire me.

Scripture identifies the Spirit as God's breath, as wind, and as fire. In the natural world, wind and fire are forces of vitality and power. I understand the Spirit as both life-giving and life-disciplining. As an active person of God, the Spirit gives life, desires, enables, comforts, and sends. Jesus calls the Spirit the Advocate and the Helper. The Spirit moves us toward wholeness and justice, toward God and each other. When we pray the Prayer of Invocation at the beginning of worship, we invite the Spirit into the space and into ourselves. God is always present and the Spirit is always working, but worship is time set apart to respond to and participate in the Spirit's work. We invite the moving guiding person of God to transform the space from ordinary to extraordinary. From static to fluid. That's powerful stuff because in that invitation is also our acknowledgement that the Spirit is transforming us too.

I think the Spirit helps us discipline and transform the parts of ourselves that seek ways other than God's. My church used to sing *Spirit of the Living God* before the Pastoral Prayer: "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me." One particularly hot summer, the secretary changed the words from "Melt me" to "**Bless** me." It was received with laughter and lots of "Be careful what we ask for" jokes. "Bless me" stayed that way in the bulletin for several weeks and I took notice of the implication of the song's language in a new way. The prayerful demands of that beautiful simple song have two parts: participatory (Fill me / Use me) and transformative (Melt me / Mold me). If I ask the Spirit to fill me and use me, to take my shape and use me as I think I can be used, I risk missing the possibilities for me that she already visions. I risk caging the Spirit to sing my favorite song rather fly higher than I ever thought possible with the Spirit's lead. To pray for the Spirit to melt me, to mold me, that is an act of trust and surrender. That is the prayer of a disciple. Melt me, Spirit, mold me. Melt all the parts of me that have been shaped by the broken ways of this world and shape my life as God dreams it – in wholeness, with dignity, in freedom. Melt me, Spirit. Break the chains that bind me to the lies of this world – that

I'm not enough, that it's not possible. Melt down my apathy and my pride and mold my mind to see as you see and love and as you love. The Spirit, one of the three persons of God, is in the business of putting back together God's people - in community and individually. She is a constant activating agent of God's promises.

Church

The Christian church is the diverse community of God's people that aims to demonstrate love for God, neighbor, stranger and enemy as modeled and taught by Jesus. The ministry of the church relies on the power of the Spirit to manifest God's transforming love. Jesus established the church as a community called and sent to serve and to testify to the Good News of God's forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace. The church is called by God to do specific things. The UCC Statement of Faith names specific calls to action for the church: practice discipleship, serve the whole human family, proclaim the Good News, resist evil, partake of the sacraments, and join Jesus in life, death and resurrection.

The church receives its instruction and authority to do these things from Jesus. Jesus models and teaches Christian discipleship throughout the Gospels. For example, in Luke's gospel Jesus models the "doing" of church and ministry: "Follow me" (5:4), "Love" (6:27), "Be compassionate" (6:36), "Forgive" (17:3-4), "Go," (10:37). These are actions of hospitality, breaking barriers and making whole. Jesus' ministry also demonstrates inclusivity beyond the familiar and the traditional: defending the woman who anointed him (Mark 14:3-9), touching untouchables (Luke 5:12-16), inviting the children (Matt 18:13-15), teaching anywhere at any time (John 9:13-16). I understand community, hospitality and inclusivity as the scaffolding of church ministry. When we follow Jesus we will find ourselves in relationship with others.

In Luke 10:1-12 Jesus instructs the seventy-two to become like strangers and seek the hospitality of those they encounter on the move. I find this example of Christian mission a

compelling guide for the church's work in the world. In Luke, Jesus prioritizes building relationship in the other's space and on the other's terms, "Don't move from house to house." The disciples are instructed to dwell among the people. Luke's Jesus teaches the disciples to be present to the other in the reality of their needs. Similarly, Jesus models hospitality when he meets the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus sets up the encounter on their terms. He asks about their concerns. He lets them make the invitation for dinner. There is no temple or building in sight; just the opportunity for relationship. The kingdom of God is manifest in authentic relationship. The work of building relationship, trust, and an awareness of the community's needs becomes the work of the church and the proclamation of the Good News becomes the church's identity, not just an announcement.

In proclaiming the Good News, I think it is important for us in the church to remember that God's work in the world includes God's work in each of us too. Discipleship does not authorize the church to change people or request their obedience to our way. God makes the invitation and God transforms people. In this way, being church is also practicing humility. Sometimes being church means physically leaving the church building to go meet God's people where they are, not where we are comfortable. Other times, being "on the move" means moving within ourselves (from where we are often *very* comfortable). I think Jesus' call to "follow" and "go" are also invitations to the church to bring our own thinking to new places, to hear the stories of our faith anew, and to be open to encounter God, Jesus and the Spirit in unexpected ways.

The Sacraments

Theologically speaking the Church is the body of Christ with Christ as its head. In reality, the Church is actually many churches and being church sometimes looks very different from church to church. Which church – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Nondenominational? Which

bible translation? Which worship style? Who is allowed to be clergy? What level of social activism? Churches approach Christian theology and discipleship from different angles. One source of agreement and shared doctrine between the Catholic Church and mainline Protestant churches like the UCC is the primacy of the ancient sacraments of Baptism and Communion. The sacraments are ritual acts instituted by Jesus Christ during his ministry. Just as the church was instituted by Jesus, so to the sacraments of Baptism and Communion are understood as holy rituals performed and received specifically within church worship.

Baptism

In all four gospel narratives the beginning of Jesus' ministry is marked by Jesus' Baptism in the water of the Jordan River. The gospel narratives tell us that when Jesus was pulled up from the water, the Spirit came to him and God claimed him as his Beloved son. The ritual of Baptism invokes upon the one to be baptized God's blessing, God's claim on the person's life, and the community's welcome into the Christian Church. The water poured out in Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the inward receiving of God's grace. In the UCC, Baptism is open to anyone at any age but the practice of infant Baptism is most common. The child's parents and family publically commit to teach and nurture the child to know God and follow Jesus. Promises are made, "I will, with the help of God." The child is named before God and bathed in the living waters. The church community gathered as witnesses also makes a vow. The church promises its love, support and care for the child and the family on their Christian journey.

Baptism is a beautiful sacrament. Some denominations practice adult Baptism only. Sometimes the idea of full immersion Baptism makes me wish I could be baptized again. I wish I could answer the Baptism questions for myself at this point in my Christian journey. Yes, I will follow Jesus, with the help of God. Yes, I will resist evil, with the help of God. I wish I could experience my body pulled up through the living water, restored and reclaimed. But if it had never

happened, if I had not been baptized and dedicated as an infant, I'm not sure I'd be here now, hearing God's call to ministry. At every stage of my Christian pilgrimage, I felt a freedom in knowing I was baptized and I belong. My UCC church community made me feel loved and respected as a child, a teenager and an adult. This belonging is a foundation that I have depended on in moments of doubt. God claimed me at my very beginning. My family and my church faithfully modeled God's love and Christian discipleship. Baptism gave me the security of belonging and the freedom to learn for myself what it means that God has called my name. Though I completed the Confirmation process in junior high, I regret that I did not experience the Confirmation curriculum or ceremony as a personal affirmation of my baptism; I memorized what was required. I look forward to helping young people understand Confirmation as a meaningful and celebratory invitation to affirm their Baptism.

Communion

Like the sacrament of Baptism, the sacrament of Communion was instituted by Jesus. The gospel narratives tell of Jesus gathering the disciples for the Passover meal the night of his arrest. At the end of the meal he passed around bread – everyday bread – and he did the same with the wine – everyday wine. He said the bread was his body broken for us and the wine was his blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. The gospels say that the disciples ate and drank. “Do this in remembrance of me.” John's gospel says Jesus gave them a new commandment at the table, “Love one another as I have loved you” (15:12). The sacrament of Communion is the holy invitation to the table to share the meal of the bread and wine with Jesus Christ. The UCC and its Protestant relatives understand the bread and wine to be symbolic representations of Jesus' body and blood, of life in Christ and blessing. We partake of the meal as a remembrance of Jesus life, death and resurrection. We approach the table and encounter the risen Christ.

When the pastor says “Come, for all things are ready,” I have to stop myself from jumping up into line. I confess that I experience the sacrament differently with pew Communion (when the bread and wine are passed out by ushers to people sitting in chairs). The incarnational language of the Communion story and liturgy is electrifying to me. Communion is the invitation to Christ’s table for the simple shared meal of bread and wine. I am reminded that when the disciples first received the bread from Jesus, they did not yet understand all Jesus had taught them and shown them. I am welcome to the table exactly as I am. I believe the table is open to all; open to anyone who wants to meet the Risen Christ. I knew from my childhood experience that non-Catholics were not invited to receive Communion during mass. The Catholic Church teaches that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. In order to receive this transubstantiated bread and wine, one must profess the Catholic faith teachings and participate in required ritual preparations. In the European churches I visited, I was introduced to the practice of approaching the priest for Communion with arms folded across my chest. This signaled to the priest that I did not want Communion but requested a blessing instead. This simple act of hospitality galvanized my understanding of Christian love through the sacrament of Communion. The Communion table. The bread. The wine. They are not ours to offer. They belong to Jesus. Jesus offers them to all. I will invite all to encounter Jesus at the table.

Part 2. The UCC

In my UCC History and Polity course we were asked to write an "elevator speech" explaining the UCC (less than a minute). Mine went like this: "It's a Christian church with roots back to the Pilgrims. We say 'no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.' And we really try to live into that reality: inside and outside of the church. Even if we don't agree 100%, it's our goal. We have lots of Christian theologies represented, but at the end of the day, I think we aim to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. And all are welcome on that walk." With five minutes, I would add a couple things.

More than Pilgrims

Our founders are separatists and reformers, pioneers and visionaries. We trace our denominational lineage through four traditions: Evangelical, Reformed, Congregational and Christian. The German Evangelical church sprang from the reform doctrine of Martin Luther. They sought to remove the hierarchical authority within Catholic Church that they believed created barriers between God and God's people. The German Reformed church followed Calvin's reformed Christian doctrine, placing utmost importance on a direct redeeming relationship with Christ. Both churches experienced persecution in Europe and found their way to the New World in search of religious liberty. The E&R understood church as "a people gathered by Christ the Lord."³ The two churches merged in 1934 to become the Evangelical & Reformed church (E&R).

Congregationalists started as Church of England Protestants during the reign of a Catholic queen. While taking refuge in Germany they picked up Calvinist ideas and when persecution continued in England, they too came to North America in search of religious liberty. They wanted complete separation. The Christian Church was born in the US out of the Second Great

³ Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*. "Chapter 7: From the Continent of Europe: The Evangelical and Reformed Story."

Awakening. The Christian Church in the North supported abolition, women in ministry, and had an Afro-American convention of churches. The Congregationalist Christian churches resisted organizational structure and understood church as “a voluntary religious organization”.⁴ The two merged in 1931.

In the pursuit of Protestant ecumenism and Jesus’ prayer “That they may all be one” (John 17:21) the E& R church and the Congregationalist Christian church merged to form the United Church of Christ in 1957. From the E&R tradition we get our reforming spirit (e.g. the inclusive language of the Moss version of the Statement of Faith), our covenantal values, and confessional testimony. From the Congregational Christian churches we get our separatist spirit for local church autonomy, our insistence on testimony (not tests), and our audacity for social justice.

Autonomy and Covenant

My experience growing up in a UCC church was positive and nurturing. However, there was zero connection to the wider UCC church. The only UCC identifier was the 1959 Statement of Faith that we read six times a year on Communion Sundays, trading off with the Apostles’ Creed. I remember explaining to curious friends that the UCC was “kinda Lutheran, I think” because I just had no idea. I did not know it at the time but I was unwittingly participating in UCC polity in action - the autonomy of the local church. According to UCC polity, local churches are self-governing. They have the right to choose their pastoral leadership, to decide how to spend their money, and to decide (or not) to participate in wider church initiatives. My church exercised its right to not participate. However, we were ignoring an equally important polity agreement: covenant. Yes, autonomy gives the right to choose most things, but our polity also outlines responsibilities and accountabilities for the local church.

⁴ Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*: Chapter 6 "From Movement to Denomination: The Congregational Christian Story."

Local churches in the UCC are asked to covenant with one another; to be in an accountable relationship. We agree to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the head of the church. Then, ideally, we make space, practice sacred listening, and encourage each other's faith formation. Covenant is a practice of ongoing discernment. It's like a pledge to keep trying: trying to dive deeper into our faith, trying to build bridges and strengthen community, trying to follow Jesus and make our lives actionable vessels of Christ's light. The UCC motto "That they may be one" takes a lot of work but it starts us in the direction of our neighbor, a direction outside of ourselves and towards relationship, the cornerstone of covenant.

What happens when local churches discern something different than or outside of the wider church testimony? A resolution was presented at the 2005 General Synod to reaffirm that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. I imagine the resolution was in response to churches or associations moving towards a low Christology. The final resolution encouraged local church discernment of doctrine but it also drew a line on autonomy, "Be it finally resolved that the Twenty-Fifth General Synod encourages all who proclaim the Sovereignty of Jesus *in their words* to discern the implications of that proclamation for the way they live their lives."⁵ I do not know if churches left as a result of this resolution but I agree with the synod's conviction that our unity is the Sovereignty of Christ and our diversity is how we discern and manifest that truth.

"The unity that we [the UCC] seek requires neither an uncritical acceptance of any point of view, nor rigid formulation of doctrine. It does require mutual understanding and agreement as to which aspects of the Christian faith and life are essential."⁶

The 25th General Synod reestablished our testimony to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as essential to Christian faith and life. I think the tension between autonomy and covenant, between unity and diversity can be as anxious and frustrating as it is inviting and revelatory. Parts of our Christian

⁵ "Minutes Twenty-Fifth General Synod" United Church of Christ, <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/gs25minutes.pdf>

⁶ "What is the United Church of Christ?" United Church of Christ, http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-is-the-united-church-of

testimony are certainly challenging, but we don't throw the hard parts out; we show up to experience them and figure them out together.

Our churches are so different and the interest in the wider church initiatives so varied, sometimes I wonder how our denomination survives. Our motto comes to mind, Jesus' prayer "That they may be one." Jesus calls us to love – no matter what, even when it's hard. Our "overarching creed is love."⁷ Even in our most complicated differences, maybe we all remember that commandment in our own ways.

Ecumenism and Interreligious Engagement

I recognize that I was born into the Christian faith. Just like another person is raised in a different faith. And yet another is raised with no religious affiliation at all. I try not to assume how someone "knows" church or God. I try to get the faith story from the person experiencing it. I am comfortable in ecumenical and interreligious engagement. I appreciate the insight of the UCC Rev. Rueben A. Sheares: "It isn't that you've got the whole truth; but the part you've got you've really tapped. But don't forget that you don't have it all."⁸ I can value and respect others faith testimonies and still maintain a commitment to my own. As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ I believe I am expected to engage in ecumenical and interreligious engagement with respect and on behalf of building relationships and coalitions that minister to and strengthen our communities.

⁷ http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-we-believe

⁸ Reuben Sheares, "The UCC: A Merger of Two Kinds of Churches," *The Living Theological Heritage*, vol. 7, 63.

Part 3. Faith Pilgrimage

As might be obvious by now, I have a deep appreciation for the United Church of Christ testimony to *unity in diversity* as it is one of the central themes that shaped my religious imagination and Christian concepts. My Czech father is a lifelong practicing Catholic. My Latina mother was raised in the Latino Pentecostal Assemblies of God. I was baptized in the Catholic Church, dedicated in the Pentecostal church, and raised in the United Church of Christ. And that feels just right to me. While we did not discuss religious differences as a family, my parents created a both/and space for each other's practices. Similarly, I made my own room for their different images of God. My father's Christ was the suffering man with thorns cutting into his head. My mother's Jesus walked in gardens and his sweet voice made the birds hush their singing, as the song said. The two images were not immediately connected as the same person in my young mind but I embraced both as special. Unity in diversity had a natural place in my first understanding of God and faith.

From my father I gleaned that obligation was somehow important to the practice of faith. My father's example of discipleship was to follow the teachings of the Catholic Church. I remember wondering how people knew what to say in the mass without a bulletin. I gleaned that meaningful worship in the Catholic context meant sticking to the script. From my mother I learned that devotion was also an important part of discipleship. My mother spoke often of Jesus the loving Lord and Savior. And she prayed. A lot. She prayed her own words as the Spirit moved her. If my father's praise was "It is just and right," my mother's praise was "Yes, Lord Jesus! Thank You, Jesus! ¡Gracias al Señor!"

My first examples of discipleship seem incompatible, but the two coexisted just fine. When I began to intentionally seek my own relationship with God, my father's religious obligation and my mother's religious devotion helped me understand the "cost and joy of discipleship."

Obligation and devotion are actions outside of the self and require a type of sacrifice. Sometimes the cost of discipleship is the call to do things I might not want to do. It is the call to obedience to God's vision, not mine. The joy of discipleship, on the other hand, is embodied in my mom's faith expression. She praises God with unending gratitude. Her joy is rooted in an unwavering faith that the peace of Christ is with her and new life in Christ awaits her. My mother's roots helped me plant mine.

In the early 1920s my Presbyterian great-grandmother Inez Cruz experienced a dramatic healing and spiritual conversion at a Pentecostal tent revival in rural southwest Texas. My great-grandfather Jesús did not share Inez's heart for this new life in Christ, but he supported her journey completely and is remembered for his humanitarian heart. Four of their sons (my great-uncles) became ordained ministers in the early Latino-American Assemblies of God. My grandfather Cornelio was not ordained but was gifted in public speaking and counseling. Growing up, my mother regularly shared the stories and wisdom of Inez and my grandfather and swore by the power of my grandmother Delfina's prayer. Knowing Grandma Cruz was praying for me was always comforting. During my adolescence and young adulthood, when I struggled to believe or understand for myself, I had my family's deep Christian love and convictions to believe for me.

My younger brother Dave and I attended our local UCC church every Sunday through high school. We spent a significant part of our childhood at church: Sunday School, vacation bible school, plays, youth group, choir. For Confirmation I memorized the 23rd Psalm and the Apostle's Creed. Even though my memories of church are positive, church for me was neither my father's reserved obligation nor my mother's emotional testimony. As a teen, I wasn't really clear what it meant to follow Jesus outside of attending church activities. I sang in the church choir from confirmation to college, so I had access to religious language but I did not speak it myself. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" – how? "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace" – what does

God's peace feel like? "One little word shall fell him" – *which* word?! I had questions but at this point I was not searching for answers. I gathered being a Christian was about fellowship, the golden rule and contributing to charities. In youth group we collected food for the local food pantry but I couldn't tell you where that pantry was located. I used church activities on my college applications and attended when I was home from college on breaks but I remember feeling like the real Christian expert was my mom. When it came to testifying to Christian convictions, my whole family spoke with confidence and authority. At this point I was content to be a Christian by proxy. It wasn't until my mid-20s that I began to intentionally choose to seek out and respond to my own Christian identity.

At age 24 I moved to England for my first teaching job. My circle of friends during this time were practicing Catholics. A few studied European medieval history and the early Christian Church. Next to professors, I felt I had little to contribute so I did a lot of listening. While in England, I visited European cities and worshipped in ancient churches. Learning the history of the early church was fascinating. I felt connected to a community of believers spanning thousands of years. I was deeply moved by the sites and artifacts of early Christian relationships with God: ancient ruins, medieval manuscripts, early Christian graffiti.

My conversations with my Catholic professor friends were the first time I was challenged to explain my Protestant faith. These conversations and debates helped me articulate my beliefs. For example, talk of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit or women clergy made my Catholic friends roll their eyes. I remember feeling embarrassed at first and then angry with their dismissal of my experience. After all, the Spirit spoke to the core of my mother's faith. The power of my grandmother's prayer changed lives. And for the first time in my life, in the midst of these ancient places and stories, I was hearing the Spirit speaking to the core of me. I felt grounded and I was ready to start building up.

When I moved back home, my church was looking for a youth leader. I was teaching full-time junior high in the public school but I was excited to be involved in the church. As I exposed the kids to the mission and vision of the UCC, I was also learning myself. During this time, the pastor introduced me to wider church events. Before this time I had never heard of an association or a conference or a general synod. The diversity and energy of the Chicago Metropolitan Association (CMA) of the UCC opened my eyes and heart to the Gospel in a brand new way. I met people working hard to improve real local lives by educating and calling out injustices like systematic racism, LGBTQ and senior discrimination, unfair wages, and generational poverty as a matter of Gospel priority. This kind of faith in action seemed different than my father's obligation, my mother's devotion or my childhood church experience, but it made sense to me. I was meeting Jesus in the justice work.

I remember attending an Illinois Conference meeting where the speaker, explaining the value and need for multicultural engagement as a matter of Gospel priority, said, "If you are uncomfortable in a multicultural worship service, then you are doing it right!" I started to recognize my struggles with faith as something holy. At another wider church event, my worlds collided and my religious vision exploded when I heard, for the first time ever, a UCC pastor pray just like my mom! In these wider church moments, a bridge formed, a walkway. I discerned my own path; leading out from my Catholic, Pentecostal, and home church experiences and toward my own new understanding of discipleship in Jesus Christ.

My church encouraged me to seek seminary education. I did not see this for myself initially. I felt like I was still learning and wasn't prepared enough to be called...as if God's call on our lives is negotiable. Nonetheless, this time of service in youth ministry and lay leadership all felt right and good. During these years of church service, I met God, Jesus and the Spirit again and again in the work of building and being community and I was excited to share God's call to

relationship and Jesus' example of actionable love and service. In the summer of 2012 I found that my excitement for sharing God's love and my eagerness to continue my Christian walk gave me peace and joy in ways my public school teaching vocation did not. I resigned from my job even before I knew I was accepted to seminary. That's how sure I was of this mid-30s ministry career change.

My time at Chicago Theological Seminary was a transformative experience for my faith and call. In class and in community I was invited to discover the Gospel through multiple sources and contexts. We stretched our religious imaginations. We found God in the ancient church and in the Black Lives Matter movement. We opened the circle wide and worshipped in different styles, celebrating God in ecumenical and interreligious praise and study.

Along the way I was compelled to follow Jesus into uncomfortable spaces; to find the courage to speak truth to power in the name of the one who came to liberate the oppressed. I entered seminary anxious to learn the right words. I felt strong in my faith convictions but I believed I needed academic theological vocabulary to make them compelling and worthwhile to someone else. I knew deep down that this was simply not true but nonetheless my first year I took copious notes and carefully quoted lectures and readings. During a class discussion I announced, "I wish I could carry you all around in my backpack and let you loose on people when I hear their bigotry, racism, and sexism." Some of the class laughed. But my professor very seriously asked, "Liz, why would you wait for someone else to speak up?" At that moment, my stock answer just seemed kind of silly: "I don't have words yet...?" My personal understanding of Christian discipleship stretched and clarified that day. Learning about theologians and the jargon of hermeneutics is important, yes. But with or without the vocabulary, I can always stand up and say, "No. This is wrong." I also learned that while the work of justice and mercy may often be (or feel)

confrontational, I am called to speak the truth in love, respectfully, and with the intention to build. Always to build.

My instructors, my church internship and hospital chaplaincy mentors, and the UCC encouraged me to develop my theology, exercise my empathy, and discipline my fear. My faith found conviction and my testimony found words. During seminary I also met my husband Tommy. To share this journey with him – to talk about faith, worship together, and serve together – is a gift for which I am so grateful.

A year after graduation, in June 2017, I joined the staff at St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Elgin as the Minister for Children, Youth and Families. It is a joy to serve this congregation and join lay leadership in developing faith formation programs and initiatives. In the future I hope to serve in a similar position or as an associate pastor. I enjoy working in a ministry team and being able to focus my skills and efforts on particular ministry needs.

Ministry Moving Forward

My first semester of seminary I remember expressing to my colleague my desire to do urban ministry. I was tossing around which urban ministry to choose and in which Chicago neighborhoods I'd want to live. My seminary colleague chuckled and explained, "Well, that's a great plan but it's not really up to you where you're called, is it?" She was right of course. Being called to ordained ministry is about discernment between the calling community and the one to be called. It's about knowing my gifts and my growing areas and listening for the Spirit's wisdom. It's trusting that God is present in the process and will send me where I can grow.

I think the same is true when churches discern mission and ministry directions. I look forward to walking with congregations during discerning moments. Pastors cannot "fix" a church. What I can do is help guide congregations to ask hard and new questions. I can walk with them

and invite them to catch new visions. Conversation can be a revitalizing activity all by itself. It is exciting to witness new life sprout in unexpected places; to witness people make brave decisions and hold each other up in the midst of the process. In my ministry, I will encourage faith formation as an ongoing practice. Healthy congregations encourage ongoing education for all ages. If we sincerely testify that God is still speaking and the Holy Spirit renews the church, then faith formation should be a matter of Gospel priority for the church interested in vitality.

I am also passionate about hospitality as a priority of Christian discipleship. I enjoy fellowship and spending time listening to and working with others. I support completely the inclusive welcome to all into the full life and ministry of the church as outlined in Open and Affirming covenants. I also believe hospitality is a just and good starting point for Christian mission and evangelism. I am inspired and guided by Jesus' sending of the seventy-two in Luke. Do the work of relationship building. Dwell among the people. Be present to the needs of another, yes, but also be present and open to their gifts and wisdom. I am passionate about the work of building relationships. At the end of Luke, when the two on the road recognized Jesus, they got up and they went to tell the Good News. I pray that my ministry fosters the recognition of God's call to relationship, action on behalf of Jesus' teachings of love, and the acceptance of the Spirit's invite to "get up!" Amen.