

My Faith Journey

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My faith journey to the United Church of Christ (UCC) has come through many transformative experiences. In order to explain this process, I believe it is necessary for me to explain my background. I am extremely happy to say that I was born into a God-fearing Christian family. I was the fourth child to my parents, who live in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, a state in India.

I should also admit that my family was the one of the richest families in the town. My father had his own business, which was doing well. My grandparents owned part of the nearby mountains and terrain, which they used for making bricks. In short, one could say I was born with a “silver spoon in my mouth.”

Things began to change as I started growing up. During the fifth grade, my father’s business changed as market giants began investing in the same industry. Economic giants such as Reliance started opening shops, which resulted in many shop owners losing their revenue. My father was one of those shop owners unable to compete with the giants.

Adding to our pain, the government decide to take charge of the mountains which were once owned by my grandparents. They gave these to private market giants along with the land. Therefore, the land on which my father constructed his shop was taken away from him, in the name of development. The government said it would pay for the land, but it still remains unpaid even after 20 years.

Thus as a family, within my early childhood, we moved from wealth to poverty. Since I was a child, I never knew what it was like to be rich. I only remember the pain and suffering my family went through. The only things that I remember are my parents struggling to meet the daily needs of our

family. Yet, irrespective of the suffering they were going through, they still fed us, paid for our education, and made us who we are today. They ate leftover food while giving us fresh food.

It was during this situation that my deep connection with God began to emerge. In India, prosperity Gospels are one of the main forms of preaching even in traditional churches. Thus as a boy, belonging to a poor family at the time, I easily fell into this trap. I believed in a God who was omnipresent, omnipotent, and who made his followers rich. Many ministers preached that being poor was a sin. So I felt at that time that as a family we had sinned and must repent. I began doing many things to attain salvation and thereby become prosperous.

Along this journey, my elder brother was a huge supporter. Since I am the youngest one in my family, there was always extra love and affection poured out on me by everyone in my family. My eldest brother Kingston showered me with his unconditional love. As the eldest one, he guarded me like an angel and I still believe he guards me today.

We were even more than brothers; we were close friends. He taught me everything from learning to ride a bike to how to use a cell phone and TV. We used to go everywhere together and tell each other everything. He was my mentor and my pillar of strength and support. He rescued me from bullies even though he himself used to poke me a lot. But those were the Good Old Days.

In regard to my spiritual journey, it is he who first took me to Sunday school with him. He would recite verses and sing hymns by memory. It is he who encouraged me to walk closely with God from my childhood days, and I followed his advice. By following in his footsteps, I joined the church choir. After a decade, I was promoted to being the cross-bearer in my church.

As the famous saying goes, “All good things must come to an end,” and sadly, my brother passed away in an accident when I was completing my engineering degree. He left behind a wife and a six-month-old daughter. He was actually working in a different city at that time, and I was the last one

in my family who saw him alive. I was the first one to receive the news about his death through a phone call.

At his funeral, his daughter was knocking on the coffin, asking him to come out and get up. This incident totally shattered the faith that I had in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I questioned the very existence of God. But at the same time, I could not walk away from my childhood faith. On one hand, I didn't want to pray, and on the other hand, I could not do anything but pray. Through prayer, I shared my pain and frustration with God.

In order to put an end to this confusion and to know more about God, I decided to pursue Theology. It is through my theological professors and my studies that I came to a different understanding of God. I began to see God in a different way. And I am still working on this. Books such as *Faith Seeking Understanding* by Daniel L. Migliore and *New Testament History* by F. F. Bruce have helped me in this process.

I have witnessed the plight of many in the course of my theological journey and also in my role as an assistant pastor in my church. I have come to an understanding that God cannot be comprehended by the human mind. Rather, we should accept with all humbleness that we don't know many things about God. Our lives should be focused on trying to lessen the pain of our fellow human beings, created in the image of God; we need to help others to understand what God expects from all of us. It is along this line that I discerned the calling of God, in my theological journey.

In India, the plight of *Dalits* (the lowest of social classes) and women, especially widows, shook me from the very bottom of my heart. Further, in India the karma theory and the theory of predestination have entered into Christendom. Many preachers interpret the biblical verses justifying the difficulties that these people face in their lives. It is against these unjust and unethical preachers who are oppressing the already oppressed that I wanted to bring my understanding of God. It is also has

to do with how I was oppressed as a child because of these kinds of teachings. After reflecting on all this, I decided to marry the love of my life with the call to ministry.

It was during this process that I came across another hurdle. Since my caste was different from the caste of those who are in power in the church, I was refused ordination. Despite ranking first in all the examinations and winning eight awards in my theological studies, I was refused. For them, caste became more important than the call of God.

However, I never gave up on my call. I always felt that I should know more about God and God would make a way for me. The good God whom I trusted helped me meet Ms. Thehil Ruselliah Singh. She was one of my classmates in India who came to do her higher studies in the US. Through her help and encouragement, I was able to gain acceptance to McCormick Theological Seminary and pursue my theological studies.

It is during my studies in the US that I became a member of United Church of Hyde Park and became exposed to the UCC. Meanwhile, I came across Rev. James Olson, who told me about an Indian church and their search for an Indian pastor. He was gracious enough to put me in contact with them and has guided me through this process. Through him, I was able to contact the elders of the Christ Tamil Church and help them in God's ministry for the past year.

Recently, I was called to become the pastor of Christ Tamil Church in Wheaton, Illinois. A lot of prayer and hard work has gone into my faith journey, always with a profound expectation. The last two years I spent in the United Church of Christ have made me proud of its diversity, attention to social justice, and its welcoming spirit to all people, regardless of race, creed, or background. I am proud to be a part of such a diverse yet welcoming church.

My Theology

I believe my experiences and my interaction with the Word of God have enabled me to frame my own theology. I cannot separate my experiences, from the experiences of people I know, from that of the Word of God.

I see them as complements to one another. For example, if I would not have been exposed to prosperity preaching and the loss of my brother, I think I would have remained within a closed circle. My theology would have never developed. I would always look at God as a Master who has a whip in His hand and treats everyone as slaves and objects. But my experiences made me question the Scripture. My questions forced me to seek answers within and outside the Scripture. This led me to shape my own theology that stands with the oppressed and not the oppressor. My theology doesn't believe in tuning out voices of the voiceless, but it requires me to assist the voiceless to find their voice. My theology doesn't believe in condemning anyone; it accepts everyone just like Jesus did.

This transition of mine from a closed, conservative mindset to that of an open mind would not have been possible if not for my experiences and my constant challenging of the Scripture. At this point in my faith journey, I would like to express how my theology has helped me in my pastoral ministry. As a pastor, I have been focusing on the challenges I have had to face in ministry and how I integrated my faith and theology in working with my congregation, using the talents and tools that I am gifted with by God.

God:

I would say that my relationship with the God is more real now than it has ever been. I talk about God and spirituality when I engage with others, especially with the youth in my congregation and in my Theology class. It is in these conversations with the youngsters in my church and my friends in class that I understand I am in the process of learning and unlearning God.

When I evaluate conversations within myself and conversations with God, I have come to terms with the fact that no one can understand or clearly say who God is. If a person says that he/she understands God, then clearly that person is a liar. I say this because God is constantly talking to us in many different ways and is showing God's many facets. In order to understand these many facets of God, one lifetime is not enough. Finding God is a process, and understanding God requires more than one lifetime. God spoke, is speaking, and will speak forever.

Also, this understanding of God makes me feel vulnerable as a pastor, mainly because many expect pastors to know everything about God. But my understanding as a constant revealer and revelator has helped me to embrace my vulnerability. I have learned to say "I don't know" to these questions. This honesty has helped my congregation to understand the constant revelatory nature of God.

Through my call as a pastor, I have grown in my relationship with God, I have helped my youth the congregation to know more about God. Further, I have always understood God as loving each person regardless of sexuality, race, and gender. I believe that God walks alongside each person regardless of where they are in their own spiritual journeys.

I have also learned to work with people who do not view God as walking along with everyone. Also, I have come across so many people who have changed me and who have challenged me. At all times, I have felt the presence of God in my life, which has allowed me to stand up one more time for God's glory.

Jesus Christ:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27). The life of Jesus Christ is a very emotional and religious experience. In the life of Jesus' ministry, we grab a glimpse of a personal

relationship with God. Jesus healed the sick, had relationships with social outcasts, and challenged oppressive systems (like the caste system in India). He established permanent patience, revealed righteous anger, and wept with close friends. Through the examples of Jesus as a person called to be a pastor, I am encouraged to grow and transform following His example.

My Life in Christ:

I accepted Jesus Christ when I was a child. By his revelatory nature, he has brought peace and joy to my life. I have recognized His word in the Bible to be true. It is a blessing to know that even when I didn't think about God, He still loved me. When I was doing wrong things, was angry, and was disrespectful, He still wanted to be in my life. I now accept and love myself just as I am because I realize that I have been created as an acceptable child. I have failed Him many times, yet He forgives me, corrects me, and gives me strength to go on. Jesus has demonstrated His unconditional love toward me. He has loved me through times of failure, times of doubt, times of weakness, and times of loneliness. I know with certainty that accepting Jesus Christ into my life has been the best decision I have ever made.

Holy Spirit:

I believed that the work of the Holy Spirit is the basis of my faith because my intellect, spirituality, and my understanding of God could not exist without the aid of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person in the Trinity. The Holy Spirit gives power. "But you shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come on you. The Holy Spirit dwells in us teaching us, inspiring us, and giving us power" (Acts 1:8). I believe that there is no training that adequately equips someone to be a pastor. The basic qualifications reside elsewhere - in the Holy Spirit. God reveals to us, Jesus helps us to discern the revelations through the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit helps us process and act based on revelation and discernment. Without the power and the guidance of the Spirit, we are nothing.

I say this because I have seen what it is to be a pastor and lead the flock astray. When we were struggling as a family to meet our daily needs, we had a pastor in our church back in India. Typically, pastors in India are expected to visit the homes of their congregation members regularly. This Pastor performed this duty in a different way. He would visit the neighbors' homes but never visited our house during his tenure as pastor at our church. The reason for this rejection was our poverty. All our church members were rich, and so he went to their houses and collected offerings and used them for his personal gain. His thirst for money and power blinded him from seeing those in real need of pastoral care, like my family. Thus, pastoral care, like all church ministries, must be directed by the Holy Spirit.

In addition, The Holy Spirit provides encouragement and uplifts me in every situation. Every area of my life is controlled by the Holy Spirit and there is a new joy that is brought forth through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Church and Discipleship

The Church is the Body of Christ which is filled with God by the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. With such embodiment and indwelling of the Divine, the Church is equipped to do activities which Jesus carried out in His life. The Church is a divine reality and a human institution. It is mystery and history. Through its human participation and divine empowerment, the church is called to carry out the works of Jesus.

We are all just one check away from being homeless. It is in this sense that the Church and the Church body must be confident that they are doing more than merely providing for material needs. The Church must believe that their mission is broader and more-far reaching than any specific moment of time. As M. M. Thomas, an Indian theologian, once rightly said, "Spiritualization is humanization." If that is the case, then charity works alone will not work. We as Church must be questioning all the systems that create oppression and homelessness. The Church should be ready to bear the Cross just

like Jesus did for everyone. The Church should prophetically speak out against those in power who are proposing and proceeding with systems that will place the vulnerable and poor at a higher risk.

This oppression of people is not just happening outside the Church. It is happening inside, too. I was blessed to be born in a Church-oriented family. The Church is my second home, where I have spent most of my time with my friends. The privilege of being part of the Church was revealed to me as I grew older. I began to be aware of voices of concern, voices of suppression, and voices of needfulness from within myself and from others in the Church. I found myself as one among them in the midst of that vulnerability. I began to realize that the Church and its worship for me and others was just another ritual to be followed. The Church that I considered the place of ultimate spiritual destination was the kind of religious institution that Christ was against because of the dogmas and traditions that it practiced. I began to realize that the church was a place that practiced exclusiveness, hierarchy and control. As I begin to integrate my theology, experience, and understanding about the Church, I challenged myself to explore my prophetic voice. My goal is to discern the meaning of Church according to how God wants it to be and how the Church exists and is perceived in the world.

My Home Church:

The congregation of which I am a member is Christ Tamil Church, United Church of Christ, Wheaton, Illinois. This church is a great gift to me because it has provided a new meaning to my life, helped me understand Church according to how God intended it to be, and extended much love and care toward me. The church is composed of predominantly Indian immigrants (the Tamil community). They have embraced me and considered me as one among them. I felt the inclusiveness from the various ministries. The church not only stood for me but stood with me and encouraged me in all situations. I received much love, spiritual nurture, and motivation that I missed in my own church back in my country.

For the past seven months, I have been working with Rev. Godwin, in this church. Through him and his guidance I understand better the nature of the Church, along with its purpose and mission toward the needy. Also, I began to realize the fact that the Church is not just a building and that it requires committed spiritual leaders with a sense of discipleship.

Understanding UCC Polity:

United Church of Christ polity is a faithful form of church government that makes it possible for individual congregations to remain in a covenantal relationship. The UCC is a collection of many congregations which sometimes approach church life and movement differently. Polity is the form of governance in which a denomination manages and administers its life and relationships among the individuals, churches, and groups. One of the UCC's core beliefs is that it is "called to be a united and uniting church." The main mission of this denomination as a Christian community is to welcome all those who wish to share in this ministry. The UCC seeks aggressively to reach out to those in need and to encourage the embodied congregations to love, support, and care for themselves while showing God's love for everyone.

I did not grow up in the UCC and was unaware of its existence until I met some wonderful UCC people from the Fox Valley Association and McCormick Theological Seminary. Compared with the Church of South India where I grew up, there are a lot of different practices, theology, and cultural differences. Since my time with the UCC, I have developed gratitude, respect, and admiration for this denomination which I now call home. I intend to nurture and tend to its care and growth as much as it has tended to mine. Theology and history inform my personal understanding of Theology, and the UCC nurtures my understanding and identity.

The United Church of Christ is a young Protestant denomination which was formed in 1957. But the reason behind its formation goes back to many centuries. The UCC was formed as result of a

merger between the Congregational and Christian Churches with the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

The Congregational Christian Church by then was itself the product of a 1931 union of Congregationalist and Christian churches. Similarly, the Evangelical and Reformed Church was a product of the merger between the German Reformed and Evangelical Synod churches in 1934. This diverse historical background includes Calvinism, American revivalism, and German pietism. The history and purpose behind the creation and development of the UCC were informed by the challenges to construct a new and healthy way of being Church. As they tilled the soil together, key components to the denomination of the UCC were formed:

1. A covenanted community – local and universal in covenant with God and with each other
2. Local autonomy – each parish valued as an autonomous unit in relationship with others
3. Unity with diversity – with a practically concrete theology, stable institutions, and a distrust of set denominational structure.

They respected educated pastors and each congregation reserved the privilege to appoint and remove pastors in positions of congregational leadership.

While local church autonomy is at the forefront of our denominational structure, the importance of unity, inherited from all four founding traditions, remains. The fundamental unit of the United Church of Christ is the local church. Local churches enjoy the freedom to oversee themselves, each adopting their own informed internal organizational model and theological truths. Therefore, whether Indian or another nationality or ethnic group, each brings with them their own cultural activities, styles of worship, and spirituality. Hence, local church expressions differ extensively throughout the denomination. In my first church, the congregants had the right and freedom of choice. However, like so many church governing systems, the responsibility of day-to-day business is handed over to the Church Council. All policies have to be within the purview of the Bylaws and Constitution. The

Church Council can recommend new laws, delete obsolete laws, and/or update current policies.

However, those changes must be approved by a congregational majority vote. The autonomy of the local church is very important. In this congregational autonomy, we identify with other congregations of the UCC, whether large or small, rich or poor. Whatever the church size, the congregants make their own decisions about such things including worship, membership, mission, and leadership. This autonomy is one of the outstanding policies in the United Church of Christ, to me. In my experience, the United Church of Christ assists mutual dialogue with many faith groups, including members of the Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim communities.

The basic structure of the UCC is outlined in the UCC Constitution and Bylaws. The church includes four non-hierarchical bodies: the local congregation, Associations, Conferences, and General Synod. The local church is the basic unit, while local churches are bound together regionally in “Associations.” Associations, in turn, comprise larger bodies known as Conferences. The Conferences combine to make the General Synod. And all are bound together in a covenantal agreement.

Understanding of Baptism and Communion:

Sacraments are visible actions by which Christians may be marked, fed, and touched by the Holy Spirit so that the work of God in Christ are seen through “an outward sign of an inward grace.” Sacraments recall God’s promises and presence to the worshipping community, binding it together into an even tighter and clearer purpose. The UCC recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Baptism centers a Christian’s life. This sacred washing purifies the baptized for a new life dominated by belonging to God. Forgiveness of sin demarcates the past life from a new life of freedom, love, and joy.

Holy Communion is an event that emulates and follows the words of Jesus at the Last Supper with his disciples. During this gathering, Jesus told them that He must die to save humankind and they must always share the bread and wine in remembrance of Him. Ever since that time Christ gathered with His disciples, Christians have held services called Communion or the Lord's Supper. Many UCC churches offer the Eucharist, Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of every month, to give thanks for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. I believe that this is a reference to communion.

For me, there is something very spiritual when it comes to the Lord's Supper. The Scriptures teach us that we are to do it often in remembrance of Him. So, when I do get to hold the bread and the cup in my hands and partake, I feel affirmation of God's amazing love. Truly these are gifts from God for the people of God. I have heard it said that the closest one can ever come to touching God is by coming to the Table of the Lord and receiving the bread and the wine.

Understanding the Bible:

The Bible has messages that are timeless. It explains and answers some of the most important questions in my life: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? How can I find meaning and purpose? How should I live? What happens after death? The Bible tackles and provides some answers for many profound issues. I find the Bible a good resource in my own wrestling with moral issues, and Bible reading is a regular part of my devotional life.

Many of the words and messages included in the Bible are said to come from God. In fact, in II Timothy 3:16-17, the author of the Epistle presents a fantastic claim made by no other writing, ancient or modern: All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. I believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word, and therefore is to be our chief guide both for faith and life. In

my opinion, nothing in this world informs us more authoritatively about what the Church ought to be than Christian Scripture.

Conclusion:

Being born in a God-fearing Christian family and being the last of four siblings, I have always been spoiled and pampered. Even though my parents weren't wealthy or educated, I would say that my parents always gave me the best. I grew up caring less about situations around me, and I have always tried to anticipate facing the consequences. I have always enjoyed being with friends and have been very playful. After experiencing theological training for quite some time, I had the opportunity to examine myself asking "Who Am I" and "What I am going to do?"

As a pastor, now I feel that I am responsible for the lives of the people to whom I minister and I have always cared about. And I understand that I am responsible for their lives, and I need to express God's love to them and for them in their time of need. I realize that I have always seen God in the eyes of other faithful servants, and now it is my turn, with God's help, to allow myself to be in a place for others to see God through me.