

## **General Faith Pilgrimage**

I was born into a United Methodist family April 7, 1981, and was placed on the probationary member roll at Union Chapel UMC in Monroe, GA. Growing up in that church my maternal grandmother, Pallie Adcock, was a large influence on my life. As I sat with her in the worship services at Union Chapel UMC, we would watch my mother, Marlene Gray, play the organ and my father, Russell Gray, sing in the choir. This was my first exposure to my family being involved in worship and church leadership. My grandmother also taught me the parts of worship she deemed to be invaluable such as memorizing the Apostles' Creed, and to know at least the first and fourth verse of every hymn in the hymnal. As I got older I went through confirmation and was placed on the professing roll under the direction of the Rev. Stiles P. Cobb.

Since Union Chapel UMC did not have a strong children's or youth program, and my paternal grandparents were members at Monroe First UMC, I attended many of the children's and youth activities at Monroe First. At that church I began taking piano lessons from Mrs. Judy Rupard, the church organist, and also was carried along in my Christian walk by her. In the youth group there I had many fine Sunday school teachers and was well taught by Mrs. Linda Pritchard.

Also, I had the opportunity to see my paternal grandfather, Marvin Gray, Sr, as a leader in that church. He was a strong man with a stronger Christian faith and beliefs. He showed me that the foundation of leadership was prayer. No matter what the issue at hand a leader in the church should always begin by taking it to God in prayer. I hope that I can one day be half the leader he was. He helped me to understand the need for laity to understand a call to ministry. This call to ministry should be a ministry that each individual identifies for himself or herself and may use to build God's kingdom.

I have a strong call to ministry dealing with local church ministry, as well as, social justice activism. My education has been building toward this goal. In 2008, I obtained an AB in Speech Communication from the University of Georgia in order to give me the skills necessary to teach a class or speak with a congregation I may lead. In 2011, I obtained an AB in Music from the University of Georgia in order to have the knowledge base needed to run a church music program with excellence and speak with confidence on areas of music performance. In 2014, I obtained a Master of Divinity from Candler School of Theology at Emory University. This degree is the base requirement for ordination, but I wanted to continue. In 2015, I obtained a Master of Sacred Theology from Boston University School of Theology focusing on liturgy and sacred music. Currently I am working toward a Doctor of Ministry also at Boston University School of Theology expecting to graduate May 19, 2018. This degree is in transformational leadership, and will be looking at how we can better use inclusive language in traditional liturgy of the ecumenical Church.

### **Call to Ministry**

I had been feeling a call to ordained ministry for several years when I went on a pilgrimage to Israel in 2009. While there were many amazing sights and experiences during this trip the most moving moment was when our group had been touring around Galilee for a few days. Finally, we got on a boat to go out on the Sea of Galilee. It was a cool February morning. When we got out in to the middle of the sea the boat was stopped, it was quiet, and the water was smooth. All of a sudden the wind picked up, and the cold February water started crashing over the side of the boat. People were putting up ponchos and umbrellas, and yelling, as they got wetter. In an effort to calm people, I was asked to sing. I sang, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot thou hast taught me to

say: It is well, it is well with my soul.” It was in that moment that my call to ordained ministry was confirmed for me, and I have had it confirmed in each ministry context I have found myself since.

While I have been working on my education, I also have been employed and volunteered in the Church as I try to presently fill God’s call. During the past years I have held leadership positions in multiple settings of The United Methodist Church which have included teaching, preaching and administration. I helped to lead worship at the 2015 General Association, and began on December 10, 2015 as Minister of Music and Worship at the Congregational Church of Grafton, UCC in Grafton, MA. I attended the ONA National Gathering in St. Joseph, Minnesota June 7-9, 2016, and Annual Meeting June 10-11, 2016 where I presented the resolution which I penned regarding gender neutral restrooms. I am now serving the Connecticut Conference as the chairperson of the Conference Open and Affirming Ministry Team. In this role I have planned a Bisexual Visibility Day Worship Service to be held at the First Congregational Church of Meriden, CT on Sept 23rd at 7pm, I will be leading the Building an Inclusive Church training which will be held Nov 18-19 at the East Woodstock Church, and I have already penned a resolution regarding Transgender Day of Remembrance to be presented at next year’s Annual Meeting. Also, I will be helping to lead worship again this year at General Association Sept 25-26, and have just signed a contract to be the Designated Term Pastor of South Congregational Church, UCC in East Hartford, CT. It is clear to see that the church and the work I do for it are one of the most important things in my life.

My vocational plans include ordained ministry in the local church, but also continuing to reach out past the walls of the local church into the surrounding community to affect change in

matters of social justice and equality. Our churches should have something to say about this, and the UCC is well suited to support these endeavors.

**Describe how UCC principles of covenant and autonomy, local church governance practices that you have experienced, and our denominational polity impact your understanding of and practice of pastoral authority.**

In the United Church of Christ, the Local Church context informs so much of our understanding regarding all aspects of life together in a community of faith. This stems from our understanding that “The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church (UCC Constitution, Article V),”<sup>1</sup> and that in this setting there is both covenant and autonomy. The covenant secures our relationships with each other, and our autonomy ensures that one person or church setting will never trample the freedoms of another. These central concepts are found in our denominational polity, our local church governance, and how to function with pastoral authority.

As the United Church of Christ, covenant is at the core of our identity. We can see the importance given to this identity of covenant by its placement in the UCC Constitution. Just after our name and structure of the denomination we see Article III. Covenantal Relationships.

This article states:

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God’s ways.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United Church of Christ, “UCC Constitution and Bylaws,” [http://www.ucc.org/ucc\\_constitution\\_and\\_bylaws](http://www.ucc.org/ucc_constitution_and_bylaws) (accessed July 4, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Here we see that just as in Biblical covenants the covenantal relationship of the UCC has responsibilities and rights in relation to the parties involved. Each setting of the church should listen, hear, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of the other church settings. In this way we are bound together not as fully autonomous local churches, but churches who have chosen to live in covenant together.

This identity of covenant continues throughout the UCC Constitution and Bylaws. In Article VI we see that “The Call of an Ordained Minister or Ordained Ministerial Partner (see Article VII) to a Local Church establishes a covenantal relationship among the Ordained Minister or Ordained Ministerial Partner, the Local Church, and the United Church of Christ as represented by an Association.”<sup>3</sup> The individual clergyperson, the Association, and the Local Church all have responsibilities toward each other in maintaining our common life and ministries of the UCC. In Article V we see that the local church can “formulate its own covenants”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, from the founding of the UCC from our historic branches all the way to the local member there is covenant relationship. We live together, learn together, and respect the other settings of the church that might be able to provide advice, council, and requests in order to fulfill our mission and ministry together as the United Church of Christ.

Each church is different in its relationship to the wider church structure due to our autonomy in covenant. Some churches are very connected in knowing exactly what is happening in the Conference and the news out of General Synod. Other churches are simply not concerned with this information. Even with the variability in the closeness of these relationships it is easy to see that a Local Church will have its closest denominational relationship with the Association. The Local Church will have more contact with the Association because that is where their clergy

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

will maintain their standing. Along with this the Association (Regional Minister) will meet with a search committee to help them through a search and call process, and will help them set an appropriate pastor's compensation based in Conference guidelines. If there happens to be a problem with the pastor of an ethical nature, the Association's committee of ministry may take up this case. For individuals seeking ordination out of the Local Church, the Association is the entity which provides licensing and ordination on behalf of the denomination.

The autonomy that each Local Church has can be seen in the experience I have had with local church governance. During my time with the United Church of Christ I have seen two different governing structures to a Local Church. The Congregational Church of Grafton, UCC has the same governing structure they have maintained for generations. At this church there are many committees made up of approximately ten members representing each ministry area of the church (i.e., deacons, trustees, music, Christian education, etc.). The chairperson of each of these committees in turn holds a seat on the Church Cabinet, which meets once a month to coordinate all of the ministries of the church. This model of governance has been the continued choice of the Congregational Church of Grafton for many years; however, Westfield Congregational Church decided that this model no longer worked for them.

After years of having a similar governing structure to that of the Congregational Church of Grafton, Westfield Congregational Church found that it was time for a change. There had been years of decline in church membership, and it was finally realized that there were not enough people to populate the numerous committees of the church. Along with not having the numbers of people needed, this former model is very time intensive for a church to meet in committees and then have those committees report at another meeting to a Church Council. Therefore, the members of Westfield decided to move their governing structure to a unified

board. All of the committees of the church were dissolved, and now one board governs the operations of the church. The board is made up of individuals who represent certain broad ministry areas (i.e., faith formation, outreach, etc.), but these individuals have no committees themselves. The activities promoted by the board work on an ad hoc basis only. If faith formation has a project they wish to accomplish, a team is raised to accomplish the work and then that team is dissolved after the work is complete. Westfield has found this model of church governance to be both less time intensive and allows for the operations of the church to be nimble enough to meet the needs of a changing context.

These two examples of differing models of church governance are a perfect example of the United Church of Christ's understanding of autonomy in covenant. Article V of the UCC Constitution states, "The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action."<sup>5</sup> These two churches are autonomous to the point that they can modify their processes to suite their own needs, but these modifications do not hurt the workings of any other church. These two churches along with numerous others are still in covenant relationship together to be the United Church of Christ.

The understanding of autonomy in covenant that is seen above in our local church governance is the same understanding which affects the practice of pastoral authority. Some of our churches either by virtue of their historical tradition or by means of the cultivation of congregational identity have the core value of a sense of strong pastoral authority. Other of our churches maintain the seat of authority in the congregation with a much weaker role for the pastor. By means of autonomy in covenant either one of these designs of pastoral authority and all other points along the spectrum are welcome. The Local Church's desires and boundaries for

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the role of the pastor are simply an outgrowth of the collective wisdom of that particular community of faith.

The only clear direction given for pastoral authority by the United Church of Christ is found in our *Book of Worship* as drawn from Article VI of the UCC Constitution. It states, “Ordained ministers of the United Church of Christ, by virtue of their ordination vows, the traditions of the church, and the constitutions and bylaws of local churches, are entrusted with primary responsibility for preaching and teaching the gospel, administering the sacraments and rites of the church, and exercising pastoral care and leadership.”<sup>6</sup> With this statement from the *Book of Worship* as a basis, I believe that pastoral authority is both derived from and is summed up in relationships. Ordained clergy are called from out of the congregation, they maintain their membership in the local congregation, and it is there through relationships with the people that they are called to lead. Without the trust and care of a congregation there is no authority to be had.

I have attempted to define for myself what it means to be clergy in this context or why there is even a need for clergy at all. I believe that clergy are members of the congregation who are set apart as “keepers of the story.” Now, anyone in the church can tell the story, but we who are set apart are tasked with making certain that the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is told over and over again year after year. The story is told to those who have heard it their entire lives and to those who are just hearing it for the first time. That is where pastoral authority comes from, and that is the pastor’s job. Everyone has the same right to tell the story, but I have to make sure that it does indeed get told.

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<sup>6</sup> Reuben A. Sheares, II, ed, *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: United Church of Christ, 2012), 13.

## God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit - atonement

One issue at the heart of our religious life is atonement. Theologians have written on this topic for millennia attempting to figure out this great mystery. Daniel Migliore writes on the topic of atonement through the theory of moral influence. He states, “Christ shows God’s love to us in such a compelling way that we are constrained to respond in wonder and gratitude. The atoning work of Christ is complete only when it is appropriated in the act of faith and allowed to transform one’s life.”<sup>7</sup> This theory shows exactly how much we are cared for by God and in turn prompts us to respond by living better lives, or as William Placher says, “Christ’s suffering shows us how much God loves us and therefore inspires us to be more loving and lead better lives.”<sup>8</sup> I appreciate this theory showing the love of God in such a powerful way; however, the problem I find with this theory is that it places all the responsibility on humanity. Individuals are called to complete atonement in this theory by living better lives, but how is one supposed to know that their life is good enough. There is no standard or benchmark in place to show when your sin is completely atoned. If I were a strong proponent of this theory, I would constantly be questioning my thoughts and actions wondering if I had responded to God’s love in a full enough way to make certain that my relationship with God was thoroughly mended.

Dorothee Sölle gives an understanding of the doctrine of atonement which is closest to my belief at this point in time. She begins with the moral influence theory, but fills in the problems I have had above. Sölle states, “Because God’s love is always unchanged, there is no need to make God change his mind. Christ, rather, is the one who reveals this nature of God, his

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 185.

<sup>8</sup> William C. Placher, ed, *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 190.

fatherly love.”<sup>9</sup> Here we see that there was never a time that God did not love us. Even in our sinful state the love of God is constant, and Christ shows this love to us. Sölle continues, “Jesus loves us so much that he sacrifices himself for us and our brokenness, and overcomes our alienations, so that we become free and certain that we ourselves are children of God.”<sup>10</sup> This theory fills all the problems I have had with other theories. Jesus loves us so much that it was his choice to sacrifice himself for us. God did not have to force the death of his own son. It was Jesus’ choice to die for us. This sacrifice overcomes our alienation and reconciles humanity to God. Also, this covers my largest concern with the moral influence theory. With the sacrifice of Jesus we “become free and certain that we ourselves are children of God.”<sup>11</sup> There is no ambiguity. We are children of God and do not have to be concerned if we have been good enough. God’s love is never called into question.

While using Jesus as a moral example one can see that the job of atonement is not simply to reconcile humanity to God, but to also heal our relationships with each other. We see these examples in the Gospel texts such as Matthew 18:15, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one,” and Luke 4:18-19, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” These texts speak to us regarding bringing the members of the community back into right relationship with each other.

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<sup>9</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

As a member at Westfield Congregational Church, I get to see the brokenness of our world, the hurts of our community, and the ways the church is able to take a stand for what is right in order to help the community of faith work through their hurts. I have seen a lesbian couple ask hesitantly worried about the answer if they could kneel together and pray as a couple. I have seen a transgender woman stand at the edge of the sanctuary overwhelmed at what was going on around her, but looking for a place to call home. However, most profoundly I saw the events of Sunday, June 12 as forty-nine people were shot and killed in a gay bar in Orlando, FL. This was a tragic event that shook our church and our community. On Monday morning I volunteered to put together an order of worship for a vigil to be held that evening. We prayed and read Scripture. We moved around the sanctuary to prayer stations and sang, “On a street where neighbors gather, shots are heard; a young girl dies. On a campus, students scatter as the violence claims more lives. In a gay bar filled with anger, tempers flare and shots resound. God of love, we weep and wonder at the violence all around.”<sup>12</sup> We prayed together, “May we play our parts in breaking the cycle of violence by realizing that peace begins with us. In the name of Christ, who is our peace, Amen.”<sup>13</sup> People sat in their seats, moved around the space, and held each other to weep. This was clearly not the end to the reports of violence in our country or in our world, but it was a transforming experience for our community of faith. We have not finished the conversation on what our part is in complacency toward violence, but we have begun to draw the curtain back on the idea that we have nothing to do with it, no voice in the community, and no stand to take. The atoning process has not just begun within the members of the Westfield but also the place of our church in the community.

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<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, “God of Mercy, You Have Shown Us,” adapted by T.G. Gray, [http://carolynshymns.com/god\\_of\\_mercy\\_you\\_have\\_shown\\_us.html](http://carolynshymns.com/god_of_mercy_you_have_shown_us.html) (accessed June 13, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> North Carolina Council of Churches, “A Prayer for an End to Gun Violence,” <http://www.ncchurches.org/lectionary-archive/year-c/gun-violence-proper-26/> (accessed June 13, 2016).

## **Humanity - sin**

The doctrine of sin can be understood through the sources of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. Individuals are not capable to do the good works which are pleasing to God on a consistent basis in order not to fall into sin. Scripture also helps to inform this understanding of sin through its description in Isaiah 59:1-3,

See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness.

This passage also does not identify sin by a list of activities or inactivity deemed as sinful, but simply says that the sin we commit becomes a barrier between us and God. I am reminded of the scripture passages that refer to punishment after death not as Hell or a lake of fire, but as being cast out "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Dorothee Sölle holds this orthodox understanding of sin. Sölle states, "sin is separation from God...Sin is certainly also my decision, my free will, my 'no' to God, but it is also the destiny into which I was born."<sup>14</sup> It stands to reason that if we sin in our earthly life which causes a barrier or a hindrance in our relationship with God, then the punishment for this would be eternal separation from God that we caused ourselves.

I have thought often of sin as separation. This makes more sense to me that my sin would separate me from God just as if I betrayed my partner it is feasible to propose that we would separate. However, there is no parallel between the love God has for me and the love my partner has for me. The love of God is too great to find a comparison. This is shown to us in Romans 8:35-39:

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<sup>14</sup> Dorothee Sölle, 54-55.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is nothing, absolutely nothing, with no exceptions, that has the power to separate me from the love of God. This includes sin. While this may be hard to comprehend, it is also comforting to realize that whether I sin or don't sin, whether I struggle not to sin and fail, God's love is so great that God will love me just as I am. Nothing has the power to separate us from the love of God.

Daniel L. Migliore has a definition of sin which is closest to the definition I currently hold. Migliore states, "sin is fundamentally opposition to grace...domination and servility...the denial of human destiny as appointed by God."<sup>15</sup> These three points give a well-rounded understanding of sin. We deny the grace God is offering, we practice activities that are either self-exalting or self-destructive, and we sin through our indifference toward God's plan for our lives. Migliore summarizes all of this by saying, "sin is primarily the disruption of our relationship with God."<sup>16</sup> Migliore says that there is a disruption caused by sin. I would say that our relationship with God is strained by sin. It may be strained, but there is never a moment of separation.

We can see this understanding of sin both institutionally, as well as, personally. The Congregational Church of Grafton has not historically had a prayer of confession as a part of their order of worship. During my time at this church we have added this prayer as a time before

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, 150-153.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 151.

we share Communion together. The sins we have confessed together have been wide and varied: homophobia, sexism, racism, anger against our neighbor, etc. We have seen the ways that we as a church have failed corporately to do the things a church should do in the name of God, and this prayer of confession puts it in front of us whether we like to examine these parts of our community life or not.

However, there is also individual or personal sin. This individual sin is harder to diagnose, and at Grafton we don't even try because if we use the definition of sin as those things that distract or get in the way of our relationship with God, then the sin of each person could be different. So, during Lent we used this season of preparation to examine our own lives for the broken areas that might be hindering our relationship with God. We sang Psalms of lament together, we had moments of silent prayer to confess our own sins, and we sang a Kyrie each week. These are not actions that we take each week, but during the six weeks of Lent they were great teaching moments which help to put in sharp relief for each individual the areas of their life that they want to work on during this season in order to reconcile their relationships with God as we prepared for the joy of Easter.

Some churches where I have worked have been squeamish regarding talking about sin in their worship services. However, sin takes up a large part of the Biblical narrative. It is not a topic that we can just ignore. We must find a way to acknowledge the brokenness in our world and the part that we play in it both individually and corporately. I am proud of the work we have done around the personal and community recognition during my time in Grafton.

## The Church – the Lord’s Supper

The institution of the Eucharist or Holy Communion has been central to the worshipping lives of Christian communities since the earliest days of Christianity. The understanding of how this event was to be practiced and the theology surrounding it has changed over the course of passing centuries through scholarship, church councils, reformations, and counter-reformations. However, from the time of the Vatican II Council there has been an ecumenical convergence in the liturgical practice. This convergence came as “Protestants have come to see the positive side of ‘tradition,’ which so often had been dismissed as unimportant if not indeed detrimental...At the same time, Catholics have come to see that ‘tradition’ is flawed and cannot be relied upon as unerring precedent.”<sup>17</sup> From the time of the Vatican II Council, liturgies have been written reflecting the context of the local church.

These liturgies reflect the context of the local church, but only to the extent of what we believe to be actually happening during the time of the sacrament. Rex Matthews of Candler School of Theology gives the “Contingent Sacrament” model which is shared by those in the Reformed tradition. Matthews states:

- There is no change in the substance of the elements — bread remains bread, wine remains wine — but the body and blood of Christ are spiritually present in the elements and are communicated to the recipients through faith.
- God’s grace is communicated by the Holy Spirit to believers “immediately” during the act of receiving the elements, allowing them to perceive and appropriate the spiritual presence of Christ’s body and blood through the bread and wine.
- If taken with faith, the sacrament results in spiritual benefits to recipients; if taken without faith there is no spiritual effect; as a result, this model tends to have an “open table” available to all so long as they are open to growing in grace.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast With the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Rex Matthews, “Alternative Models of Christian Sacraments” (lecture, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, GA, November 19, 2013).

The operative piece of Matthew's definition for many of us in the United Church of Christ is the final understanding of the open table: if you believe then it has meaning for you, if you do not then it does not. Either way, belief or not, you are welcome at the table of grace.

While Matthews gives a good overview for the Reform tradition, for those of us specifically in the United Church of Christ, we may find this more helpful: "The invitation and the call to the supper emphasize that all people of faith are welcome at Christ's table. The invitation and call celebrate not only the memory of a meal that is past, but an actual meal with the risen Christ that is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which Christ will preside at the end of history."<sup>19</sup> Communion is all of this and more. It is a memorial to what has been, a foretaste of heaven, a meal shared with friends around a table in a specific community of faith, and with Christians around the world, and with Jesus as our host.

We can see what the sacrament means and how the liturgy might reflect the Local Church's setting, but it is also important to see that the United Church of Christ gives no prescription as to how the Communion elements are to be distributed. At the Congregational Church of Grafton there are two methods we have historically used to serve Communion. First, the church has celebrated by intinction. The pastor speaks the Eucharistic Prayer from the altar as deacons are seated at either side. At the conclusion of this prayer the deacons welcome the congregants forward to receive the bread and dip it in the chalice. Second, the church has celebrated as they remain seated in the pews. Just as in the previous method the pastor speaks the Eucharistic Prayer from the altar with deacons seated at either side, but at the conclusion of the prayer instead of the congregants coming forward the deacons then pass the bread followed

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<sup>19</sup> Reuben A. Sheares, II, ed, 32.

by trays of small, individual Communion cups through the pews for each person to receive their portion and everyone eats at the same time in their seat.

These two alternating methods of receiving Communion have occurred at the Congregational Church of Grafton for as long as anyone currently in the congregation can remember; however, this past Holy Week the church was going through a particularly divided time in the life of the church. Through several meetings, conversations, and emails you could easily see that this congregation was not one unified group of people. So, as we approached Maundy Thursday I decided that we would celebrate Communion differently. For this service we brought a long folding table up from the fellowship hall and set thirteen chairs around it. We made our way through the service focusing on the story of the disciples gathered in the Upper Room with Jesus. When it came time for Communion the pastor spoke the Eucharistic Prayer from the pulpit and the deacons invited the congregation to come forward in groups of twelve each taking a seat at the table. A deacon took the thirteenth seat and began serving by passing the loaf of bread to the person seated at their right. When the loaf had made it around the table they then passed the chalice. In this manner each person was served by and in turn served a member of the congregation. The first group was dismissed and subsequent groups of twelve were welcomed forward until the entire congregation had been served.

As with any change in the life of the church, making this change in how Communion was received was a risky move. One never really knows who may be upset by these changes. However, in this case the change was well received. I was told by members of the church after the service was over how they could feel the congregation coming together as they were served by and also served each other. The table of grace is not just the grace extended to us by Jesus, but also the grace that we extend to each other as we commune together.

## Conclusion

In the words of Carl Daw, Jr, “God has work for us to do, God has work for us to do, ‘til God’s will is done, and all things are made new, God has work for us, work for us to do!”<sup>20</sup> As we seek to build community through the sacraments, rites, and rituals of the Church, as we mourn our sin, and find atonement in our relationships with God and one another, God has work for us to do. The United Church of Christ has welcomed me into her membership, and I am ready to work for her. I believe that the experiences that I have had along my faith journey, in my education, and in my ministerial career have positioned me well to take up this cause. I see the work that is laid out before me and my colleagues in ministry. It is a high calling and a mighty task, but with God’s help I am here for the work God has for us to do.

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<sup>20</sup> Mark A. Miller, *Roll Down, Justice! Sacred Songs and Social Justice* (Dallas, TX: Choristers Guild, 2015), 67.