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**Accepted God's Invitation**

Ordination Paper

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## **My Christian Experience:**

My faith has increased because Jesus helps me walk the road of discipleship. I am a servant in the family of God. My upbringing was on the Southside of Chicago. My parents were never married, and my stepfather was an alcoholic. Though a loving man, sometimes he could not keep a job due to drinking himself into a stupor and not being able to get up to go to work on Monday mornings. Living in Chicago during the spring and summer months was always fun, but the winter months were brutal because often we did not have any heat in the house. Our house was heated with oil. My mother would have to pay cash for the oil to be delivered and many times we did not have the money. We heated the house by using the stove. A dangerous move, but the stove kept the family warm. My family life shaped my theology and desire to escape from the ghetto. My thinking was the only way to make it out of the ghetto is through education. I made a vow to myself to always have money to pay the gas bill in the winter months and to go to college.

I am the first born of six siblings and two of my siblings suffer from asthma. When they had asthma attacks it broke my heart because I would see the fear in their eyes as they gasped for each breath. It was at that time I told my family and teachers I wanted to be a doctor. Providing medical care to mothers and children to teach them how to live healthy lives was important to me.

My maternal grandmother was a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) who insisted that I along with my siblings attend a Catholic school and she would pay the tuition because my mother was a stay at home mom. I attended Catholic school from kindergarten until graduation from high school. I fell in love with Jesus in Catholic school because the nuns taught me that Jesus loved everyone. My maternal grandmother advised me to become a nurse. My passion was to become a doctor not a nurse.

But my dream of becoming a doctor never happened. Pregnant at 18 years old, forced to marry a man I did not love who had sexually assaulted me was a nightmare. The trauma that happened to me was our family secret. During those painful moments I stopped praying to Jesus because I was too wounded and angry with God. My question to God was, “How could you let this happen to me? I thought you loved me” I stopped going to church because I felt God had turned God’s back on me. My vision for my life had been to graduate from college as a doctor, get married, and then have children in that order. For years I felt my dreams were shattered. I decided on a trade school to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) like my maternal grandmother; still, my yearning was to become a college graduate. I worked as an (LPN) for 22 years while pursuing a college degree with the help of family and friends.

My Bachelor's degree is in English with a focus in Secondary Education. My grandmother would say, "You can now become a teacher or a school nurse." Yet my soul pulled me still towards healthcare. My church family encouraged and supported me as I returned to college to become a Registered Nurse (RN), but not without a struggle. At times I felt like giving up. My life's dreams of being a healthcare worker felt satisfying; but Jesus came into my life and flipped my entire life upside down. Jesus wanted me to become one of his servants.

Later, I graduated from Loyola University Chicago with a Master's in Pastoral Studies. I thought that is all the "MORE" of God I needed to learn. Until one day at church, Rev. Wright commented, "God wants "MORE" from you." I said to myself, "Are you kidding me? This is it; I have learned all I need to know about God." When I tried to re-enroll in nursing school for the Master's in Nursing, I started getting denial letters. I started crying because I could feel God saying you need to learn "MORE" about me. I remembered screaming at God, "What do you want from me? "I am not supposed to attend seminary." I heard God plainly say, "You need MORE of me to be my servant." Because I became exhausted and tired of struggling with God, I called Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia and inquired about their Master of Divinity program. I still did not believe I would get accepted. I would always say to my friends, "As a nurse I could work in any of the 50 states," but deep down inside me I did not believe I could.

God opened the door for me at Virginia Union's Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology and discovering the "MORE" of God continued.

### **Ordination Request in the United Church of Christ:**

I am requesting to become an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ because the denomination demonstrates the love of God which includes all people, no matter their race, color, creed, gender, or sexual orientation. I want to be an ordained minister with a focus in pastoral care to encourage people when they feel God has abandoned them. I love that the denomination promotes social justice outside the walls of the church for all people. The autonomy of each church allows them to bring the creativity of God into their midst as they see fit. As a trauma survivor, I am a living witness of God's goodness. God granted me the desires of my heart and exposed me to places I never dreamt I would see. I want to preach and teach others that they too can be a part of the family of God if they confess to God and believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior.

I chose the United Church of Christ because the pastors are men and women, gay and straight, and the diversity of ethnicity in the denomination is rare in any other denominations. We need more female and male pastors, ministers, preachers, chaplains, and deacons, both gay and straight to serve God's people. I want to serve God's people with Communion and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's message is so powerful.

The United Church of Christ believes “God is Still Speaking.” The UCC demonstrates in action how to be involved in the wider community. This includes social justice ministries, prison ministries, food pantries, and clothing drives. The UCC attracts members who are not just seeking justice for African Americans, but for people of all colors. The UCC speaks to people who have lost hope from hurt and devastating situations, such as sexual assaults, unwanted pregnancies, and gun violence. Terrorism across the globe is also causing an increase in innocent deaths. Nature is running havoc on cities where people are losing their lives and their residences. It is at this critical time that there is a need for Christians to speak up and speak out. We must continue to march in the streets shouting there is a living God. Christians must continue to believe in God’s promises and in God’s presence despite the hell they may be going through. The UCC calls to people, like me, who believe this.

My theological understanding in church and the world began with a cosmos of integrated views which include Catholic, Baptist, and Islam. Church is a place of worship where believers come to worship in community. As we come together, we pray, sing, cry, dance, and listen to the preached word hoping to hear a word of encouragement, to be healed, and to believe that a better day is coming. I have also witnessed people coming to church to hear something they can use to manage daily stresses and unexpected traumas.

Church is also a place within each person where God dwells. The dimensions of depth with God and each person's spirituality depend on belief and a relationship with the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) that develops over a lifetime.

**United Church of Christ Statement of Faith:**

The United Church of Christ, Statement of Faith embodies my belief in helping the entire family learn what faith and hope look like. Hope lifts bowed down heads. I recall when I was completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), and I answered a call in the hospital to visit a patient that requested prayer. I had no idea the patient was a prisoner from the Cook County jail. I did not expect to see guards outside and inside the room. I did not expect to see the prisoner handcuffed to the bed. My heart was beating so fast, and I wondered "Had he killed or raped someone?"

When I looked into the prisoner's eyes and introduced myself as the chaplain on call, the prisoner asked for prayer. God reminded me I was called to this room, to represent God to all people. I began to pray. I was holding back my guilty tears because I had started judging, and then felt grateful that I was called to pray with him. As I looked around the room, the patient and the guard had tears in their eyes. My tears came down my cheeks as I walked away from the room.

I felt the heaviness of the prisoner, but I also felt the love of God when I started

saying the prayer. We are all God's children and God's love must be demonstrated by practicing agape love for one another.

My call is to be a servant of Christ, and the Statement of Faith reminds me I will be traveling down roads of joy and pain with God's children. Being present in the moment with God's children is the cost and joy of discipleship that I have accepted. The Holy Spirit of God is living in me to carry out the work of Jesus Christ; it gives me the courage to tell others about God's grace, mercy, love, and transforming powers that Jesus gives us if we open our hearts. I am consciously aware that it is a privilege to be given new grace and mercy every morning by God. Therefore, by "**Accepting God's Invitation**," I am not afraid to upset the status quo against the evils of social injustices regarding all people. Jesus came to give us life, to bring justice in this corrupt world as well as peace that surpasses all understanding when all hell is breaking out all around in our communities, and the world.

### **The Sacrament of Baptism and Communion:**

The two sacraments recognized by the United Church of Christ are baptism and Communion. Baptism is a sacred sacrament and public ritual used in the church community to demonstrate the "practice of faith." There are adults that make a personal decision to become baptized to become a part of the body of Christ.

Baptism symbolizes the renewal of a person's mind; the old person has passed

away and a new creature is birthed (Acts 2:38). We must remind them that God includes all of us into the ritual of baptism, but even if you are not baptized you are still children of God. As I mature daily in my Christian walk and read the Bible and my devotions, I find new self- discoveries Jesus is teaching me; for we are all sinners saved by the grace and mercy of God. The sacrament of Baptism brings us into God's community of love. I believe in infant baptism as recognized by UCC when the parents are in belief of God acting on the infant's behalf.

Communion is another sacred sacrament and a public ritual in the church that symbolizes the body of Christ. Jesus modeled hospitality and demonstrated welcoming all people to the Communion table. Jesus showed the love for all, the forgiveness for all, and the thanksgiving for all to feel the love of God. The practice of Communion is a special reminder how Jesus died on the cross to save our souls. It is at the Communion table that I and others can reflect on how grateful we are for having a savior that loves and cares about us. Communion reminds me when I feel alone that God is right there. Communion reminds me that though Jesus disciples betrayed him, Jesus still demonstrated God's love and invited them to the shared meal. Therefore, there is nothing we can do to be omitted from Jesus' table. God has brought me from a mighty long way, and I will not take my journey for granted.

Serving the people in community was Jesus' ministry. I learned when I accepted God's invitation that it means to come outside the walls of the church into the community. The scripture I use as an ordained deacon at Trinity when administering Communion to the shut-in comes from Matthew 26:26-28, (KJV). According to the United Church of Christ, Christians that are in different "doctrine agreement" may choose to not participate in Communion and "they should be respected" for their choice.

### **The Bible: Its Authority, Relevance, and Application:**

The Bible is the sacred book of God, inspired by God for the people of God, even though it was written by human hands. The Bible matters to me because this sacred book inspired me when I was angry and lost in the world. I was angry because I thought God had abandoned me until I began to study the word of God. The stories of others who have been through the joys and pains of life inspired me.

I learned that I can be healed of trauma when studying the book of Isaiah. "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31, NIV). This verse helped me understand that if I leaned on God, God would carry me on the wings of an eagle. Through my anger and pain, I got stronger when I put my trust in God.

I learned to be involved in the body of Christ and discovered I was not alone in the trials and tribulations of life and that I could help others by demonstrating the love God has given me.

The Bible matters to me because I have learned how I and others in the church lean heavily on Psalm 23 when loved ones die. The words remind us God is at our side through the pain and tears. The Bible is relevant to me because it contains stories of triumphs through oppressive times and there are stories where people had faith in God and believed in God enough to devote their lives to God. The Bible is available to people during times of despair, loss, and triumph. This sacred book is relevant to me because it helped me find my voice. I saw myself as the woman at the well talking with Jesus. I felt Jesus' love and forgiveness. The Bible taught me how to love and forgive others in order to grow in Christ.

### **The Church: Its Mission and Ministry:**

The mission and ministry of the United Church of Christ is to demonstrate love as God love's and welcome all of God's children into God's family. The mission of the churches is to go into the communities to fight for social justice for all people and bring peace on earth. I believe Jesus Christ died, was buried, and arose from the grave to save God's children/adults and bring them into God's family. The mission of the churches is to accept all people regardless of gender, religion, or culture differences.

I believe the pastor teaches that God is the head of the church to preach and teach holistic care if possible. The church helps people build a relationship with God which then transforms their minds to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is also to help people trust and obey God's word.

People come to church seeking love and hope for the future. I can relate to people who are hurting, burdened, and have lost hope for their future, because I was once there. I came to church seeking to be a part of God's family and worship God in community. I was a single mom working a full-time job and raising two African-American males in a violent African American community where some people had no hope for tomorrow. The church showed me transformation with the help of God is possible.

I therefore feel I can relate to people coming to churches hoping to see and hear about God's miracles. I joined the choir so I could sing hymns and Gospel songs to encourage me and give me strength to face my trials and tribulations. I know what hopelessness feels and looks like. I am a witness to how God transformed my life from one of despair into a life filled with hope for tomorrow, a hope I can share with other people. When I began building a stronger relationship with God, I began teaching my sons about praying 24 hours a day. My relationship with God helped me demonstrate to my sons that God is real.

I want to model the power of prayer in the churches I serve and for the people I serve. It is important to say that I am still growing in Christ and the church helps me grow. I am willing to be used by God as God's servant to serve God's people. I believe the mission of the church is to reach beyond the walls of the church building seeking to save those who have moved away from God. I want to be part of that mission.

**United Church of Christ History and Polity:**

I choose the United Church of Christ because it stresses that the uniqueness of each church can be used to make a difference in the lives of people. In the last 60 years, the UCC has evolved out of four original denominations, Congregational, Christian, Evangelical and Reformed. The Congregational church stressed the importance of local autonomy which allowed the church to grow without a government or hierarchy directing individual churches how to serve and worship God. Local autonomy also allowed the creativity of the people in each community to blossom. The Christian Church, as well as the Congregational Church, stressed the importance of the sacraments in the life of the people. The Reformed tradition stressed the idea that the church should reflect local culture, language, food, music, and soul. The German Reformed Church connection with Communion where Christ is spiritually present at the shared table.

They were ecumenical, interested in Christian education and used some version of the Heidelberg Catechism. Their personal faith in God connected them to UCC. The Evangelical traditions stressed the importance of educated pastors and lay members of all ages. I love that the UCC has continued the tradition of welcoming a diversity of people. I can see and hear the beauty of God's uniqueness in each. I love learning the word of God, and I believe our pastoral leaders in church should be educated to teach the word of God. This does not mean I cannot learn from others. This means we can learn from each other. Church is not made up of people thinking alike but having one central focus- believing in God's love for us.

UCC churches are joined by a covenant and renewed by scriptures. The Abrahamic covenant demonstrates faith, trust, and belief in God. The love of God unites each congregation in covenant with each other and joins them despite their differences. One aspect of the UCC I value is the importance placed on young people. Christian historian Margaret Rowland Post writes that beginning in 1972 the denomination introduced more young people in ministry. "No longer are young people seen as "the church of tomorrow," they are an integral part of the church today throughout the denomination.<sup>1</sup> I believe the church grows with

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Rowland Post, & Thomas E. Dipko, History and Program, Revised and updated. (Cleveland, OH, United Church Press, 2007) 57.

young people being included in ministries, beyond just sitting in the pews with their parents. Young people bring fresh creative lenses of visions and ideas.

### **Significant Writers, Theologians, and Preachers:**

Joining Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago with an awesome pastor, preacher, and teacher, like Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr, changed my life forever. Thirty-one years ago, I walked down the aisle at Trinity and gave my hand to the pastor. Walking down the aisle saved my life and transformed my pain into purpose. Rev. Wright encouraged me and others to attend Bible classes and learn the Word of God for ourselves. It was through those Bible classes that I began to grow in the Word of God. My prayer life became stronger. I learned how to pray aloud.

I was introduced to Dorothy Day when I enrolled in classes at Loyola University Chicago Institute for Pastoral Studies (IPS). She was a brave woman of her time that was not afraid of being with the people in the “field of living,” just like Jesus. She could have chosen to be an aristocrat since she was from a rich family; instead, she chose to be with the least, left out, and oppressed people. Like Jesus’ ministry her ministry was with the ordinary people.

Another significant theologian for me is Rev. Dr. Renita Weems Espinoza. This phenomenal theologian and scholar was introduced to me in the early 90’s.

Dr. Weems-Espinoza displays a powerful, prolific approach to understanding the Old Testament scripture. Rev. Dr. Weems-Espinoza is gifted in weaving in the stories of the people in the Old Testament and correlating the stories to the lives of people of color in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I connect well with her preaching and teaching in books because she gave the African American woman a voice in the Bible.

Lastly, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, current Pastor of Trinity in Chicago is teaching and preaching using “Hip Hop Style,” for the millennials which is his way to make ancient words and ideas speak to young hearts and minds. The young people demonstrate God is still moving. Rev. Moss reminds me of the importance of intergenerational families in the church and learning from each other. No generation is excluded at God’s table.

### **Pastoral Ethics and Boundaries:**

Pastoral ethics and pastoral boundaries mean being in a daily covenant with God. To me ethics mean I have a moral obligation to uphold the gospel in daily spiritual practice, and in my words and action. They grow out of daily prayer time with God, daily devotions, daily meditation, daily Bible reading and studying the Word of God. Showing respect to others of different cultures and nationalities and different denominations is an ethical responsibility of clergy. It is important for me to maintain boundaries to prevent any spiritual harm to myself or others.

Participating in the boundary training classes offered by the United Church of Christ with other clergy helps hold me accountable to my covenant with God and God's people. My training in the healthcare field for over 35 years has taught me to respect the privacy of people and the importance of confidentiality.

Confidentiality and respect both remain high priorities of mine. Being able to blend my ministry of soul healing with physical healing is important to me. Daily I pray to uphold my morals and ethical behavior according to God's will. I lean on close friends I respect and confide in. If they see or hear me crossing boundaries, they will tell me, and I listen to them.

**Present Ministry and Call:**

Presently, I am serving at Trinity as an ordained deacon. I visit the sick and shut-in members, administering Communion and prayers. I am on the Prayer Team where I attend weekly prayer meetings and participate in devotions and prayers with the community. In the future I will be conducting free training to Cluster Six churches involving pastoral leaders in my current thesis project for the Doctoral Program through McCormick Seminary. I will provide an educational awareness-based training to leaders on the basics of trauma.

I hope to provide trauma-informed pastoral care techniques and co-create a referral list that includes culturally specific professional counselors. The training will also provide information to assist leaders within their perspective clusters in

identifying trauma survivors, providing trauma informed pastoral care, and appropriate referral services for more professional care. I will be using qualitative analysis including pre/post training surveys, observation, interviews, and narratives to measure my hypothesis.

My internship in 2019 was at First Congregation Church of La Grange, where the Senior Pastor is Rev. Carly Stucklen-Sather. I was able to perform Pastoral Care responsibilities which I discovered was certainly my calling. I worshipped and prayed with God's people who were different from my own community. I had several amazing opportunities to preach, teach, and work with the Confirmation Class, and commission lay leaders for the Called to Care Ministry. I worked with Christian Education lay leaders to choose a new children's curriculum that would include diversity in the lesson plans. I felt a sense of freedom: Rev. Carly's leadership style was not critical but comforting as she continued to push me out of my comfort zone to participate in children's church and to control my pitch when preaching to various congregations.

### **My Promises to God:**

My promise as I walk this faith journey is to carry God's love with me wherever I go. My faith in God's love calls me to demonstrate that which Jesus set forth in Jesus' two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your mind, body and soul- (Matt 22:37) and Love your neighbor as yourself- (Mk 12:31).

I promise God to journey and listen to people even if their stories make me uncomfortable and pray with people of other cultural backgrounds. My promise to God is to be obedient to God's directions for my life. When I fall, I will ask for forgiveness and get back up, knowing God's grace and mercy will see me through another day to do God's will. I know God saved me for such times as this: to use my voice and tell others not to give up. There is "MORE" to discover about God. God is not through with me yet. I am so grateful because I "**Accepted God's Invitation**" to be one of God's disciples and I look forward to working in God's garden with the United Church of Christ.