



Ordination Paper

A Statement of Testimony, Faith,
Theological Perspective, and Calling

Presented to
The Cumberland Association of Churches and Ministers
Maine Conference - United Church of Christ

Danielle Arnett Keller
Submitted for reading
March 12, 2024

- I. Are you persuaded that God has called you to be an ordained a minister in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and are you ready to enter this ministry and faithfully serve in it?
 - A. Briefly relate a summary of your faith journey and your call to the Christian Ministry in the United Church of Christ.
 - B. Within the context of the universal ministry of God's people, why have you chosen to seek ordination, and what particular gifts do you bring to this ministry?

Not long before I became an MID here in the Cumberland Association, a friend and I were talking on the phone. Both of us were at a crossroads in our lives, wondering what to do next. I don't remember who asked it first, but the question came up, "What did you want to be when you grew up?" We laughed as we each shared some of our funnier ideas: she wanted to be a guard at Buckingham Palace having seen them on a trip to London when she was little and fallen in love with their hats. I, on the other hand, wanted to be a bunny-rabbit because I thought that they were the best animals ever and my Mom had told me that I could be whatever I wanted when I grew up. Eventually she described how she came to be a teacher and how fulfilling she found it, but she was exhausted with the angry rhetoric that was being dished out against teachers and our public schools. After listening to her story I decided that I would share something that I did not tell many people. I began to tell her how I had felt a calling to become a minister when I was an undergraduate at the University of Connecticut. I started the discernment process at the Episcopal Chapel that I was attending at the time. I had many meetings: with the discernment committee, with the Deacon, and with the priest. I also had as many days of tears and frustration. Eventually I came to the conclusion that this was not the time to pursue a calling to ministry any further. The discernment committee thought that I should have a family first, since I was so young and newly married. The priest thought that it didn't matter if the discernment committee liked me or not or thought I should pursue ministry now or not. As the head of the Bishop's committee he was going to make sure that I advanced in the process.

This is because it would look good for him if he brought a candidate forward while he was head of the committee. The deacon, by contrast, thank God for the deacon, as she simply listened, and encouraged me to make time to listen for God.

My friend was astonished, she had known that I went to church, but I wasn't what she thought of as particularly religious. I explained to her that I had been raised going to church at a small, independent Congregational Church in Harpswell called Elijah Kellogg. From the time I was a very little girl until my early teens I really liked going to church. I always found Sunday school fun and interesting, so much so that I am still in touch with my Sunday school teacher. I was fortunate enough to not just have one church, but two to grow up in. The second one was my family's church in my Mom's hometown in Connecticut, the East Woodstock Congregational Church.

It was at that church in Connecticut that I first experienced what I would now call a Spirit-filled moment. I was about 11 years old when we went to church with my Gram before heading home to Maine one Sunday morning. They had a relatively new minister, a woman named Shirley Bromley. I had not known until that day that a woman could be a minister. I can remember sitting still through the whole service, I even remember the sermon. I was transfixed. The next Sunday we were at Elijah Kellogg, when the adults were down in the hall for coffee hour, all of us kids, per the usual, were in the sanctuary. Kids were climbing over and under pews playing tag, banging on the piano and racing up and down the aisles. But that Sunday while everyone else was engaged in the normal shenanigans I went up into the pulpit, opened the Bible and began to read a story aloud. I would not have said then that I wanted to be a minister but I knew there was some feeling in me that I had never felt before and that it was very special.

A few years later we had a new minister at the church. Many families stopped attending and with no other teens to hang out with, so did I. I did not stop wanting to be a part of a church, however, so I would occasionally go with my friends who belonged to a Methodist Church in Brunswick that had an active youth group. One conversation that stands out during this time was with my boyfriend. We were talking and he quoted the philosopher Nietzsche, "God is dead." I got upset with him, saying that I believed in God and that God was very much alive and loved everyone. He was surprised and even more so when I said that I wanted to study theology someday to possibly become a minister. I was a little surprised, myself. At the time I had no idea where those words came from. I just knew that deep within me it felt good and right to contemplate ministry. Looking back I would say that it was another Spirit-filled moment for me.

When I attended college, at the University of Connecticut, I found myself floundering both in my studies and in my faith. I had become upset with the Christian voices that I heard over and over again in the media proclaiming a God who hated LGBTQ+ folk amongst others. I found my desire to be a part of the Church painful when it seemed at odds with what I personally believed and understood the Scriptures to say. This uncertainty left me restless and in need of a change. This was when the opportunity arose to leave college for a while to live and work in Tokyo, Japan as a nanny for an American family. I jumped at the chance. As a nanny to three rambunctious kids under the age of eleven my days were full. The family attended the Tokyo Baptist Church and brought me along with them. This church was different from any church I had ever experienced. From the music, to the preaching, to the makeup of the congregation itself (35 different countries represented!) it was church in a whole new way. The part of this community that stood out to me more than anything else was the way individuals spoke

of their relationship with Jesus. It was personal. It was filled with love. Jesus was someone that they spoke with on a regular basis and when they spoke about him it was as if they were talking about a very dear member of their family, someone they trusted and knew would never let them down. I wanted that in my life.

When I returned to UConn I started attending Storrs Congregational Church, UCC for regular Sunday service. I enjoyed talking to the pastor, Rev. Ken Ferguson, and the student pastor from Andover Newton Theological School, Oscar Brockmeyer. After the third conversation with Oscar about ANTS, he finally gently said, “Perhaps you should take a class or two? It seems that your curiosity could be God inviting you into a deeper conversation.” Ken, on the other hand, came right out and asked, “Do you think that you are being called to ministry? Because I do.”

Around this same time I met the man who would become my husband. He was a devout Catholic. For the first month we dated we would attend my church in the morning and his at night. One night as we left mass he turned to me and said, “When we get married, you will have to become Catholic.” I responded without hesitation, “When we get married I won’t become Catholic: I want to be a minister.” He didn’t hesitate, but said, “Then we will figure it out.” In the end we started attending St. Mark’s Chapel, the Episcopal church where I would first enter into discernment. As it happened, the Episcopal church was both geographically and theologically right in between the Catholic church and the UCC church. Aaron and I were married a little over a year later and three years later we moved home to Maine.

It would be another five years before I began attending First Parish Church in Brunswick. My first day there attending a service was Rev. Mary Baard’s first day, too. It was still several more years before I would enter into discernment again. There were

many ups and downs through those years. I drifted from job to job, started my family, and took a couple of classes at Bangor Theological. Though I had times of doubt in my faith and sometimes could not see God in my life, God never lost sight of me. Again and again the Spirit would move me to be a part of the church, to be steadfast in prayer even when I could not hear that still small voice speaking. This went on for some time until at last I went to Mary and asked to meet with the discernment committee and I became a Member in Discernment in the Cumberland Association.

One particular gift that I bring to the ministry is that of Storytelling. I utilize storytelling to make ideas clear to people and to connect with them. By using relatable stories I can communicate God's love for all of God's children and God's desire and call for justice for all the world. When people see themselves in a story they understand the message of the story more fully than they would if I simply stated the message the Spirit put on my heart.

Another gift that I bring to ministry is skill with and commitment to pastoral care. I practice a deep-listening, compassionate care because it is so important for a person to feel they have been truly heard. I have a holistic understanding of the wellness of a whole person. That is, physical, mental, and spiritual health all contribute to a person's well-being. An illustration of this care comes from my time last summer while I was at Maine Medical Center participating in my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. M was a patient who had reached the end of available treatments. Her doctors were clear and her family accepted that it was time to make her comfortable for the time she had left. It was time to say goodbye. M refused to believe it. She was visiting Maine for the summer when she ended up in the hospital, and she was confident that if she could just get back to her doctors in southern New England, they would be able to

do something. "I'm not done yet," she would say. A chaplain visit was requested by her sister-in-law, who was an ICU nurse herself, to help M come to terms with the end of treatment and to make plans for the time she had left. My first visit left me with the impression of a very strong-willed woman who was afraid of death despite professing a strong faith. She repeatedly told me that there were more options which might heal her and she was frustrated by the feeling that no one was listening. It was at my second visit when I learned more of who she was, including a central part of her identity: M was a musician. When she spoke about music, there was a visible difference in how she held herself. The tension in her body eased, I could see how she sank into the pillows and how her face relaxed into a smile. When we listened to her favorite piece of music using her phone, she relaxed even more. Music was the key to connecting with her. The medical staff had been focusing on her failing physical health, her family had been concerned about her mental health with her seeming lack of understanding or acceptance. In finding the key that filled her heart, music, I was able to have a conversation with her on my next and last visit about what was happening with the end of treatments.

During that visit I asked her to think of her life as a symphony that she was writing; would she be able to describe the first movement for me? We spoke for a while in this way as she described the various highlights of her life that she would put into her symphony. And then I said, "M, the time has come to write the final movement. How do you want the symphony of your life to end? What notes will hang in the air as it draws to a close?" She became very quiet and began to cry. We prayed together before I left, she asked that I pray for her to feel peace. Later that day she called her family and asked the staff to call the Palliative Care Team.

A third gift that I bring to ministry is my practice of the radical hospitality of our God; as it says in Romans 12:13 “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Radical hospitality may come in many different forms. Radical hospitality is opening the doors of my house and welcoming people to dinner, not just family, or friends. One person I invited to my home for dinner was a cashier from the grocery store who said one day while ringing up my groceries how much she missed her family in California. Another was the parent and child who my children and I started talking to in Gelato Fiasco. They were new to Brunswick and looking for friends. Radical hospitality is also recognizing new families in our church whose first language is not English and meeting them where they are by offering not only translating devices, but including prayers and hymns in their languages as well as learning hymns that they loved from their home countries. Radical hospitality can mean setting aside what is familiar or comfortable to make people feel welcomed.

My call is to ordained ministry. Words can have power in a person's life and actions even more so. Ordination means that I am not just sharing my own personal beliefs when I tell someone that God loves them. Through the rite of ordination the word of an ordained minister carries the weight of the faith community and gives power to the message that is shared. The best example I have of that is J and P's wedding. When J got engaged to P, P really wanted a Christian wedding. He was raised in the church and his father was a pastor so a Christian wedding was important to him. He knew that he could not ask his father to officiate as it was not safe for him to be out as a gay man in his church and especially not with his family. J was asking around to see if he could find a minister to marry them, not really believing that it was possible. I assured him that either of the ministers in my church would be glad to perform the ceremony. I explained

that the church was Open and Affirming, clarifying what that meant. J remained doubtful despite our friendship of many years. It was only when he spoke to a minister that he believed that he and P would truly be welcome in the church. “Danielle, it’s not that I didn’t believe you, but you love everyone and see the best all the time. I just had to be careful. I couldn’t risk P getting hurt by a church that was supposed to be safe.”

My ministry is outreach, which means many of the people I connect with are not coming to church on Sunday morning. They may not have been raised in a faith tradition or they may have experienced rejection or harm in the name of Christianity. As an ordained minister my words would have the bearing of the church behind them. Because of this, if I were to say to someone, “I am so sorry for the hurt that you experienced through the church,” my words would be heard in a different way than they would coming from a lay person. J heard my words of welcome and inclusion but could not trust them fully, as I was really only speaking from my own conviction.

- II. Do you, with the Church throughout the world, hear the Word of God in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and do you accept it as the rule of Christian faith and practice?
 - A. How do you understand the nature of the Word of God as it is revealed in the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments?
 - B. What does it mean to accept this Word as the rule of Christian faith and practice?

In one corner of the Sunday school classroom stands a simple wooden box. It is perhaps 3 1/2 feet tall by 2 feet wide and 13 inches deep. There are hinges on one edge that allow the box to be swung open to reveal that it is actually a set of bookshelves. On these bookshelves are a series of blocks 2 in x 6 in and perhaps 8 inches tall. All cut to the same length and painted in different colors with a name carefully written on one edge of each of them. It is a model of the Bible and each block represents a book in the Bible. The two shelves are labeled. The left hand side “Old Testament / Hebrew scriptures” the right hand side “New Testament / Greek scriptures”. The organizational

structure of the Bible is made clear by the color-coding of different groups of books, which are in turn labeled The Torah, The Laws, The Prophets, and The Gospels, etc.

I don't know who made it or when, but it is a treasure. This teaching tool is one of my favorites. And it is one the kids in our Sunday School have grown to love. It clearly demonstrates that the Bible is not one book, but rather a library in and of itself, containing many books. I do not take the Bible literally. I do, however, take it seriously. It is nothing short of the most incredible love story—God's love for us and desire to be in relationship with us. It contains books of history, books of poetry, and of prophecy. Yes, there are contradictions and it is sometimes really confusing (see the story of the Woman and the Dragon in Revelation, for example). It was divinely inspired, but written by human beings after all.

I appreciate the United Church of Christ saying, "God is still speaking." In part this means to me that there is still more to learn from engaging with and questioning the Bible. Reading, studying, and engaging in discussion about the Scriptures with one another in community and the Holy Spirit is how we best find our way on our journey with God. The Bible tells us not only who we are, but whose we are: the beloved Children of God. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us of God's covenant, of God's love for God's children. From the story of Noah and God's bow in the sky to the Prophets and beyond, God is constantly seeking to be in relationship with God's children and in their various ways each book in the Hebrew Scriptures tells about this seeking. The call of the prophets is God's voice reaching out to God's children; Abraham Joshua Heschel said in his book The Prophets: "The message of Second Isaiah... is of no age. It is prophecy tempered with human tears, mixed with joy that heals all scars, clearing a way for understanding the future in spite of the present. No words have ever gone further in

offering comfort when the sick world cries.” Through God’s judgments and laws as well as God’s comfort and love, we can have a right relationship with God. Through this relationship we experience joy.

I learned in Sunday school that God in the Old Testament was a god of harsh judgment whereas God of the New Testament was one of love. I find love and judgment are contained in both. To adhere to the oversimplification learned as a child would be to do a disservice to the full depth and breadth of all that is in the Bible. The Greek Scriptures also tell of God’s love for her children through the life story of Jesus, his teachings, and those who followed him. Jesus time and again points the way to God by how he embraces people, heals people, and breaks bread with people. It is through Jesus that we learn the importance of prayer: he prayed before meals (Mark 8:6), he prayed after healing (Mark 1:35), he prayed with others as well as alone (Matthew 14:23), and he taught us the prayer that we use to this day, “Our Father, who art in heaven...”. Jesus’s love for God was powerful and his love for us was absolute. He knew that defying the occupying Roman force by disrupting the peace in various ways was to risk death. Yet he did so to show his Love.

For me it is important to remember in any discussion of the scriptures how the Bible has so often been used as a bludgeon or a knife to beat people and cut people down. I cannot talk about my faith and my love of the scriptures without also noting that even to this day there are many who find that the Bible brings only pain to them. Christians have taken the scripture and twisted it, turning it into messages of hate and intolerance. The Bible has been used to justify slavery, to condemn Jewish people, and to vilify my beloved queer community, among many other wrongs. White settlement in the United States with westward expansion was justified with reference to scripture, as

was the original settlement of the Americas which came before. And as this was going on, the perpetrators of these crimes claimed to be coming in the name of Jesus Christ to bring the word of God. Under the guise of bringing indigenous peoples to the faith, colonizers committed genocide and deliberately set out to destroy cultures, languages, and ways of life. There is much work to be done in atoning for our sins in this abuse of people using the Word. We have started the work in the United Church of Christ and there is more that we need to do to make our churches safe, loving places for all people.

I have a responsibility as an interpreter and teacher of our sacred stories to preach this message, first, that we need to listen to marginalized voices. Those who have been harmed and continue to be harmed within and outside the church need to be heard. Second, I have a responsibility to acknowledge the wrongs that have been done. Third, that we need to seek forgiveness. And finally, we need to center those voices now as we work towards healing. That can mean giving up privilege and stepping aside. When we teach the scriptures to future generations we must convey to them the message that they are loved and that every human being is a beloved child of God. We must share that the most important and deepest message that comes from the Holy Word is one of love and forgiveness. It is a message that it is not our place to judge. This is how we can begin healing from the harm that has been caused. It is our place to do our best to love one another, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love our God with all our hearts, and all our soul, and all our minds. Jesus said that this is the greatest commandment. This is how I strive to live and what I endeavor to teach when I teach the Scriptures. It is my fervent prayer that in the future our sacred text will not be weaponized.

- III. Do you promise to be diligent in your private prayers and reading of the scriptures, as well as in the public duties of your office?
- A. How do you practice your devotional life and what is the place of prayer in your life?
 - B. How do you intend to find rest and renewal in the context of the Biblical theme of Sabbath within the context of the “public duties of your office,” and how do the present (or future) demands of family life (or of single life) fit within the context of those duties?
 - C. What do baptism and the sacraments mean to you in your personal life and to you in your role as a leader in the UCC Worship?

For a long time my Aunt Debbie had a note taped to the steering wheel of her Jeep that read, “A day hemmed in with prayer is less likely to come unraveled.” I have found this to be true. This simple saying often comes to mind when I find myself feeling harried from the moment my alarm goes off, springing out of bed with a half-dozen things already clamoring for my attention. When this happens, I take three deep breaths, then I recite part of Psalm 51:10-12, 15:

Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

Another deep breath and my heart is calmer. I am able to face the day. Often that is all the time I have in the morning to pray until the door closes behind my children as they race to the bus. Once the house is quiet, I make myself a cup of tea; on days where I have a tight schedule I read the Daily Devotional, or open a book of poetry. I frequently read the poetry of Mary Oliver, Jan Richardson, and Joy Harjo. On days when I have more time I may read an essay from Parker J. Palmer or Madeleine L’Engle. I add new books on a regular basis, most recently In Trembling Boldness: Wisdom for Today from Ancient Jesus People by Natalie Perkins and Hal Taussig.

Another practice of mine is Lectio Divina. I was introduced to this practice in a class that I took at Bangor Theological where the professor, Pam Shellberg, recommended using crayons or colored pencils to note any word or phrase that stood

out from the scripture. On the days that I make time for this practice I gather my tea, colored pencils, paper, and the Bible my oldest brother gave me when I took my first class at BTS. Next I check the lectionary to select which scripture I will read and open my Bible. I take my time reading aloud a few times, writing or drawing whatever part of the Scripture resonates with me.

My current personal favorite prayer practice is to put on a song such as Spencer LaJoye's Plowshare Prayer. A line from this song that speaks to me is:

I pray if a prayer has been used as a sword against you and your heart, against you and your word. I pray that this prayer is a plowshare, of sorts that it might break you open, it might help you grow.

I listen to the song a few times with my whole heart, then sit for a period of time in silence, listening for what I can hear after the music ends.

Prayer sustains me so that I am able to bring my whole self to the public duties of my office. It is an ongoing process to find rest and renewal when what was once my Sabbath, Sunday, now means working from morning until evening. It is also an ongoing process to practice Sabbath with my family when we only have one full day a week together and that day can easily be filled with other activities. Mondays have become my personal Sabbath Day. It is a day in which I do not open email, work or personal. I take long walks with my dog, snuggle my cat, and I read. I plan and cook dinners for my family, one of my favorite things to do, and which is often done with haste on other days of the week.

I address Baptism and Communion in Part V of my paper.

- IV. Will you be zealous in maintaining both the "truth of the gospel" and "the peace of the Church," speaking the truth in love?

- A. Concerning the “truth of the gospel,” what is your understanding of the doctrine of salvation: the person of Christ, the incarnation, the Cross and Resurrection, sin, repentance, forgiveness, judgment, grace, and eschatology?
- B. Concerning the “peace of the Church,” how would you deal with those conflict situations when you are called to speak the prophetic word of “truth in love,” both in personal and social justice situations?

Frederick Beuchner once said, “SALVATION IS AN EXPERIENCE first and a doctrine second.”¹ Have you ever had one of those salvation moments? A moment where your heart is open, leaping in joy, laughter on your lips, tears streaming down your face where you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that what is filling you is nothing short of God’s glorious love? Those Spirit-filled joy moments have come only very rarely in my life, but miniature versions come everytime I lose myself in deep belly laughs with friends, in quiet moments with my teenagers when they share their feelings with me, when I climb to the peak of a mountain and take in the beauty of Creation. These moments are love-filled moments and God is love. If I did not know God’s love then I could not experience salvation. It is through Jesus that we come to know God’s love. Salvation does not come only when we die. Salvation comes when we follow the teachings of Jesus and are in right relationship with God.

In the summer of 2021 I provided full time sabbatical coverage from May through August for Rev. Sue Foster at East Woodstock Congregational Church in East Woodstock, Connecticut. I preached every week, led Bible study, met with various committees, wrote for the newsletter, provided pastoral care, and led monthly worship at a nearby assisted living facility. While I was serving this community conflict naturally arose from time to time. Two situations in particular come to mind from that time which

¹ <https://www.frederickbeuchner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/10/22/salvation>

illustrate how I address conflict in both personal and social justice situations and maintain the “peace of the Church”.

Prior to my arrival the church had voted to have worship outside for the summer. For the previous year they had been worshipping virtually, coming together inside a building in those early days of the covid vaccine was still fraught with tension, so Sunday morning worship outside was seen as a safe option. The first couple of Sundays people were simply overjoyed to be gathered together again, raising our voices in prayer and song. However, after a few weeks went by some people began to feel that the work of set-up and breakdown for outside worship was too much. One man in particular started talking loudly to anyone who would listen about what a chore it was. One Sunday after worship he came to speak to me, “Danielle, you need to tell everyone that we are going to worship in the sanctuary from now on. This is just too much work. I mean, we bring everything out, then we lug it all back in! Why are we doing that when we can just use our sanctuary? It has been good enough for people since it was built in 1834, it should be good enough for us now! You just need to tell everyone that is what we are doing.” It was an uncomfortable situation. He was a big, frustrated man and no one else was around, but I was fortunate enough to be a member of First Parish Church in Brunswick during Rev. Mary Baard’s ministry. I learned a great deal from Mary including how to handle challenging moments like this one. First, I responded calmly. Mary had helped me to recognize my propensity for my emotions to show on my face and encouraged me to make sure that I could maintain a calm outward demeanor. Second, I echoed back his concerns to him regarding the work it took for Sunday worship outside. I then thanked him for his tremendous help, as without him it would be so much harder for the community to gather. Finally, I echoed something Mary had often said, the minister can

provide leadership and expertise, but the congregation is the body where decisions are made, that is the United Church of Christ polity. So I said, "I am unable to tell everyone what we are doing. The congregation held a discussion, then voted to hold worship outside. I cannot change that decision. You are welcome to talk to the Council about it." He calmed down, albeit still grudgingly. By staying calm, by putting the power of decision making where it rightfully belongs, the congregation, he knew that he could not push me into making changes that I had no right to. By staying collected he calmed down enough to admit that he would like more help for his part of set-up on Sunday mornings. I thanked him again for his work, and we brainstormed about who else might be able to help. Sunday mornings became easier.

A social justice situation arose that same summer during a meeting. The church was an Open and Affirming Church yet they knew that they had more to learn. I had several conversations over the start of the summer about gender identity and expression, pronouns, and more in Deacons and with other groups within the church. As the meeting was wrapping up that particular night, I invited everyone to share any prayers that we could lift up before heading home. One woman, S, spoke right up. She was deeply concerned about the well being of her daughter's best friend. She was in middle school and she thought she was gay. S wanted prayers especially for her daughter's friend because she felt that "expressing that at such a young age was unsafe and unhealthy. She probably felt pressured because being gay was talked about in school so much." I was upset with what S was saying and I could see another woman, who described herself as an "old fashioned lesbian", beginning to get upset. When S went on to say that she had spoken with the girl's parents and emailed the parenting group that they both belong to I became worried about the girl's safety since I had no way of

knowing if she would be safe having been outed to her family and extended community. I remained calm externally, saying to S, “I hear that you are really concerned about your daughter’s friend. It sounds like a longer conversation would be a good idea, maybe later this week? In the meantime, as an Open and Affirming Church I want to remind everyone that we ‘welcome and affirm all persons of every race, age, gender, family structure, physical or mental ability, economic status, faith back-ground, nationality, sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity into the full life and ministry of this community of faith, including membership and leadership.’ ”² I then led the group in prayer.

The next day I followed up with S to begin a conversation regarding social justice, LGBTQ+ safety and more. I also checked in with the other woman to make sure that she felt okay after the homophobic statements made by S. By staying calm and citing the church’s Open and Affirming Statement I reminded S and the other people at the meeting in a non-confrontational way about what the church believed. In acknowledging S’s concerns, while not validating them, and inviting S into further conversation I opened a door to connection and created an opportunity for growth.

- V. Do you accept the “faith and order” of the United Church of Christ; and will you, as an ordained minister in this communion, show compassionate affection toward all who are in Christ?
 - A. How do you understand the “faith and order” of the United Church of Christ, specifically concerning the Trinity, Baptism, Communion, Covenant, and the Statement of Faith?
 - B. What is your understanding of “The Church,” local church, covenant, the wider church, and how does “The Church” relate to the world through evangelism, social action, and mission?

The “Faith and Order” movement stems from the early 20th century. It is, at its heart, a movement to bring diverse churches together with the hope that they may ultimately come together in full communion.³ The United Church of Christ is a part of

² <https://www.eastwoodstockchurch.org/>

³ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/what-is-faith-and-order-gunther-gassmann>

the movement as it states in the Vision Statement from the UCC Board of Directors in October 2016: “United in Christ’s love, a just world for all.”⁴ I accept the “faith and order” of the United Church of Christ and as an ordained minister I will show compassion and respect to all who are in Christ.

Through baptism we are joined to those who have come before and those around the world who are baptized. Through baptism we enter into a community of love and belonging, belonging to one another and to God. In the Gospel of Mark 1:9-11 we read, “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” These are the words I hear again at a baptism, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ These words transcend our frail human existence, coming from One who is absolute and eternal. This is no frail human relationship, there is no uncertainty, there are no qualifiers. Jesus heard that he was God’s beloved Son. Full stop. This same message comes to us. We have the privilege of hearing this message through Jesus’ ministry, through the Gospels passed down to us. And it is through him we learn that we, too, are beloved children of God. It is through Jesus that we, too have been given a name, that we have been given an identity, that we have been grounded in the Love that is eternal and absolute. We are God’s beloved children.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family that had a heart for hospitality. Breaking bread with people is a true joy in my life. I love to gather around a table with

⁴ <https://www.ucc.org/mission/>

people and share a meal. It doesn't need to be fancy, simple is often better. As my older brothers made their way in the world they started giving out my parents' name and number, telling people, "If you are ever in Maine, you can stay at my house." We had people come from all over the United States. When it was my turn to go out in the world, I did the same, and my parents welcomed people from other countries. Even when language was a barrier, everyone understood food. Many joyous meals were shared around our table. Breaking bread with a variety of people is at the heart of Jesus's ministry. We know in Matthew 9:10-17 that he ate with "tax collectors and others with bad reputations". In the story of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44) Jesus blesses two fish and five loaves making enough to feed thousands of people with leftovers. At the last supper with those closest to him he blessed bread and cup, sharing them with his beloved family. This meal is our communion that we share in our communities and congregations. In the United Church of Christ we believe that everyone is welcome at Christ's table. The sacred ritual of communion, the practice of an open table, welcoming all, is at the heart of my faith. Feeding and being fed in the breaking of the bread brings us closer to one another, closer to Christians the world around, and closer to Jesus. Communion is a sacred ritual that can bring healing to those in need.

As stated in the Beliefs of the United Church of Christ, I believe, "in the triune God: Creator, resurrected Christ, the sole Head of the church, and the Holy Spirit, who guides and brings about the creative and redemptive work of God in the world."⁵ I believe in the Creator in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) I believe that the Creator is the divine spark of love and light in every living being.

⁵ <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/>

I believe in Jesus who came to teach and point the way to God. The one whom we came to call Jesus Christ did not come to establish a new religion, but came that all may know the Love of the One who created us and may know that Love is for all people. Jesus showed us the Way by breaking bread with those who were on the margins during his lifetime. Jesus showed us the Way through healing those whom no one would touch. Jesus showed us the Way to justice in Matthew 25:35-36, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Jesus taught us that we cannot show greater love than in laying down our lives for friends and that in losing our lives for his sake we will find it renewed. (John 15:13, Matthew 10:39.)

I believe in the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that we are moved to extend an extravagant welcome to all whom we encounter. It is through the Spirit that we are led in our work for justice. It is through the Holy Spirit that we unite in community. It is this call of community that brought the United Church of Christ together as a united and uniting church inspired by the scripture John 17:21, "that they may all be one." Indeed, one motto claimed for the church is, "In essentials-unity, in non-essentials-diversity, in all things, charity." The movement of the Spirit brings together people, calling them in their hearts, to bring about the kingdom of God.

The United Church of Christ is often described as a church of "firsts". The Churches that would later join to form the UCC were among the first to speak out against slavery (1700), engage in civil disobedience (1773), to ordain a woman (Antoinette Brown 1853) and more.⁶ The United Church of Christ has also been the first

⁶ <https://www.ucc.org/ucc-firsts/>

in other important ways. For example, the Church apologized for the actions of the Church against the people of Hawaii, the Kānaka Maoli, to begin a process of reconciliation in 1993.⁷ These acts from the not so distant past carry on as the UCC continues to grow in areas of social justice such as calling for policy change to end gun violence⁸, work for justice for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees⁹, as well as the call to address climate change, to name a few actions.¹⁰ This justice is a vital part of local churches and the larger Church. It is evangelism as the witness and actions of the people in the United Church of Christ lead the way to the One who calls us to peace and justice. It is this call to justice, it is this work for peace, it is the Mission Statement of the UCC, “United in Spirit and inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all” that inspires me. My God calls me to this work of Love, of Justice, of feeding people, and being fed by the Spirit.

⁷ <https://hawaiisqueen.wordpress.com/history/an-apology-to-na-kanaka-maoli/>

⁸ <https://www.ucc.org/understanding-the-issues/gun-violence-prevention/>

⁹

https://www.ucc.org/justice_immigration-2/#:~:text=As%20the%20United%20Church%20of,called%20to%20love%20our%20neighbors.

¹⁰

https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/the_ucc_council_for_climate_justice/