

Katherine Peterson-Madden
Member in Discernment
Spring 2021

Ordination Paper

The following paper is the required ordination paper for the Members in Discernment process through the Southwest Ohio and Northern Kentucky Association of churches through the United Church of Christ (UCC). In this paper I will reflect on my interpretation of theology using the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith. I will then discuss my understanding of the history, polity, and practice of the denomination and I will end this paper with a reflection and understanding of my own faith story and how it informs the practice of ministry.

Part One **Understanding of Theological Perspectives**

UCC's Statement of Faith

The UCC's Statement of Faith is not simply *the only* statement of faith in the denomination, it is merely *a* statement of faith. We function in a way that allows us to constantly add to it and alter it as it goes. It is a collection of one understanding of the Christian faith as one denomination sees it. This is my response to the UCC Statement of Faith (all quoted sections are italicized).

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 in a God that is both within us and around us all. I believe in a God that breathes life into us and helps us breathe, while also breathing life all around us. Just like breath, we

cannot always see its existence, but we know it is there. I believe that we are living testimonies of God's goodness, compassion, grace, and mercy. I believe God gave us the gift of Jesus Christ's life as a tool to learn the purest form of love possible, helping us see the reflection of God in human form.

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death. God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

I believe that God is the image of creativity. God is a creative God who has made all that is. I believe all people are sacred and holy pieces of God's ever-growing tapestry. All people, in their true image, are reflections of that creativity and are sacred in their beings. I believe that humankind is constantly faced with choices that will either separate them from God or bring them closer to God. This separation is one that causes people to stray from the compassion, love, and mercy of God, and respond to the world around us with hatred, violence, and oppression. I believe all of humanity is responsible for their own sin of evil; the sin of using words to hurt, violence to divide, and greed that leaves others out, and that it pushes us away from the divine creativity that was used in our makings. I believe God calls all people to enter into a relationship with Him to share in the divine understanding of true redemption and righteousness. Redemption that allows reconnection and an extravagant welcome for all She has created and righteousness that allows people from all ages, tongues, and races to be free in their identity given by God.

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 in Jesus Christ, the man who looked hatred in the face and responded with love time and time again. I believe in the man who used his time to make a difference by doing what he knew would help the people around him. I believe Jesus Christ knew his acts of love were going to be met with hatred and violence, but knew reaching past the boundaries of society at the time was worth it. I believe the work that Jesus did in his life that set out a path for the rest of the world. A path that mirrors the love God has for the rest of us. I believe that the life of Jesus is one that causes us to examine the world and reach out to those who are oppressed, marginalized, and live on the edges where society has forced them. The work of Jesus Christ makes us open our hands and hearts to embrace those members of society and warmly and compassionately lead with love. We see a representation of reconciliation and resurrection through the life and death of Jesus Christ that we can attempt to emulate in order to extend that love through the ages.

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 in the Holy Spirit. The one who guides us and pours comfort over us throughout life. I believe that the Holy Spirit seeps into all areas of creation, like a shadow that protects all individuals and creation. The Holy Spirit gives us fuel to find God within our communities on a small and large scale, helping us share God's love when we find it. I believe the Holy Spirit allows all people in all areas to discern God's still speaking voice by whispering, singing,

winking, whistling, shouting, and sitting with us all. The Holy Spirit weaves all of humankind together through the connection of covenant.

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.

I believe we all hold power to create the world that reflects God's holy imagination, the world Jesus began to live out, the world that the Holy Spirit exists in and around. I believe we are all capable, through service, to make this image possible. Through Her holy imagination and our ability to live out that imagination is a calling for each individual of humanity. I believe that is possible when we all focus on the presence of each person's sacred soul. God's church calls us to join in God's mission and serve the Gospel. The Gospel being the one that loves God and all people.

I believe that through the practice of baptism and communion at the Lord's Table we affirm our faith on a public scale. We affirm our covenant to God and to others as a reminder of receiving God's extravagant welcome. We join together in both passion and victory, knowing the fullness of grace through the understanding of the suffering and brokenness we all experience. We find joy in the connection of the feast at the Table because we understand that we all join together through all times before, present, and still to come. I believe the connection of baptism and communion allows us all to embrace the covenants we have made and celebrate life eternal.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

I believe God forgives. I believe we do not have the ability to understand all that God can do and that our human limitations do not allow us to comprehend the level of forgiveness we are met with. I believe we are all given the gift of courage and when we find the desire strong enough to restore God's peace and justice, that courage becomes palpable. I believe the work we all do in our lifetimes adds to the eternal life in the kingdom. I believe God gives us each the ability to make this life one reflective of His presence.

Personal Creed

After submitting my final portfolio at Bethany Theological Seminary, my professor told our class that we had one final assignment; to write our own creed. She explained that this was a good way to represent ourselves and our beliefs. After four years of beliefs being tossed around and reexamined, I found this to be the hardest assignment of them all. To be able to articulate my understanding of what I believe in took more work than I realized, but also proved to be the most rewarding assignment I have had while in school. This creed of mine, which I would say mirrors the idea of the UCC's Statement of Faith in that it is a creed of *mine*, but not *the only* creed that I would find myself agreeing with. It is formatted with the repetition of the phrase "let me," because it is a reminder of how I can live my life in a way that mirrors my understanding of the UCC's Statement of Faith intertwined with the culmination of four years of seminary and 29 years of living:

Let me strive to live every moment with arms open to the possibility of becoming better. Better in my ability to communicate, love, listen, hear, and serve. Let me take time out of every day to recognize the goodness of God's everlasting and abundant love. Let me find the courage to listen when I am uncomfortable, act when I am scared, and speak when my voice is trembling. Let me despise the idea of greed and personal storehousing of money and riches. Let me devote my time, energy, and ability to serving God through the work of love. Let me be open and welcoming of all people in my path, regardless of how they differ in the way they look, think, or act. Let me use the privilege I possess to lift others up and reexamine where I am blind to inequities. Let the rage I feel blaze my path of restoring God's peace and justice in the world.

Let me strive passionately to see the world through God's eyes, full of creativity and empathy. Let me recognize the difference between simply being nice and truly being kind. Let me feel unbridled laughter when life is bubbling over with joy. Let me feel my weeping deeply when the depths of grief overtake my soul. Let me use that joy and grief to see others beyond the initial reaction of their actions. Let me understand them and what they need. Let me use my strengths to be a moment of peace or action for as long as they need. Let me survive for them when they feel they are unable to.

Let me fight the temptation of complacency. Let me recognize where I have overlooked those who are in need and overcome the feeling of "turning off." Let me believe in the power of people's actions. Let me feel refreshed so I can keep working when I am tired and feel like becoming numb to the pain around me. Let me open myself up to the opportunity of change.

Let me remember myself. Let me give as long as I can give while also remembering my own soul. Let me create boundaries that allow me to live out acts of service while also giving myself the grace God has poured upon my life. Let me find ways to challenge and question what doesn't make sense or feel safe. Let me courageously walk into scenarios that will challenge the systems that threaten liberation, love, and justice. Let me feel encouraged by the leaders before me and let me become a leader in my own time. Let me be inspired and led by those who have begun the work and let me continue the work to make them proud.

Let me recognize my call into ministry as someone who can bring the light of God to others. Let me feel encouraged to shake the hands of those who I feel slighted by, serve with those who I disagree with, and share with those who seem to have it all. Let me find a way to love like Jesus, knowing what happened before my time and what will happen after my time, but still willing to look violence and retribution in the face and love anyway. Let me live out my days following the words of Jesus Christ; loving my neighbors as myself and loving God with all my heart, mind, and soul.

Part Two

Understanding the History, Polity, and Practice of the United Church of Christ

The history of the United Church of Christ is known for the concept of the “four streams,” of faith traditions; the Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed churches. These denominations, along with the enthusiasm of the people in the denomination to continue to come to the table with the intention to live out God's will, worked together to form a new way to look at church. This enthusiasm led to the 1957 decision to merge the Congregational Christian

churches and the Evangelical Reformed churches to form the United Church of Christ. The UCC is a *united* and *uniting* church, with a commitment to unity between members of differing faith backgrounds and a diverse and deep future of continued unity.¹ With a history that celebrates the inclusion of women, people of color, sexual orientation, and more, the UCC has worked towards living out the theology of unity.

The UCC has a unique history and understanding of its governance, with three concepts running throughout the denomination. These three concepts are:

1. Individual Conscience
2. Autonomy
3. Covenant

These terms, while interpreted differently through each member of the church body, provide a framework of how we continue to Be The Church through our denomination. Beginning with individual conscience, we understand that each person must make decisions that they are comfortable with. This individual conscience does not advertise the concept of living without any sort of faith praxis, but always under the understanding of the UCC's reflection of Christ as the head of the Church. Individual conscience reflects the understanding that the church is not made up of only clergy, but of people. Each person makes decisions that reflect the wider mission of the church and world, and each believer is entrusted to continue their own exploration of beliefs and faith ideas. This level of unique understanding of personal faith lends itself to the understanding of each congregation's level of autonomy.

When I first began learning about what the United Church of Christ was really about, one of the main points I learned about was the concept of congregational autonomy. The bylaws of the UCC note that the "autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy

¹ *Affirming Faith: A Confrimand's Journal*. (Cleveland, Oh, United Church Press, 1996). Pg.66

or limit the right of each Local Church.”² The idea that each UCC church has its own governing process and makes its own set of decisions that is reflective of the group of individuals operating within it. As a free and responsible church, the UCC allows each congregation and conference to decide what is best for its people. Not only for decisions like governing bodies, but also of how often, and how, communion is given, how baptisms are completed, and the process of letting new members join their faith families. This creates a continued reminder of the history of the four streams in the beginning.

While the Statement of Faith should be reflected in the decisions made in each governing body, there is freedom in the way that is interpreted. This creates a church denomination that holds vast beliefs and understandings throughout the country. These expressions of differences do not undo the connection that is made as members of the UCC body, but celebrate the unique relationships we all hold with one another on both a congregational and wider church level. This is a unique trait of the UCC and upholds the understanding that each church has the responsibility to make decisions best for the people, who all hold a responsibility to make decisions best for themselves.

Covenant, as we see throughout both the Old and New Testaments, is the notion that we are entering into a relationship with God. Serving different purposes at different times, these relationships bring hope, promise, and fulfillment to those who enter into them. As it applies to those of us in society now, the UCC upholds these covenantal relationships. Jane Fidler-Hoffman states that scriptural covenant is “all about God,” but covenant under the umbrella of the United Church of Christ focuses on becoming “a way of thinking about this relationship is that if we are each in a relationship of covenantal grace with God, then God stands at the center of us all and

² UCC Bylaws’ Article V, paragraph 18, accessed via *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ*: Fidler-Hoffman, Jane. *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ*. (Cleveland, Oh, United Church Press, 2008).

we, like spokes on a wheel, find ourselves inextricably linked to one another in relationships that need endless development in future covenant making.”³ The concept of covenant shows that we must continue to work with God to make continued covenants. Like the spokes on the wheel, we are connected in both direct and indirect ways, and must keep those relationships growing and advancing.

The combination of these three concepts runs throughout the unique history of the United Church of Christ. As we enter into continued relationships with one another, the wider church, the world, and God, we find ourselves living out the freedom and connection that was formed by those who made the decision to join together years ago. This combination of love and connection, freedom and responsibility, individuality and intentionality is one I strive to continue throughout my own ministry, hoping to nestle into the history of the UCC in my own right and as a reflection of the work that began so long ago.

Part Three

Understanding My Personal Faith Journey

How could I possibly explain in words on a few pages, my full faith understanding and how it informs my ministry? I never had a moment of divine revelation, there was no transfiguration, sudden blindness, or burning bush. My parents didn't raise me to be in a church-going household, but also never denied God in our lives.

I grew up watching my parents forgive people, love people, open up their hearts and homes to any and everyone. They were people who worked in fields that most people ran from (social services), they embraced those on the margins and my brother and I grew up to

³ Fidler Hoffman, Jane. *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ*. (Cleveland, Oh, United Church Press, 2008). Pg. 33

understand that that's the way to live. We didn't even have to have a reason to do good, we just knew we had to do good. Instead of having one mountain top moment telling us to "go," or a moment on a long walk where we were blinded in transformation, we were shown that every interaction with every person was a chance to both *meet* the divine and *be* the divine. Each moment was a time of calling and opportunity for a loving response. This shaped my understanding of covenant and community. While I didn't have the vocabulary to explain it while I was younger, I have been working in a covenant with God and people for as long as I can remember.

I went to seminary thinking I understood my faith and what I knew. However, as I have discovered in seminary, what I have found is that I, in fact, did not understand my true feelings about faith at all. Seminary has led me to understand that I do not have to say yes or no or answer the questions asked with confidence and gumption. I can tell someone "I don't know" and be fully credible in that notion. Not knowing is part of the fun and freedom of a faith journey. I get to spend the rest of my life continuing to find out those answers. I can explore my faith on every level of my life as time continues on, and in ministry, I can work with others to do the same. Seminary made me realize that it doesn't have to be frightening to not truly know where I stand on the limits of reality and the crucifixion. I don't have to constantly try to fill the gaps of if Sarai heard Abram's conversation with God about her future motherhood or if Jesus *really* fed 5,000 people out of five loaves and two fish.

I was raised in a one stoplight town in Indiana where life was idyllic and simple. The post office had the same mailman the entire eight years I lived there, the corner store down the street

had everything you needed from lottery tickets and liquor to bubble gum and baseball cards. You had about 15 people to choose from to go to prom with and eventually get married to. There were tiger lilies that grew wild in our backyard, the church parking lot was where you learned to ride your bike, and the most popular activity on a summer night was chasing fireflies.

This world was perfect and untouchable to me until I went back when I was in my early 20's. When I drove back to Richmond for my dad's seminary graduation, we drove through Fountain City and all of the magic was gone. The bright yellow house I grew up in was muted and peeling. The big barn that I played hide and seek in was dilapidated and condemned. The town was not as bright and beautiful as I remembered it being. I look back at this time as one of the more defining moments of my life because I saw the truth behind what I imagined. It hurt to know that the life I imagined having growing up was not all true. Although I still look back at the years in Fountain City fondly, I understand that there is always a different point of view to the world we surround ourselves in. I looked at this life as perfect, when it was far from it. The paint was peeling and the town had its secrets when I was six, I just didn't see it.

My family ended up in Indiana after a long journey my parents embarked on pre-children. They met at a bible college, and due to a shift in leadership that caused the entire organization to change in ways they weren't comfortable with, they left. Because of this, they never wanted my brother and I to feel forced into the church and we didn't regularly attend one. When I was eight, my dad's office got transferred to Mason, Ohio, which is where I lived until I finished high school. Talking actively about faith was never a priority in our family life, but I never questioned my faith because I never really *thought* about my faith.

When I was 12, my family and I found ourselves at Lakeview United Church of Christ after my brother watched a commercial and felt like he wanted to go to church, so he Googled

the closest UCC and found Lakeview. The commercial had all sorts of “sinners,” including a prostitute, alcoholic, etc. get launched out of their pew at church, then join together as a community and feel welcome. The commercial hit my brother, and subsequently our whole family, because it carried out the values we had; no one is better than others and that every person is deserving of love and grace. After visiting one Sunday, we collectively felt we were home.

After we became members, all of us became actively involved in the church family. My dad, a radio broadcast engineer at the time, began to assist with the sound for productions, services, and weddings. My mom began to bake for the potlucks, visit people with casseroles in hand, and basically began to do anything that involved a labor of love in the form of a baked good. I became a choir member, volunteered to help with the children’s ministry, helped my mom bake, and generally followed the adults, who I thought were the coolest people on earth, around. Through all of this, I don’t know if I ever had a moment in the beginning years at Lakeview where I felt the presence of The Lord but that is because I didn’t experience any moments where I *doubted* the presences of The Lord. It can be imagined as a low humming through my life, always there, but almost never detectable.

In high school, an opportunity came about to go on a mission trip to Kenya with Global Partners. While I was in Kenya, I had a chance to look at a meteor shower next to The Milky Way and the way I felt about The Lord’s peace changed. It was a feeling that I had not experienced before. This was a palpable feeling of the power of God’s presence in my life. Something beyond baked goods and kind smiles, but this major non-verbal, cosmic shift began to reveal itself slowly.

During the shower, the students from the school we were staying at and the other members of my trip and I laid down in a field and silently stared at the most pristine and clear night sky I have ever witnessed. In this moment, I felt a deep sense of stillness. I understand this as being one of the moments where I noticed the humming getting a little louder. I had felt God's peace and felt settled in ways I hadn't realized before. I was noticing the presence of God in a much louder way.

My brother, Robby, who is two years older than me, is one of my biggest heroes and I truly wanted to be him growing up. When I was a sophomore in high school, Laurel Humes from Washington United Church of Christ, approached the congregation at Lakeview looking for after school tutors. My brother jumped at the chance, which meant I jumped at the chance, too. To be quite transparent, I didn't begin tutoring because I wanted to help children or get volunteer hours. I did it because Robby did it. And through tutoring, I felt a pull to keep coming back, long after Robby finished; tutoring, then volunteering as a camp counselor over the summer, overnight camps for the kids, etc. which eventually led to working the next five years in various positions throughout the church.

This pull, I see in hindsight, is one of the first times I felt my call into ministry. After continuing to help children who have dealt with the worst of the worst, simply because of the zip code they live in and the opportunities afforded to them, I couldn't stop. I watched kids who were told they never had a chance to succeed grow into strong and smart people because they knew there were people rooting for them. Through all of this, I felt God quietly guiding me back and helping me continue to provide the love that some of the kids needed. On days where the job

felt too heavy and the burdens too big, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder letting me know that I could help by simply loving them.

I worked as a summer program staff member at Washington United Church of Christ during my summer breaks from Ohio University. I lived in an apartment the church provided for its staff, which happened to be in the community we served and I loved it. I got to interact with the people of the community and deepen my roots with them. I also learned during this time that one of the best forms of ministry is simply showing up. The work of listening to people who were needing companionship outside on the bench, a hug, a quick word of positivity, or someone to validate their pain, is sacred. I discovered that *this* is the work of God.

I had my life planned out since I was in third grade; I knew I would be a teacher and would go to Miami University. I ended up at Ohio University (OU) in Athens, Ohio and studied Early Childhood Education. During my first few days at OU, my roommate invited me to a pizza party, and being a new college student, the prospects of free pizza and meeting new people was ideal to me. The pizza party was a welcome gathering for Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru) and I felt instantly welcomed by the students. I began going to the weekly worship services and bible studies that Cru offered and my beliefs were pushed quite a bit. The underlying beliefs of Cru are fairly evangelical, which is quite the opposite of what my beliefs tend to be. I began to explore my relationship with God while at OU when I was exposed to thoughts that did not align with mine. Even when I sat back and realized what the people in my bible study agreed on was the polar opposite of my beliefs, I began to find what I felt I *did* believe in. This is one of the defining times of my spiritual life because it has become a base of my own, independent interpretations of God in my life.

I attended Ohio University for two years before I realized that I did not enjoy being a teacher. After student teaching in a preschool classroom, I understood that I was not in the field of work I wanted to be in. While making a board game for my preschool students, I had a moment where it clicked that I was not where I was supposed to be. About two weeks after class ended, I dropped out of OU and felt right about doing so.

Although I felt like this was what I was supposed to do, it didn't stop my own self-doubt. I had become so disappointed that the master plan I had for my life was turning out much differently than I originally intended. During this time, I felt very isolated because I had made a decision after prayerfully considering my options, but there was so much room for comparison, questioning, and negative self-talk.

I don't know where God was during this time, but it certainly didn't feel like He was holding me during the process. I felt alone and abandoned and utterly angry from the moment I realized how I felt until I could even face the thought of praying about it. I have learned that saying how I feel out loud to God, and getting mad at Him for not placing Her mighty hand on my issues, has caused me to begin the process of healing. I know that this experience of being alone while being my own worst enemy has informed my future ministry in the sense that I am able to understand how it feels. I have survived the darkest of times, when I was laying in bed and feeling the pain of reliving the choices I had made, unsure of how to face myself or others. I have heard the hum of God whisper to me that I am not alone and that I would make it through. This, as I see it, is a blessing because I am able to hear what people are saying without assuming that it is my job to *fix* them. Sometimes, most times, it is my job to be present, to be the hum of God cheering them on.

After a long few years of walking through life without truly understanding where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do, I found myself married with three stepchildren, enrolled in seminary, and actively serving at Lakeview UCC. Sometimes it feels like I blinked and ended up where I am now. The work that was done in that blink was nothing short of divine and I attribute the advances in my life to the partnership I find in God. Now that I have served at Lakeview for the past few years, I have been exposed to the in's and out's of ministry in a congregational setting. I have been able to walk through the honest realities of ministry that don't include sermon writing, pastoral care, and Bible studies. I have continued to grow a deepening understanding of the settling of my soul that comes when I am engaged in ministry and how the hum that has turned into a song that has turned into roaring divine laughter rings through my ears all the while.

My understanding and informing of my own ministry came to me in many small ways throughout my life. From my work at Camp Washington UCC, time under the stars in Kenya through Global Partners, the long process of seminary at Bethany Theological, work at Lakeview UCC, and the still small voice that has weaved its way through my life for years, I am beginning to understand the call I am being beckoned to. God has called me to serve the people around me. The indication that I have been where I need to be when I feel a sense of peace that I can't put into words. As I have been assisting as worship leader, I have felt a peace in front of the congregation. The entire seminary application process and visit provided me with a hum that turned into a loud joyous song. While I have been on a journey of "unknowing" what I once knew, I know for certain that while listening to God's still speaking voice, I can continue to learn how to serve God's people in ways that matter, hold meaning, and mirror the love Jesus Christ taught us all.