

Ordination Paper

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Theme:

“One Chaplain’s Journey through the Circle of Life”

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*“From the day we arrive on the planet
And, blinking, step into the sun
There’s more to see than can ever be seen
More to do than can ever be done
There’s far too much to take in here
More to find than can ever be found
But the sun rolling high
Through the sapphire sky
Keeps great and small on the endless round.
It’s the Circle of Life
And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
Till we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the Circle, the Circle of Life.”¹*

Personal Journey

This song, “The Circle of Life,” echoes the journey that I travel in faith and ministry. As a wife, mother, grandmother, chaplain, and minister, I have the opportunity to join the circle of life in both ministry and in my profession. I journey with people as they come into the world and as they leave the world. During my Clinical Pastoral Education residency at Trinity Hospital in Chicago, I was blessed to be assigned to the Labor/Delivery department. I introduced myself to mothers when they first checked into the hospital, which gave me the opportunity to hear their stories and address any fears before the delivery process even started. Now I work with patients and families in the dying process. During this life season, I help individuals and families prepare for and work toward acceptance of the “new normal” before and after death. This ministry of chaplaincy—walking with people through the circle of life—fits well with the loving, inclusive mission of God and of the United Church of Christ (UCC). I am pursuing ordination through the

¹ “Circle of Life,” music by Elton John, lyrics by Tim Rice, ©1994 Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc.

UCC because my faith journey, inner call, and theology came together in the UCC.

I was born on the south side of Chicago, and for the first six years, it was just Mommy and me; she then met and married my step-father, who I came to call “my dad.” Ten and twelve years later, my sister and brother were born. Mommy and I developed a special relationship which carried us forward through the years and bonded us even beyond the grave. We experienced life’s challenges together, which included divorces, my mother’s diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, my severe auto accident, the death of her father, and then her death as well. My mother was my best friend and my rock. We did most things together: traveling in choirs, singing, shopping, praying, and sometimes even arguing. We even “got our praise on” together in church.

Mommy took me to church faithfully, and I accepted Christ at an early age. She was also the one holding me the first time I felt the power of the Holy Spirit within me (I “shouted,” as it is described in some churches). She encouraged me to hold on to the Spirit and to let it be the driving force in my life. She taught me to always trust that God would direct me through every season in life. Her favorite scripture was Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, “a time for every matter under heaven.” I still stand by that today. This circle of life that God has ordained helps me to understand that there is a time for everything, even “a time to be born and to a time to die” (Eccles. 3:2).

The first two decades of my life were also special because I formed a close relationship with my maternal grandparents. I was dependent on my grandparents; they gave me whatever I asked. My granddaddy, Arthur C. Davis, was the one man in my life who showed me consistent, unconditional love. He was a hardworking man with the patience of Job; he was a Pullman Porter for Santa Fe Railroad and later Amtrak. There was never a day that my grandfather did not pray; from him I learned the power and importance of prayer. I also learned from him how to

completely trust in God no matter the circumstance. This trust was demonstrated when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. When he was told that he only had six months to live, his only response was: “I won’t complain.”

During my freshman year of high school, my mother and I moved two blocks from the old building of Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago (TUCC). As a teenager I was drawn to the choral ministry of this church, and it was during my teen years that I developed a very personal relationship with God.

My personal spiritual walk progressed over the years as I learned that faith is absolute dependence on God. Life experiences that could have drawn me away from God and the church actually drew me closer to God, so that the faith and values that I was taught shaped who I am and how I live today. Through three marriages and two divorces, having children, caring for loved ones, and then the removal of the circle of support and love on which I depended, I started to realize that regardless of what happened, God was still with me. In each difficult season, I sensed the presence of God encamped around me. Through God and the support of my family and church family, I would be able to get through it and grow stronger.

During my time at TUCC, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. became an influence in my life. He helped my mother and me through our differences, officiated at my marriages, and walked with me through the pain of divorce and the death of my loved ones. I identified with Pastor Wright’s story, theology, and leadership style. Like him, I did not always like myself as a young person, and my decisions often led to pain. But despite my past and my imperfections, God called me to be of service. I felt like one of the “least of these” who was brought into a broad space of acceptance and purpose through the call of God. I remember listening to sermons

in the 1990's, some of which are written in his book, *What Makes You So Strong?*.² Those sermons addressed how it is that Black people have produced “giants” in each area of society, despite their history of oppression and weakness. Dr. Wright talked about the power of adversity to produce tenacity, about unexpected blessings and the audacity of hope, about not forgetting our past and yet letting go of what binds us—topics which had a profound effect on me and my faith. Despite all the struggles in my own life and my own questions, I was to keep moving forward into God's call (a process I describe more below).

Pastor Wright's leadership style influenced my own growth as a leader and impacted me greatly, providing an example of how to be truly present with all kinds of people and to empower them to make better choices.

Within my family I have always been the decision maker. Some would say this happened because I am the eldest sibling or because the women in my family have been the dominant force in our family. I see now, however, that it was because I could be counted on to take responsibility and to endure in the midst of life-threatening situations. There is something inside of me that takes over in a crisis situation. For instance, during the illness of my grandfather, grandmother, mother and uncle, the family looked to me to make the life-altering decisions. Whenever Mommy was ill, it would be the two of us in the emergency room waiting for the doctor. It was during the last days of my mother's life that my father and my grandmother looked to me through a haze of tears and emotions when the doctors told us that there was nothing else that they could do for her. It was *me* they asked, “What should we do?” I knew that it was God who gave me the strength to be there for everyone else. I learned the importance of listening and

² Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. *What Makes You So Strong?: Sermons of Joy and Strength from Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.*, ed. Jini Kilgore Ross (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993).

the necessity for humility, all while my faith in God was growing stronger. During those critical times in my life, God was teaching me compassion and preparing me to spiritually care for the sick. I had no idea then that my compassion, endurance, and ability to minister to the sick would become a calling.

During the last six months of my grandfather's life I was introduced to the nature of hospice and the work of chaplaincy. As we prepared for my grandfather's transition, I yearned for more knowledge about hospice and the dying process. The last few days of my grandfather's life is also when I realized, or shall I say I began to understand and accept, my call to ministry. A few hours before he passed I sat in the car with the chaplain (with whom I'm still close today and is one of my ministry partners) who was assigned to his case. She knew, and I knew, that God was calling me because I felt drawn in and was full of questions. There were many signs before of a call, but I did not acknowledge them; I just could not see God calling *me*.

In May 1998, I had to take my mom off of life support. That was one of the most difficult yet most important decisions I ever had to make. I was devastated that she was leaving the world, and I did not understand why God was taking her away at only 57 years of age and at a time in life when I needed her the most. I was 38 with two young children and a failing marriage. In addition, I was unable to be with her the moment she made her transition to heaven. I felt guilty because I thought that I *should* have been there. I was shaken to my core. "But God!" God was still at work in my circle of life, even while removing those I depended on. Not long after my mother's death, I was asked to join the deacon-in-training program at TUCC.

Some thought it was too soon in my grief process to train as a deacon. I sensed, however, that God knew that this training was where my healing would begin. It helped me take my own pain and redirect it as holistic ministry to others. For instance, the training taught me to be conscious of transference. Since my experiences of grief and care-giving were so recent, I knew I

had to face my own pain and work through it instead of ignoring it. The months of deep reflection and continual prayer helped me avoid transferring my anxiety and pain onto others. Through this training I was able to step out of my comfort zone and into complete trust that if God brings me to it, surely God would bring me through it. I have learned that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

I was ordained as a deacon in December 1999. As a deacon I visited the sick and volunteered with Amani-Trinity Hospice, a part of TUCC’s community health program. I was also hired to work for Trinity’s Higher Education Center, as the coordinator of the Educational Talent Search grant. That experience led me to further ministry as a College and Career Coach in the Chicago Public School system and with the Southwest Youth Collaborative, a not-for-profit community outreach organization in Chicago.

It was also during this time that I began to sense a desire to take the next steps in the journey of call. One day I received a surprise phone call from the office of the Center for African American Theological Studies (CAATS) in Chicago saying they had received a reference letter for me from Pastor Wright and they were wondering where my application was! So, in January 2005, I started seminary in the CAATS program.

In July 2005 I was asked to do an internship at TUCC. My first thought was, “You have got to be kidding me!” By that point, I had only taken two seminary classes! The internship involved being an on-call minister, teaching preparation classes for the blessing of babies, officiating funerals, and providing pre-marital counseling. “But God!” God was at work again! The church provided the training and support I needed to do the job. I remember that even though I was as prepared as I could be, I was still terrified in the moments before officiating my first funeral. I remember praying, “Okay God, I’m leaning on you; order my steps and guide my tongue!” The experience and anxiety of having to step into the pulpit was also indescribable. All

I can say is, “the Lord is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust” (Ps. 91:2).

Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk, the Founding Director of the CAATS program through Chicago’s Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE), taught my first seminary class. I was impressed by her because she was the first African-American woman ordained in the United Church of Christ and the first African-American woman to head a national office in the UCC (the Office of Church in Society). Rev. Delk walks in the Holy Spirit, and she became my spiritual guide throughout seminary. When she spoke words over me at the beginning of seminary, I knew that God was going to equip me for the journey ahead.

One thing I learned from Rev. Delk was the concept of *Ubuntu*, which means, “I am because you are, and because you are, I can be also.” She said *Ubuntu* is the foundation for and the power of community. I also remember her saying, “Some of our best living is done by those we leave behind.” Those words opened my eyes to see that while I was created in my mother’s womb to walk with others in the circle of life; in order to be able to be who I am now, my mother had to leave me behind. It was not until I left *her* behind, in a sense, that I could live out her legacy, drawing on the Spirit (as she did) to walk into the spiritual and physical places of pain and fear where others may not want to go.

In seminary I was also introduced to Alice Walker and womanist theology. Her theology was grounded in her own identity and struggle as a Black woman. In her writing, she urged Black women to embrace themselves and their place in the world, like flowers in a garden. “No person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended. Or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into the world.”³ Her works influenced me to take pride in *my* history, identity,

³ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1983).

and strength as a Black woman, but to also appreciate and welcome others for who they are.

It was fitting that Rev. Delk spoke at my graduation in May 2009, where she gave me my “sending out orders,” i.e. commission. “It’s moving time!” she said. She assured me I was ready to serve and encouraged me not to fear, to stand firm, to walk in my own pastoral authority, and to remember that God “will provide a way out of no way.”

Current Ministry

In September 2016, I accepted a position as full-time chaplain with Unity Hospice of Chicagoland. This was the second hospice company that I have worked with. I work mostly with individuals who have a terminal illness and have a prognosis of six months or less. I am one of four chaplains who are responsible for contacting all new patients (and/or their care-givers) admitted to our service and offering spiritual and emotional support. Often I am called to officiate funerals and conduct committal services, perform baptisms and blessings, and administer Holy Communion. I am also frequently on call. Being on call requires me to respond to urgent requests for the presence of a chaplain and respond to requests to be present right after a patient has died. In the latter example, I pronounce the death, provide pastoral care to families and caregivers, help with final arrangements, and occasionally assist with removal of the remains. My role also includes providing spiritual and emotional support to the hospice staff through teamwork and building relationships of trust.

I am also a minister and chaplain at Advocate United Church of Christ (AUCC) in Chicago. In partnership with Senior Pastor Rev. Malcolm Griffith, I provide pastoral care, visit families in crisis, and officiate at weddings and funerals. I also participate in worship regularly, preach, and assist in administering the sacraments. This position has helped me develop skills to lead with a team of ministers. I have learned to walk forward in the pastoral authority of God’s

call, while continually seeking the Spirit's guidance. I base my teaching and preaching on my foundation in Scripture, as well as my theological, pastoral and psychological training and experiences. I also seek to bring all of these elements together in conversation with the needs and situation of each individual, couple, or family with whom I interact, whether in the church or with Hospice.

God has called and equipped me to walk into emotional, spiritual, and physical places where others may choose not to enter, just as Jesus did. I seek ordination in the UCC, where I have found my home, so I can fully serve at AUCC, Unity Hospice and wherever God may lead me in the future. As "The Circle of Life" song says, "there's so much more to do than can ever be done." For instance, I hope one day to seek a Master's degree in pastoral counseling (or a similar field) and obtain Board Certification with the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC). I also seek ordination so that I may officially represent Christ and Christ's church in each moment of care and service. I have found my place and purpose in God's will and in a world that is in need of love.

United Church of Christ Identity and Polity

As I have experienced the UCC and learned about its history and polity, I have a deepened appreciation and feeling of belonging in the UCC's distinct identity as a diverse, united church which pursues social justice and liberation.

The UCC grew from roots in the Congregational, Reformed, Christian and German Evangelical movements in early America. The congregations that grew out of those movements found theological common ground and joined together for mission and accountability. Even though they were united in many respects, the founding congregations felt it was crucial to maintain and respect the autonomy of each local church. They believed that even the individuals

within those churches had the freedom to differ in practices.

I found a home in this individual-yet-united church body for several reasons. First, I believe that accepting Christ as Savior is how you become part of Christ's body. For me, this fits well with the UCC understanding that membership in a local UCC church is based on baptism and either confirmation or profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Due to the fact that each local church is autonomous and seeks to minister to and within its own context; there is now a wide diversity of ethnic, racial, and regional identities, structure, style, and/or mission emphasis among the churches of the UCC. The UCC did not appear to be threatened by the differences which were present and which developed among the congregations. The UCC has defined several main guiding principles, such as those outlined in the UCC Statement of Faith and the recently adopted Purpose, Mission and Vision Statements.⁴ The UCC has put structures in place to unite the whole body, including the General Synod, the biennial gathering of the denomination. A belief that has become a core of UCC identity and one which I greatly respect is, "in essentials unity, in non-essentials freedom, and in all things, charity."⁵

The belief and practice of the UCC is that all humans are created in the image of God and are therefore equal. At the same time, it affirms that each ethnicity and race reflects an aspect of the divine; therefore it is crucial to uphold each of them in order to see the full image of God. So it is fitting that I found my home at TUCC, who embraced an identity as both "unashamedly Black *and* unapologetically Christian". For instance, at both TUCC and AUCC we celebrate certain rites of passage common to the African-American culture. In addition, both churches make it a mission to build up black men and black women by teaching godly character and

⁴ Moujaes, Anthony, "Vision of A Just World Underscores Clearer UCC Purpose, Mission," *United Church of Christ News* (October 24, 2016), URL http://www.ucc.org/news_vision_of_a_just_world_underscores_clearer_ucc_purpose_mission_10242016.

⁵ Marco Antonio de Dominis, *De Republica Ecclesiastica*, 1617; quoted on the UCC's website: http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-is-the-united-church-of.

embracing the image of God in them. To me this lives out the words of Scripture that tell us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

While TUCC helped me understand myself as being “unashamedly Black,” it also helped me develop a deeper understanding of my belonging to the larger body of Christ and my role in society. I recently agreed to stand for, and was elected, as dean of my local cluster. I also plan to join the membership of United Black Christians of the UCC. This association brings lay leaders and clergy together by acknowledging the common bond and experience of Black Christians in a still-predominately white denomination. Though Black Christians have a specific and distinct identity, we are an integral part of the larger UCC. As it states in Romans 12:5, “We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

The UCC maintains the diversity of difference while uniting the whole in choosing to be governed by representation, rather than a “top-down” hierarchy. In the UCC, the basic unit of life and organization is the local church. Representatives of local churches participate in meetings and ministries of regional associations and conferences and send delegates to the General Synod. I resonate with the importance of coming together on the denominational level as one body, while each local and regional identity is represented at the table. It is so fitting that even though we are different in many ways; we all pray the Lord’s Prayer and eat at the Lord’s Table together!

On an individual level, I have done my best to make sure that my children were exposed to other cultures, languages, and religious traditions. I taught them to listen to others without assimilation and to learn about another’s perspective of faith, so to get a fuller picture of God. It is the same principle I use in my work as a chaplain. With my patients who have different beliefs, I seek to find common ground in our human identity as God’s creatures. I have learned

from them and continue to adapt my ministry to others' traditions. I am able to minister to people of all faith traditions since I am confident in what I believe, yet I can understand and accept different points of view.

I appreciate the UCC has made social justice a crucial part of its mission and vision. I relate especially to the emphasis on the inclusion and equality of women and all races and ethnicities. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). During my seminary studies, I was especially inspired to learn that many Congregationalist churches, homes, and businesses had been stops along the Underground Railroad. Also, I was impacted when I learned about the churches' joint effort to establish Black colleges in the South after the Civil War. I vividly remember the depth of gratitude that I felt the very first time that I set foot on the campus of Virginia Union University where I received my Masters of Divinity. I could feel its great history, and I sensed the huge sacrifices that were made so that I could receive an education. That experience brought tears to my eyes.

Theological Reflections on the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith⁶

I affirm that God is the Creator of all life and the very source of our being; "In God we live and move and have our being," (Acts 17:28). God is certainly my "All in All" and my reason for existence. Both the non-human creation and the many human cultures reflect God's glory. God's very self is seen in the creation of humanity in the divine image. The world and even the Church, unfortunately, still have issues with gender, race, and nationality, all things that have divided us over the centuries. Yet I continue to affirm the UCC's belief that all people are made

⁶ Italicized quotations are taken from the UCC Statement of Faith in the form of a doxology, "What We Believe, Statement of Faith," URL http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-we-believe#DOX.

equal. As a chaplain, religion, gender, and racial differences do not keep me from going into places that may otherwise have been uneasy for me. I affirm every person's birth in God's love and into the divine image. Also, in my work I am privileged to be present in the whole circle of life, which represents the earthly aspect of humanity; therefore I believe all of us are born of a mother and all of us must one day return to soil.

I also believe that I could not do what I do efficiently and effectively if I did not believe that the Spirit of the Lord is constantly creating and renewing me. As a chaplain, I agree with John Wesley, who famously said, "I look upon all the world as my parish."⁷ When I go to visit a family in crisis, I consider myself a representative of Christ's church. I prepare by asking God to grant me divine words and presence. For it is only because of God's Holy Spirit resting on me that I am able to give, be present, love, and speak words of comfort. I cannot be effective, transparent, or empathetic in another's journey if I do not carry my "All in All" with me, as my hope and strength. Only in trusting the eternal love that is around me, can I offer precious moments of peace and hope.

When I look back at my life, I see how God "*set before each one the ways of life and death,*" and how God's hand was at work in so many ways, saving me "*from aimlessness and sin.*" For instance, Thanksgiving 1997, my husband at the time, myself, and both of my daughters were involved in a serious car accident. As a result I had to spend several months at home in recovery. At first I was just grateful that God spared me from death. But the next May, my mother fell, and her doctors discovered that she had cancer. She died two weeks later. Since her final days passed so quickly, I was grateful to have had the previous five to six months with her. If it had not been for the accident, I would not have been able to be home from work,

⁷ From a sermon on May 11, 1739, in which Wesley responded to the bishop of Bristol, England, who objected to his preaching outdoors, as it "disrupted" local Anglican services.

spending time with her. I have to believe that God's hand is at work in history to carry out a divine purpose. And, as I have already described, instead of letting me wander about aimlessly during the illnesses and deaths of my loved ones, God used them to call me to the pastoral care of others.

I believe that because of Jesus Christ, even in the shadows there is light. It may not be on this side of death; it may be on the other side, when all things will be put right. But there *is* light! In the difficult times I have pondered how Christ came to us and "*shared our common lot,*" including the experience of sorrow and pain. Despite the darkness, Jesus was faithful and so "*conquered sin and death and reconciling the world*" to Godself. Because of Christ in me, I can also enter the shadows where others dwell and speak about the life and light to come. Through Christ, the one who went through death to life, I can encourage them to live to the fullest, even in the face of death.

In chaplaincy we often hear people's reflections of their lives. Sometimes they have walked far away from God's "*righteous will declared through prophets and apostles*" in the Bible. Yet I affirm what I have experienced for myself, that God promises "*forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace*" to all who trust and accept God's grace. This allows me to sit with someone without judgment as they reflect on both the shadows and the light. Knowing God's loving presence, I can honor their regrets, while helping them find peace with the perplexities of their lives and pursue both forgiveness and reconciliation.

As I have described, the church was instrumental in shaping my faith and life values and it was in the church that I found healing. It was through the church that God called me "*in the service of others.*" For me, "*the cost and joy of discipleship*" is to sit with people, wherever they are in the circle of life and faith. It is my personal mission to serve God's people, whoever they are and wherever they are. Acknowledging that the work of pastoral care is hard on the body and

soul, however, I can confirm that the Holy Spirit renews me through the church of Jesus Christ, whose presence with me on this journey has enabled me to rejoice even in trials. God strengthens me when I “*share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table.*” God has also provided a circle of good friends, my loving husband, my four daughters and grandchildren, my siblings and extended family. Through them and the church, God provides courage to keep me in the struggle.

Views on Baptism, Communion, the Bible, and the Church

As part of my ordination to Word and Sacrament, I look forward to walking with individuals in preparation for and performing their baptisms. I believe baptism is the sacrament that marks their desire to make a public declaration of their decision to believe in Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord over all. Baptism as a sacrament is an outward sign of an inward reality of a new beginning; through water and word it acknowledges God’s calling forth to a new life.

I also look forward to preparing parents who desire to bring their children forward for a blessing or baptism following the practice of the UCC. In those moments, I stand as part of the “village” of the Christian community, whose responsibility it is to train up the children in the faith and love of God. Children who have been baptized as infants are later expected to make a personal profession of Christian faith.

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion, is also an outward, physical ritual that reminds us of the reality of God’s grace and mercy. It is a sacred symbol of God’s loving presence with us and an opportunity for us as a community to be present to one another even as we share the ritual together. As a servant of Jesus, called to the ordination of Word and Sacrament, I am honored to sit at the table where Jesus sat and administered the elements; which are the symbols of his body and blood. For me Communion is a personal reminder that Jesus Christ called *me* to the table, gave of himself to *me*, and then chose *me*. In administering Holy

Communion, I hope to convey a similar sense of its meaning to others. I strongly affirm the UCC's view that the Communion table is open to all believers regardless of church affiliation. The reality of God's loving presence humbles me, continues to shape my character, and keeps calling me forward in service. It is after I acknowledge God's presence with me, give my pain to God for healing, and receive the grace of the divine call to my life and service, that I am able to be fully present with others in an authentic and non-anxious way.

The sacraments are commands of Christ and are based on Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Both sacraments represent the presence of Christ with God's people, and are important in pastoral care, since they remind individuals that they are not alone. Even when they take Communion or receive baptism at home (due to health or extenuating circumstances), they are united to the body through the presence of Christ. The sacraments are also powerful teaching tools on the past and present work of God (1 Cor. 11:23-25).

I believe the Bible is the primary source for understanding the work of God in the world and the authoritative guide for us in faith and conduct. It is also the presence of Christ as the Word of God. In becoming an ordained minister, I see my role as joining people on their journey and helping them find a way through the hard times by pointing them to the presence of God's Word. In every home or situation that I encounter, first, I listen for the leading of the Holy Spirit, and I share the calming presence of Christ in me. Then, if appropriate to the person's faith tradition and situation, I share words of encouragement, hope, and challenge from Scripture. In addition, every time I preach and teach, I thank God for the privilege of the call, and ask, "What do the people need to hear?" I pray that people will not hear my words, but hear a word from God and sense the presence of *the Word*.

The Church is the body of Christ: the community of his disciples who continue God's work in the world. We are the hands and feet of Jesus serving the world. The local church, then,

is the place where the broader United Church of Christ expresses its purpose, mission, and vision in a local context. Our purpose is to “love the Lord our God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves,” as UCC President and General Minister Rev. John C. Dorhauer has urged us.⁸ The local church is where we gather with others to worship God with music and dance, learn about God and God’s priorities in the world, and practice God’s amazing welcome for all.

As the saying goes, “It takes a village to raise a child.” The church is like a village in that it takes the whole body of believers to “raise” a believer. It is in the congregation that we learn how to love our neighbors as ourselves, especially through the practice of forgiveness. As “iron sharpens iron” (Prov. 27:17), we sharpen one another through sharing life and faith experiences. My church family has supported me at every milestone in my life, both small and large. If it had not been for what I learned from the body of Christ, I would not be able to serve in ministry. Now it is my job to help provide that same support for others. I frequently consider how I can help make the local church a place of support and cultivation for others, as it was for me.

The body of Christ is also where we unite, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to seek justice for all, because our vision is “a just world for all.”⁹ One of the areas where local churches can fulfill this is in trying to be better stewards of the environment. For example, not only can the church seek to follow local ordinances for recycling, they can stand alongside those affected by pollution. Local church members can also work for justice for children in their neighborhoods, whether churched or unchurched. For example, before I pursued chaplaincy, I worked in education as a college and career coach as stated earlier. Each teenager I interacted with I

⁸ “Commentary: The Three Great Loves,” April 27, 2017:
http://www.ucc.org/commentary_three_great_loves_04272017.

⁹ *Ibid.*

considered to be a precious part of God's creation. Many of them became like my own children. In fact, one child with particular needs I mentored, brought home, and eventually adopted.

Pastoral Ethics, Boundaries, and Ordination Vows

In ordination I am entering a community with a shared identity and a specific, sacred calling. Since I am "set aside" to perform certain rights and rituals of the church, I am accountable to serve within its leadership and structure. The vows maintain our shared identity and help keep us faithful, not only to those whom we serve, but to one another in the body of Christ.

I fully understand the need for the ordination vow that states to be diligent in private prayer and study and in public duties, especially considering the complex demands of ministry today. I believe self-care is essential to being effective in ministry. For example, date nights with my husband, good "girlfriend time," and monthly body massages are important to keep me and my relationships strong. I also make a conscious effort to spend individual time with my four daughters. It is my plan to continue my current habits of prayer, study, and accountability. I will also dedicate myself to self-awareness and sober judgment, as Rev. Dr. Jorge Morales, our Illinois Conference Minister, recently challenged us to do.¹⁰ That includes regular reflection on the efficacy of my leadership and the impact God has in my daily living. I will also seek to serve in the broader UCC as God leads. In practice, I will remain aware of the ever-changing updates within the larger body of the UCC; so that I may join in the prayer for unity, discernment, humility, and faithfulness to Christ, especially in this era of constant change.

I take very seriously the vow to "regard all people with equal love and concern and to

¹⁰ "From the Conference Minister," Illinois Conference of the UCC E-Newsletter, September-October 2017.

minister impartially to the needs of all.” This has been part of my training in ministry and outlook since the beginning of my faith journey. I find a deep sense of belonging in the last vow, where we are called to show Christian love to all who are in Christ *and* to all who are not, whether of other faiths or no faith. To me this is a summary of the identity of the UCC, of God’s love for humanity, and of God’s call on me.

Just as I drew on those who trained me, I can pass the legacy on through mentoring and my own self-awareness. I will pray to continually walk in grace and humility and not think of myself more highly than I ought, but rather think of myself with sober judgment (Rom. 12:4). I will continue to be conscious of change by utilizing discernment, to determine when it is time to step up or to step aside, making sure others also have a chance to serve in positions of leadership, especially the younger generation.

As I take my vows, I will walk in pastoral authority out of God’s call on my life, and I continue to walk as an integrated and grateful servant of the circle of life in the community of God’s gifted and called servants. “*Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.*”