

A PAPER FOR CONSIDERATION OF ORDINATION

BY MEMBER IN DISCERNMENT

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MILESTONES

I was born into a close-knit family with roots in Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Southern Illinois. The Great Migration beckoned my family to Chicago in the 1940's. I am the youngest in a blended family of six children—four girls and two boys. My parents Thomas and Wilma raised my brother, sister and me in a home on the Southside in Westchesterfield. I am a "first generation Northerner" who possesses what my pastor Otis Moss, III calls "southern sensibilities." I look back in wonder at my family's struggle and accomplishments. My siblings and I are just three generations removed from emancipation. Our parents, grandparents, and a dozen-and-a-half aunts and uncles gifted us with love for one another, a deep and abiding faith practice, and a desire to make something of ourselves to make this world a better place.

My memories of God's power and presence are enmeshed with my first memories of self. I have no recollection of a time or space in which God did not exist. I anticipated the ritual of preparing for Sunday in our home as a child. It was tradition to complete chores on Saturday to "remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." Washing and ironing were strictly prohibited, and portions of our Sunday dinner were prepared Saturday evening. During morning worship service, my father would march up the aisle with the choir at Lilydale Progressive Baptist Church as they processed to "How I Got Over." We watched for him excitedly, while we sang and clapped with the congregation. These were special times. We were a two-church family then. My mother was Lutheran. The Lutherans, however, were not yet clapping. After church, we would visit family or receive company at our home. We often went for a Sunday afternoon drive. At night when the house was quiet, my parents would listen in bed to sacred music and preaching from a Sunday night radio broadcast. A choral arrangement of

Albert Hay Malott's Lord's Prayer was a familiar lullaby. As the years passed, my church attendance was almost exclusively within the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) where I was baptized at age seven and confirmed at twelve at The Lutheran Church of the Resurrection. I was an active youth who attended Sunday School and congregational meetings; wrote and performed in plays; ran track, swam, and bowled competitively; sang in the Young Adult (Gospel) Choir, enjoyed being a band geek, and served as an acolyte. I worked hard to get good grades at my local public elementary school and then at Luther High School South.

In college and graduate school, the course of study I began was seldom the one I completed. There were twists and changes as God's hand adjusted and aligned my steps and my majors. Attending a parochial high school equipped me as a quiet, introverted girl to live out my faith among my peers. I earned a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education with a Psychology Minor; a Master of Education in Curriculum, Teaching and Psychological Studies; a Master of Divinity with an emphasis in Pastoral Care and Counseling, and a Certificate of Theological Studies with an emphasis in Pastoral Theology and Spirituality and Wellness. I like school and took additional graduate coursework in education to hone my teaching craft and provide my students my best. I worked for three decades as an elementary and middle school teacher.

My family of origin and my church family were my first and my greatest spiritual and theological influences. I have only but to look at my family members, many of whom are teachers, for role models and guidance. However, I have been blessed with gifted teachers and God-sent friends throughout my journey as a life-long learner. As a student at Chicago Theological Seminary, I gained an understanding of the practical

nature of African American spirituality and pastoral care from Drs. Lee Butler and Homer U. Ashby. My Pastor Emeritus, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. speaks of how "the theology of somehow" seasons the African American faith pilgrimage. Beloved Christian Education professor Dr. Jonathan Jackson's adage, is well known among his students. He said that, "Christian Education is the ministry of the church that supports all the other ministries of the church." My ministry was influenced by Bowen Family Systems Theory while studying with Drs. Edward P. Wimberly, Carolyn McCrary, and Jonathan Jackson at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta. Lastly, the leadership of my childhood pastor The Rev. Moses Samuel Dickerson helped give me the foundation which guided my nascent faith into my teenage years and beyond. He was both my pastor and principal at the church's Christian Day School where I completed kindergarten before transferring to public school for grades 1-8.

THE CHURCH

My parents played an active role in the Westchesterfield Community Association. My father acted as a block captain, and my mother led a Girl Scout troop at Wesley United Methodist Church. I often accompanied my parents to these meetings. Although it was never our church home, we spent a considerable amount of time at Wesley UMC. Church was the central meeting place of our small community. Our neighborhood church was an ecumenical gathering place to distill the needs of the community, problem solve, plan, hold forums, and vote, as well as praise and worship.

The church is a place where important conversations take place. God's word is preached, and the lessons of scripture are prayerfully taught and hopefully

contemporized for the people. (“Go ye therefore and teach...”) My parent's activism normalized nontraditional ministry and made the intersection of church and society clear for me. The church was a place where the community's pulse was checked and monitored. Today the Church is so many things to me, least among them is a building made with human hands. The church is a gathering place of safety, comfort, hope, healing, and learning. The institution of church is not confined to a building. At Trinity UCC I first heard the prayer, “...and Lord, after we get through having church, help us to go out into the world and be your church,” and that resonated with me. The scripture says, “Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am in the midst of them.” Those words from Mathew 18:20 are the basic requirements for being church. The primary mission of the church is to spread the gospel or good news, make disciples, glorify God, and to initiate transformation in society that mirrors justice and mercy. I like the expression “the body of Christ called Church,” (something I also heard for the first time at Trinity UCC) because it is a reminder that our arms and legs have work to do for Christ. Hymnody and scripture reference Christ as a bridegroom and the church as the bride of Christ. Christ's sacrifice of His life is akin to paying a dowry or bride price. The church is Christ's. He is its sole head.

CALL AND VOCATION

The earliest hints of my call to ministry began with the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968. I followed Dr. King with great interest during his time in Chicago to fight for fair housing in 1966 and the founding of Operation Breadbasket. We talked about how the adults in our community rioted and reacted upon his death, and we prayed for his children and family at home and in my

kindergarten class. Something inside me had resonated with who King was and the grief and pain experienced by so many upon his death. Somehow, I knew I might not want to share with the rest of the class that I thought of being a minister like him. I remained silent because I was a five-year-old girl, and girls were not ministers. At that time, women could not wear pants in the LCMS and girls could not serve as acolytes. I had seen and been inspired by female lay leaders, but I never saw a woman minister. I kept my thoughts and yearnings close to the vest.

I began to look to the nuns wearing wedding rings dressed in their habits walking in Roseland shopping district. I knew they were sisters committed to God's work and many of them were teachers. I wondered if there was a place for me in their mission. Never mind, we were not Catholic. I was focused on opportunities to serve God, and in my young mind, the sisters were my sole vocational context of [female] boots on the ground.

After listening to a sermon in fourth grade, I was moved to declare my passion for teaching to my pastor. I knew then that teaching was both my gift and vocation. I would serve God by demonstrating God's love in the classroom. Through education, I could share God's word as a way to ease the pain and to bring comfort to others. Being a teacher was a calling for me.

INNER CALL

The seed had been planted at Resurrection Lutheran; it would grow and flourish at Trinity United Church of Christ. I always wanted to know and understand more about a committed life in Christ, and the will of God for my life. As a child, I wanted the

answers to difficult questions like, "Why am I here?" The scripture my pastor chose for me at the end of my confirmation was "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth..." Romans 1:16a. This verse encouraged me as a seeker to remain firm in my faith. I began leading Sunday School in the Lutheran Church and I also co-taught Vacation Bible School. I earned degrees in education. Although I was teaching, I still felt something was missing.

When I joined Trinity in 1987, the missing pieces began to fall into place. I heard the preached Word in sermons that touched my heart in a way I had not experienced since childhood. I saw women engaged in ministry for the first time. I joined the Single Adult Ministry, the Sanctuary Choir, and began taking Bible classes in earnest. Not only did my sense of "call" become more evident, but I also started to discern the call in others! Every single person denied it when I inquired, but each person who answered, "Oh, no!" ended up attending seminary. A unique part of my ministry is to minister to other ministers, and this began with affirming my own call to ministry.

The preached Word plays an essential part in my call story. My call became almost undeniable during the annual revival in 1990 when the Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes preached a sermon entitled, "What is Your Project?" The next summer he followed up with "Lord Show Me My Project." My prayer was, "Lord make your will concerning your call on my life clear as the nose on my face." God answered that prayer, and I said yes to God's call in 1991. I applied to Chicago Theological Seminary in 1992 and received the Presidential Scholarship. I would describe my calling as a continuum of yeses. God still beckons, and I continue to answer yes.

UCC IDENTITY

Trinity United Church of Christ was my introduction to the UCC. I had been Lutheran with Baptist Church flavorings for my entire life. I began to research the larger church, and the denomination seemed to be the perfect marriage of my theological heritage and upbringing. In the earlier days of my attendance at Trinity United Church of Christ, I would read and reread an explanation of the UCC symbol which covered the entire front of the Sunday church bulletin. I was searching for answers. “The UCC logo comprises a crown, cross, and orb enclosed within a double oval bearing the name of the church and the prayer of Jesus, “That they may all be one” (John 17:21). It is based on an ancient Christian symbol called the ‘Cross of Victory’ or the ‘Cross Triumphant.’ The crown symbolizes the sovereignty of Christ. The cross recalls the suffering of Christ—his arms outstretched on the wood of the cross—for the salvation of humanity. The orb, divided into three parts, reminds us of Jesus’ command to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The verse from Scripture reflects our historic commitment to the restoration of unity among the separated churches of Jesus Christ.” I would examine this over and over to explore what I was getting into. At my pastor’s suggestion, I attended the next General Synod in Fort Worth, Texas. Seeing the larger church in action affirmed that this denomination was for me. I met President Paul Sherry; environmental activist and chemist Rev. Ben Chavis, Rev. Andrew Young, and Rev. Yvonne Delk the first African American woman ordained in the UCC. I learned about the UCC’s role in the Amistad Event, the founding of educational institutions and social justice initiatives. I even discussed attending seminary for the first time beyond my pastor’s study.

Synod was like an impromptu history and polity class. The United Church of Christ was founded on June 25, 1957. Our denomination is composed of four predecessor denominations: the Congregationalist, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed churches. Two mergers took place before the 1957 merger: the Congregationalist and the Christian church merger in 1931, and the Evangelical and Reformed church merger in 1934. These prior mergers were referred to as C and C and E and R in seminary circles. In 1957 each church voted as to whether or not they would be a part of the larger merger. Each church has autonomy, and some churches voted not to join. It is estimated that some one-hundred thousand members declined the invitation to merge. I learned that sometimes a church's history in this process can be observed by its name on the church marquee where the church's original name may still exist. For example, in the name First Congregational Church--United Church of Christ in downtown Atlanta where I attended while in seminary the UCC part is an add-on.

I treasured my upbringing in the Reformed tradition of the Lutheran Church. I still feel a certain something during a rousing rendition of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." However, I have been a member of the United Church of Christ for more than half of my life. Church autonomy was a gift of the denomination. It was important to me that I could still embrace the history and tradition of the Protestant reformers and the hymns and creeds of the church. The United Church of Christ did not expect me to wipe my slate clean when I joined. We are a church that united and is still gathers uniting with Christ-like pursuit toward Oneness and Wholeness.

The UCC was my choice. We are known for an extravagant welcome to all people; acknowledging other-abled individuals; our commitment to open and affirming

congregations that affirm God's love and welcome to members of the LGBTQQAI community and others that may have been historically marginalized. We are a just peace church, meaning we endorse the employment of peaceful and just strategies in governance and society. We encourage the use of gender-neutral or inclusive language when speaking of God, and we use the scholarly New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The national office is now in Cleveland in a building we own instead of renting in New York City, and our denomination took on major restructuring in 2000, and additional changes in 2011, and 2017. Some of these changes were admittedly difficult for me, but I trust the spirit of the process and conversation. We are a church that believes God still speaks in love and truth to humankind, so change is inevitable. The phrase "united and uniting" is used a lot, but I like to think we are a church that is evolving.

THE BIBLE

For me, the Bible is the Holy Word of God. I find comfort, strength, and solutions for my life's circumstances in the scriptures. Author Allen Dwight Callahan speaks of the Bible as a "Talking Book," and I believe this ancient book of books speaks even now in a post-modern, post -9/11, Twenty-first Century world. When I went through a divorce, I began to mark and highlight my Bible. I found the greatest comfort in the Word of God during that difficult time.

I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God. I find it useful and effective for teaching, preaching, and aligning my walk in the Christian faith. In my opinion, its wisdom is both prescriptive and descriptive of life's situations. I prefer to read the New Revised Standard Version and its more gender-neutral references to God. I preach the

Gospel, but also enjoy teaching from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible because the story of Moses and the exodus of the Hebrew people parallels the history of African Americans in chattel slavery in the United States.

It is worth noting, in my opinion that the Bible calls itself a sword in several places. Ephesians 6:17 calls it the Sword of the Spirit as it describes the tools a warrior needs to prepare for spiritual battle. I relate to the metaphor of the Bible calling itself a sword. Weapons must be handled with care. Like any weapon, the Bible can be used in ways to hurt or harm--ways that do not advance the cause of Christ. I find it reprehensible that the Bible was misused to justify the institution of chattel slavery, to prohibit women from the pulpit, and to attack same-gender-loving individuals in church.

THEOLOGICAL THINKERS

As dead German theologians go, (a favorite seminary professor's joke) Martin Luther was my primary influence. I learned at an early age that Martin Luther King, Sr. was so impressed by the Protestant reformer that he changed his name and his son's name from Michael to Martin Luther. This excited me even more. Five hundred years ago, a Catholic monk and university teacher named Martin Luther nailed a document of 95 sentences on the door of the church in Wittenburg Germany. He wrote in protest to practices of the church he thought were classist, unjust, ungodly and not biblically sound, namely the practice of the church selling Indulgences. He was our Lutheran rock star. Martin Luther stressed that a faith without works is a dead thing. I heard this over and over growing up Lutheran. It became my first mantra before I knew what a mantra was. Luther was an example of someone who thought critically, and who was not afraid to challenge authority to stand up for what was right. Luther put his life as he knew it on

the line for what he believed in, just like the man named for him in Atlanta hundreds of years later. Both Martins took enormous risks.

I read about Aristotle and his description of God as "the unmoved mover" or "prime mover" as a graduate student in The University of Michigan's School of Education. I learned about the words of Howard Thurman at Trinity United Church of Christ's Ministers-In-Training (MIT) class from Rev. Dr. Ozzie E. Smith, Jr. Thurman spoke about "meeting people at their [ashtray] level." After several unsuccessful visits to minister to and connect with a female smoker, Thurman broke through by helping her empty her ashtrays. After transferring to Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia from Chicago Theological Seminary, I relished conversations with my professor Jonathan Jackson who knew Paul Tillich personally. Tillich spoke of God being the "ground of Being-itself."

BAPTISM

I believe Baptism is a sacrament and ordinance of the Christian Church. It is conducted in a ritual symbolizing the death, burial, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is usually reserved for new converts in the Christian Church. At an early age, I felt the need to be baptized. Finally, at age 7 I was able to persuade my mother to allow me to be baptized. After professing my faith in Jesus as Lord and receiving the sign of the cross upon my forehead and my chest, my pastor used a seashell to pour water from a silver bowl over my head. After being baptized, I felt a closeness with God. I knew that I needed to live in a way that was pleasing to God, and I determined that I needed to live in a way that people could see the God in me. One of the highest compliments

someone can give me is to say, “I can tell you are a Christian.” I collect seashells during my travels as a reminder of my Baptism experience.

COMMUNION

The most exciting day of my life to that date was the morning of my confirmation and first communion at age 12. I barely slept the night before. Growing up in the liturgical and ritual rich Lutheran Church served me well as a quiet child with an active and contemplative thought life. There was hardly a place that felt more welcoming and right to me than when singing congregational hymns during communion. When my pastor stood before the altar and raised the chalice with both hands while blessing the elements, a unique feeling would come over me. At that moment I experienced a holy knowing. I knew deep inside that I was supposed to be doing what my pastor was doing. Divine imagination took me to this sacred, peaceful place every Sunday. Once I was confirmed, kneeling before the altar and receiving the symbols of Christ’s broken body and His shed blood was my favorite part of the service. As brothers and sisters in Christ, our church family confessed and affirmed our faith. Then we gave thanks and broke bread, the symbol of the broken body of the crucified Christ. We drank wine the symbol of Christ’s spilled blood. Our Lord Himself began this ordinance and tradition during His final Passover meal with His disciples. This ancient ritual is a sacrament--an outward sign of inward grace from God. Although God’s grace is a gift that cannot be earned, I believe it is important to inwardly examine ourselves as preparation for coming to the communion table.

CLERGY ETHICS AND BOUNDARIES

Just as healers in the medical field take the Hippocratic Oath of “first do no harm”; as spiritual healers, ministers, must do likewise. Counselors and ministers must know their limits and when to seek the support of a licensed clinician for their congregants and themselves. Self-awareness is an integral part of this determination. Pastor Wright has been a big proponent of those engaged in pastoral ministry or pastoral care of knowing when to counsel and when to refer. He introduced me to the concepts of transference and countertransference. Church members can project feelings of appreciation and other emotions onto the clergyperson that have little to do with the crisis or situation at hand. In countertransference, the minister or counselor projects their feelings into the pastoral or clinical relationship. Ministers and counselors must be aware when such situations are occurring. Ministers and pastors are in a place of authority and power as they preach, teach, counsel and advise others. Clear boundaries must be in place so that parishioners or clients are not harmed by the very people who are there to help them. Clergy ethics and boundaries are critical to me and should be to anyone contemplating entering the ministry.

MY CALL

My call is pastoral ministry to families and children in Word and Sacrament.

1 John 4:7-21 says "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God: everyone who loves is born of God and loves God." In its simplest terms, our Christian journey is all about our love and relatedness to one another--God, self, and neighbor. There is also a special place in my heart for ministry to other ministers. I established

Operation Tincup in 2001 to encourage others to confidently move forward on the sometimes-daunting journey of answering yes to God's call. TINCuP is an acronym for the UCC's ordination track formerly known as The InCare Process. Today potential candidates are called "Members in Discernment."

ORDINATION VOWS

I look forward to the transition from discernment to authorized Ministry in the United Church of Christ as my faithful response to God's call. I believe God is the sole head of the Church. I hear the word of God in the Scriptures and accept the word of God as the rule of Christian faith in Christ. I have attended many ordinations, and I am moved to tears each time I hear the vows. They remind me of my call to spread the word of God and to teach people about God's love and redemptive power. Each ordination is an opportunity to revisit the vows I have already made in my heart. It is my hope and prayer that I have lived those vows and kneeling at the altar will be a public acknowledgment of affirming my faith in God's love and saving grace during the service of ordination. I will with God's help continue to bring lost souls into the Christian faith and bring comfort to those in need of spiritual uplifting.

SELF-CARE

I care for myself with prayer, meditation and me time. It may be as simple as a walk in the park on a sunny day, listening to smooth jazz, writing in a journal, visiting a loved one or selecting a pretty shade of nail polish and painting my nails. I especially enjoy spending time outdoors in nature. I love time near bodies of water, and I take my

dog to the beach where she can dig in the sand to her heart's content. I like taking photographs of my travels and adventures to enjoy later.

After experiencing years of chronic pain, I was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia also known as Fibromyalgia Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (FMCFS) in 2007. This condition forces me to take care of myself. I spent time at the Mayo Clinic and found their approach of integrative medicine extremely helpful. I take advantage of the best of what Western medicine and Eastern and holistic leanings have to offer. I use essential oils, vitamins, supplements, massage, guided meditation and work with a team to strategize and manage my health.

Self-care is supremely important for givers of care and for those who work in helping professions like teaching or ministry. Like many, women in particular, I have had my share of issues with the “disease to please.” Doing the work to heal my own past hurts and trauma in therapy has strengthened my boundaries. From time to time I use these skills to remind myself that being kind and being nice can be quite different, and that I do not have to nurture or please others on demand. I have learned that the word “No.” is a complete sentence!

UCC Statement of Faith

The word doxology brings to mind the Gloria Patri sung in my childhood church each Sunday. It begins, “Glory Be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost...” The Gloria Patri is a doxology, but it is not “the” doxology. I realized this during my first encounter with the UCC Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology. Its purpose is to praise God, specifically the Triune Godhead or the Holy Trinity. At its

core, The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the form of a doxology is a song of praise to acknowledge the three persons of the Godhead--God as the Creator, God's son Jesus as Christ and the Holy Spirit as Comforter. This statement affirms the tenets of our faith, and simultaneously praises God. I find it credal in nature, yet different because it is lyrically beautiful like a song or poem. Whether read privately or recited publicly in worship it invokes our corporate belief as a denominational faith family that the transcendent and immanent God created the world and put in place a plan of salvation for humankind saving us from our sins.

Paraphrased: We believe in God, who is an eternal Spirit without limits. This the same God that Jesus Christ Himself worshipped. This is the same God that gave the name "I AM" during the call of Moses in Exodus 3:14. This God is a God of love and action, and we testify and share the news of God's good deeds and right actions. This God spoke a word, and a world was called into existence. God's call is important because it shows God's divine intent and a desire for purpose relatedness. This is a God of distinction, and we were made to glorify God.

Sin is archery term mean "to miss the mark." God's love saves us from our bad aim or aimlessness. God's love is pure and Holy. It is without fault or ill intent. The Statement of Faith reminds us that God's prophets proclaimed God's will and the coming of the Messiah and that God alone is the righteous judge. During Christ's earthly walk and following his death, Apostles proclaimed God's will. The words of John 3:16 tells us that God loved the world so much that God sent God's only Son that those who believe would be saved. It is amazing that an all-powerful God would extend mercy, empathy, power and attention to us and come dwell with us in a human

experience. One of my favorite authors Max Lucado says, “God came near” in his book of the same title.

The United Church of Christ affirms the priesthood of all believers. It is my belief that those in Christ are born to walk in their unique purpose as they glorify God, share the Gospel, resist the powers of evil and stand for justice. Part of that purpose is to accept the joy of discipleship as well as the cost. If we follow Christ, we are promised grace or the free unmerited favor of God and the forgiveness of our sins. We are promised courage, or a Holy boldness as we work to build and transform our communities. Lastly, we are promised an eternity with God when we transition from our earthly bodies. The statement of faith ends by affirming God’s supremacy and power with honor and a blessing.