

Mercurio Ordination Paper

James Mercurio

February 1, 2024

What I believe

Robert Frost is one of my favorite poets from the early 20th century. One of my favorite moments of Frost's was when he was invited to read a poem at John F. Kennedy's inauguration. When he went to read, he could not because of the bright reflection of the sun on the white paper. However, Frost cited the poem *The Gift Outright* from memory.^[1] Frost was the first to cite a poem during an inauguration, and this tradition is still practiced today. Frost is often part of my daily devotions, and the "Snowy Evening" is central to where I am on in my ministerial journey.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost

*Whose woods these are, I think I know
His house is in the village, though.
He will not see me stopping here.
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it is queer.
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and the frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake.
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound is the sweep
easy wind and a downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

There are two reasons for my admiration of Frost's poem. The first is its historical and cultural significance. On the day of JFK's assassination, journalist Sid Davis read it to close the broadcast.^[2] The second reason and motivation for sharing this within this

writing is how this poem has spoken to my call and how I believe God is not finished with me yet. The significance of this poem rests on the last two repetitive stanzas of the poem which embrace the words, "Miles to go before I sleep." They (the stanzas) are important to me because of how they speak to one's journey of life in God. Our journeys in God are continuous one and how my ministerial journey still has miles to go.

A journey of crossroads and invocation

From the beginning of my call to the local church leadership, I have found a place where the experiential has informed faith. When I say experiential, I am referring to the part of my theology where I have seen God in the experiences of my life, including the trials and triumphs. All of the life we live, I see as good fodder (material) for God to do something amazing. As previously described in my faith statement, this call to pastoral ministry sparked into a flame while Laura and I were worshipping at the First Congregational Church of Norwich, where Rev. Olivia Robinson taught a preaching class.

This class sparked a desire to continue to uncover and discover the way God was calling us to a ministry of the church. I do believe from this experience that God has transformed our lives and has in turn been the source for others to be inspired as well. I have witnessed this throughout my time in the United Methodist Church when I have discerned with mentees and assisted others in realizing their call to ministry.

The road I have traversed has been twisting and turning ever since we moved to Putnam and joined a United Methodist church in 2006. It was there in the United Methodist Church that the call to pastoral ministry became more than a suspicion; it

became a call. I accepted my first charge in 2010 as I began working towards a Master of Divinity degree that I finished in 2019 at Boston University School of Theology.

There has consistently been tension between me and the UMC, specifically around the Book of Discipline, which the UMC holds in high esteem. The BOD is the doctrine and policy of the global UMC. These sets of rules have been the reason and motivation for me to move away from the United Methodist Church and to come back home to the United Church of Christ. Moreover, within the polity of the UMC, some statements exclude those that I love and those I believe God loves. Consequently, in 2019, I formally withdrew from the journey toward ordination in the UMC when I discovered the church, I had been serving for ten years was not going to be inclusive.

The decision to separate from UMC was not an easy one. Laura and I have five children, and two of our children identify as queer and transgender. Therefore since that decision, I have been actively seeking clarity as to what God is calling me to do next, and in 2021, I was recruited to become a hospice chaplain, which I have been joyfully serving ever since. The deeply ingrained desire and call to the local church and pastoral ministry have not left me though. I thought my call to pastoral ministry was over until my sabbatical caused me to rediscover my call to pastoral leadership. I discovered I still have a desire to preach, teach, and work with the church community. I possess a desire to walk with the community and help find out how we are charged and challenged to be a community of faith.

Theology: UCC is rich in policy, theology, and tradition.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Galatians 3:28,29

As the letter to Galatia concludes in Chapter 3, we are all united in the love of God. It is God's invitation to love and redemption through Christ. Paul realized this and defined that there is no separation of God's love or call from the community of believers. I celebrate the United Church of Christ's rich history of inclusion and its unifying sense of seeking alignment in God through Christ.

The UCC has a deep and diverse history that I see as refreshing as well as the methods by which the UCC informs its theological praxis, politics, and practices give me assurances that I am home. The UCC was formed from the merging of five streams (churches). They were the Afro-Christian, German Reformed Church of the United States, the Evangelical Synod in North America, Congregational Churches, and the Christian Churches. All of these churches merged in unity to form one ecumenical community. ^[3] Additionally, each of these streams has its unique traditions and a historical connection to the Protestant Reformation, as well as a connection to Congregational, Calvinist, and Lutheran traditions.

Timeline of Mergers and Connections

They may all be one. [John 17:21] This motto of the United Church of Christ reflects the spirit of unity on which it is based and points toward future efforts to heal the divisions in the body of Christ. We are a united church. ^[4]

In 1931, the Congregational Churches and the Christian Churches formed a merger with an emphasis on congregational autonomy, freedom, and reformation. In 1934, the German Reformed Church of the U.S. and the Evangelical Synod in North America merged and ensured an emphasis on their common German Protestant heritage consisting of the authority of Scripture, covenantal polity, and pietism (worship). Then in 1956, during the Council of Congregational Christian Churches, a merger took place in Omaha, Nebraska, consisting of the Evangelical and Reformed Churches as well as the Congregational Christian Churches, marking the beginning of the United Church of Christ.

The Reformation in the United States

"From our beginning, the United Church of Christ has been at the forefront of a prophetic ministry advocating for peace and social justice." [\[5\]](#)

18th-century German immigrants formed the German Reformed Church to seek security from the war and to obtain economic and religious freedoms in America. The formation of the German Reformed Church occurred after the Rhineland devastation by Louis XIV, King of France. The United Church of Christ inherited the Heidelberg Catechism from the Reformation as well. The Heidelberg Catechism was written in 1563 at the request of Elector Frederick III, ruler of the most influential German province, the Palatinate, to answer the questions about the Lord's Supper of Calvinistic faith in the Lutheran territories of Germany.

The Heidelberg Catechism was formed as a series of questions and answers for teaching Reformed Christian doctrine dating back to 1563. The structure of this

document was presented in such a way that it could be taught in a year; or, as one may conclude, it would be taught on the 52 Sundays, or Lord's Days.

The Heidelberg Catechism has three parts: misery of man, deliverance of man, and gratitude due to man. In his book, *The Heidelberg Catechism* strikes a balance between rigidity and accommodation. The German Reformed Church revered the Heidelberg Catechism as empowering each person to find common ground with each other and their identity. Said differently, this form was to unite unionism and pietism as connected, as the watchword of both was "*deeds, not creeds.*" ^[6] Moreover, one might say their focus was on the orthopraxy of faith (practice) and less on the orthodoxy (doctrines), which this author agrees with. I believe a forced adherence to doctrine can make it difficult to respond to God or love our neighbors, **ALL** of our neighbors. St. Francis' quote to preach the gospel daily and if you have to use words, speaks to the idea of leaning more on practice (orthopraxy) and less on the doctrine (orthodoxy) as a basis to love.

Evangelical Church

The Evangelical Synod of North America can trace its beginnings to an association of German Evangelical pastors in Missouri. The association was formed in 1841 and held the 1817 union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany. The Evangelical Church's primary goal, they believed, was to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ through words and deeds. The Evangelical Catechism has a dependent focus on the individual's conversion to Jesus Christ. According to H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, the Evangelical Church is inclined more toward liberalism on the principle that the church's prime purpose is to preach the gospel through words and deeds.

From its union with the Evangelical Church, the UCC embraces the Evangelical Catechism, evangelical mission, institutions of compassionate service, and the Bekenntnisparagraph Confessional Statement of 1848. ^[7] Additionally, the United Church of Christ inherits the tradition of Pietism from the Evangelical Church. The Evangelical Church emphasizes the ethos of this by asserting that our interpretation of the Bible is more sentimental and less rationalist.

The Congregational Church and the UCC

Significant historical influence is attributed by the United Church of Christ to the Pilgrim Congregationalists and Puritans who established themselves in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620 and Salem, Massachusetts, respectively, in 1639. The polity of the Pilgrim and Puritan founders is defined as a kind of local congregation-based church governance. Both self-governance and a hierarchical framework are absent. Every local congregation had its own organization, was self-sufficient, and depended on its members for governance.

In 1648, Governor Endicott at Salem, Dr. Fuller of Plymouth, organized a meeting of pastors and other delegates gathered in Cambridge as a synod to adopt the document called the Cambridge Platform. According to Engelsma, the Cambridge Platform was utilized to shape the understanding of democracy and a unifying community. The Cambridge Platform was significant in shaping the understanding of democracy and fostering a sense of community among the Puritan founders. It provided a framework for local congregations to govern themselves and emphasized the importance of individual participation in decision-making processes. This decentralized system allowed for a greater sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency within each congregation

while still promoting unity and cooperation among the Puritan community as a whole. *"The CP treats the various aspects of the government, order, and discipline of the church."* [\[8\]](#)

Furthermore, this document defines how Christians, as individuals, are responsible for their relationships with God and have an invitation to God through their relationships. The CP pushes against the principles of the Westminster Assembly's Westminster Confession of Faith (1648) and assures the autonomy of each church that has the freedom to govern its local congregation(s). Additionally, each congregation elects its leadership and creates its constitution, by-laws, and *"all"* other matters of the church. This declaration also makes sure that every person is welcome to have a relationship with God as they travel along their journey under the guidance of the divine conscience. The United Church of Christ embodies the same themes, freedom, love, and glory towards God, and the "Christian Connection" of all United Church of Christ traditions is American in origin and character and thus relies on the rule of democracy for governance.

The Congregational Church has a focus on maintaining communion among each of the affiliated Congregational Churches. The six methods utilized are:

- Caring for each other and praying for each other
- Hearing each other and those who may know the other's needs
- Methods of admonishment for non-communing churches
- Open communion with each other

- Recognize a membership transfer to another congregational church.
- Supporting churches in financial hardships

Each synod is meant to inform and suggest, but it is not able to hold authority over another congregation. Each congregational church has autonomy; it is their responsibility to commune with one another and to live out their call as a Christian church.

According to Freeman, the covenant of autonomy has responsibilities and dangers along with it. The sole head of the church is and always will be Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our author of salvation. We, as churches, must discern each of our calls as a church. *"Every church has its responsibility... to discern and respond to the call of God to it—God's will and way for it—in its time and place."* ^[9]

Moreover, the United Church of Christ also has the danger of individual churches running astray from the principles explained, as well as the "perversion" of the principle of covenantal partnerships within the church. With every positive principle of UCC, there is the marrying of traditions from the five streams from which it is informed. Utilizing the theology, principles of love, the sacredness of Scripture, and the practices of the sacrament, the focus is brought back to God and therefore centered on our calling as Christ's church.

The Church is also steeped in the social justice principles of civil rights, marriage equality, civil liberties of the LGBTQIA, and environmental justice. The United Church

of Christ has been a voice to advocate for the rights of all people around the world as well as care for the world.

Covenantal Policy and Theology

"As members of the United Church of Christ, we testify to the deeds of God, saying together in the words of the Statement of Faith: You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races. You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.^[10]"

Several denominations employ a similar covenantal relationship with God as the UCC practices. The defining difference is the UCC does not utilize a hierarchical structure of governance, leaving each congregation in a covenantal relationship with the other local congregations, associations, conferences, and denominations. In the United Church of Christ, the head of the church is Jesus Christ, and we look to God for direction and to discover God's will for direction. There is a power structure within the local congregation that consists of its officers and those in leadership for the running and governance of the church. Each congregation develops and votes to adopt its constitution, elect its leadership, and self-govern.

The association was meant to provide support to the congregations and encouragement for fellowship with other UCC congregations. The association assists their congregations with resources, such as a search and call process for pastors and resources to strengthen the congregational life. The association also provides a network

of resources that can be shared, studied, and learned. The associations are part of a larger group of associations called the Conference. The Conference is a larger geographical area under the leadership of a Conference Minister. The Conference provides services and programs to its Association, so they meet the needs of local congregations with global missions and ministries of the United Church of Christ.

The United Church of Christ also provides structured organizations such as Justice and Witness Ministries to assist global and national missions. ministries that bring staff and resources to local churches. In our Constitution and Bylaws, the national body has covenanted ministries: Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, and Justice and Witness Ministries; associated ministries: Office of General Ministries; United Church of Christ Board; affiliated ministries: Pension Boards of the United Church of Christ. [\[11\]](#)

Although the denomination, under the direction of the General Synod, maintains the day-to-day order of operations for the denomination, the primary decision-makers and authority come from the local churches. The General Synod only "speaks to but not for" local churches and other settings of the denomination because the UCC (we) are in a covenantal relationship with one another and are seen as equals in the membership of the United Church of Christ. As members, we are all equals in the priesthood of believers.

Like many other denominations, ordained ministers must possess special training and qualifications and are seen as servants as well as shepherds. The members of each UCC church worship, practice, and seek out their calling because they believe God's will is for each of their lives.

A beautiful quality of the UCC, in my opinion, is that one could walk into five UCC churches, and each would be unique as each has their own identity. The UCC possesses a diverse group of congregations, which celebrate two sacraments and have a common cause which is to live out the will of God within each of their settings. This allows for a continued seeking of God's will for each of their calls, and a quality that one may consider to be the origin of finding God in the human context.

Dannell Migliori, in his book titled "*Faith Seeking Understanding*," defined theology as a human attempt to understand God. ^[12] This would mean that God is not confined to a doctrine or definition. Instead, theology is the practice of discovering that God has been present in all things and places. It is the human lens, which is finite, that is trying to see the infinite. However, God finds us where we are and gives us the language as well as the structure to find faith. This language includes prayer, compassionate and loving fellowship, Scripture learning, and allowing ourselves to be open to what God is doing in our journeys.

Personal Understanding of Theology and Pietism

I see theology as an intentional act. It (theology) was meant to challenge what we think we know about God and discover how God is working in our journey. The practice of listening intently is to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what God is doing with or without our direct knowledge. Our knowledge of the past should inform our present through the practice of continuously looking for God in our present and future. That said, I am reminded of an article from CS Lewis in which he enlightens us by stating that our human tendency to want to be right in all things pushes against the flow of knowledge. If we are convinced that our idea of God is the only right one, then I believe we are missing

the opportunity to be enlightened, inspired, transformed, and possibly unified with those who worship and respond differently than we do.

What is the truth?

The lowercase "t" in truth is a subjective construct of individual journeys and their perspective on what is true and what may not be. I do believe in the inherent holiness and sacredness of Scripture; however, there is a caveat to this. I believe holiness comes from how we hear and receive the Word in our lives. If it is just read and there is no emotional investment or response, then have we heard God?

God is still speaking. Are we listening?

1 Samuel 3:1 "Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

I have a deep appreciation for Scripture and the multi-layered meanings within each text. The attempt to expand on the knowledge of God in our lives also requires our intentionality to listen to God in each aspect of our lives. In the Samuel scripture, I have the belief that God has not been quieted or stifled. It was the human who had stopped listening. God is still speaking, and it is up to the church and the individual to be listening intently for it in all our journeys.

Speaking and listening

I believe in the Holy Spirit and that it is working through each of us, and the Scriptures of our canonized Bibles are to be read, studied, historically criticized, and talked about with each other so that we may uncover how God is speaking to us. I possess a practical theological approach as well as a liberal understanding of God. I believe that

God loves us, and there is nothing we can do to change that. I also believe that when we realize the invitation to be in a relationship with God, we are to respond and continue to live a life that is more aligned with the principles of loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I believe that we are invited to live a life of love, peace, joy, and forgiveness. By saying this, I am aware that some may not feel this way. We all experience moments in life where it feels as though the world is against us. The promise of forgiveness, love, joy, and peace are not meant to be situational. Instead, these promises are founded on our faith in God to be present with us in every situation. Although we experience life challenges that are part of our human condition, we can seek to find peace, hope, and joy through our faith. This would mean we are called to love indiscriminately, forgive relentlessly, speak to justice, and embrace the presence of God in our lives. Even when we are in the dark valleys of life, we can faithfully embrace that God is present with us and that we are going to be okay. I believe that our faith is not the great retirement plan of heaven. It is the belief that our faith is a life plan that allows us a way through our human experience of mortal life. Moreover, I do believe we need a compass for morality, as Kant defines it. "*His (Kant's) synthesis of empiricism and rationalism proved to be a breakthrough at the time, and his moral theory still has ardent defenders to this day.*" [\[13\]](#)

Christology: The Ministry and the Love Legacy of Jesus Christ

A society that does not acknowledge its obligation to render account to this God and this Christ may call itself a church, but it is difficult to attach a specific meaning to the term. Without a sense of moral dependence upon or obligation to Christ, society lacks the moral reality of the Church. It may be a religious association of some sort, but it is no

church in the historic sense of the word. In the New Testament, the church appears, first of all, as the company of those who answer the call of Jesus and then as the fellowship of those who await his return. In both instances, the church responds to more than a historical Jesus. [\[14\]](#)

Jesus is the Lord and our Savior, the Son of God, and the one who authored salvation for all people. Jesus is the head of Christ's church, a teacher, a transformer of hearts, and the prophesied Messiah contained in our Hebrew Scriptures. The purpose of Jesus Christ is to be the compass of the church, and the challenge is to love deeper, live faithfully, and remain humble. [\[15\]](#) It is this divine example that we are to set for our morality, our call to social justice, and our evangelistic practices. We are to continually seek to live into Jesus' teachings and examples found in the Gospels.

Additionally, in Jesus' example and teaching, we are to love God and our neighbor with the courage of undeterred fervor and without inquiring about their worthiness. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy for the way to salvific absolution, and Christ is how humans have been covenanted into the Abrahamic promise.

Soteriology: *The Nature of Salvation*

2 Corinthians 5:4 *"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."*

This is a topic that can be summarized into two principles that I believe are true. First, I believe we can experience a resurrection in life before human death. I define this to mean that we do not have to wait for death to be filled with the fruits of the Holy Spirit: joy, hope, love, kindness, patience, and hope. To this point, I tend to lean towards

the 2 Corinthians Epistle, where Paul says that we no longer look at faith from a human point of view. We are to see life through the lens of Christ. This would be a faith statement to believe that regardless of what we do or have done, we are seen through a lens of love (aka God).

From this angle, I think that we are already experiencing a resurrection in love and do not need to wait until death for the love of God to transform us personally. This is what I define resurrection in life, aka salvation, to mean. Said differently, we do not have to wait for human death to be resurrected in life through the love of God. Or, as I tend to remind people as often as possible, God loves them, and there is nothing they can do about that. Maybe this is part of why I still partake in celebrating and educating myself on John Wesley's theology. I agree with his principles of defining God's love as God's grace and that we are known by God before we are aware. We are recipients of a prevenient grace that beckons us to new life through the knowledge of love, which is God. Moreover, I, like Wesley, also believe we do good works as a response to the salvation we have received through the love of God. Only God's works—not human works—are capable of providing this salvation.

Additionally, I am aware that my belief system is liberal, and this may sound to some as if we are not accountable for our behavior. To this end, I would say we are all still accountable for our sins, and God does not erase the consequences of our choices. We see this in multiple accounts within the New Testament as well as the Hebrew Bible, and what God does through the power of Christ is to call us to a priesthood of faith. Therefore, we are to reconcile ourselves, seek forgiveness and love, and change our

hearts to be more like God's. This is the importance of organized religion: to teach, inspire, and affirm each other's journey in love.

Ecclesiology

Our ecclesial approach, for me, goes back to the Acts Scripture, which reminds us of what it looks like to be in a community. **Acts 2:42** "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.*"

An ecclesial community, aka church, is a grouping of people who are attempting to know God better in their lives and do this by communing together, praying together, working together, and continuing to look for God's will in their lives. This is a community that may have different beliefs but has chosen to work together to uncover their connections with each other.

The church is also the individual, a ministry of believers that lives out the call to love each other by remembering the stories of Jesus contained in our gospels. We commune together and share in the denominational fundamentals of beliefs that affirm a belief in one God, priesthood in our baptism, and a lived response through our actions. Moreover, the church gathers as a community to explore faith, community, love, and hope through prayer with one another, and the community develops its knowledge through Bible study and prayerful meetings. The church is charged with discerning its call as a church and aligning its discerned purpose according to its sense of God's will for its local church community. The business of the church is the responsibility of each local church and leadership to live into the covenantal relationship with the UCC. The church

has the responsibility to be light on the hill, promote the qualities of love, mercy, and justice, and be responsible stewards of God's good gift, aka creation.

In short, the church is charged with trying to figure out this Jesus thing by loving, forgiving, bringing hope and encouragement, and being a partner in directing the moral compass for the world to the qualities of love.

Sacraments: where we experience the physical means of grace.

With the sacrament, we are given a physical means to experience the love of God in a physical form. The sacrament is an outward symbol of inward change. Both baptism and communion are paramount for us to experience God's invitation to new life through the love of Jesus Christ.

On Baptism

"Administered in obedience to our Lord, baptism is a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other, and with the Church of every time and place." [\[16\]](#)

I had the great joy and honor of baptizing a three-year-old girl whose family was ecstatic about the festivities on a sunny, warm Sunday in September. It was a good Sunday; it was a sacramental Sunday where we were reminded of the invitation and the incorporation of our lives into the Christ community that we simply call church. I was feeling really good about the day and felt the love of God in the journey of water, prayer, and community. That same afternoon, as I was having my obligatory pastor nap and off time and watching the New England Patriots play on the TV, (they were even winning the game), I received a telephone call from the Deputy Chief of the Fire Department. This

department was one that I had served for many years as their chaplain. The chief's call was in a somber tone. There had been a tragic accident in which a young woman had lost her life, and they wanted someone to come and provide comfort for the family.

In short, a young lady who was enjoying the afternoon of warmth had gone on a motorcycle ride with her fiancé riding his bicycle beside her. Without warning, as they rode down the road, a tree limb came down, hit her, and left her lifeless in the middle of the road. According to the EMTs, she was gone before they arrived. It was the worst kind of fear realized—a tragic loss of a promising life. I knelt at the side of this young woman, who moments before was full of life and now was lifeless with her distraught fiancé holding her hand. Why? Why her? Why was this all that the fiancé could say as I got there with them? I could only be a presence of empathy and compassion and convey love and words of prayer. We stayed there till it was time for the police and coroner to take her. While I knelt there, I was silently praying for this family's grief and their loss while still trying to be present for this man, who felt as if his life was ripped from him. In a short time, I was face-to-face with the promise of life at a baptism and the certainty of human death in a tragedy.

Later, as I processed the day, I was deeply moved by how profound the contrast of these two very different moments had on me and my perception of God. My hands were in the waters of baptism, and the ashes of our mortality which was only separated by a mere few hours. And it was in this moment that Psalm 23 kept bubbling in my heart. David in this Psalm gives us the human example of embracing faith over heartache and calamity. He writes even in the darkness of death; God is present and offers blessings and assurances of life everlasting. He writes, *"Even though I walk in the valley of death, I will*

fear no evil for thou art with me... You prepare a table in the presence of my enemy... My cup runs over." [\[17\]](#)

The Psalmist writes this as a reminder of our human condition and the freedom faith gives us. When I was asked why, I had no words that could make this acceptable or even make sense. All I could do was reassure them that our faith is the salve that helps us make it through our dark valleys.

The Christian Baptism brings us into the membership of God's covenantal promise. It is this invitation into Christ's church that brings the responsibility to live into being ministers of our faith-what I have called becoming a disciple of Christ. This does not imply we have all the answers and will perform at perfection without error or fault; it is simply an awareness to be better versions of ourselves each day.

On a personal note, there are days I succeed at this, and there are days I do not. Either way, I am grateful that God still invites us into this relationship through Christ, regardless of who we are or where we have been in our journey. That said, as I reflect, I was at the accident with that family to be a presence of hope and to remind them that God weeps too. All of which began for each Christian with the eternal promise of our baptism. As a church community, we together contemplate and acknowledge that we are incorporated into the ritual of love, where we welcome each other into a family of love.

Communion:

A sidebar here: I have a love for liturgy, and it has been my practice to write most of what I bring into worship for these intimate moments. Several years ago, I preached how the invitation of God is bigger than our humanity. This invitation is larger than the

human ability to comprehend. In the Advent season that year, the theme of the series was "greater than the grains of sand," a reference to Psalm 139. The Psalmist contemplated how wide and vast God's intentions are for us and concluded with the statement that if we try to count them, they are too many, and they are greater in number than the grains of the sand.

I brought music into the Communion liturgy from a song written by Pippen titled "Come to the Altar of God." The song illustrates that all are welcome at the table of love, where God's presence is made visible and where we receive the love of God in the form of bread, juice, and love. This reminder of the grace we receive in communion stuck with me as I was contemplating what to write on the theology of the sacrament. I agree with the UCC that communion is a visible sign of God's great love for people and an invitation into a relationship with God through transformation in love.

That said, I was raised Roman Catholic, and they practiced an exclusion of who could receive this Eucharistic meal. Catholic theology states that communion is a living transformation of Christ; what is transubstantiation? This is defined to mean that the belief in the wafer and wine becomes the literal body and blood, something that I had difficulty comprehending. However, as I have deepened my understanding, I realize that communion is centralized and incorporates two concepts for me: the first is love, and the second is remembrance. The invitation for God's love to be received and to bring a transformation and/or renewal of our relationship with God through Christ. Communion therefore is a continuation of the same meal that has been celebrated since the Passover feast, in which Jesus invited the disciples to take, eat, and drink in remembrance of me.

Remembrance:

Remembrance is a significant word within the Communion liturgy for me, as I invite people to come and partake in this feast of love. Remembrance means more than just the act of remembering; it is the taking in and anticipating of change. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, the word remembrance has a memorializing meaning as well as a definition of reconciling and changing based on the memory. ^[18] I summarize this to mean that we are anticipating the love of God in Christ as we are fed and inspired to love one another and God. All of which is the influence of the Holy Spirit on our hearts.

Several years ago, one of the parishioners of our community was seriously hurt, underwent surgeries, and spent months in rehab. This individual, along with their spouse, had a deep faith and have been some of the most devout people I have ever had the joy of serving, as their pastor. It was over four months before I could visit with them and provide support that they were aware of. During those months, they were bedbound and in an incapacitated state, and it was after those four months before we could talk and have a comprehensive conversation.

I was sitting across from this faithful person with Communion from the prior day's church service, with both of us enjoying our time of prayer I talked about how this (communion) is a physical sign of God's love for Chris. As I asked them if they believed this, it was not a question of their sins being forgiven, it was our human lens that stood in our way of realizing just how vast and deep God's love was for them.

As we partook in day-old bread and grape juice, we were both overcome with joy and weeping. It was in this moment that the profoundness of love filled my heart, and I was deeply moved by the experience. This faithful person passed away a year ago, and at

his funeral, I talked about how he changed my gratitude for the sacrament and how his faith was transformational. His wife told me that in his work as an environmental scientist, he was rebuked for most of his career, which spanned over thirty years. He never let go of his faith, even in his dark valleys, and he lived a life with a faith that inspired others in their walk with God. He has and does inspire me every time I have the joy and honor of sharing in this feast of love.

Sacrament or Sacramental

One note that one must make is the difference between a sacrament and being sacramental. I understand this is from my perspective; I have been keenly aware of God's presence at the bedside of those who are in the final moments of human life. It is there, through the Holy Spirit, that the oneness of the divine and human intersect. God's presence is palpable in the moments of the end of life and has the potential to bring hope, peace, love, and joy to the grieving. All of which is through the mercy of God.

I believe we all have flaws as humans. As David writes, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and blessedly made" ^[19] We have a human condition that challenges us to be conscious of the effort necessary to be in communion with each other and with God. The polity and ritual associated with our practices of the sacrament have less meaning if we are not present with our hearts and consciousness. Thus, I believe the Holy Spirit is still at work, even without our awareness or consent.

Pilgrimage of Faith: Why Ordain

This journey I have been on has been one of crossroads, choices, and some detours. The call to pastoral ministry began with a preaching class and has been

transformed more times than I can recall. With each step, each challenge, and each choice, I have seen God guiding the steps and even bringing me to a new awareness of God's will. I have summarized it to mean that God has wrecked my plans and changed my life. God did save my life and continues to do so.

My spiritual journey continues to have the precept to keep listening, to look for God in the ordinary, to see God in creation, and to remember that my journey is only as extraordinary as God has made it. A saying that I tell the mentees I have mentored to pastoral ministry is to take the next faithful step. Each step leads to the next, and before you know it, God has done something amazing and has transformed us.

Ordained ministry has been my goal for over 18 years, ever since the first sermon I ever preached at the First Congregational Church in Norwich. The journey has traversed many no's along the way just to expose a light of God in them. However, I believe I have a call to ordained ministry because of my love for the church and my continuous seeking of God's will in my life and the life of the church. Besides this, I am skilled in team development, teaching contextually, preaching compassionately, and helping others see beyond their conflicts. Ordination, in my sense of God's will, has become, after eighteen years the next faithful step in my ministerial journey.

Bibliography

1. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/fast-facts-john-f-kennedy/the-gift-outright-by-robert-frost> (accessed January 26, 2024) ↑
2. Glikes, E.; Schwaber, P.; and Schlesinger, A. Jr. (1964). *Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and by the Death of John F. Kennedy*. Basic Books, Inc., New York; reprint edition (January 1, 1964). ↑
3. Holznel, Hans (October 10, 2022). **Afro-Christian tradition's status as a distinct UCC'stream' gets Historical Council support.** <https://www.ucc.org/afro-christian-traditions-status-as-distinct-ucc-stream-gets-historical-council-support/> (assessed January 28, 2024). ↑
4. https://www.ucc.org/domestic-policy/ourfaithourvote/about/about-us_what-is-the-united-church-of/ (assessed January 28, 2024). ↑
5. Pastor Robert Hurst (June 7, 2015). **The United Church of Christ has made a difference!** <https://hurstrobert.wordpress.com/2015/06/07/the-united-church-of-christ-has-made-a-difference/>(assessed January 28, 2024).↑
6. **The History of the Heidelberg Catechism**<https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-heidelberg-catechism/the-history-of-the-heidelberg-catechism/> (assessed January 28, 2024) ↑
7. <https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/bekennnisparagraph-lth-6.pdf>↑
8. Engelsma, David, **The Cambridge Platform: A Reformed Option? (A Review Article):** <https://www.prca.org/prtj/nov95c.html>(assessed January 30, 2024). ↑
9. Freeman, Donald. **Autonomy in a Covenant Polity. Lancaster Theological Seminary, January 1998 Revision of the article in Prism, vol. 11 no. 2, fall 1996, pp. 17-25**↑
10. MOM, p. 5 ↑
11. <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/structure/> (assessed January 31, 2024) ↑
12. Migliori, Daniel. **Faith Seeking Understanding**, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014. ↑
13. The Ethics Center, 12 April 2021. **Big Thinker: Immanuel Kant.**<https://ethics.org.au/big-thinker-immanuel-kant/> (accessed January 31, 2024). ↑
14. Niebuhr, H. Richard. "The Responsibility of the Church for Society." The responsibility of the church for society <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-responsibility-of-the-church-for-society/para12> (accessed January 27, 2024). ↑
15. Micah 6:8 reference ↑
16. MOM, p. 10, para 3. ↑

17. PS 23:4,5 (NRSV) [↑](#)
18. The United Church of Christ (UCC) has made a significant impact on the world through its faith-seeking understanding and the Heidelberg Catechism. The church's responsibility for society is emphasized in various texts, including "Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and by the Death of John F. Kennedy" by Robert Hurst, "The Heidelberg Catechism: The History of the Heidelberg Catechism" by Donald Freeman, and "The Responsibility of the Church for Society" by H. Richard Niebuhr. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/remembrance> [↑](#)
19. Ps. 139 (NRSV) [↑](#)