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## **My Call Story**

I stood in the doorway of my kindergarten room. The day had just started and I was free to choose whatever I wanted. I could play with any toy on the shelves. I could go over to the plastic kitchen set and pretend to cook. I had at my disposal books, blocks, cars, puzzles, and much more. But I was frozen with indecision. It was the third month of school and my best friend Jason had moved to a new school. He was my closest friend, my only friend really, and he was not there. I had no idea what to do next. So, I stood there alone.

The next thing I remember is a ball of energy with blond hair came bounding up. His name was Adam Kline, and he decided that we were now friends. I do not remember what we did that morning before Circle Time. Most likely we found our way to the art table to draw birds (a not uncommon free time activity for us). That was my new routine for the rest of that school year. Find Adam and figure out how we were going to spend our free time.

Adam quickly became my closest friend, and quite honestly until Junior High, my only friend. Adam introduced me to the world of comic books and tried when we were older to introduce me to music. When my parents allowed me to have a friend over, my choice was always Adam. There were more than a few weekends we spent at each other's homes. Most Saturdays were spent pestering the parents of whichever house we were at to let us do chores to earn some money and then begging them to take us to the comic book store. When we got older (but probably not old enough just yet) we begged to earn money and then walked to the comic shop ourselves.

I was able to be a friend to him when hardship entered his life sooner than anyone should have to face it. When my father died, Adam was the first face I saw at my dad's service. Years and miles have kept us apart. But I still count him as an amazing friend.

I still see in him the boundless energy he had when we were five. I still see in him the ability to find the people at the edges, those standing in doorways unable to decide what to do next, and make them a part of whatever he is doing at the time.

My ministry today is marked by a desire to find those who are standing in doorways and bring them in. To be there for others. That is what Adam taught me about ministry. I could quote the passages about Jesus letting lepers and children approach him. I can tell you the verses that call the people of God to stand up for and defend those on the edges. But in all honesty, my ministry was impacted more by the actions of my friend than by any single Bible quote. I believe the fancy term for this is incarnation ministry. This story of the kindness and welcome of my lifelong friend is just one of many stories, just one of the many people who have impacted my life and my ministry.

That Kindergarten classroom was a part of Forest Lake Christian School in Auburn, CA. I attended Forest Lake for my entire primary and secondary education, from Kindergarten to grade

12. Beyond the formal Christian education I received from Forest Lake, my family was also a part of a local church. My earliest memory is looking for my parents on the small lawn behind the church. However, I do not remember much, other than searching through a sea of legs, hoping to find the one that belonged to at least one of my parents. Attached to that memory is one of Sunday school at that church. I do not recall the room or even the teacher. What I do remember is a picture on the wall of Jesus surrounded by children. I remember being told that Jesus loves and accepts everyone.

When I was four, I sat across the kitchen table from my father. He was excited to share with me the most important thing in his life. My dad explained to me God and heaven and the idea of eternal life. He explained how he and my mother both had put their faith in Jesus, the son of God who loves everyone. But in all honesty, most of the big theological concepts we discussed went over my head. I remembered the picture of Jesus on the wall at church. I knew that Jesus loved me. I knew that Mom and Dad loved Jesus. And so with the faith of a child, I put my trust in Jesus.

On that day, I bowed my head and prayed the prayer. I went through the right motions, I said the right words. And something changed. But I do not believe the change came about because I had my hands in the right position or that I had bowed my head just the right way. Our words have power, but I could not tell you the words my father used and that I repeated in our kitchen on that day. Instead, what I believe happened is that God marked me as belonging to God. For most of my life, I thought what happened that day was that I simply had entered into a relationship with God, that I had become a Child of God. But looking back, God had other plans, I just could not see them at the time.

That afternoon with my Father we spoke of love and faith. We spoke of Heaven and what was next, but we did not cover sin and the need to be saved. The conversation was more about a relationship with the God who made us and loved us. As time went on, I learned about the concepts of sin and sacrifice. I began to understand the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice for me. However, I misunderstood grace.

Intellectually, I knew there was nothing I could add to the equation of God's love for me. However, I still lived my life in fear of God's punishment. Simultaneously, I was desperately trying to live a life good enough to earn God's pleasure. The conflict between what I knew to be true (God's love for me) and what I believed to be true (that I wasn't good enough for God to love me) caused a dissonance in my identity as a Child of God.

I grew up in the church and was active in ministry as early as sixth grade. I helped in the Toddler Classroom at church. I use to sit on the floor and try and draw shy kids into the main group. I started by playing with them as they stood nervously in the doorway. Slowly we moved closer to the middle of the room. When they saw the other toys and the other kids they forgot that they were nervous about this new environment they found themselves in. Soon they were playing with the other children in the room.

My faith in Jesus informed my identity and ministry dominated my schedule, yet I still did not hear a call to ministry or a calling to my pastoral identity.

During my senior year of high school, I was getting good grades, staying out of trouble, playing varsity basketball, serving on Student Council, and leading Bible studies at school and church, but I felt empty. My faith was not rattled. I was not in a difficult place. It was simply that I had reached a spiritual plateau. In the Christian faith, we so often talk about peaks and valleys in our lives and our faith. But neither of those was what I was experiencing. I was wondering, “Is this all there is? Is there more to this life of following God?” And so I began to pray. I prayed daily, “Lord, I want you to become real in my life. I want to experience you in a new way.” Several months later, I was attending chapel at my Christian high school and the Spirit interjected into my life. The speaker that week began with the words: “Do you want to experience God in a new way? Do you want Him to become real in your life?” That speaker was from a summer missions organization. At that point, I did not know what I wanted out of life or ministry, but I knew overseas missions work was not where I was called. And so, I entered that chapel not expecting to get much from it.

My prayer had been “I want to experience you in a new way. I want you to become real in my life.” For months I had prayed this. And here was this stranger quoting my prayer back to me. And so as a faithful follower of God, I responded in the most obvious way. I started to argue with God. “I don’t need this, God. This is for people who want to be missionaries. That is not for me. And besides these organizations are so full of themselves. They say if we want to experience you, we *have* to go with them this summer.” Then I heard the speaker say, “And there are many ways to experience and serve God this summer, we are simply offering just one.” I was not too pleased. This went on. I gave God my very thoughtful and reasoned arguments as to why I was not supposed to be on a mission trip that summer. And each time, the speaker (and I honestly, believe God with an amazing sense of humor) answered my objections. “This is my last summer before college, I do not want to be gone the whole time.” “We offer five-week trips.” “I am not good with foreign languages.” “We have trips to London.” “But God, the money...” “We have a proven fundraising technique and almost everyone raises all of their funds.”

That summer I went on a five-week mission trip to England. In fact, I raised enough money, I was able to share my funds with others on the trip so that their experience was fully covered.

We spent a week in the States bonding as a team (my trip consisted of sixty high schoolers from around the country), getting used to our summer routine, and practicing the tools we were going to use (drama, puppets, etc) for evangelism in country. On our last night in the States, our team and the dozen or so other teams that were also ready to depart met in a local high school gym. Hundreds of teens gathered in their teams, each around a single candle. That night was our commissioning service. At this service, we took communion together. As the elements made their way around the circle, I sat and reflected on my week. Reflected on the times I had needed to ask forgiveness of my teammates. Reflected on the cross and sacrifice of my Lord. Reflected as I had likely hundreds of times before. But something happened that night. For the first time, I realized

what the communion meal meant. For the first time, I realized that Jesus had come to the earth for me. I knew that God so loved the world and that I lived in the world, and therefore salvation was for me. I knew that years before, I had the faith to trust God, that I had the child-sized mustard seed of faith to begin a relationship with the God who made me and loved me. But I did not truly understand what that meant.

As the candle flickered and the elements made their way to me I realized for the first time that God loved me. I distinctly remember hearing God, not audibly mind you, but without question God's voice and not mine. I remember hearing God say, "Stop It."

"Stop worrying about the things you do that you think make me love you more. Stop worrying about the things you do that you think make me love you less. I love you fully and completely." With the faith of a child, I entered into a relationship with God. On that night, I learned that the relationship was based on grace and love, for me. Grace and Love for me, no matter what. I now understood myself not simply as a Child of God, but a Child of God who was Forgiven.

I went off to college and ministry again dominated my identity and schedule, I still did not understand the fullness of my particular calling. But I did ministry with the passion and joy that can only come from those who understand they are forgiven.

I attended Simpson College (now University), a liberal Christian Arts School in Redding, California. I started down the road of teaching secondary history and pivoted to pursuing Elementary Education. Once again, I had ideas about who I was, but those ideas had yet to form into the full picture of a vocational call. After graduation, I moved to Southern California, convinced I could finish my post-graduate credentialing while working as a classroom educator. However, the district I lived in was not in as dire need of classroom teachers as it was when I started college. I did find work as a substitute and began the long process of finishing my credentialing. I spent eight years finishing this work. Part of the delay was due to my insistence on continuing to fill my schedule with ministry. I became heavily involved with Children's Ministry at my church. After eight years it was time for a change of pace and scenery.

I moved back to northern California to work as an Outdoor Educator at Redwood Alliance Christian Retreat Center in the Bay Area. One of my duties was to facilitate fifth and sixth graders on a zip line. We used the zip lines to teach about the comfort zone and taking risks. The students were to leave the platform under their own power and if they chose to travel back down the ladder to the solid ground they could. It was not uncommon to be leaned down next to a student sitting on the platform to encourage them with the words, "You are going to be okay. Just lean forward and trust." It was also not uncommon for the non-audible voice of God to respond, "And what about you?" "I am at work can we talk later," was my most common response. But this idea of trust was one I could not shake. This idea that God had more in store than even I could imagine did not leave my thoughts.

Once again I filled my schedule with ministry. I became involved in the Children's Ministry at Redwood Covenant Church (now Bayside Covenant). However, I tried to stay in the background. I tried to not over-commit myself. One evening while I was helping to chaperone an overnight

event for fourth and fifth graders, I had the chance to literally take center stage. The Children's Ministry Pastor, Scott Peterson, had a tradition at this event to get on stage and sing "Baby Shark." This was long before the song reached the level of pop culture infamy that it has today. Scott was not available at the moment. I believe there was an issue with the fish sticks that were soon to be served for dinner. So, in Scott's absence, I jumped on stage and began to lead the children in the song. Roughly halfway through my performance, Scott found his way back into the room. As we were cleaning up the next morning, Scott made sure to let me know that he wanted to meet about me getting more involved with the ministry.

The next week Scott and I met for lunch. It was at this meal, that I noted that while the Children's Ministry had all of the resources that a ministry could want, it maintained a core focus on relationships. Everything the ministry did fed into building children's relationships with adults, each other, and most importantly with Jesus. Scott explained that the program was able to do this, because, they first made sure that relationships were central to the program and that the extras were added around this core concept. At that meeting, God spoke to me and said that I had the skills to do the same. Through my experience with Scott and his ministry, I was able to hear and embrace my identity as an Equipped Leader.

The next step from there was to attend seminary. Bayside is a part of a denomination known as the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). The only seminary of the ECC is in Chicago, IL. So, after living for thirty-four years in California, I moved to Illinois to attend North Park Seminary. I moved with not much more than an empty apartment on campus being held in my name and a semester's worth of classes scheduled, and just enough money to pay for those four months.

I graduated four years later with a piece of paper with the words "Master of Divinity" printed on it. But the most important thing I took away from North Park was a deeper understanding of whom God had made me. Despite all of the answered prayers, opportunities to serve, and numerous people who had shown me my value and worth, I still struggled with self-doubt. This identity of self-doubt found its support in the trauma of the death of my father when I was twelve years old.

For a long time, I internalized this pain and over time it metamorphosed into an identity of shame. The Spirit used my academic and experiential learning at North Park alongside personal therapy and the support of amazing friends, to bestow upon me a new identity of Worthy and Beloved. This new understanding did not pop up fully formed after a conversation at a kitchen table with my dad or at lunch with a Children's Pastor. This new understanding did not lock into place like a simple flip of a switch. Instead, this was more like filling a very leaky and resistant bucket. It was friends inviting me to their place because they "had ordered too much pizza" and needed someone to help them finish it all. It was friends who in small group settings listened to my doubts and fears and responded with affirmations of what they saw in me. It came from countless hours of board games and movies and struggling through Greek Exegesis class together. It came from families inviting me over for Thanksgiving when I couldn't afford a plane ticket home. It came from friends serving as pastoral interns at the church I attended and finding ways to support and encourage me. Seminary ended, some friends found vocational calls right

away, and some like myself struggled to find work. My brother had moved to Texas during my time in Chicago, and he offered me a place to stay while I found my footing.

I moved to Texas and started working at Trader Joe's while still looking for a vocational call. There is a church in Washington State with whom I had a phone interview, two in-person conversations back in Chicago at the annual ECC conference, and then a full weekend of candidating, as well as a quote from the Family Pastor that position reported to directly, "You are the candidate, if this doesn't work out, we start over." I was so convinced that I had landed the position I quit my job at Trader Joe's and packed all my belongings into my Honda Civic, in anticipation of driving north and starting my time in vocational ministry. I received a phone call from that church a week after I had flown home from my weekend of candidating. They told me they had decided to go in another direction.

Not completely sure what to do next, I hung out at my brother's house and went to church as often as I could. In Houston, there was a Lutheran Church that had recently transitioned from a traditional Sunday morning service to serving as a Dinner Church in the evenings. I learned of this church, Kindred, because they were renting out space on Sunday mornings to the DOC Church known as Canvas that I was attending at the time. I met two pastors JD Rose (Canvas) and Ashley Bath Dellagiacomma (Kindred) who reflected to me the things I had been learning. At a time when I was unsure of who I was, unsure of my vocation, and unsure of my call, JD and Ashley reminded me that I was indeed a Worthy and Beloved Child of God, who is Forgiven, and Equipped. They reminded me of these things by sharing their pulpit with me. They reminded me of these things over conversations at the coffee place catty-corner from the church building. They reminded me of these things by being a true friend (a rare and invaluable gift given by a pastor to a congregant). They reminded me of these things by showing me more than they ever told me.

Each week Kindred has leftovers from the meal they serve to all who come on Sunday night. Each Monday, the meals are distributed to those in need in the neighborhood. Often, Ashley invited me to come out and help her distribute those meals. This was a job she could have easily done herself. There was no pragmatic reason for me to be there. But like Jesus, Ashley was teaching through parables. She saw the call God had placed on me. She saw what I could not see. Rather than beat me over the head with the truth obvious to everyone but me, she gave me opportunities to serve. To literally hand life and health to those in need. To literally search out those who were pushed aside and hidden. To put in my hands what was needed. To put in my hands something to give. To show me that there was a role for me in the Kingdom of God.

From 2016 to 2020 I floated from church to church serving in Children's Ministry. Poor fits at unhealthy churches or budget crunches with other congregations ensured I never stayed in any place for more than two years. Each time I transitioned, it became harder and harder to justify why I had moved. It became harder to answer the question, "So why have you been to so many places in so short a time." Each time I was able to tell the calling church that my goal was to find

a place to serve, find a place to stay, and put down roots. That I simply hadn't found the place to stick. I describe it as not finding the other side of my velcro.

In February of 2020, I was called into the Pastor's office after service, and once again it was budget crunches that led to that conversation that ended with "we really love you and all the work you do, but I am sorry we cannot keep you on staff." That is when my old friend JD Rose got ahold of me via text and asked, "How would you like to pastor a church in a town of two hundred people?" I believe my response was "Not at all." At the time I was still looking for Children's Ministry and Youth Pastor roles. And if I am honest it wasn't because I was convinced it was exactly where I should be, but because it was familiar and comfortable. But despite some really good interviews, the kind of interview where you honestly connect with the people on the other end of the phone or Zoom call, none of those boards put together to discern their next pastor discerned that I was the right fit for those positions.

As the positions I applied for began to send emails that let me know I was not the right fit for the places I was looking to serve in, JD got in touch with me again. "Just send them a resume" he coaxed. So I sent my resume and cover letter to the search committee of Salem United Church of Christ in Westphalia, Indiana. After a round of phone calls and Zoom meetings, I was invited to preach at a candidating weekend.

That weekend went exceptionally well. Salem UCC called me as their pastor, and I accepted. I began in July 2020. In less than five months, Covid-19 and its severity in our area dictated that we go to online-only worship (and cancel our in-person Christmas Service). Four months after that we were able to cautiously meet for in-person worship again while still providing online services for those who wished to worship remotely. For the next seven months, things went well for both Salem and me. I met a woman named Suzanne, fell in love, and proposed.

The night I proposed to Suzanne, very little went the way it was supposed to be. While we had talked often of marriage, I was doing my very best to keep the actual proposal a secret. The time was right to finally ask her, but the weekend I knew was right was already going to be busy, with several events planned long before I had decided that it was also supposed to be the weekend I would ask Suzanne to give me the rest of her life. This meant I only had one night where I could ask the question. And it needed to be at sunset.

The first time Suzanne visited Westphalia we walked from the parsonage to the church building to show her around. We stepped outside just as the sun was beginning to set. Suzanne fell in love with Westphalia in that moment. From that day forward, every time she visited, we made sure to be outside sitting in the shelter house behind the church when the sun set. Some nights we spoke of serious things. Other nights the conversation was anything but serious. Other nights we just sat and watched the sun fill the sky with reds and oranges as it went to sleep.

However, the night I had set aside to propose was also the night of the North Knox Homecoming Game. So we planned to attend the game. I knew we could not make it back before the sun went

down if we watched the whole game. I had several plans to try and mitigate the issue. I settled on leaving at halftime and catching the very end of the sunset. After all, we were able to see the beginning of the sunset out on North Knox's field. And maybe I was biased based on what was going to come later that night, but somehow that night the clouds and the colors (and the one who made them) conspired to create the most striking sunset I have ever witnessed.

We left at halftime and made it home too late, missing the sunset. Even if we had made it in time to watch the end of the day, Suzanne had figured out what I had planned. I fumbled for an excuse to try and get the ring from where I had put it. Suzanne excused herself to go to the restroom so that I could "stealthily" retrieve the ring, which of course I had not removed from the box. I found out the ring was still attached to the box, so after I asked her, I couldn't properly put it on her finger until we returned to the house. I missed the moment, she was completely unsurprised, and we had to cut the ring out of the box in the kitchen after we came back in before I could place the symbol of things to come on her hand. But she said yes. Despite my plan not being what I thought it would be, she said yes.

Less than a week later, Suzanne suffered a heart attack. Ten weeks later Suzanne died. There are so many things we had planned that we will never do together: watching the sunset for years to come, having a wedding reception of fried chicken in the shelter house of Salem, showing her the West coast where I grew up, and taking her to the Pacific Ocean. I had promised her that I would take her to the Pacific one day.

Three months after her funeral, I took a trip home to help my mom transition into a full-time care facility. While I was there, I had planned to take a small bit of Suzanne's ashes to the Pacific. Once again I had a plan. I was hoping to be joined by some family friends and of course, we were going to meet at the shore at sunset. The family friends were not able to make it. The evening turned into my brother and I trying to make it to the shore by sunset. We arrived well after dark. But because we did, we were able to find a secluded jetty. Honestly, the perfect place to show Suzanne the Pacific Ocean. The city was lit up in the distance, and the moon gave just enough light to see the waves as they swirled around my feet. Just like the night I proposed, my plan did not happen, and yet it was exactly as it should have been, just like the night she said yes.

That night God gave me a moment of release from the grief I had been holding. Between funerals and estates, between Advent and Christmas at Salem, between quite honestly feeling numb for weeks, it had been a while since I had experienced a good cathartic cry (honestly not since the hospital in October). As I stood there in the jetty, tears finally came and did not stop. I stood there and looked at the city lights crying knowing, that for this loss, there would be no end of tears. I cried out everything I had for that night. I fulfilled my promise. I know there will be more missed sunsets, more tears, and more grief in the months and years ahead. But that is okay. Because grief is simply the evidence of love persisting.

The ten weeks Suzanne was in the hospital pushed me and the church to our limits. It was a time of uncertainty felt by everyone involved. It has been ten months since then. Slowly, Salem and I are finding a new rhythm of care for one another.

My journey from learning about Jesus across a kitchen table to sitting behind a computer as the Pastor of Salem UCC of Westphalia and writing this ordination paper has been anything but a straight line. In all honesty, it has been anything but an uphill trajectory with every lesson learned fully and completely understood and never forgotten. Despite the winding road, my journey with the Jesus I met when I was four, has always been one of forward momentum. I would not be who I am today without every valley, every peak, and even every plateau. These stories, these people and so many more remind me that I am Worthy and Beloved. They call into evidence that I am a Child of God, who is Forgiven, and Equipped to be a Leader of the Body of Christ.

### **History of the UCC**

The UCC motto of “That they may all be one” is a poignant theological statement. It also serves as a summary of the pragmatic movements within Church history that led to our current denominational makeup. The UCC churches in America can trace their structure back to four distinct Christian traditions: German Reformed, Evangelical, Congregational, and Christian Churches. These four traditions are often described as the four streams that eventually joined to create our present-day United Church of Christ.

The oldest tradition of these four streams is that of the Congregational Churches. Marked by Calvinist theology and belief combined with Puritan and Congregational ideals. The earliest European settlers to the Americas arrived as early as the 1620s. Centered in Massachusetts these settlers began North American Congregationalism. Over the centuries, other denominations joined Congregationalism. 1892 saw the introduction of Congregational Methodists to the fold. Followed by Evangelical Protestants in 1925 and German Congregationalists in 1927.

Meanwhile, the Christian Churches in North America began roughly one hundred and seventy years later. James O’Kelly a Methodist minister during America’s Second Great Awakening, left the Methodist denomination over disagreement on whether ministers should have a say in their call placements. O’Kelly believed that they should. In 1794 O’Kelly was foundational in starting a new movement that eventually became known as the Christian Churches. Before that occurred, the First Free Christian Church in Vermont was founded in 1801. Followed by the formation of the American Christian Convention which organized churches in America’s northeast in 1850. In 1922 the Christian Church was organized and formally went by its new name.

In 1931 the Congregational Churches and the Christian Churches joined to form the Congregational Christian Churches. It is from these two streams that the present-day UCC receives its focus on congregational freedom as well as an emphasis on continuing reformation within the church.

Following the Congregational Churches to North America by roughly a century were the German Reformed Churches. As early as 1725, German immigrants came to the United States and began to establish congregations in their new homes. These early churches were steeped in the beliefs and traditions of Calvinism. Reaching official status in 1793 and dropping the “German” from the title in 1867, the Reformed Church is the earliest stream of the UCC to organize.

Following the beliefs of Lutheranism, the Evangelical Synod in North America was founded by German immigrants settling in the Midwest in the 1800s. By 1872 these churches were organized and formally named. In 1927 German was dropped from the official title.

Four years after the Congregational and Christian Churches merged, the Reformed and Evangelical Churches joined to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1934. It is from these two streams that the present-day UCC receives its focus on the authority of Scripture as well as its proud German Protestant heritage.

The Reformed, Evangelical, Congregational, and Christian Churches became one denomination in 1957 when all four traditions came together to become the United Church of Christ. Today, the UCC works to find ways to work across congregational and denominational boundaries. Marked by congregational freedom, openness to reformation, and the authority of Scripture (as well as in many UCC contexts a continued pride in their German Protestant heritage), the UCC on the surface may seem like a bundle of contradictions created by the muddy merger of disparate streams. However, creating a space where the focus is not tilted toward one extreme or the other places the present-day UCC in a unique position to find balance in its theology and remain available to the continued work of God in the world.

### **Reflections on the History of the UCC**

These four Christian traditions serve not only as the foundation for our structure as a denomination, but they also serve as the core of the identity of the current UCC. Each of the four streams of our history brings advantages and challenges.

It is from the Reformed and Evangelical traditions that the UCC finds its emphasis on the authority of Scripture. The Christian Churches also bring this same focus due to their foundations steeped in the Great Awakening. An emphasis on the authority of Scripture creates a culture where we look to the wisdom of God rather than to our own. This creates the advantage that our identity lies in the truth of the Scriptures. However, the challenge of leaning on sola scriptura can cause tension when discerning if our doctrine is founded on the Scriptures themselves or simply the history of interpretation of those sacred words. The Great Awakening created a culture that valued the careful study of the Bible, however, paradoxically it also created a culture that does not easily take in new voices or new contexts.

The Congregational Churches bring to the UCC, fittingly enough, a culture that emphasizes congregational freedom. This focus creates the advantage of allowing for contextual ministry. If we cannot meet people where they are at, if we cannot speak to the specific needs of a subculture, if cannot find real practical ways to meet their needs, then we put our churches at a great disadvantage. What is most proper for a small church of farmers and educators is not the

same as the needs of a larger church in the suburbs. Over the last two-plus years at Salem, we have taken the time to address both the challenges faced and the blessings we have received in our worship and our sermons. We have this freedom to make space for the realities that we walk through the door of our church with each Sunday, because we are not required to follow a script or a pace laid out for us by the denomination.

While this freedom allows us to care for those who are currently a part of our church family, it does create the potential for a barrier to those seeking us out. One challenge of congregational freedom is the ability to distinctly communicate to new congregants what it is that we believe, as many people are not used to a church that believes in conversation. In addition to this challenge many who are seeking Church life again, are those who grew up in the Church and have suspicion and critique about the harm that is often done in the name of Jesus and the Scriptures. Many are looking for a local body that agrees with them on the issues that are important to them.

If the UCC is going to be a denomination that makes an impact in the Kingdom of God, we must confront the challenges of the Christian Church in America today. We must commit to learn how to communicate our denomination's value of unity over any singular particular dogma. We must create the space to actually listen to one another. When we open up the dialogue we must make sure to form our conversations and our conclusions around not simply our tradition of interpretation but include as many ways of understanding God and our world as are available to us.

Congregational freedom often leads to an emphasis on individual salvation. Our roots within the Reformed and Christian Church traditions bolster this understanding within our UCC culture. The Reformed tradition and the Great Awakening of the Christian Churches place great importance on individual faith. While this is not a stated emphasis of the UCC, this tenet of these traditions is still felt in our churches. This focus allows for a sense of commitment to a lifelong journey; however, it can also limit outreach both practically and theologically with the same challenges faced with congregational freedom and its lack of standardization and cohesion among congregations. As Gunnemann notes in *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, in Jesus, there is unique freedom and unity that only God can bring. This paradox of push and pull between freedom and unity is still felt in the UCC today

Each of our four traditions serve as the foundation for who we are as a denomination as unlikely as their amalgamation. Gunnemann notes the improbability that the UCC could come out of the context of these early faith movements. He then noted that due to the goodness of God moving among the early leaders of the UCC, the current shape of our denomination was all but inevitable. Gunnemann's work contrasts individual faith and the unity of a larger body. These are issues that impact the UCC as well as the Church in America. Gunnemann noted that an understanding of a private faith leads toward the dangerous position of becoming nothing more than a collection of individuals gathered to sing songs and hear nice sermons. He then touted the active piety of the UCC and our focus on a Gospel that lives outside our doors and is not confined to Sunday mornings.

It is this tension between private faith and active gospel that I have experienced in my short time as a minister as a part of the UCC. The UCC boasts theology and praxis that are inclusive and forward-thinking. The denominational position favors active gospel in the day-to-day call and practice of ministry. However, many congregations are more likely to demonstrate favor to a private faith. In my current context, I have found this to be true. It should be noted that a leaning toward private faith is not an indication of the individual or congregation's ability to demonstrate characteristics of welcome, hospitality, family, or even outreach. The tension between active gospel and private faith centers on the question of why are we here. Do we attend service on Sunday morning to make our lives better or to make the lives of our neighbors better? Do we evangelize to bring people into the fullness of life (as promised in John 10:10) or to bring people into our building to fill our pews and our collection plates?

Walker, in his work *The Evolution of a UCC Style*, takes a harsher approach to UCC History. He states that the emphasis on the four traditions served the UCC when those who were a part of it, still remembered being from one of those four traditions. He suggests looking at the history of the Church in America over the last fifty years to glean a better understanding of what the UCC is and what we should be working to become.

It is always good to look back and know where one came from. The Scriptures are full of examples of God calling the people to remember the works done by the Lord and commands us to teach the next generation where they came from. Yet, if our only approach to our history is a bird's eye view of past events gleaned from books, we will miss the real lived-in experiences of those we serve. This disconnect between the history of books and the life and culture of a local church body mirrors the disconnect that the UCC at a denominational level has with many of its congregations. This reality is not unique to the UCC, nor should it be taken as a critique of denominations in general or the UCC as a whole. Rather, it is interesting to note, that our past shapes us in many ways. However, an understanding of the present may be more beneficial for the calling and work of a minister, particularly, one whose congregational context differs from their education or upbringing.

In my context of rural Southwest Indiana, it is important to know the history of the UCC and be able to identify the four streams that make up our founding, but it is equally as important to understand the identity formed by the context as well as the identity claimed by the congregation that I serve. I have noticed the strong German influence on the UCC in Southwest Indiana. Following my sermon during my candidating weekend, the first thing a congregant told me was that this church is made up of "German Lutherans". With no mention of the other three streams that compose our history, or truly an understanding far beyond an identity of individualism (found in both the German and Lutheran roots of our denomination and this particular congregation.) It is always interesting to juxtapose the academic and pastoral understandings of a denomination with the congregants' understanding. It is important to know the roots of any institution because they will be deeply felt even when they are not recognized or understood. It is the role of ministers to take the understandings of both the academic and pragmatic views of our denomination and use them to understand not just the past, but work to shape the present and future of who we are as congregants and as a denomination.

## **My Theology**

I believe that humanity is made in the image of God. I believe that we are called to be co-creators in the work of this world. I believe that sin and death hinder this work and that we are called by Jesus to enter into his “Upside Down Kingdom” to bring its values of mercy, justice, and healing to this broken world. I believe the Kingdom of God will come in its full and complete glory one day. I believe Jesus will return to earth bringing with him a new heaven and creating a new earth. I believe until that day arrives, it is the work of those who follow the words and actions of Jesus to work to bring the Kingdom values to bear on this present world in this present time.

I believe that Jesus of Nazareth was a real, true historical figure who walked the earth. I believe in the mystery that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. I believe that Jesus chose to allow the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman government to bring about his death through crucifixion. I believe this action was the self-sacrifice of God to restore the relationship between holy God and imperfect people through a final sin sacrifice both similar to and unique from the sin sacrifices described in the Covenant of God given to Moses. I believe that three days later Jesus was fully resurrected to a full and complete life demonstrating both his divinity and his victory over the power of sin and death. I believe Jesus’ death and resurrection are the sign and seal of a new Covenant of God given not just to Moses but to all people.

I believe in the mystery of the Trinity. That we serve one God in three persons (often named as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). I believe that God in three persons calls us to leave the shame of sin and enter into the forgiveness of sin through the New Covenant whose sign is the death and resurrection of the Son and that as we await the return of Jesus, we are given the Spirit of God to guide us in understanding and enacting the values of the covenant and kingdom given to us by God.

UCC Statement of Faith:

The United Church of Christ Statement of faith is listed below in bold type, with my responses in light type.

### **United Church of Christ Statement of Faith—adapted by Robert V. Moss**

**We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:**

I believe that Jesus is Lord. That we know the Father through the Son. I believe that we are called to not simply be hearers of the Word of God, but doers also. Our testimony to the deeds of Jesus should not be simple mental assent to a list of rules and dogma or verbal repetition of those words to prove our faith. I believe to testify to the deeds of Jesus we must act as he acted, offering mercy, justice, and healing to those in society who live on the margins and are outcasts from society.

**God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.**

I believe God has made all that is seen. I believe that humanity in all its diversity echoes back the divine image of God. I believe that God has left truth in nature, relationships, and in the Word of God that lay out for us ways of life and death. I believe that through these messages God has revealed to us how even in this world of sin and death we might live healthy lives, caring for our physical, emotional, and spiritual selves.

**God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.**

I believe that the Scriptures states “For God so loved the WORLD.” Therefore, I believe that the New Covenant is open to all who would enter into relationship with the God who made them and loves them.

**God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.**

I believe that we are called to bring the Kingdom values as stated and demonstrated by the life, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus. These values however were not unique to Jesus but were modeled after the righteousness of the prophets of the Old Testament. After Jesus returned to glory with the Father, the apostles carried on declaring the righteousness of God. It is the call of all who follow Jesus to live in the righteousness of Jesus as it is the righteousness of the prophets and the apostles and the righteousness by which God will judge us.

**In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.**

I believe that God became fully human, allowing God to share in our common lot. I believe that God in the person of Jesus sacrificed himself upon a cross in order to restore relationship between God and all creation. I believe that God in the person of Jesus was fully human, allowing Jesus to be resurrected and conquer the power of sin and death.

**God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.**

I believe that as the old hymn states, we should thank God “for giving us the Son, and leaving the Spirit till the work on earth is done.” The work of the Spirit renews not only the Church but the individuals who comprise its members. We are bound not by creed or dogma, but by the New Covenant of the death and resurrection of Jesus. I believe the Spirit calls all of humanity into this covenant, regardless of any outward appearance or life circumstance.

**God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, 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. Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God. Amen.**

I believe the Spirit calls us into relationship with God to be disciples and servants, to bring hope, joy, healing, mercy, and justice into the world.

## **The Word of God**

### **Scriptures**

I believe the Bible is the written word of God that reveals to us the living Word of God that is Jesus and the call upon those who enter into covenant with God to bring healing to the world. I read Scripture through the lens of the life and actions of Jesus. During his time on earth, the Word Made Flesh never found a social, moral, or religious reason to keep anyone from worship. He never found a sin so great that the forgiveness of God was not greater still. As I read the Scriptures, I ask myself, does the interpretation and preaching of this text lead to a greater understanding of the Good News that God so loved the world, or does it create barriers for humanity that dictate that humanity prove themselves worthy of God's love (and by extension my love towards them)?

### **Sacraments**

I believe that sacraments are the outward sign for the community of the inward reality of the work of God in our lives. I believe the sacraments serve as signs and reminders that the grace of God is sufficient for humanity. The sacraments remind us that all may approach the table of grace and the waters of forgiveness without having to prove themselves worthy of God's grace.

I believe Baptism is the outward sign of the inner cleansing from the power of sin and death of an individual, as well as the outward sign of that individual being welcomed into the larger family of God. When adults take on this sacrament, the signs of welcome and inner cleansing are celebrating the individual choosing to walk in covenant with God and the Body of Christ. When an infant takes on this sacrament, the signs of welcome and inner cleansing are celebrating the community choosing to take on the responsibility of walking with this individual, training them up in the understanding of Covenant with God, and what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ and the faith and hope that one day, they will understand fully what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ.

I believe that Communion is the outward sign of the inner cleansing from the power of sin and death given to the whole body of Christ. In communion, we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus and celebrate that God has entered into covenant with all of us regardless of any outward appearance or life circumstance.

### **Ordination**

While ordination is not recognized as a Sacrament by the UCC, I believe it does have a sacramental function. In Ordination, we celebrate with outward signs of stoles and the laying on of hands, the inward reality of the work of God calling an individual to the role of leadership within the Body of Christ. We celebrate the call to love the people and preach the Word.

I believe that the calling to love people and preach the word is placed upon all of those who follow the words and actions of Jesus. I believe that during my time as pastor of Salem UCC, I have been called to love the people and preach the Word. I do not believe that gathering together

to sing hymns and be presented with stoles is necessary for me to fulfill this call placed upon my life. I do believe that a service where hymns, the laying on of hands, and the presentation of stoles are presented serves as an outward sign for the community to recognize and celebrate what God has been doing in my ministry thus far and to celebrate what God will do in my ministry going forward.

I humbly submit this paper as a request to be Ordained within the United Church of Christ through the Wabash Valley Association on behalf of Salem United Church of Christ in Westphalia, Indiana. A request to be recognized through words of office, stoles, and prayer to celebrate God's call upon my life as a Worthy and Beloved, Child of God, who is Forgiven, and Equipped Leader of the Body of Christ.

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