

Ordination Paper

by MariBeth Welch Brainerd

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“The place God calls you to
is the place where your deep gladness
and the world’s deep hunger
meet.”

– Frederick Buechner¹

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 119.

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Introduction:

No one was more surprised than I, when, at the age of 59, I finally responded to what had become an increasingly persistent call to ministry and entered into the Chicago Theological Seminary Master of Divinity program, to prepare for ordained ministry within the United Church of Christ (UCC). I came by this holy surprise honestly, given that this “preacher’s kid” had, from the age of majority, distanced myself from organized religion, just to get away from that socially confining label. Moreover, as I grew in my critical awareness of the role of the church in maintaining socio-political inequalities, I assiduously stayed away from all organized religions. As the “icing on the cake,” I came out as a lesbian-feminist in the mid-1970s, a time when even the most liberal of denominations were challenged in their theology and practice by not only the civil rights and the feminist movements, but also, increasingly, by the gay liberation movement. As a young person coming to terms with loving my authentic self, I had no interest in joining a community that “hates the sin but loves the sinner,” when the “sin” was my love of another human being who happened to be of the same gender. And yet, here I was, as I moved into the last season of my life, accepting a call to prepare for ministry.

Part I: Milestones in My Life and Faith Leading Me to My Call to UCC Ministry

Born on June 19, 1952, I was the third child and first daughter of a 30-year-old Congregational minister and a 28-year-old elementary-school teacher-in-training, thereby becoming the younger sister to two boys, ages two and four. At the age of six months old, my father moved us to a new settled ministry in East Providence, Rhode Island. By the time I was 15, my father had moved us two more times across the states of New England to new settled ministries. My brothers and I learned, as if through osmosis, the never-ceasing work of the minister and how difficult it can be to maintain a balance between home and work. Both of my parents coped with those pressures by the daily drinking of alcohol, starting at the dinner hour and then going on until bedtime, accompanied by shouting arguments which were followed by biting silences. At age eighteen, with a deep sigh of relief, I

moved 1,000 miles away to begin my undergraduate studies at Kalamazoo College, Michigan, a community that did not know me as the “minister’s daughter.” It would be over twenty years before I would once again be part of a church community.

Another major milestone was my “official” coming-out as a lesbian-feminist at the “Alice Doesn’t Day” Women’s Strike March on October 29, 1975. Two years earlier, I had dropped out of college and moved to Los Angeles. There I became active in peace, equality, and justice movements, such as women’s movement consciousness raising and the farmworkers’ grape boycott. In 1978 I returned full time to college, graduating in 1980 with a special major in Speech Communication and a double minor in Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies, a concentration that enabled me to combine academic studies and my social justice commitments. In the fall of 1980, I entered the UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning. My goal was to gain the skills and credentials needed to bring community development resources and skills to Los Angeles women’s and low-income communities of color. As I matured as a scholar-activist, I decided to complete a doctorate in Urban Planning, so I would be able to combine meaningful teaching, research, and activism in community development with my social justice commitments, alongside others similarly driven to leave the world a better place than we had found it.

By 1987, at age 35, I was three years into my doctorate program and had just ended a relationship with a woman who had been more absent than present in our four years together. With that breakup I realized that for fifteen years I had neglected to see the addictive behavior all around me and had repeatedly selected partners who were emotionally unavailable and either drinking alcoholically or drugging compulsively. Friends told me about the Alanon 12-step recovery program for family and friends of Alcoholics, which is built on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. Because of the spiritual recovery I found in those 12-step Alanon rooms, I decided to attend the Church in Ocean Park, a United Methodist Church known for its social-justice ministry. The first Sunday I attended church services there, I found myself in tears, so overwhelmed by the acceptance, by the community,

and, I knew in my soul, by God. Nevertheless, it took yet another relationship break-up, and sinking into deep depression, that led me to hit my spiritual and emotional “bottom,” longing for death, but without the energy to kill myself. I finally fell into a deep sleep in which I had a vivid dream of God holding me, as a mother would hold a child in her arms, rocking me and letting me know that I was loved. It felt like I had been free-falling down a dark hole and had suddenly been hoisted by a divine force. I knew from that moment that in a death-cold world I now chose life, and that God was an essential wellspring for that life-saving choice.

Some twenty years later, I was living in Chicago, five years into what would be a sixteen-year lesbian relationship. One of my work colleagues invited me to her church’s Thanksgiving Day Service, saying that her teenage daughter would be performing in the church’s liturgical dance group. And, so it was that I began attending a charismatic, Spanish-language, non-denominational church with Puerto-Rican Pentecostal roots. It would be at this church that I began to hear God calling me to ministry. The call to Christian ministry was clear and insistent, but to what denomination, to what ministry?

In the meantime, because of family ties, I remained connected with the United Church of Christ. My father continued preaching and providing pastoral care up to his death in 2003 at age 84. My oldest brother was ordained as an UCC minister while I was still in my twenties and continues to serve in the Wisconsin conference. My mother, after retiring from elementary school teaching at age 65, went to seminary and in 1999 was ordained within the United Church of Christ in the Massachusetts conference. She served as an Associate Pastor at a UCC church for some fifteen years, retiring from ministry at the age of 89. She is my role model for how an older woman in recovery can respond to God’s call into authorized ministry and share her unique gifts in the last third of her life.²

Despite this deep family history with the UCC, I looked for signs for where I was being called to ministry. I asked for God’s help in finding a local UCC church that was truly inclusive and diverse,

² My mother, Rev. Phyllis Frechette, has given me her blessing to include her A.A. spiritual recovery story in my ordination paper.

that would accept me, a lesbian, and be willing to be my “in care” community as a member in discernment. Within a week I found it: The First Congregational Church of Chicago, UCC, known by its parishioners as la Primera Iglesia Congregacional de Chicago. Primera Iglesia was, and is, a diverse, progressive, welcoming church, and engaged in the social issues of the larger community, even though at the time it was not an Open and Affirming Church (ONA). In the fall of 2012, I entered Chicago Theological Seminary, and one year later was accepted as a Member in Discernment by the UCC Chicago Metropolitan Association. Over the course of my seminary studies (which I completed, one or two courses per term, while working at an executive-level, full-time position in a non-profit), I also completed a two-year Spiritual Direction Training program through the Siena Retreat Center in Racine, Wisconsin, completed one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital as a Chaplain on the Hospice and Palliative Care wing, and interned one full year under the supervision and mentorship of Rev. Jose Jerez at Iglesia Unida En Cristo, a startup Spanish-language ministry in Berwyn, Illinois. Over the course of training as a Spiritual Companion and completing my required CPE unit at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital, I became aware of my gifts for chaplaincy and began to prepare for entering the specialized ministry of chaplaincy. From my graduate education and over twenty years of work in Urban Planning and Non-profit organizations I also bring such skills as program development, strategic planning, fund-raising, and leadership development, as well as an understanding of organizational and human behavior, all important to church administration, and which would also be useful in a specialized ministry such as chaplaincy.

To explore what spiritual and psychological baggage I might be carrying with me as I made my journey toward ordination, with a specific goal of addressing my palpable discomfort with other people’s anger, I decided in the Spring of 2014 to begin what turned out to be three years of psychotherapy with a therapist who has a special interest and training in addressing emotional and sexual intimacy, life transitions, faith, and loss. Little did I know then how much I would also learn about the gifts that come with the healing of our wounds: being present and having empathy for others

in ways not possible without having been deeply wounded ourselves. As it turned out, another issue emerged that became additional fodder for my spiritual and psychological explorations: my sexual identity. To my surprise, as I began to heal from the break-up of my 16-year relationship with a woman and became more emotionally available to others, I realized that I had feelings of attraction toward a male seminarian. That attraction did not mature into a relationship, but, in the course of my coming to terms with my feelings of attraction to a man, I realized that I could no longer truthfully say that I was a lesbian. Moreover, I realized that authenticity in ministry would require that I come out to family and friends—and my church—as a *bisexual* woman. About a year later, I rediscovered love with one of my oldest friends, a man who had, in fact, been my high-school sweetheart. This led to yet another milestone: in September 2018, Sam and I married, with my mother (“Rev. Mom”) officiating, and six family members attending. I moved to Carroll County, Maryland, became an associate member of Trinity UCC, a small rural church, and was taken under the wing of the Interim Pastor there. I have preached multiple times over the last year and a half, joined the choir, and was elected to the Consistory in the position of the chair of the worship committee. All these milestones in my life and faith come together now as I seek my committee’s recommendation for ordination, pending call, understood as a call to specialized ministry as a hospice chaplain, in covenant with a local UCC church.

Part II: My Personal Theological Position & My Fit within the UCC “Big Tent”

1. My Personal Theological Position & Major Theological Influences

I identify theologically as Christian, largely because Christianity is my first and strongest language for understanding God as a unifying creative force and connection in the world. That said, I do not think that Christianity is the only way to understand God. I do not think that God can be contained within one cultural or religious viewpoint, and the more we can understand all religious expressions the closer we come to fully seeing all the facets and aspects of the face of God. I think that my openness to and appreciation of the many cultural and religious understandings of God and the

Divine is a strong foundation for being able to minister as a chaplain and provide a “listening presence” on behalf of the many different peoples of faith whom I will meet in my specialized ministry of chaplaincy.

My thinking regarding interfaith connections and the multiplicity and multi-relationality of God has been greatly expanded by my reading of Laurel C. Schneider, whose work, for example in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology Of Multiplicity*, provides me with creative and transformative insights for thinking about and envisioning God.³ Schneider argues, that if we go beyond the dualistic thinking of who God “is” and “is not,” and instead employ the improvisational theater rule of “Yes (that)... and (more),” then God can be conceived of as everything and nothing and can encompass, all at the same time, Black, Red, white, Asian, female, male, transgender, no gender, lesbian, or gay. So, by extension, we are all made in God’s all-encompassing image.⁴ Rather than assert that Christianity is THE one and ultimate understanding of God, Schneider gives insights for how we might talk about a God that is, by God’s embodied presence in creation, evident in all God’s creation, a “theology of multiplicity and relation.”⁵

Another theologian who has greatly influenced my thinking about Scripture and Church is the Rev. Dr. James H. Cone, the founder of Black Liberation theology. He has provided me with the key understanding that Christian theology is, at its core, liberation theology, a theology of justice, social action, and irrepressible love. Moreover, I take to heart his warning to white churches and their theologians, to beware of any faith that in any way promotes White Supremacy, using the Bible to defend the superior position of a particular gender or race, or upholding any oppression or exclusion of people. Rev. Cone states, “White Christianity is not the gospel of Jesus. White supremacy, in fact, is

³ Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge:2008), ix-xi.

⁴ “Yes (that) . . . and (more)” is a method used in improvisational theater to encourage more ideas by making sure that every premise is supported and built upon. It can also be used in corporate settings to encourage discussion and innovative ideas. In a theological setting “Yes, and” moves us beyond understanding only one way to know the divine.

⁵ Laurel C. Schneider and Catherine Keller, eds., *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (New York: Routledge, 2011). Schneider also co-edited, with Stephen G. Ray, Jr., *Awake to the Moment: An Introduction to Theology by the Workgroup on Constructive Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

the Antichrist!”⁶ My take-away from this bold statement is that those of us who find ourselves leading or worshipping in predominantly or wholly white churches need to ask ourselves whether, by not challenging the status quo, by not questioning the solely white images of Jesus and God, by allowing our religion to uphold rather than break down the oppression of people of color and others who are oppressed, we have evolved into a religion that is no longer Christian in its actions, and is instead serving the Anti-Christ.

While every moment of my life has prepared me for seeking ordination within the United Church of Christ, *most* of what I have learned about being a Christian and being a minister to the spirit I learned, as an adult, from twelve-step spiritual recovery programs. It is in those twelve-step recovery rooms that I came to believe in God, whom I know as my higher power. Moreover, much of what I have learned about being a part of God’s “beloved community,” in essence a “church in the world,” I have learned from people seeking recovery and transforming their lives by sharing their struggles, shortcomings, and hopes with each other, day by day, at twelve-step meetings. It is in those rooms where I have witnessed modern-day miracles, in the form of spiritual transformations. It is in those rooms that I have come to believe that by turning my life and my will over to God, I gain the essential humility of knowing that I am part of the universe, but I am not the universe. I belong to God and God lives within me, but, clearly, I am not God.

Finally, my understanding of God and spirituality has been greatly expanded by “new cosmology” theologians,⁷ most of whom would likely identify as “spiritual but not religious,”⁸ who

⁶ James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 22. Also Cone’s discussion of White Christianity, White Supremacism and the hope of repentance and reparation in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books Paperback Edition, 2013).

⁷ “New Cosmology” theologians explore the relationship between theology and science, and what spiritual understandings we can draw from the “new,” or modern cosmology, specifically in the fields of neuroscience, quantum physics, and astrophysics. “New Cosmology” theologians that I consider part of that genre of spiritual writing include Matthew Fox, Diarmuid O’Murchu, Judy Cannato, John Philip Newell, Richard Rohr, Joan Chittister, Dr. Sally McFague, and Edwina Gateley.

⁸ About a quarter of U.S. adults (27%) now say they think of themselves as spiritual but not religious, up 8 percentage points in five years, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted between April 25 and June 4 of this year. This growth has been broad-based: It has occurred among men and women; Whites, Blacks

provide the foundation for my training and work in Spiritual Direction and greatly influence my personal theology. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, professor, prolific writer, and theologian, answers the question I hear so many times in Spiritual Direction training and, similarly, in faith formation: “Where is God in all this?” She writes, “God is all over the place. God is up there, down there, inside my skin and out. God is... revealed in that singular, vast net of relationship that animates everything that is.”⁹ This understanding of who and where God is in our world and universe also drives my sense of call to becoming a UCC minister who can provide a “ministry of presence” whenever, wherever, and however we make a place for our spiritual BE-ing in the world, *even* in the buildings and spaces that we call church.

2. The Bible—Its Authority, Relevance and Application Today

I see the Bible—the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament—as the primary sources of our sacred stories. However, like Marcus Borg, I believe that the Bible cannot and should not be taken literally, even as it should be taken seriously.¹⁰ The Bible stories, never intended to be understood as historical accounts of God and God’s peoples, are instead *metaphorical* accounts: Judeo-Christian myths with deep religious and theological truths. What the UCC adds to these traditional yet modern and, indeed, radical Christian and Jewish stories, is the declaration of faith that “God is Still Speaking,” and the recognition that the sacred texts that guide our faith, today and into the future, are still being written.¹¹ Just as we learn in 12-step recovery, if you “keep coming back,” in this

and Hispanics; people of many different ages and education levels; and among Republicans and Democrats. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 54-5.

¹⁰ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (New York: Harper One, 2001).

¹¹ *Stillspeaking*. the shorter form of "God is still speaking," is a campaign by the United Church of Christ to remind us that God still has a lot more to say. Since 2004, the *Stillspeaking* campaign has inspired thousands of UCC churches and individuals across the country to make religion relevant again and to extend an extravagant welcome to all—because “no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here.” <https://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking>

case, keep coming back to the stories of the Bible, you will find your own story, you will read or hear your own spiritual truth. As stated on the UCC website, “Who We Are”:

The story of our book never ends if we remain open to the promise of newness that takes place both in the pages and in the lives of the people who read and hear its wisdom.¹²

What this means to me is that when we Christians read the Bible, we need to permit it to evolve in its meaning, both for our own continuing spiritual growth and for the spiritual growth of those to whom we have been called to minister. By acknowledging that “God is Still Speaking,” we acknowledge God’s gift of a “continuing text,” the writings that come to us from fellow spiritual seekers of the last 2,000 years, thereby providing us with new insights and contexts for understanding God and our own continuing creation story.

3. The United Church of Christ: History, Ministry, Mission, and Polity

One of the aspects that draws me to the “big tent” of the United Church of Christ, is the story of its formation from two culturally distinct Protestant reform branches with very different polities. When those two reform denominations came together in 1957 to form the UCC, they promised they would hang together, through thick and thin. Indeed, as stated in the UCC Manual on Ministry, “Covenant—the commitment of God to God’s people, of the people to God, of the people to one another as the Body of Christ—is foundational to UCC identity and is at the heart of our governance.”¹³ As stated in the UCC Statement of Faith (1981 Doxology Version): You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, *binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.*¹⁴

The creation of the UCC was a miracle of faith and trust, a model for how to live with one another in covenant, even when the only thing we can agree on, as a denomination or a local church, is

¹² https://www.ucc.org/about-us_who-we-are

¹³ Manual on Ministry: A Guide to Authorizing Ministry in the United Church of Christ (Cleveland: Ministerial Excellence, Support & Authorization (MESA) Ministry Team, United Church of Christ, 2018), 6.

¹⁴ “UCC churches share core Christian beliefs, but we believe in pitching a big tent—allowing individual congregations the freedom to choose how they want to ‘be church’ together.” Speech by Rev. Dr. John Thomas, “The Big Tent and the Great Parade,” *United Church of Christ News Headlines*, June 22, 2008 (*italics mine*).

the central unifying understanding that Jesus is the sole head of the Church. This inauspicious beginning, where extended and bitter legal challenges to the formation of the United Church of Christ threatened the denomination's very existence, may be the very aspect, 63 years later, that has led to the ability of its member churches to remain in community even when, or especially when, dealing with what might otherwise be seen as fundamental disagreements in both vision and polity. The UCC not only can be a place where we can agree to disagree over matters of biblical "truths," but, indeed, was founded, in covenant, *to be one in Christ*. To borrow from the Rabbi Hillel who cited the Golden Rule when asked to teach the Torah while the student stood on one foot, "all else is commentary."¹⁵

In practice, I understand this covenant to mean that we are called to pray with each other, to listen to and hear each other, to share our stories, and to stay in the room with each other, even when it is difficult and even when we strongly disagree. We do this in faith that we grow and do better together under the same wide tent than we do apart and separated. This is not to say that we pretend we do not disagree when we do. This is not to say we cannot take any action because we cannot agree upon any. But it does mean that we work as hard as we can on finding our places of agreement, allow wherever possible for others' disagreement, always keeping in mind the one thing that binds us together: that we belong to God and Jesus is the sole head of our church. This UCC call to live in covenant, not only with God but with each other, brings me to request ordination to ministry within the UCC.

In addition, as a bisexual woman, I celebrate that the first woman *ever* ordained in a mainline church, the Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, who was a member of the Congregational Church. I also celebrate that the UCC was the first mainline denomination to ordain a gay man, the Rev. William R. Johnson. His historic ministry is now honored by the UCC through a named seminary scholarship to support "out" LGBTQIA¹⁶ seminarians pursuing ordination, a scholarship which I was fortunate to have received. While I celebrate these UCC milestones of inclusion, it is also important to note that

¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

¹⁶ LGBTQIA is acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual or allied.

Blackwell was in fact ordained solely by her local church and *never* recognized by the Congregational denomination and Johnson was never called to a church as a settled pastor. Moreover, inequalities and exclusions based on gender, sexuality, and race continue even to this day, both within the UCC and within other mainline denominations, making me keenly aware of how important it is to speak out, lift up, and support those who have sought ordination and continue to be discounted, diminished, or excluded from sharing their spiritual and pastoral gifts. This commitment for me involves being “out” in my work as a bisexual woman so that I can be visible example of how God shares God-self with us, even as, or especially as, someone who does not fit the traditional mold of someone “set apart” for authorized ministry.

4. UCC Statement of Faith

What I think is notable about the UCC and its statement of faith, whatever version (original, inclusive language revision, or revised doxology), is that the UCC does not make its statement of faith into a creed or a test of faith. Rather, like the Bible, the UCC statement of faith provides insight into how UCC denomination members have collectively experienced and understood their relationship to our Triune God. However, the UCC Statement of Faith is a “still-evolving” testament to which we are invited to place our own imprint. Moreover, by not adopting one universal creed to be used as a “test of faith” for all members, the UCC instead provides an open call to all to join with us in worship and service to or with our triune God, as we each understand God to work in our lives. The UCC recognizes that we each have our individual relationship to God and that we come together in community as a “priesthood of believers.” All that said, as I consider my own testament of faith, just as new members of my home church, First Congregational Church of Chicago (Primera Iglesia Congregacional de Chicago) write and then share their personal statement of faith with the Primera Iglesia community, I write the following:

I believe that there is a higher power, a power greater than myself, that exists in the world, and whom I choose to call God. I believe that all creation is part of God and God’s energy in the Universe,

and that we, as part of creation, are called to connect and be part of that God-energy and for that God-energy to connect and be part of us.

I believe that Jesus, who became Jesus our Christ when he responded to a sacred call from God to be God's presence in the world, is the sole head of our church. His teachings, work, and resurrection from death on the cross showed his followers, of which I am one, the way to co-create God's kin-dom in the world, by following God's greatest commandment to love God and one another with all our hearts and minds, and thereby become one with God. I also believe in the presence of God as Holy Spirit, whom Jesus, God's human presence, sent to be with us when we most feel abandoned and alone and to spur us to find our connection with God, who is always reaching out and present, even or especially when we feel abandoned and utterly alone.

In all this and more, in ways that only God and my spirit can hold and know, **I believe**.

5. Sacraments of Baptism and Communion

"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have clothed yourself with Christ. 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."—Galatians 3:26-28

The UCC celebrates two sacraments: Baptism and Communion. Baptism is a gift of God's grace, signifying that we each, created in God's image, belong to God and are God's beloved. The act of baptism also marks the beginning of new life of discipleship with God in Christ, which is the Christian response to that gift. In baptism we are, as stated in Galatians 3:26-28, "clothed in Christ"; we are "no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free nor male nor female." We are joined with the universal church, one in the body of Christ. Baptism with water and the Holy Spirit is the sign and seal of our common discipleship. Infants, children, youth and adults are baptized within the UCC. For infants and children, as well as for youth and adults who have never been baptized before, baptism marks their acceptance into the care of Christ's church, the sign and seal of God's grace and forgiveness, and the beginning of our Christian faith and life.

I was baptized as an infant by my father, an ordained Congregational minister in Massachusetts. A photo in our family scrapbook shows me in a white christening dress and bonnet, with my mother and my Godparents standing alongside my father who is holding me in his arms. Despite my having been baptized as an infant, at 58 years of age I requested and received a believer's baptism of immersion in the non-denominational Spanish-language church I then attended. I wanted to experience the sensation of being immersed in the water, feeling the sense of being re-created in spirit, of being transfigured, as it were, in Christ. When I brought up my sexuality as a possible issue for the pastor, he said that he was called to baptize, bless, and pray for people; my sexual identity was between me and God. The water was ice-cold, because the pool heater had conked out that morning. I emerged from that frigid pool transfigured. I was later told by another parishioner that after I rejoined the congregation, my face and entire being glowed with a bright aura. I knew what he said was true. I felt that glow that he had seen, emitting from my face, indeed from my entire person. It was then, that day, I also knew that I had been called to ordained ministry, though I also intuitively knew that the call I sensed was not to ordained leadership within that particular charismatic non-denominational church.

Of course, as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, I would counsel anyone petitioning for a second baptism that the UCC recognizes the validity of all baptisms, therefore there is no theological basis for a re-baptism. Since there is no erasing that the outward and visible sign of the grace of God has already been given, any subsequent baptismal renewal is, logically, a baptismal renewal rather than a re-baptism.¹⁷ Moreover, the common agreement with the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs along with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church-USA, the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ, declares that there is only one baptism. Today I would suggest to anyone wanting to be baptized again

¹⁷ In the circumstance where a transperson sought me out to request a "rebaptism" because they consider their former name and gender "dead" and they want their "birth" into their authentic gender and new name to be blessed by God, I have proposed instead a naming ceremony and a baptismal renewal, which would include language that clarifies that God knows us and loves us from even before the time of our birth, and loves us as we grow into our authentic selves.

to instead renew their baptismal vows in a service of baptismal renewal, such as the Order for Renewal of Baptism in the UCC Book of Worship.

Finally, the recognition of our baptism by the ecumenical church is important to us as a church, and important to me personally. Because of that commitment to ecumenism, and despite my resolve to use inclusive language in our liturgies, I will, in administering the sacrament of baptism, follow the Book of Worship, which encourages the use of language recognized in most Christian churches: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." That said, given my commitment to inclusive ministry, I would, in accordance with the UCC brochure on baptism, also incorporate feminine images for God to enrich understandings and offer balance.¹⁸

Communion:

The communion meal is simultaneously a time of remembrance, a time of joyous thanksgiving, and an intimate experience of fellowship where all are welcome to partake of the table. Communion is a *remembrance* of the last supper that Jesus celebrated with the disciples before his execution on the cross and his subsequent resurrection and appearances sharing meals with disciples before his ascension to be one with God. It is a time of joyous *thanksgiving* when we who identify as Christians are invited to hear, taste, touch, and receive the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ in a unique way. We give thanksgiving for all God has done and is doing in our lives, and will do, in the creation of heaven here on earth, making all things new. It is an *intimate experience of fellowship* in which the whole church in every time and place (across history, cultures and geography) is present and divisions are overcome. The broken bread (or gluten-free crackers) and poured wine (or juice) represent—present anew—the new covenant of the crucified and risen Christ. The wheat gathered to bake one loaf and the grapes pressed to make one cup remind participants that we are one body in Christ.

¹⁸ "Baptism: A Practice of Faith in the United Church of Christ." "Baptism" is one of 11 introductory brochures from "Practices of Faith in United Church of Christ" published by Local Church Ministries.

At every communion celebration at my membership church, “Primera Iglesia,” Pastor Rosa specifies that the communion table does not belong to any person or group - not to him, not to the President of the Church Council, or even to la Primera Iglesia - but rather is the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone is invited to come to the table, regardless of skin color, gender, national background, language, religious background, economic class, sexuality, or age. The communion meal ritually celebrates the “hopeful sign of the promised Realm of God marked by justice, love and peace.”¹⁹

Celebrating the sacraments is one of the key privileges of authorized ministry, one that visibly sets apart those who are ordained ministers from lay ministers. The ordination to authorized ministry provides the same cloak of sacred authority to any pastor, regardless of the color of our skin, our gender identity, our nationality and language, or our sexuality. That fact is not lost on our congregations and parishioners, especially when the pastor clearly does not reflect the dominant paradigm of ordained ministry.

Because my call to the specialized ministry of chaplaincy will mean that I will be talking and praying with people who are not in the places we usually call church, I will bring the church and the sacraments to them. Moreover, given that my call to ministry in a specialized setting, like a hospital or a hospice program, is structured and authorized through a UCC four-way covenant²⁰ among the calling body, my local UCC church, the local church Association, and me, I will share in the Ministry of the Word and the Sacrament at both the local church and the wider church settings. I will lead worship and perform sacraments when invited to do so by my local church pastors or, in their absence, through the invitation and consent of the Church Council. Therefore, being ordained and authorized to bring the sacraments of baptism and communion, our most sacred moments of connection and blessing, is essential to being able to conduct chaplain ministry with the people for whom I am called to serve.

¹⁹ UCC Brochure "Communion," one of 11 introductory brochures from "Practices of Faith in United Church of Christ" published by Local Church Ministries.

²⁰ Manual on Ministry: A Guide to Authorizing Ministry in the United Church of Christ (Cleveland: Ministerial Excellence, Support & Authorization (MESA) Ministry Team, United Church of Christ, 2018), pp. 88-90 and Section 3 On-line Resources for Committees on Ministry, Section 2:5 Four Way Covenant Template.

6. The Church—Its Mission and Ministry

To “be the church” in the world requires seeing the church as much more than that Sunday morning sacred place we go to worship. God is much bigger than that, and God’s beloved community extends far beyond any building topped by a steeple. The church we need to be today is the beloved community that Jesus calls us to be—a church that is both diverse and one: reflecting the diversity of God’s creation. The church of Jesus Christ should not be confused with a building that houses a church community, and God’s beloved community should not be confused with a particular religious community or affiliation. In this reconceptualizing this beloved community, where God resides, I draw on Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, a founder of Mujerista Liberation Theology, and what she brings to our understanding of the dailiness (“lo cotidiano”) of God’s presence in our lives. Church happens “wherever two or three are gathered together.”²¹ Chaplaincy is very much a ministry of connection with people right where they are at that moment, whether feeling joy or overwhelmed by the dailiness of their lives, and whether the hospital or hospice bedside is the place where we gather to connect with God and feel God’s presence in their lives.

7. My Reflections on the UCC Ordination Vows, the UCC Ministerial Code, and the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers

As part of my discernment of call to authorized ministry, I have reviewed the UCC Ordination Vows,²² the UCC Ministerial Code,²³ and the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers.²⁴ Without hesitation I am ready to make all the vows and promises that the UCC asks of its authorized ministers and will strive, with God’s help, to be faithful to my call by being faithful to my vows and commitments. Specifically, I acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the source of our church’s faith,

²¹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*, 10, no.1 (Aug. 2002): 5-17.

²² <https://uccfiles.com/pdf/MOM-Sect3-liturgy-ordination.pdf>.

²³ https://www.ucc.org/ministers_ordained-ministers-code.

²⁴ Manual on Ministry: A Guide to Authorizing Ministry in the United Church of Christ (Cleveland: Ministerial Excellence, Support & Authorization (MESA) Ministry Team, United Church of Christ, 2018), pp.10-14.

mission and unity, and as an ordained minister I will carry the Word of God to the people, even as I belong to and am sustained by both God and the people. This relationship is embodied in our UCC covenants. To affirm the UCC Ministerial Code, “Relying on the grace of God, I... covenant with God to: lead a life worthy of the calling to which I have been called; demonstrate a sincere yearning for connection with the triune God, expressed in prayer, worship, Bible study, retreat, and other spiritual practices including chaplaincy and pastoral care; and affirm the importance of discernment in relationship to my call and, using the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers, will continue to discern the nature of my call to chaplaincy, including my role as an ordained minister in my local church. In the next section of this paper I use the eight categories of the “Marks” to share my continuing discernment of my preparation for entry into authorized ministry and the specialized ministry of chaplaincy.

The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers: Eight Categories of Discernment

1. ***Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practices:*** largely through my training and practice of Spiritual Companionship, including an ongoing connection with my own Spiritual Director, I have deepened my spiritual connection with God, through daily prayer, meditation, and writing and look for ways to share spiritual practice with others.
2. ***Nurturing UCC Identity:*** I hold membership in the First Congregational Church of Chicago (La Primera Iglesia), where I have preached, led Bible & Confirmation Studies, served on the Church Leadership Council, and led the Open and Affirming (ONA) process leading to its becoming an ONA congregation in 2016. From 2014 to 2017, I served as secretary of the Great Lakes Regional Council for Hispanic Ministries and participated in Member-in-Discernment annual meetings and Association trainings. Since moving to Hampstead, Maryland, I have been active with Trinity United Church of Christ in Manchester, where, in addition to occasional preaching, I am an elected member of the Consistory, chair the Worship Committee, sing in the choir, and for the last year

have participated in the church's interim planning and vision team. I have also attended General Synod: in 2015 as a volunteer; and in 2017 and 2019 as a delegate from the Illinois Conference.

3. ***Building Transformational Leadership Skills:*** As a life-long learner, open to the surprises of the Holy Spirit, I will seek out a chaplaincy peer group with whom I can collaborate and exchange insightful feedback for mutual spiritual transformation and growth as faith leaders.
4. ***Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions:*** I regularly return to our sacred texts, through daily devotions and, when available, weekly Bible study, to grow and deepen the foundation of my spiritual companionship, preaching, and pastoral work. I also chair the worship committee at Trinity Church, and preach and lead worship, including sharing a children's message, about four times a year. As a chaplain, a key aspect of my work is to provide a listening presence to my patients, regardless of their faith traditions, so the patients can share their sacred stories, their spiritual pain and, with God's grace, grow into spiritual wholeness.
5. ***Caring for All Creation:*** Love of Creation is one of the 3 Great Loves of the UCC. Caring for someone or something is a one way to show our love. Exercising self-care is one part of caring for God's creation. My self-care includes healthy meals, pausing to pray, meditate, rest and exercise, engaging in nature through walks and birdwatching, and singing and playing my guitar. My care for the environment is shown through recycling, re-using and reducing the use and waste of non-renewable resources, and to pause with others, especially those in our churches, to celebrate our creation, such as on Earth Day. As part of caring for our church's spiritual-holistic-mental health, I attend the UCC WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, Engaged) Congregations for Mental Health²⁵ conferences, most recently the 2018 conference held in Massachusetts.

²⁵ WISE, currently supported by a UCC Genesis grant, is a program of the UCC Mental Health Network, which is in ecclesiastical covenant with the UCC Collegium, a non-profit, 501c3 organization. In accordance with the WISE Resolution approved at General Synod, 2015, the UCC Mental Health Network, through its resources and training, including the annual WISE conference, works to reduce stigma and promote the inclusion of people with mental illnesses/brain disorders and their families in the life, leadership and work of congregations.

6. ***Participating in Theological Praxis:*** My Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and my lay ministry at my local church, are the primary places where I put theology into action. In 2019 I completed a second CPE unit at the Frederick County Hospice Services organization and plan to complete 2 more units within the next calendar year. A public theology project that I began as my final project in my “Living into Our Commitments” course at Chicago Theological Seminary, is the non-secular and non-partisan Braver Angels depolarization project, which brings neighbors together, in the very conservative northern Maryland county where I live, to find ways to engage civilly in political discourse. Since our first “Red-Blue” workshop held in my local church on January 26, 2019, we have held a number of depolarization skills training workshops, created a steering committee of “reds” and “blues” and in 2020 established the Carroll County Braver Angels Red-Blue Alliance.
7. ***Working Together for Justice and Mercy:*** The UCC mission statement is: “United in Spirit, inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.”²⁶ The UCC mission aligns with my own moral and ethical commitments, inseparable from my call to chaplaincy and ordained ministry. I have worked for justice, whether for environmental justice, gender justice, racial justice, immigrant justice or “just peace,” from the time I was a teenager. As a chaplain and as part of my local church, I will continue in justice and mercy work, both in the U.S. and abroad.
8. ***Strengthening Inter- and Intra-Personal Assets:*** I completed three years of psychotherapy with a trusted counselor to identify the places where I wasn’t feeling whole and authentic and the places where I claim my strength and can share my gifts, especially ministry. I plan to continue to work with either a spiritual director/companion or psychotherapist as I carry out my chaplaincy ministry.

Part III: My Present Ministry/Call: Chaplaincy, a “Ministry of Presence.”

Frederick Buechner defines “vocation,” from the Latin *vocare*, to call, as “the work a person is called to by God.” To determine whether you are being called by God, by Society, or from Self-Interest, he advises, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger

²⁶ https://www.ucc.org/congregations_weekly_a_just_world_for_all

meet.”²⁷ I know that God is calling me to the ministry of chaplaincy, whether in a hospice setting, a hospital setting, or in any community setting where chaplaincy services are needed or requested. For me, discernment towards accepting a call to become an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ has not been a straight-line journey, but rather a spiral, persistent and evolving. I see my present call to ordained ministry to be that of a specialized ministry, a “ministry of presence,” in a hospice, continuum of care community, or hospital setting. My call provides a pastoral presence to those who are seeking to understand their spiritual selves, at a point in their life where they are confronted with profound life questions. My call will also be responsive to the spiritual and pastoral leadership needs of the local parish church community in which I am a member, in keeping with the UCC four-way covenant for specialized ministries. In carrying out the responsibilities of my call, administering the sacraments, preaching, teaching, and pastoral care will be integral to the ministry. Most hospital and hospice calls require that the chaplain be ordained and have good standing and authorization within a mainline denomination. In addition, in my call to specialized ministry as a chaplain, there will be times when I will be called upon to administer a sacrament, whether baptism or communion, that will give them peace and a sense of God’s grace. Being an ordained minister, fully equipped to lead worship and officiate in administering the sacraments, as well as preside over a funeral or commitment service, will enable me to support fully the senior minister in any parish that engages with me in a four-way covenant, support that is becoming even more critical as more and more parishes can only afford a part-time settled pastor.

The opportunity to companion and minister to those who are facing major spiritual challenges, including confronting end-of-life issues, and helping both patients and their families and community members grieve the losses and changes in their lives, is an especially rewarding and sacred calling, and one that I feel prepared to enter into, with the help of my covenant partners and the Holy Spirit.

²⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 119.