

Ordination Paper

June 1, 2023

Autobiography

On Thursday, April 9, 1959, at 8:10 a.m., I was born at Cook County Hospital (The County). The County was a public hospital whose clientele consisted largely of people and families like mine who were poor and without private health insurance. My late mother was a poor unwed woman who had migrated to Chicago from the State of Mississippi in the mid-1950's. She had arrived in Chicago with few skills and only an elementary school education. She came in search of better economic opportunities and to escape racial violence and oppression of the South. Her name was Zelma Lee Parrott. She was listed as a Negro on the Certificate of Live Birth which the State of Illinois issued to document my birth. Consequently, I was also considered a "Negro." At the time of my entry into the complicated world of politics, race, gender and class, "Negro" was the label given to those who are currently referred to as Black or African American. I had been born into a world that generally had few if any hopes or expectations for most Negroes; let alone for a poor, fatherless Negro boy. When I was born, there was not yet a Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, or Fair Housing Act of 1968. Negroes had not yet achieved the status of equal citizens, or the rights, benefits and opportunities afforded those who were treated as full citizens. A year and a day prior to my birth, my mother had delivered another baby boy. Twenty-

one months after my birth, a baby girl was born into our single-parent family. That was the composition of my family.

I lived almost the entirety of my first 17 years of life in the Woodlawn community which lies to the south of the University of Chicago and the Hyde Park community. They were two considerably different worlds. One world was a bastion of prosperity and achievement. The other was a cauldron of poverty and crime. Woodlawn was the latter. The community was being terrorized by street gangs like the Black Stone Rangers and the Black Gangster Disciples. And there was little, if any, investment in the neighborhood.

My primary education would take place in the Chicago Public School system. It was at James Wadsworth Elementary School and Andrew Carnegie Elementary School that I would receive the fundamental tools required to navigate the world. During my sixth-grade year at Wadsworth, I did very well on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). My accomplishment earned me a double promotion. I skipped the seventh grade and went to the eighth. In the eighth grade I repeated my performance on the ITBS. As a result, my teacher encouraged me to take the entrance exam for Robert Lindblom Technical High School. Lindblom was a college preparatory high school. I took my teacher's advice and scored high enough on the exam to earn acceptance to the incoming freshman class. It was an accomplishment that would help to shape my future.

In my senior year at Lindblom, I did well on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). My score warranted the designation of National Merit Scholar Commended Student. As a result of that achievement, I was awarded a four-year academic scholarship to Florida A & M University (FAMU) in Tallahassee, FL. where I earned a Bachelor of Science

degree in accounting. I subsequently returned to Chicago in 1982 and sat for the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) examination which I successfully completed. Before sitting for the CPA exam, I returned to Florida to marry my college sweetheart, Deirdre. We were wed on March 13, 1982, in her hometown of Miami, FL. We raised three children whose names are Marcus, Brandon and Ariel. In March 2023 we celebrated 41 years of marriage.

### Call to Ministry

From the time that I was a child until the present, I believe that God has been calling me. I have not always recognized the call, but even when I have, I ignored it. My first recollection of entertaining thoughts of service (ministry) occurred when I was in the third grade. I received what amounted to a citizenship award that was named after Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. At that age, I didn't recognize it as a call. Because I had seen and heard Dr. King on television, he was the first theologian to have an influence on my life. Theologically, I have been shaped to some degree by him. Although I had not reached the age of nine when he was assassinated, Dr. King made an impression on me. The fact that I had some misgivings about his strategy of non-violence and belief that it would appeal to the morality of those who opposed equality for Blacks notwithstanding, I had a great deal of respect and admiration for Dr. King's love ethic and vision of the beloved community. I was moved by his determination not to give in to hate or to respond in kind to those who hated him. To me, it was commendable that he seemed to exhibit the kind of love which Jesus exhibited. I was also impressed with his desire to put the needs of others ahead of his own needs. Though given the opportunity

to enrich himself and to live a quiet and comfortable life, Dr. King chose the road of self-sacrifice and loneliness. For those reasons, as a third grader, I remember wishing that I could have the same type of impact on people's lives as Dr. King. I believe, in retrospect, that this desire to stand in the gap for the oppressed and the unfortunate was God's first call to me to engage in ministry.

After that initial call, over the years, God sent others to water the seed that was planted by Dr. King's work. During my first thirteen years as a member of Trinity United Church of Christ (Trinity), several people approached me about becoming a deacon. It seemed that I had hardly answered that call and begun my training when people began asking me when I was going to seminary and calling me "Rev." I had never considered or discussed, with any of them, the possibility of enrolling in seminary. It finally dawned on me that God was still calling me. I found it humbling that God would still call me into God's service. After all, once my mother stopped making me attend church, where she was a member, I stopped going. I was an adolescent when I walked away from the church. When I returned, I was about 24 years of age and had almost died in a car accident.

One night in February 1982, I was returning to Chicago for good after completing my education at FAMU. While pulling a U-Haul trailer full of all my worldly possessions, I lost control of my car on an icy Interstate 65 (I-65) in Indiana. During my struggle to regain control of the car, I could see that there was a steep embankment on the right side. The car and trailer would have certainly rolled over had I gone off the road on that side. Fortunately, the car came to rest in the median and I thought or said, "Thank you Jesus!" I knew that my life had been spared that night. I was unable to drive my car out

of the median because the wheels were bogged down in the snow and mud. So, I turned on my hazard lights and waited for a state trooper or someone to come along and help me. A state trooper eventually arrived and called a tow truck to pull me out of the median. That incident convinced me that it was time to return to the church.

### Christian Pilgrimage

My earliest church affiliation was with Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church which is located on the south side of Chicago. At the time, Fellowship's senior pastor was the late Rev. Dr. Clay Evans. Currently, Rev. Reginald W. Sharpe, Jr. is the senior pastor. Fellowship was the church my late mother attended during my childhood. Because I was too young to decide if, when and where I would go to church, by default, Fellowship was my church. As a result, Fellowship is where I was first exposed to organized religion. If memory serves me correctly, Fellowship appeared to be a relatively conservative church. I recall that, for me, the services were long and boring. And the sermons were incomprehensible for someone my age. That is the reason I stopped attending once I wasn't forced to go.

Trinity is the church I began to attend after the near fatal accident on I-65. My introduction to Trinity came as a result of Pastor Emeritus', Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.'s preaching. Additionally, my wife Deirdre, had been attending services and had joined the church before I decided to attend church with her. I first heard Pastor Wright's sermons on radio station WJPC. I remember that Rev. Wright's sermons were radical and relevant to the African American community and its experiences. His preaching also factored into my decision to return to the church. Pastor Wright was the second

theologian to have a significant spiritual impact on me. After attending Trinity for about a year, I joined, was baptized and received the Right Hand of Fellowship in December 1983.

Once I was a member, Pastor Wright and Trinity became major influences in terms of my spiritual growth. Because of its' pastorate, emphasis on daily bible reading and study, prayer, tithing, social justice and Black Liberation Theology, Trinity inspired me to delve deeper into the written word of God and to become a better Christian. Accordingly, I took a number of the bible study classes offered by the church. Those classes would prove to be beneficial as they helped fulfill one of the requirements for becoming a deacon-in-training. God was still calling. In September 1997, I was accepted as a member of the deacon-in-training class that would go on to be ordained in December 1998. I would subsequently answer my call to ordained ministry and enroll in seminary.

In addition to working full-time as an accountant for most of my time in seminary, I was still an active member of Trinity. I continued to fulfill my responsibilities as a deacon and serve as a member of the Men's Chorus. My first ministry participation at Trinity was with the Men's Chorus. I sang in the chorus for 18 years. Prior to being ordained as a deacon, I was a member of Isuthu (Coming into Manhood) which is Trinity's male mentoring ministry. After being ordained, I focused primarily on my responsibilities as a deacon and later my seminary studies. Currently, I write devotions for the church's website.

Next to enrolling in seminary, my decision to answer God's call to become an ordained deacon has been the single most important decision on my spiritual

journey. Responding to that call forced me to leave my comfort zone and, as a result, I have grown in ways that I never would have if I had not “stepped out of the boat.”

One particular moment comes to mind when I think about my personal and spiritual growth. The deacon-in-training class that I was a member of had been given fifty questions and the answers to study in preparation for ordination Sunday. The night before ordination, Pastor Wright called to see if I would be singing with the men at the first morning service (7:30). After I told him I would be, he said that he was going to ask me one of the ordination questions before the actual ordination at the 11:00 a.m. service. The question was about the role of women and the diaconate. The answer to the question was very long. I'm an introvert. So, I was petrified at the notion of standing before the congregation without the support of my deacon-in-training classmates. When the time came, Pastor Wright called me from the choir stand into the pulpit, handed me a microphone and asked me the question. I recited the answer perfectly. Afterwards, I hugged and thanked Pastor Wright. I was thanking him for giving me the opportunity to confront my fear of public speaking. That moment was a milestone in my growth as a person and a minister. I had gained tremendous confidence. Ultimately, the decision to accept the role of ordained deacon was the catalyst that made it possible for me to embrace the notion of becoming an ordained minister.

Before fully committing to ministry, I held various accounting positions in the Chicago Public School system and Corporate America. In 2009, I abandoned accounting and gave my full attention to ministry. I used to say that I was a minister trapped in an accountant's body. However, after some reflection, I realized that I was a minister “hiding” in an accountant's body. Prior to leaving accounting, I had enrolled at

Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) on a part-time basis in 2003. I would fulfill my responsibilities at CNA Financial Corporation during the day and would attend class at night, usually twice a week. Because I could only attend classes on a part-time basis, I deduced that it would take me twice as long as full-time students to earn my Master of Divinity degree. Due to several challenges, which included a significant change in my health status and another near fatal car accident, my time at CTS was extended well beyond the six years I had anticipated. Nevertheless, my faith was strengthened as God saw me through all the challenges. I graduated in May 2013 with my MDiv. degree. My Christian pilgrimage has had highs and lows. And although it has been a long journey, it has also been a fulfilling one. It has taken me from a pre-adolescent, who was not quite sure what to make of the Christian religion or Jesus Christ, to a man who has decided to accept the calling God has placed on his life. I look forward to what lies ahead on my journey.

### Call to Chaplaincy

While attending seminary, I completed two field placements to fulfill the requirements of my degree. I was fortunate enough to serve as a Pastoral Intern at Trinity from July 2011 to September 2012. In that role, I was given nearly the same responsibilities as the full-time permanent associate pastors. Those responsibilities included serving as the liaison for several church ministries. Accordingly, I was the Pastoral Liaison for all the men's ministries. Because I had been a member of Trinity since 1983, I already knew many of my fellow church members and was familiar with the worship services and operations of the church. Secondly, as a deacon, I was



accustomed to serving the congregation. My internship allowed me to take advantage of the experience I had already gained and the relationships that had been made. My time in the capacity of intern proved to be advantageous in that the contours of my ministerial identity began to come into focus. The internship allowed me to learn about my abilities, gain confidence and grow as a minister.

My second unit of field education was completed at Rush University Medical Center (RUMC). It was there that I provided care as a Chaplain Intern during the period of September 2012 to December 2012. My time as a Chaplain Intern was such a rewarding ministerial experience that, after acquiring my MDiv. degree I decided to apply for a one-year residency at RUMC. I was accepted and served as a Resident Chaplain from September 2013 until August 2014. With the completion of my internship and residency at RUMC, I had four units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). The documents I received as proof that I earned the units cannot tell the story of how beneficial that experience was. I gained a new level of self-awareness that better prepared me for ministry as I came to know my strengths and weaknesses. CPE was a godsend and made me a more effective minister.

At the conclusion of the residency, there were no full-time staff chaplain positions available at RUMC. Therefore, I accepted a part-time position as a Registry Chaplain at the University of Chicago Medical Center (UCMC). On average, I provided care for twenty hours a week during the period of March 2016 until September 2018. For most of that time, I was also employed as a fee-for-visit chaplain at Family Centered Hospice. I was in that role from August 2016 until September 2018. In September 2018, I resigned

from UCMC because I was given a full-time permanent position at Family Centered Hospice where I have been employed for almost seven years.

The two units of field education not only provided me with ministerial experience, but they also provided a basis for comparison as I pondered my ministerial path. After engaging in parish ministry at Trinity and serving at RUMC, UCMC and Family Centered Hospice, I believe I have been able to identify the ministerial role to which God has called me. Initially, when I considered chaplaincy, I viewed it with a certain degree of anxiety. My perspective of chaplaincy was that it would always involve providing pastoral care for patients, their families and facility staff during end-of-life situations. I didn't feel competent enough to provide effective spiritual care under those circumstances. I felt as though I wouldn't know what to say or what to do. Nevertheless, after conferring with a ministerial colleague, I applied to be a Chaplain Intern at RUMC. During the internship, I learned that chaplaincy involves more than death and dying, especially in hospital settings. Even as people are dying in the hospital, babies are being born in the labor and delivery unit. Additionally, I discovered that some people just want to be heard as they share their stories. Eventually, I concluded that I did have something to offer, even if it was just my presence. Chaplaincy allows me to use my God-given abilities to provide care for patients, families, and staff.

In the course of providing care, I realized that my personality and demeanor can have a calming and reassuring effect on people. I tend to be soft-spoken and non-anxious in crisis situations. Accordingly, those who I am providing care for are generally less anxious. My assessment of what I bring to the table as a chaplain is not just based on how I have experienced the situations I have been called to. Others have also

affirmed me in my role. I have been told that I am doing what I am supposed to do. Many patients and families have thanked me profusely for what I have done for them. Several times, I have been asked to participate in homegoing celebrations. Finally, because I grew up fatherless, I can relate to feelings of loss and hopelessness. It doesn't matter that the loss my patients, families and staff are experiencing is different from my loss. The loss of anything can generate the same emotions. In most cases of loss, there is something that is desired, but that cannot be obtained. For example, I wanted a father in my life, but could not have that. My patients have wanted their health or loved ones back but were denied.

With all that said, I also acknowledge that I am more than a chaplain. I am all that a minister is called to be. Although pastoral care might be my strength, I am capable of more. I make that point because until late in my ministry, I would say I'm not a preacher because I don't consider that to be my strong suit. I don't remember the turning point, but I finally understood that I am also a preacher. Perhaps preaching is not my primary gift, but I am a preacher too.

### Statement of Faith

Although I had been a member of Trinity U.C.C. since 1983, I had not engaged the U.C.C.'s Statement of Faith in a meaningful way until 1998. Almost a year into our fifteen month "deacon walk," my deacon-in-training class, was entering the final phase of the journey. If approved by the congregation, we would be ordained on the last Sunday in December 1998. One of the questions to be asked during public examination was about the Statement of Faith of the UCC. The question required us to recite the

Statement of Faith from memory. It was during the process of memorizing the Statement of Faith, that I began to look at it more intently.

What became apparent was the comprehensiveness and affirmative nature of the UCC's creedal statement. Its first lines state clearly, unequivocally, and affirmatively what it is that UCC members, including me, believe in reference to God. Those lines are followed by statements rooted in trinitarian doctrine and they make references to the other two persons of the Trinity, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the statement acknowledges the attributes of each person that forms the Trinity. God's omnipotence, sovereignty, autonomy, creative power and love are all highlighted. Jesus's suffering, communion and identification with us as well as his work of reconciliation are noted. Lastly, the gift of the Holy Spirit which renews and brings believers into a covenantal relationship is also included. The Statement of Faith recognizes that the church unites believers and charges them to be disciples, serve, proclaim the gospel, resist evil, share in Christ's baptism, partake of communion and join Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection. The statement concludes with a doxology which is a fitting way to summarize the UCC's and its members profession of faith.

While memorizing the Statement of Faith, I realized that it encapsulates those things that I believe. I believe in the Trinity which includes God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and their attributes. For me God is love, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, etc. Jesus did live, die and rise for me as an expression of God's love and desire to reconcile me to God. The Holy Spirit does empower me. The church does unite, educate and equip believers.

Finally, the Statement of Faith is necessary to establish the beliefs of the UCC and to clearly state what the UCC, as a community of faith, believes so that all who consider uniting with the UCC will be well-informed.

## God

During my Systematic Theology class, my fellow students and I were instructed by the professor to write a one-page essay on the topic “God is...” From my perspective, the assignment was an impossible task. After all, considering everything that I could say about God, there was no chance that I could adequately capture my thoughts on a single sheet of paper. Even if I only chose one aspect of God on which to comment, one sheet of paper would barely be sufficient. Nevertheless, I decided to use my page to say that “God is”, which is to say that God exists. It was then, and is still, important for me to convey that what is most important to me is the knowledge that there is an ultimate reality that I know as God. In other words, I believe in the existence of God. God is real.

Although there are many other assertions about God that are valid and that have merit, I choose God’s existence as a starting point because that must be true before one can talk about any other attributes or characteristics of God. My ultimate concern and my source of hope is the existence of God. “God is” suggests the existence of that which cannot be adequately defined by any anthropomorphic or patriarchal language that emanates from we humans due to our limited capacity for comprehension. We are limited by our existential experience and our cognitive abilities. Consequently, our perception of God cannot encompass all that God is. Even as I affirm the reality of the

Great Architect of the universe, the inadequacy of my words is readily apparent. The best that I can offer in terms of finite human language is still woefully insufficient as a descriptor of God.

Additionally, the Bible expresses a sentiment which implies that our ability to fully comprehend and to describe God is parochial. The following words can be found in the Hebrew Bible, "...We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8 NIV) Accordingly, it seems unreasonable and unlikely that that which is created can be totally aware of the depth and breadth of the One who created it; that notwithstanding, I will make an honest, albeit limited, attempt at articulating what it means for me to say that God exists. The phrase "God is" has as its subject the one and only God who is responsible for the creation of all that is, all that was and all that will ever be.

What does it mean for God to exist? It means that God is the ultimate reality in whose absence nothing else would exist. However, because God does exist, everything else has meaning even if it is beyond human cognitive abilities. The existence of God is the genesis of hope in something more than our earthly existence.

Why do I emphasize the existence of God? I do it partly as a means of assuaging the doubts and questions that I possess about issues of theodicy, especially as they relate to my own personal suffering. It is encouraging and comforting to know that in spite of all my trials and tribulations and the seemingly unfairness of it all; and no matter what I go through, God "is" and God is near.

## Christ

“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’”(Matthew 16:15 NRSV) Jesus’ question to his disciples is a question which has reverberated down the corridors of time. Here is what Dermot A. Lane had to say about the subject of Jesus Christ: “Our acceptance and appropriation of the mystery of Jesus Christ is something that determines our attitude towards everything else within Christianity. In particular our response to the person of Jesus Christ shapes and informs our approach to the ultimate mystery in life which we call God.”<sup>1</sup> I find Dermot’s observation to be quite insightful. Both his observation and Jesus’ question, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, are matters which I have had to consider personally as a believer and educationally as a seminary student. I was forced to revisit my personal beliefs regarding Jesus when a professor asked a rhetorical question of my class. As I paraphrase the question, it was, “Would you (students) be okay if there was no historical Jesus?” The question waged a frontal assault on my preconceived notions of the identity and meaning of Jesus Christ. It was a question which caused me to take a critical and honest look at the bedrock of my belief system. After all, the historical Jesus was a given for me. There I was faced with the task of affirming what it was that I believed about Jesus Christ. With that being said, I concluded that for me, Jesus represents the expression of God’s salvific love as illustrated in an historical setting at a certain time in a certain place. Jesus Christ, however defined, is God’s intervention into history and the daily lives of those whom God created. Jesus Christ is an example of God displaying God’s immanence as God has done throughout history in specific places and at specific times for the benefit of

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<sup>1</sup> Dermot A. Lane, introduction, The Reality of Jesus: An Essay in Christology. (New York: Paulist, 1975) 9.

God's people. And God's salvific love is the reason that God intervened. God's love is such that it inspired God to provide a means of saving humanity from being permanently estranged from their Creator.

### Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit represents the power and the presence of God in creation and in the created. The Holy Spirit, for whom the Hebrews and Greeks used the terms "ruach" and "pneuma" respectively, is the third person of the Holy Trinity. Throughout scripture, there are many references to the Holy Spirit's activities which demonstrated the power and presence of God. For instance, the first chapter of Genesis records the activity of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Gen. 1:1-2 KJV). In addition to exercising power at the time of creation, the Holy Spirit is active in the lives of those whom God created. Acts 2 documents the work of the Holy Spirit at the birth of the Christian church: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability." (Acts 2:1-4 NRSV). As was the case on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is a gift that is given upon one's confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, receipt of the Holy Spirit enhances the quality of life for each believer through the fruit of the spirit



(Galatians 5). Lastly, the power and presence of God is manifested through the Holy Spirit by way of spiritual gifts such as the ability to prophesy, teach, discern, speak in tongues (glossolalia), etc.

It is one thing to read or hear about the activities of the Holy Spirit. It is another to see or experience those activities for oneself. In the previous paragraph, I noted examples of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit as they are recorded in scripture. Cognitively, I can accept those accounts as true, but that is not a sufficient basis for me to propose that the Holy Spirit represents the power and presence of God in my life. For me to make that assertion, I must go beyond my biblical knowledge and access that which I have experienced. In essence, I must examine my life in order to discern the times that the Holy Spirit has interceded on my behalf. It is also important for me to recall the instances where I was given the gift of discernment. Suffice it to say that I can attest to the power and presence of God in the Holy Spirit from an experiential perspective.

### The Church

Ministry is not only an individual or personal responsibility; it is also the responsibility of the faith community. Generally, a faith community is constituted in the form of a church. However, the church is not merely a physical structure which consists of bricks, mortar, glass and steel. Absent the earnest desire to serve God, that structure would likely resemble any number of social service agencies. Whereas social service agencies play an important role in society, they typically are not charged with meeting the spiritual needs of their clientele. On the other hand, the church of Jesus Christ is

expected to minister to physical as well as spiritual needs. Acts 2 provides the prototype of what the church should be. It is there that the church is birthed by the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is also there that the people are told what is required in order to obtain salvation. Upon their confession of faith, the people became a part of the family of faith and shared all things in common.

“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2:15-17 NIV) Ministry should impact the internal and the external. That is to say that ministry should be relevant to the spirituality of an individual as well as to that individual’s physical well-being. Additionally, ministry should be extended to people within church walls, the internal, as well as to people outside its walls, the external. Churches have a duty to be prophets in the world. They are to emulate prophets such as Amos. It was Amos who in the face of injustice and oppression wrote these words to Israel: “But let Judgment roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24 KJV). Prophetic ministry is an imperative if a just world is to become a reality. For it was Fredrick Douglas who said that: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” Consequently, in order to achieve the world society that God intended; the church cannot be silent. There is too much that is unjust in the world.

Globalization, which for the most part can be read as exploitation, is an issue that prophetic ministry is obligated to confront. As multi-national corporations seek to enrich their shareholders by minimizing costs, they often do so at the expense of people who

are paid very low wages, made to work long hours, denied benefits and who are subjected to safety and health risks. Genocide or ethnic cleansing is another issue which cries out for a response from the church and its members. The church cannot remain mute as hundreds of thousands and, in some cases; millions of God's children are slaughtered.

There is no shortage of ministry opportunities in the world. Those cited above are but two from an extensive list of ills that require people who profess to love God to act upon. There are many other issues that are just as, if not more critical, than the previous two. Environmental discrimination, slavery, child prostitution, homophobia, gender discrimination, racial injustice, the proliferation of guns, disparities in healthcare, food deserts, nuclear proliferation, ecological damages, pollution, hunger, poverty are some of them.

### Baptism

In addition to being a prophetic voice, the church is charged with calling and indoctrinating new members into Christian fellowship. The indoctrination process includes baptism. Baptism is one of the two sacraments of the United Church of Christ. Through baptism, believers are initiated into the family of faith, or the universal church, and united with Christ. It is a public, voluntary, and overt act. Simply put, baptism is an "outward sign of inward grace." It is engaged in by one who has come to seek

forgiveness through the confession of their sins and to acknowledge their belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And that believer freely and willingly participates in a baptism with water to join Christ in His burial and resurrection. In fact, baptism symbolizes the death of the old self and the emergence of a new self. (Tomb and womb).

I believe that publicly affirming one's faith through the act of baptism makes a clear statement to others and to God that one wants to live a life that is committed to God and to the service of God's people. With baptism comes the responsibility for one to be better and to do better as a new member of a royal priesthood. Assisting in the adherence to life as a new being is the gift of the Holy Spirit who is imparted to the baptized. The Holy Spirit enables the baptized to discern what is the will of God so that they can be more effective in the living of their lives and the performance of their priestly duties.

Regarding the baptizing of infants, I believe that it is appropriate to baptize the infants of Christians even though those infants are not yet able to profess their faith. It should be anticipated that if an infant is raised in a Christian home (Train up a child...Proverbs 22:6 KJV), he/she will eventually reach a point where they will profess their faith. In the UCC, that opportunity comes during confirmation when children are allowed to affirm the vows that were made on their behalf at their baptism. Until then, they should be embraced as members of the Christian community where they will have access to the meaning of salvation.

### Holy Communion

Holy Communion is the other sacrament of the United Church of Christ. The bread symbolizes Christ's broken body, and the wine is representative of Christ's blood. Participation in Holy Communion by baptized believers allows them to participate in the suffering of Christ. Participation also serves to remind believers of the cost of salvation and the responsibilities of discipleship. The symbols of Christ's body and blood are tangible reminders of Christ's sacrifice. Holy Communion is also an opportunity for believers of all backgrounds to gather as one Body of Christ at the Lord's table.

Additionally, each time a believer partakes in Holy Communion, I believe an opportunity is presented. Those symbols of Christ's spilt blood and broken body are a time of reflection on the gift and cost of salvation that is made possible through Christ's crucifixion. Accordingly, Holy Communion is a time of gratitude. It is an occasion for giving thanks for the promise of eternal life. Holy Communion also serves as a prompt to recalibrate or realign oneself, if necessary, with God's will as an expression of gratitude.

### Bible

I understand the Bible to be the Word of God and I accept it as the rule of Christian faith and practice. Its words were inspired by God for the use of God's people. Its truths, message, and adaptability are eternal. It is more than written words that are static and frozen on paper. The Bible is dynamic and can speak to every situation and

every time. It contains the rules for everyday living as well as words of comfort and assurance. It is indeed a guidebook for those who believe in its truth and efficacy.

### UCC Identity

There are several forms of polity under which churches can be organized. Among them are the presbytery, episcopacy and congregational. Two of those forms of polity don't allow local congregations to be autonomous. Under presbytery polity, an elected group or board of elders has authority over local churches. Likewise, local churches under episcopacy polity are subject to the authority of a bishop or archbishop. The United Church of Christ (UCC) adheres to the congregational form of polity. Congregational polity has no one person or group that has a position of authority over local churches. Each church is self-governing or autonomous which is one of six characteristics associated with a UCC congregation. The others are baptism by sprinkling or immersion, belief in freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, scripture is considered the only rule of faith and practice, and the priesthood and equality of all believers.

Although each congregation is autonomous, the individual churches work together voluntarily to do the work of the UCC. To facilitate that work, the UCC in Illinois is structured as follows. Within the Illinois Conference, which is one of the 39 conferences nationwide, there are five associations. The Illinois Conference includes the Chicago Metropolitan Association (CMA), Eastern, Western, Fox Valley and Prairie Associations. Each association is configured in smaller groups of churches referred to

as clusters. Trinity is in cluster six of the CMA. The UCC's denominational structure helps local churches do together what they cannot do alone.

The UCC's congregational polity is one of the reasons I have been a member of Trinity UCC for about four decades. Religion like politics is local. The local congregation is in touch with its members and its community. Therefore, it should have absolute authority over the way it functions. Congregational polity is also the reason I am seeking ordination as a UCC minister. I would like to be ordained as a member of the clergy in the UCC because of Trinity's Black Liberation Theology and its history of fighting for social justice both in America and abroad. I recall how, during the apartheid era, Trinity was one of the first churches to display a Free South Africa sign on its lawn in front of the church. Trinity also encouraged its members not to do business with Walmart because of the company's business practices. The presence of Walmart stores had a devastating effect on local businesses once Walmart began competing with them.

I also seek ordination because of the ministry of the denomination in general. On a local level, I am inspired by the work of the Community Renewal Society which is the mission arm of the UCC in the Chicago Metropolitan Area. The denomination's global ministry through its Wider Church Ministries is equally inspiring. The UCC also has a history of fighting for justice that predates its formation in 1957. The Congregational Church, which is one of the four denominations that eventually united to form the UCC, was fighting for the oppressed as early as 1841. It was part of the abolitionist movement and hired John Quincy Adams to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court for the freedom of the enslaved Africans who were held captive on the ship Amistad.

### Pastoral Ethics and Boundaries

I fully understand and recognize the need for pastoral ethics and boundaries. It is incumbent upon anyone who holds the office of minister to practice honesty, integrity and to avoid the appearance of impropriety. Ministers are generally afforded a level of trust because of their position. They should never do anything to betray that trust. To do so has the potential to harm those who trust them. Also, the nature of the ministerial position can lend itself to the formation of an unequal balance of power where the minister is perceived to have more power. Limits should be established so that the minister doesn't intentionally or otherwise take advantage of their power. I believe that the promises that are delineated in the ordination vows, if kept, would be very helpful regarding the maintenance of pastoral ethics and boundaries. A candidate for ordination promises to serve faithfully, accept the Word of God as the rule of Christian faith and practice, be diligent in private prayers, bible reading and in the duties of their office, etc. Adherence to those promises could ultimately minimize the chance that a minister would do something harmful, improper or insensitive. If ordained, I will honor the vows with God's help to the best of my ability.