

Holy Imagination, Holy Work
Sarah Lyn Jones Ordination Paper

“I help congregations live into their vital role in our societal infrastructure.” This is a line I rattle off several times a week as I introduce myself to congregational leaders who are looking for assistance in discerning the next steps for their church to continue in its call to its members and its community. I believe wholeheartedly that our faith as Christians and our calling as the Church provide the tools, wisdom, and guidance needed to fully participate in God’s ongoing creation and redemption of the world, both as individuals and as a community of believers. We are part of a narrative that stretches long before we began counting time and far past the future that our minds can comprehend. I am called to help the Church discern and realize our place in that larger narrative through intentional engagement with the gifts of our tradition, the diversity of our experiences, and our Divine source of life. In a more practical sense, that means helping individual congregations -- and the wider Church -- answer the questions of what it means to be Christian at this particular moment in time, in their particular place, and how they can actively collaborate with their Creator and their communities to build the world that God envisions for all of us.

Congregations’ “vital role in societal infrastructure” is a practical way of describing their faithful fulfillment of the covenant. Ours is a faith that demands participation in the world by actively working for the good of humanity and of all creation. That includes the relatively small acts of meeting an individual person’s needs in the moment and working towards a collective liberation that we will probably not see in our lifetimes. To have our eyes and hearts focused both on the proximate and the ultimate (without getting overwhelmed) requires discernment and imagination -- gifts that I bring to the ministry and threads that run through my own theological

understanding. My vocational journey winds its way through many different places of work and education and has been marked by different people that have helped me to imagine the possibilities and opportunities for the Church. My journey in ministry has taken a different route than many of my colleagues, and that experience has required prayerful reflection and distillation of these unique experiences so that I can define and develop the ministry to which I am called.

The Bible: Wealth of the Faith

I believe that all religions are defined by the specific systems of stories, practices, and metaphors that help their followers make sense of the Divine, the world, and what we are called to do with our lives. For me, there has always been real power in the symbols, images, and stories found in the Bible, the life and death (and life again) of Jesus Christ, and the rituals that have helped believers make meaning of them through millennia -- the sacraments of communion and baptism.

I believe that while Scripture is not the inerrant Word of God, it does contain God's message and truth for those who seek it. I believe that even though the text I read when I do my practice is not the original language, it retains the divine inspiration of the writers and the source of that inspiration is the God that liberates and redeems. I believe that although it was written by many people, many thousands of years ago, it is authoritative and relevant to our current lives. I believe that it is a primary source of our connection to Divine wisdom and will, and that in order to fully tap into that, we need to engage in faithful reflection and critical study of the text. I believe that one should have an individual knowledge and familiarity of Scripture as a spiritual practice and means of self-growth, and that Scripture must be read and studied in community so

that our communal understanding can be enriched by discussion and diverse perspectives; only through this will we be able to hear what God is speaking here and today.

My own understanding of Scripture, its significance and authority, has evolved over the course of many years. I grew up in a Presbyterian (PCUSA) church that didn't take a strong stance on the Bible's authority in any way; the congregation was one that was bound by fellowship and mutual support with folks who had a wide range of views on how one could, or should, read and interpret Scripture. My parents made sure that my sister and I had solid understandings of Bible stories and their main characters; they taught us that we could learn about God and Jesus from these stories but that they were stories that we shouldn't take literally. For my childhood, the Bible was a collection of stories, some that I liked more than others. My sophomore year of college, I took a class on the Hebrew Bible taught by Dr. Tina Pippin. Tina was the first person who introduced the Bible as something to be played with, picked apart, examined through different lenses, and that only through this kind of engagement could we understand the Truth it contains. Tina also taught me that no one could have a complete understanding of the text, that it would continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted with different facets of Truth coming to light with every reader in every time and in every place.

I had been told that when entering seminary, one should be prepared to have one's entire understanding of the Bible and God torn apart. Naively, I thought that this referred only to people who read the Bible literally; surely, I, who had already come to an enlightened understanding of Scripture as "just" a collection of writings, would be two steps ahead of everyone else and immune to having my theological world rocked. What I learned while I was in

seminary, and since, is that there is real power in the text – that these are more than “just” stories. Scriptural study can reframe the way we see and engage the world. It can help us understand our deepest selves, and that Truth can motivate us to reshape our realities. I witnessed as my colleagues in seminary uncovered wisdom in the text that completely changed the way they understood their very selves and the work that they were called to do. Through exposure and dialogue with people who understood the texts differently, they came to believe that (among other things) God creates and blesses a diversity of gender and sexual identities, that we are called to move towards racial reconciliation, and one doesn’t have to profess the Christian faith in order to be loved and “saved” by God. Similarly, I found my own understanding of the world could be – and was – shaped by the wisdom that was being uncovered by study and dialogue with my professors and peers. Through intentional and communal engagement, we can actually be transformed by the text.

Through years of study, for academic purposes, for individual study, and doing Bible study in community, I have found time and time again that the core message of the Bible, the driving narrative and inspiring force, is one of liberation and reconciliation. And through the telling of Scripture’s stories, through cooperative interpretation and individual reflection, that message will incarnate itself in the recipient. As Bishop Desmond Tutu has said, the Bible can be “dynamite.” “If White people had intended to keep [Black South Africans] under, they shouldn't have given us the Bible.”¹ It has real power to heal and to liberate; we have seen how oppressed peoples have found their own story within its words, heard God’s affirmation of their worth, and been

¹ “Desmond Tutu: A God of Surprises,” On Being, last modified March 14, 2015, <https://onbeing.org/programs/desmond-tutu-a-god-of-surprises/>

divinely inspired to build a liberated world. I read the text through a hermeneutic of liberation, knowing that God's truth can always be found through the centering and focus of the marginalized -- both in the text and in our current realities.²

Scripture has the power to help us find ourselves and strengthen our connection to the Divine.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, a Torah scholar, has written extensively on the nature of the relationship between YHWH and the Israelites, using a psychodynamic lens to interpret the text of the Hebrew Bible and accompanying midrash. She interprets the Torah as a transitional object, given so that the Israelites and their descendants could form secure attachments to their Creator.³ As with most transitional objects, it is playful engagement that helps to form that relationship and trust, and gives shape to our realities. By "playing" with the text through critical reading, questioning, and prayerful reflection, we are able to meet God as God has playfully engaged with the text through the authors who wrote it.⁴ Following her argument, I believe that Scripture is a primary source for discerning God's will, building intimate relationships with God, and discovery of our very self that God created (and is still creating).

² My understanding of liberation theology has been influenced by a myriad of sources, all speaking from particular experiences and identities, and impractical to list in their entirety. Rev. Dr. James Cone beautifully summarized the need for this diversity of lenses to understand the Gospel message. (James Cone, "The Gospel and the Liberation of the Poor," *Christian Century*, 1981.)

³ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "Mishpatim Before Revelation: The Healing Heart," in *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 288 – 314.

⁴ Transitional objects, associated most with Donald Winnicott's attachment and development theories, serve as a "not-me" object that facilitates an awareness of the self and other, while simultaneously providing an on-going site of trust, security and comfort. Later theories have expanded on the transitional object as "not-me" and "part-of-me" to help humans of all ages access and mediate liminal psychological space (Amanda Bingley, "In here and out there: Sensations between self and landscape," *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 4, num. 3, 329–345.). I interpret Scripture as not only "not-me/part-of-me" but also "not-God/part-of-God," creating liminal space for both the reader and the inspirer to creatively engage each other.

God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer

It is, almost by definition, impossible to fully define or comprehend the Divine power that moves through our universe at a molecular and cosmic level (and everywhere in between). The understanding of the Triune God revealed through Christian tradition is the one that speaks most to my heart and best helps me engage with the Divine. And while it is virtually impossible to try and describe the relationship between God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer,⁵ I can describe how I have come to understand and love God in these three forms.

God is the creative force that breathed over the waters of the deep to form the world (Gen. 1:1), that gives order to chaos and creates chaos from order. As Scripture tells us, there is no impetus or precipitating event that necessitated the creation of the world, meaning that God's very nature is creation. In the original Hebrew, when Moses asks for God's name at the burning bush God replies, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh" which literally translates to "I will be who I will be" or "I am becoming." In gratitude to Clement of Alexandria who first popularized the idea of *creatio continua*, I believe that God is always creating and re-creating, always doing a new thing, always imagining and shaping the world. I also affirm that we are called to be an active part of that process, all of us being examples of the *imago dei* (Gen. 1:24 - 27), and as such endowed with the creative energy of our Creator, even at the molecular level.⁶ We are called to be co-creators with God. To be partners with God in the ongoing creation of the world is an exciting and terrifying responsibility, and one that we cannot escape. And so we must answer Paul's charge

⁵ "St. Patrick's Bad Analogies," Lutheran Satire, last modified March 14, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw>

⁶ Elizabeth Johnson interprets the proclivity of DNA to replicate and mutate as molecular acts of divine creative energy, thus making us participants in the creative process scientifically understood as evolution (Elizabeth Johnson, "Free Empowered Creation," in *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 154 - 180).

(Rom. 12:2) to faithfully discern what we are called to build and what to dismantle according to the reality that God desires, because with and through God's grace we actually do have the power to change our world.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God's redeeming love became incarnate. Embarking on this human existence, God chose a life in a backwater town (John 1:46), in an empire-occupied territory, being born to and raised by a peasant family. This choice affirms God's preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable and tells us that each and every person -- no matter how neglected or ostracized by society -- is worthy of God's liberation. Because this is the life God chose, we must understand the Gospel through the lenses of people who have similar experiences and identities to Jesus of Nazareth. This is especially important for Christians whose identities have afforded them inequitable privilege and power inherited from centuries of exploitation and oppression of others. Without centering those lived experiences as a hermeneutic for our interpretation of Jesus's ministry in life, death, and resurrection we run the risk of blasphemy -- using Jesus to prop up systems of oppression rather than to tear them down.

I am fascinated with God's choice to incarnate their-self⁷ in human form and share in all of the experiences of our lives, from the extraordinary to the mundane. In Jesus, I see the God who desires intimacy with their creation, who is always looking for new ways to explore, reveal, and

⁷ The original language of the Bible, and the English language in which I read it, necessitate the use of gendered pronouns for God. There have been deliberate efforts, first popularized by Mary Daly, in the last century to "mis-gender" God as femme in order to defy oppressive patriarchal schemas. However, this affirms the gender binary, which is a product and artifact of European colonialism and inherently limits our understanding of the full glory of the divine through the *imago dei*. I do think it is important to have pronouns for God, and so have chosen to use "they/them" which are currently used by people across the spectrum of gender identity.

remain faithful to that covenantal relationship of us belonging to God and God belonging to us.⁸

In Jesus' suffering and death, God ensures that no one will ever have to die god-forsaken, for the divine presence will be there in the very god-forsakenness;⁹ I understand this as the ultimate act of solidarity and accompaniment and affirms that God's presence with and love for us cannot be severed. And just as Jesus died with us, we are resurrected with him, making our transformation and redemption not only possible, but inevitable.¹⁰

I have been lucky enough to be witness to the resurrection through my work in Chicago and have seen what redemption can look like for a person and through them an entire community. The most striking example of this came when I interned for the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP), which organizes families through congregations and schools in the Gage Park and Chicago Lawn neighborhoods around immigration and housing justice, as well as violence prevention and youth empowerment. In a one-to-one with the staff member who led the violence intervention program, he revealed to me that in his youth he had been affiliated with street organizations and had acted as an enforcer, often violently. During his time in prison, he found God and committed himself to the life and vitality of young people in his neighborhood -- to prevent them from becoming victims or perpetrators of violence as he had been. Although I would not equate this person's experience with Jesus's own crucifixion and rising, that

⁸ While the exact description of what the covenant entails changes according to the author (as well as their audience and agenda) of the book in which the covenant is written, variations of the phrase "they will be my people and I will be their God" remain the most constant in the Hebrew Bible and this phrase is repeatedly emphasized as the core of the covenant in the New Testament.

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, "The 'Crucified God,'" in *The Crucified God, 40th Anniversary Edition*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 285 – 418.

¹⁰ Rev. Graham Ross Golden O. Praem, sermon given on May 13, 2021 (St. Augustine Church, Isleta Pueblo, "Ascension of our Lord," Facebook, May 16, 2021, URL https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=665049304368560&ref=watch_permalink).

transformation of purpose and identity *is* resurrection. It is an example of God's abundant and sanctifying grace that comes about not because of suffering, but despite of suffering. One that reflects and embodies Jesus' own example of holy, transformative love.¹¹ That is what we are called to proclaim and embody as people of faith: to live into our identity as resurrected people and help others do the same. As abolitionist activist Mariame Kaba states, "there will be no magical day of liberation that we do not make,"¹² and so we must understand our role and responsibility not only as co-creators with our Creator, but also co-redeemers with our Redeemer.

The sustaining Spirit of God moves through space and time to connect us all to the Divine and to each other. It is the still small voice that brings clarity, it is the rushing wind that inspires revolution. Although a defining feature of the Holy Spirit is its inability to be defined, I think it is best understood as both power and meaning.¹³ Through the Spirit, I feel and understand God's desire for us in both Song of Songs and Beyoncé's performance of "End of Time."¹⁴ Through the Spirit, I find the energy and motivation to march and protest, knowing that these actions are both righteous and effective. While collaboration and relationship with our Creator and Redeemer leads to joy beyond measure, living a life faithful to the Gospel message is not easy. A love-

¹¹ I have found most theories and explanations of atonement to be unsatisfactory because of their emphasis on the suffering of innocents as a necessary part of redemption and transformation. I agree most with Delores Williams' answer to the question of atonement – that our fixation on Jesus's suffering and death may be misguided and that we should look instead to Jesus' ministry and his wholehearted commitment to the redemption of the world that he *lived* out. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

¹² Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*.

¹³ In regard to the Spirit, I am using Paul Tillich's description, with "meaning" being the navigation between cognitive reason and the creative unconscious and God's "power of being" that makes Divine love manifest. (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 249-252.

¹⁴ Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter, "End of Time," track on 4, Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records, 2011.

centered life demanded struggle from Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. We know that we may also be asked to give up a level of contentment and comfort in this life in order to participate as co-creators and co-redeemers with God. The movement of the Spirit in our lives sustains us by making us viscerally aware of God's presence, love, and will; it is the fulfillment of the promise of God's continued presence in and among the world even with the physical absence of Jesus (John 14:15-26). Our attunement to the Spirit helps us make meaning and channel power.

Sacramental Memory

While Scriptural study is central to our developing our understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, as well as our role in the covenantal relationship, these messages and knowledge need to be enacted and re-enacted in order to be embodied in our lives.¹⁵ The sacraments are given to us as rituals to help us re-member our faith and calling as God's people. Through the celebration of the eucharist and baptism, we relive and rehearse the stories of our salvation.

The Eucharist is a celebration and affirmation of God's embodied presence both in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and in our hearts. The welcome table breaks down barriers that we in our human ignorance erect between each other; we affirm that it is not our table and therefore we cannot control who eats with us. We are all equal at the table. Central to my understanding of the table is the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 (Matt. 14:13-21); I interpret this story not as a

¹⁵ I am exceedingly grateful to Rev. Dr. Cláudio Carvalhaes, whose teaching and guidance in reflection led to my understanding of the celebration of the sacraments as embodied theology.

miracle of multiplication, but a miracle of awakening the people to a new reality -- one defined by abundance rather than scarcity through cooperation and mutual aid. It is a miracle, small and profound, that there is always enough bread and cup for everyone to partake at the communion table. For whatever reason, either through the forethought of the worship leader or the instinctual generosity of the congregation, there is always enough to go around -- a physical manifestation of the abundance of God's love. The embodied practice of this ritual thus teaches and reinforces our responsibility to each other and active participation in creating a world of abundance and liberation.

The cross and the table cannot be separated from one another and we cannot understand either one's significance without the other. In partaking in the sacrament of communion we relive, retell, and remember the story of our salvation, which is eschatologically located on the cross of the resurrected Christ. We are literally taking that story into our bodies. As Jesus instructed the disciples, every time we break bread and drink wine, we do it to remember his ministry in life, death, and resurrection. In giving us this ritual, Jesus ensured that we would retell the story of our salvation over and over again, that we would ingest and metabolize his message on a regular basis.¹⁶ We remember that we are the physical and metaphorical body of Christ, called as he was to love whole-heartedly and commit our whole lives to love, justice, and liberation. Every time

¹⁶ Avivah Zornberg makes a compelling case that God's bringing the Israelites out of Egypt is not the event that liberates the Jewish people, it is the remembering and retelling of that story through the commemoration of *pesach*, which is mandated by God. Liberation from slavery in Egypt was a historical event that can only happen once, but God liberates the Jewish people every time the Seder is celebrated. (Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "Bo, The Narrative of the Night," in *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York, Schocken Books, 2001), 132 - 198.) This framework has shaped my theology of the communion and its relationship to the cross. By giving us the practice of communion, Jesus transforms his crucifixion and resurrection from a historic event to an eschatological one in which we can find our liberation and salvation every time we eat the bread and drink the cup.

we break bread and take the cup, we experience salvation anew, and we are liberated to participate in the redemption of our entire world.¹⁷

In our baptism, we are affirmed in our identity as God's beloved and a part of the community of believers encompassed in the Church. It is a ritual that reminds each and all of us that God embraces us, no matter who we are, and welcomes us into a community and story of salvation.¹⁸ Baptism reminds us who we are and whose we are, which is needed in a society whose norms do not always align with the Gospel message. In our faith's and general culture's symbology, water has become a metaphor for rebirth -- we can remember our baptism its significance every time we submerge ourselves. Whenever I jump into Lake Michigan, splash water on my face, or even wash my hands, I can remember that I am claimed and loved by both God and the Church; that I have been promised birth instead of death.

When I was a young child, I told my pastor that I wanted to know what it felt like to be baptized -- I had been an infant when I was baptized, and I knew that it was something that could only be done once. Pastor Lou took me to the water fountain in the hall and sprinkled water on my head so that I could have a tactile touchpoint for an event that I was too young to have inscribed in my brain. In part because many of us have no actual memory of the instant when a pastor poured water on our heads and spoke the words of commitment over us, it is important to understand that we actively partake in the sacrament every time we as a community of faith baptize an individual; the act of remembering our baptisms and affirming our identity as baptized is just as

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, and Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

¹⁸ United Church of Christ, *Book of Worship* (Cleveland, OH, Local Church Ministries, 2012), 157.

holy as the reception of those waters for the first time. Every time we participate in someone's baptismal celebration, we stand as physical witnesses to the covenant and the salvation story. I always cry at baptisms; I never ceased to be moved by the act of welcoming the baptized home to the community of believers and affirming their place in a tale that began before time and that will continue past eternity.

While my particular call in ministry may or may not lead me to a paid parish or chaplaincy position (currently I work as a congregational consultant – more on that later), that does not mean I would never be called upon to administer the sacraments or to help interpret them in the context of the congregations with whom I am working or within my home worshipping community. My ministry is transformational work, and being able to offer the sacraments would enhance both my ability to help facilitate that transformation of individuals, congregations, and the communities that they serve. This is also very public, community-focused work, helping congregations build new relationships with their neighbors and embody Christ's call for us to proclaim the Good News of God's mercy, love, and justice through physical action and material support. As such, I am often with folks who do not belong to a congregation, who do not have a religious affiliation at all, or who have a painful history with the Church. And should I be called upon by one of those individuals to act as an ordained minister – asking for sacramental ritual in the form of communion or baptism – I would meet them in that moment (and as appropriate) to offer that blessed assurance of God's acceptance and transformational love.

The “Church” and the “church”

Central to the practice of the Christian faith is participation in the Church -- the community of believers bound by our practice of the sacraments, our acceptance of the authority of the Bible as Scripture, and our profession of the death and resurrection of Christ as the locus of our salvation. Each congregation is a manifestation of the Church, charged with the stewardship of the narrative of liberation lived out by its members individually and cooperatively. It is our community of practice¹⁹ through which the Gospel message becomes real and relevant. From the very first days of Jesus’ ministry, he built a community that could support and challenge each other through the calling of the twelve disciples and the invitation extended to hundreds of followers. After his death and resurrection, the Jesus movement was characterized by the establishment of communities of faith and learning, where people figured out through trial and error, study and practice, how to embody the Gospel message. We’re still figuring it out.

Edward Scribner Ames, a former pastor of my home congregation, University Church in Hyde Park, penned what I think is the best description of what a church is called to do; “it seeks to make religion as intelligent as science, as appealing as art, as vital as the day’s work, as intimate as home, as inspiring as love.” How each congregational manifestation of the Church does this is that congregation’s charge to define and live out. This responsibility of the Church is “in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression,

¹⁹ First defined by anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger, a “community of practice” is formed by a group of individuals engaged in a process of collective learning. They share a passion for some specific skill or knowledge base and build capacity in that domain by regular inter-personal, cooperative knowledge sharing and skilled activities (Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).). I find this term helpful in describing both the Church and the church because participation in Christian community is essential to developing knowledge of self, of the Divine, and the skills of living a Christ-centered life.

and in purity of heart before God.”²⁰ Each congregation that makes up the Church must faithfully discern how God is calling it to bring its whole self to bear to realize its full potential to advance liberation and salvation in its specific geographic, cultural, and temporal context. In this way, each congregation helps the Church -- and its individual members -- evolve. Each congregation plays an essential role in the story of salvation. The Church is not only something we participate in, but also something that we actively create and re-create, with each generation of believers charged to build the legacy that the next generation will inherit.

Jesus’s physical, tactile, sensual ministry teaches that ours is a physical, tactile, sensual faith that requires us to take embodied action towards justice and liberation. Jesus’ anger, sadness, joy, and curiosity were all motivated by his engagement with people; he was catalyzed and compelled in his ministry by love for others, and so we must engage with and learn from others to cultivate Christ-like love and discern what God hopes for in our individual and collective ministries.

While Scriptural study, prayer, and service to others can (and should) all be individual practices, it is only in doing these things with others that our own horizons of understanding can expand.

Membership in the Church, and a church, comes with a commitment to be in community with others, to be open to being transformed and to bring all of oneself to bear in order to be an agent of transformation. The exposure and navigation of differences in thought, experience, and identity between individuals facilitates self-growth; only through active engagement with that diversity can we enhance our own understanding of our covenantal relationship with God and discern their will for our lives.

²⁰ The United Church of Christ, “The Constitution of the United Church of Christ,” 1957. (from the United Church of Christ, “Constitution and Bylaws,” accessed on July 30, 2021, <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/constitution-and-bylaws/>).

My own understanding of the necessity of community comes not only from pedagogical theory and scriptural study, but also from lived experience. For the past six years, I have lived in an intentional community, and that experience has been crucial to my spiritual growth and the evolution of my ministry. This particular community does not share a common theological or spiritual understanding, but we are bound through a commitment to a cooperative life, living out the (not un-Christian) values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity in all aspects of governance, economics, and interpersonal relationships.²¹ While there are specific rules, traditions, and expectations that are more or less institutionalized, none of us would know how to live this ethic without continuous dialogue, experimentation, vulnerability, and re-interpretation of who/what our community is. Each of us has grown and changed, becoming fuller versions of ourselves because of the constant interaction and engagement with others; we are challenged and supported by each other. Because my faith is an important resource and aspect for my life, I understand these experiences through that lens, and so while it has been rare for my housemates to explicitly enhance my understanding of Christian faith and practice, our mutual work in this project has taught me the value of community and the investment it takes to realize its potential.

²¹ (International Co-operative Alliance, “Guidance Notes on the Co-operative Principles,” 2015.) The six values and cascading seven principles of has been very helpful in framing my understanding of both a community of believers and a community of congregations. While the six values are identified above, the seven principles of cooperation (voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy; education and information; cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for community) are also reflected in the UCC’s governance and organization. Deeper dives into the cooperative principles have helped me better understand the tension inherent in autonomous congregations covenanting together (Donald Freeman, “Autonomy in a Covenant Polity,” *Prism*, 11, no. 2 (1996): 17-25.); this concurrence of guiding values has allowed me to both enhance my understanding of cooperative projects through a faith-informed lens, as well as strengthen my relationship to the UCC through the lived experience of cooperation in my community of residence.

At Home in the UCC

I did not grow up in the United Church of Christ, but ever since I joined University Church in 2010, I have felt at home in it. This denomination firmly believes, as I do, that God is still speaking. It is a denomination that embraces and engages difference as a means for the Church to evolve in our understanding of the Gospel message and what that looks like embodied in our lives. It is a denomination that welcomes the Holy Spirit that creates and renews the Church in each generation. It is a denomination that is committed to being in community: for each congregation to cooperatively engage in the cost and joy of discipleship,²² for all the congregations to cooperatively enhance the work and identity of the denomination, and for the denomination to cooperatively work towards a liberated world with other faith traditions.

One of the characteristics of the UCC that has been attractive to me is that the denomination lives in the tension between autonomy and covenant,²³ which reflects the tension each of us face as individuals of faith. Just as each person brings unique understanding and gifts to the Church, each congregation's unique wisdom enriches the denomination. Just as each person is charged with embodying the Gospel message in their lives, each congregation is charged with making that Gospel message real and relevant for the time and place in which they are situated. And just as each believer is reliant on their siblings in faith to help enrich and strengthen their understanding of God and themselves, so all of the congregations in the UCC need each other to come to a fuller understanding of the place and role of the wider Church. Navigating the tension in autonomy and covenant reflects the tension we all navigate between our individual selves and

²² Robert Moss, "Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ," The United Church of Christ, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith/>

²³ Donald Freeman, "Autonomy in a Covenant Polity."

society/creation as a whole. It affirms both the authority of individual experience and each of our unique theology that enriches the Church, and the centrality of cooperation and community to our faith. The Presbyterian kid in me sometimes balks at the lack of structure (I like my institutions like I like my closet -- decent and in order), but the love I have for the ever-evolving, ever-creating, ever-becoming God has given me an appreciation for a little chaos.

The UCC's recognition for the continual renewal of the Church is based on its foundational value of diversity. The UCC, though a relatively young denomination, is built on the diverse experiences and wisdoms of many different traditions. The denomination draws on the resources of our Anabaptist, Calvinist, Lutheran, and Congregational ancestors, while creating space for new understandings of the Gospel and the Church through the intentional cultivation of diverse congregations and traditions that had been historically excluded from judicatorial governance. The UCC was born out of the conviction that God was [is] doing a new thing with the Church and the Church boldly taking up the call to be collaborators with God in that project. Because of its intentional engagement with the diversity of identity under the denomination's wings, the UCC has also been enriched by traditions, interpretations, rituals, songs, and liturgies that otherwise would have been localized and marginalized. In every UCC church I've worshipped in, I've seen creative play with liturgies and traditions that one would not expect given the congregation's demographic characteristics and physical location. The focus on affirming and celebrating diversity of Christian identity, experience, and expression creates space for the denomination, and the individual congregations that covenant within it, to do a new thing.

Building Something Worth Inheriting

I believe that each generation of Christian disciples inherit a story of salvation that they are charged with nurturing and cultivating for the next generation. The Church is engaged in a project 2,000+ years in the making and our horizon is at least that long. Whenever we gather as believers, we “join in a divine-human conversation that began long before we were born and will continue long after we are dead.”²⁴ We stand with the entire community of faith at the cross and the empty tomb, we all bear witness to the liberation of the world, we are responsible for the incarnation of that Gospel message wherever we find ourselves in history, and we are all called to proclaim the inevitability of redemption and resurrection. As co-creators and co-redeemers, we must make liberation and grace real in the here and now, while also working steadily towards the horizon of God’s ultimate transformation of the world. We are called to fully embody the Gospel in our individual lives, but also as a community of faith and the Church Universal.

The Church Universal is the steward of this story, and each congregation, each believer, has a gift to contribute to its development. This is a story with real power and real impact; it has changed, continues to change, and will change the world in which we, our ancestors, and our descendants live. We cultivate and steward this story of salvation by embodying it, and by embodying it we participate in the creation and re-creation of the world according to God’s grace, love, and justice. As revealed in the miracle of the loaves and fishes,²⁵ I believe that God has already blessed us with the tools and gifts we need to faithfully steward this story, and this

²⁴ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers: Evangelism in Today’s World*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 72.

²⁵ As referenced above, I interpret this story to be about Jesus awakening the crowd to the abundance that was already in front of them – by seeing all that they had, they were able to recognize how they had the ability to meet the need of the moment. As it is one of the few miracles found in all four canonical Gospels (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-33; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14), I believe it is crucial to understanding Jesus’ ministry and message.

Church, as it continues to evolve and be re-created. And I believe that my call is to help individual congregations, and the wider Church, discern the ways in which they are called to be collaborators and co-creators of the world, cultivators and stewards of the Church, actively playing our part to actualize God's love, grace, and justice immediately and in the future.

For the past three years, I have been learning and developing these skills and gifts in a secular non-profit dedicated to the active community use and sound stewardship of historic religious properties – Partners for Sacred Places. In that work, I have been blessed with the opportunity to work with a variety of faith communities in discerning God's current call their congregations, from a declining (and vital!) UCC congregation in rural Vermont, to a synagogue along the Mardi Gras route in New Orleans, to the Archdiocese of Baltimore. With each, I have incorporated the wisdom of their tradition, the gifts and talents of their members, the larger communities' experience of these congregations, and the knowledge and skills of the secular world. God has moved through that work to help them see the possibilities and opportunities that exist for them to further their mission now and into the future. For the rural UCC congregation, that looks like creating a separate 501(c)3 that could ensure their building remained a vehicle for social services in the town even when the congregation becomes unable to steward it. For the synagogue, it means intentionally expanding their (immense, and largely unrecognized) impact for all New Orleanians, not just the Jewish community. For the Archdiocese of Baltimore, it is shaping up to be the formation of a new body that will break from Catholic tradition and put power in the hands of the parishioners to make decisions about how parish facilities are used.

What I have learned in my years of working with congregations to discern God's call for them, is that this is transformational work and therefore is difficult work. Congregations are opening themselves up to change, letting go of past versions and visions of themselves, and sometimes reckoning with an immediate future that includes merging, leaving their buildings, or becoming an entirely different kind of worshipping and serving community than they have been before. My role in these contexts is, very often, pastoral as much as it is professional. I am there to help them find inspiration and to grieve loss. I am often reminded of my Clinical Pastoral Education training, where being a compassionate presence was just as important as being a spiritual guide. And, as I work with congregations of many different denominations and faith traditions, I must provide a compassionate presence that honors and "fits" a diversity of experiences and religious understandings. Congregations, no matter their affiliation, are all undergoing a transformation as the Spirit is moving through the Church and remaking it for this new era of history; being able to be a pastoral presence helps to facilitate that transformation.

As I hope has been evident in this paper, my own theological understanding and vocation has been shaped by experiences and teachers both secular and religious, of many different traditions and disciplines. This has helped me understand the power and potential of the Church and our faith on the individual, societal, emotional, physical, immediate, and ultimate levels. It has also given me a variety of tools and perspectives through which I help others imagine and create new possibilities for God's love and grace to break through into their lives and the lives of others. I love helping people of faith see their own impact and significance in the world around them. I love helping congregations recognize the immense potential they have to carry out their interpretation of the Divine's will in their communities. I love advocating on behalf of faith

communities, helping secular society realize how essential congregations and their faith are to the objective good of the world. I believe I am called to the Church, and to that community of colleagues who have also dedicated their lives to building it into one that flourishes and thrives – to ordained ministry.

I am excited to see where and how God will call me next in this work. I see so much potential for our congregations to live into their vital role in their neighborhoods, in our denomination, in the Church universal, and the world. It might be to parish ministry, as someone who can help a congregation build a community-serving ministry and identity as they interpret and answer their call in their time and in their place. It might be to a regional UCC body, helping with the discernment and transition of congregations whose membership can no longer sustain their building. It might be for the denomination itself – figuring out how to best organize several congregations (and the UCC) around a particular ministry that demands new and creative strategies. It might be for another non-profit organization that also sees congregations as vehicles for social transformation. Whatever God calls me to, I know that it will build on the work that I have done (and am doing!) in helping congregations discern the particular role they are being called to play in their communities – at whatever congregational life stage they are at.

I am grateful for having been able to bring all of my experiences, knowledge, and talents to bear in my current work, and I am excited to be able to expand and enhance my call even further through my entry into ordained ministry. I can't wait to see what new possibilities and opportunities will be unlocked as I am able to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments as part of this holy work. While I have been blessed with numerous opportunities to hone my

homiletic skills at University Church as a “guest” preacher, I am itching to bring those skills and that passion of proclamation to other spaces at the congregational and denominational levels. Proclamation and interpretation can happen in a variety of spaces to myriad audiences. Leading Biblical study and interpretive practice within a conference or workshop space among pastors and congregational leaders who are shepherding congregations that are “dying” can be just as transformative and inspiring as leading a homily during Sunday service. Advocacy on behalf of our worshipping communities in the civic arena, affirming the value that faith communities bring to our society as a whole and inviting public leaders into collaboration with their religious community constituents, is prophetic. And even within a more traditional opportunity to preach and teach (i.e., the pulpit), ordination would open up opportunities for me to preach the Word in a diversity of spaces within our ecumenical community.

I think that the sacraments of baptism and communion hold immense potential to help congregations, our denomination, and our individual members discern and do God’s will in their immediate time and place, and I am excited to start playing and creating within that liturgical space to help us all remember who we are and whose we are, and to take the nourishment we need for the hard and holy work ahead. Communion has the power to re-ground us in the values and the life of Jesus, which is necessary in discerning how the Spirit is calling us to show up in our present and how to prepare for our future. How we set the table for that sacrament – who we call to serve the elements, how we frame the rite, how we make the call to “come and take,” and even when we invoke the Spirit and set the table lay the foundation for revelation. What might we notice and hear if we were to take 10 minutes every day to join others virtually in a blessing of the bread and cup during our lunch break? How might we think about our sibling churches in

the Association or the Conference if we were responsible for providing their elements instead of our own? How would we approach each day if we were to engage in an intentional remembrance of our baptism as we took our morning shower? These are the sorts of ideas that run through my mind and I hope to explore further as a leader who is looked to for this kind of creativity and guidance.

I see so much potential for our congregations to live into their vital role in their neighborhoods, in our denomination, in the Church universal, and the world. I am excited and anxious to formally join the community of practice made up of my colleagues in ordained ministry; they have so much to teach me and I can't wait to collaborate with them to imagine and realize God's call for the Church today.