

**How Do We Get Free - Embodied Trauma and Healing  
in Church and Movement Spaces  
Ordination Paper  
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**Statement of Faith/Journey**

i'm a poet, writer, teacher, and mother - all of which helped to spur growth and creativity in my calling and my approaches to walking spiritually in this world. First and foremost, i believe it is important to uplift and honor what has brought me here to this moment. Throughout my Spiritual Journey paper, you will witness how i "ignored" previous calls, and finally listened while co-teaching Creative Writing inside Perryville Women's State prison for womxn who are currently serving long-term or life sentences.

The verb "to call" in Hebrew is *vayiqra*. Like the English verb, it can mean many things - to summon, to proclaim, to be invited. Through just a few of the smatterings of what i shared in my other required writings, you will find i've been invited to use my gifts and my curiosity to continue to lead others in this process of a spiritual life, collectively. G-d has "used" nature and humans and literature and storms and poverty and brokenness and love and grace and kindness over and over again - all through the times when i didn't want to listen - to invite me into the space of discovery of what it means to lead others... to explore what it means to be a part of something much larger than we'll ever really get to understand.

i originally went to Seminary because i was curious why "G-d was everywhere" for me. i battled with this part of the sharing of my spiritual journey at first - i'd ask myself what does it mean to be curious about G-d and for some reason, i was ashamed of my curiosity - what right did i have to explore this question, what did it mean to develop questions around my lived and educational experiences of the deep embodied impact of White Supremacy, Capitalism, and the relationship to "American Christianity"? What i've

continued to learn is that America was founded on the belief that Christianity should be not only a “way of believing in G-d”, but (at times in our history) has become a “way of governing land and bodies”. In fact, reflecting back on some of the sermons i've given over the past three years, this is a prevalent theme i explore while introducing or reminding us of how G-d's expressions of Love for us appears time-and-time again.

i've an unique approach to describing or investigating my spiritual journey in this ordination paper. As you will continue to experience with me, i center a lot of my spiritual growth through the embodied exploration of creative endeavors, frolicking in the outdoors, engaging with a lot of reading all while learning alongside communities from various backgrounds - many of whom are living with some type of past or current trauma. And often, when talking about those experiences, i tend to rely a lot on my continuing study of Liberation, Black, and Womanist Theology - included at the end of this paper is a list of works referenced that have guided me most recently. Where all moments prior to this unique experience molded me, i believe it was the work inside the Prison where i developed the “trail eyes” needed to guide me in the next steps of my faith and spiritual discernment. And, because i was guided and molded by my public theology and leadership courses while attending Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia, i focus much of my theological framing on the interactions with and amongst people beyond church's walls. That includes folx directly impacted by incarceration, homelessness, single-motherhood, Whiteness, Patriarchy, gender-based violence, and socio-economic class distinctions.

Throughout my Spiritual Journey over the last 10+ years, i've had to present my Spiritual Journey or Calling as a way to gain access to Seminary, Clinical work, Fellowships, and now this process. Not once has this been an easy thing to write because i feel it has always been just that - to gain access to something. i want this documentation to be different, at least in the accessing part - i want it to serve as a space where i can openly explore and share with those who might care about how i move alongside others in this world - a real discernment. When thinking through how to find harmony while pushing back against the idea of production or even the need to gain access to something, you will get a meandering of my current understanding of this call. Warning - even after writing this and then

presenting it to a group of people, i reserve the right to continue to grow and refine and then change my beliefs and understandings of living by faith in G-d's Love.

As a practicing theologian and aspiring writer, throughout the past 2-years when engaging with Scripture in order to prepare a sermon or for my own study, my focus has often been on who is left out of the story - who goes unnamed - who is the most impacted by the decisions made by the dominant culture. As a poet and writer, "showing and not telling" is a tenant for all writers and i now know that changes a bit when thinking about how to sit alongside those who might be at the worst moment(s) of their life. How do we show G-d is with us when we don't feel it? How can we identify with an expression of faith that only focuses on who is named as an important character/historical figure in the story and allows the assumption that everyone else isn't important to the story (while there are many examples, as i write this during Advent 2022, Joseph comes to mind). What being a poet and writer has taught me, is there are many wonderful ways in which one might express themselves and/or deal or cope with the difficulty we experience in life. What being an aspiring theologian and pastor has taught me is even the unnamed are vital to G-d's Love and Call to be in community. How i can cultivate this kind of curiosity and faith in a loving G-d is something i'm continuing to embody each time i provide Pastoral Care and/or when i'm invited to preach. If given the opportunity to act in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ, i'm excited to build on what has become a methodology, theology, and thus praxis of my life.

my history as a teacher working with students diagnosed with special needs and those pursuing their high school equivalency, i've found i've had to dig deeper and find creative ways in which to communicate, to connect, to empower, and uplift. What teaching has taught me is the depths of neglect humans can go when choosing to forget about a group of people, G-d's children, despite what so many of the Parables of Jesus teaches us (ie: The Parable of the Good Samaritan). Why is it that so many go without? These experiences and my students' drive to live a life full of love and laughter and acceptance, drives me to want to honor their lives by advocating for their dignity.

And, as i Mother, i quickly learned what i believe to be true or best for someone else was never the case. i learned to be humble quickly. i learned to set aside my expectations and begin to honor another human that even from my seed and womb, was almost always foreign to me. Being a mother to my son opened up the opportunities to explore other expressions of faith and learn how to honor the questions my son may have had about G-d and so much more about life as we looked for the answers together. my son taught and continues to teach me to love humans unconditionally.

i feel all of these experiences should be shared because they have made me the womxn i am today. And, never did i think that this work would prepare me for a life exploring spirituality in this way alongside folx. What i hope to continue to learn is to find new ways to sit with others while in the spaces of the in-between (you'll hear me talk about this a lot) while engaging in our sacred texts as a guide to work towards healing. i desire every day to be a better version of myself. To listen more - which not only means to hear what folks are saying and how they are saying it, but also to watch and be aware of the moment in order to better exist in the in-between to care for them. Thích Nhất Hạnh stated, "i will care for you but i cannot keep you from suffering," and this is my guiding principle when providing some type of pastoral care to folx. Ilia Delio shares, "Jesus knew of the deeper truth hidden beneath the surface of human judgment, namely that this broken, anxious world is oozing with G-d. He asked us to have faith, to believe the reign of G-d is among us and within us, (email communication through Father Richard Rohr) and we see this time and time again throughout our sacred texts. Likewise, i am and will always be a practitioner of sharing in G-d's love, of abolitionist work and a weaver of faith, love, hope, and community. i believe in humanity and will always advocate for what i like to call a "love revolution" or a "kindness conspiracy".

i mentioned above about reserving the right to change. Let me give you a brief example of that change and how much it continues to inform the type of ministry work i'd like to do alongside others. It happened during the first year of COVID. Getting to work with a progressive congregation in a conservative town (The Fountains UMC), while seeking ordination through another congregation (Church of the Beatitudes) and denomination

(SWUCC Conference), while completing my required Clinical Pastoral Education (Templo Cristiano Central) hours virtually with the San Francisco Night Ministry, while becoming a Newbigin (Faith & Justice) Fellow, while living through COVID-19... proved incredibly challenging and remarkably rewarding. Where i originally believed i wanted to only engage in ministry with the unhoused or unfree, throughout the last 2+ years, i discovered a good portion of my faith and my spiritual journey is understanding how to live and pastor in the “in-between” moments, both with myself and with others.

i've discovered there is still so much to learn but also, to have confidence in what i already know. Each of the experiences i shared with you in this paper and my many other writings, have molded and shaped who i already was - a womxn with a passion to have Faith, Hope, and Love in G-d, in and with others, and for seeking G-d's comforting Love while existing in the spaces of “in-between”. For me, this “in-between” is a continual daily search of what it means to exist in a world when: both suffering and non-suffering exists; when there are people who are free while others are in the dark shadows of unfreedom; when love and hate can exist within each of us, even at the very same time; and when there seems to be no hope while reading all about Hope in our Scriptures (ie: one of my favorite scriptures Jeremiah 29:11). To better understand these experiences and moments, i've turned to G-d and my faith to guide me in practical processes in which to minister with and to others. The way this looks now, is this very deep exploration of trauma, healing, transformation, change, and through all of it, continuing to learn how to remain curious. A wonderful quote from an article i read in 2020 i think encapsulates my thought process at this very difficult time in life, “From a cosmic perspective, our ignorance is vastly more complete than our knowledge. In many contexts, we don't even know what we don't know. The only reasonable response to this conundrum is to practice the spiritual discipline of radical openness — to take in everything we can,” (Galen Guengerich, *The Medium*). Everything i've shared through my study and writings have brought me closer to understanding a faith and my calling to ordained ministry, one filled with Faith, Hope, and Love. Faith in the process, Hope in the healing, and Love everyone at every moment even when it feels impossible to do so.

Because of all of these identity markers, my theology deepened and my passion for wanting to help co-create a new narrative was/is being cultivated. I find myself continually asking questions around: why we still desire to gender G-d (even in the midst of the awakening on the expressions of gender) and the impact that has on certain communities; how do we use our scriptures to examine who we imprison and why or stated another way, who is worthy of salvation; how can we continue to shed light on the similarities of capitalism and Protestant theology and their role in justice without shaming another way of believing; and how, in the spite of so much loss and trauma and war and intentional cultural shifts to separate us and not unite us, how do we find and experience the Love of G-d? This is not the Faith, Hope, nor Love I was taught in Sunday School or even as a Rainbow Girl. As it stands now, my praxis must and will continue to seek out the ways in which we, as a collective of faith leaders, theologians, writers, artists, and humanities practitioners, continually and constantly find ways in which we create a world where we build new understandings that dismantle what we know and understand about the faith we practice now. In particular, to have a religion that guides us to, “transform theology which destabilizes pre-established notions about G-d and humanity and responds to contemporary experiences of oppression,” (Gebara, 2013) - one where we seek dignity for all of G-d’s creations.

One long common thread in my life has been a desire to teach, to learn, to explore, to dialogue, to put collective growth into action through different careers - now however, this journey has demonstrated to me that cultivating the craft of being a pastor is my calling - not only the desire to preach, but to also provide pastoral care and the sacraments and other rites of passages gently shepherding folk through the “in-between”. While there are many reasons why Church of the Beatitudes in my “home” church, I love it is the Beatitudes given by Jesus on the Sermon of the Mount which have guided me throughout my journey to where I am today. This is evident in ways I’ve become engaged in prison ministry (Matthew 5:10-11) through the teaching and exploration of G-d’s liberating Love each of us are given with our first breath (Matthew 5:8); in my outreach to communities experiencing homelessness through the learning of someone’s name and the dialogue around what dignity means to us (Matthew 5:3, 5); the learning more about the ways humans impact the environment and desire for land occupation that forces human

migration; and all of this while struggling with the theology of what G-d's Love really means in these real lived experiences (Matthew 5:6). i believe in the continual process to learn how to do these things, to live in the spaces of the in-between asking and knowing, is vital to how we can model Jesus' teachings in order for us all to have a more embodied experience of G-d's Love in the world, now and for all the days to come.

These are the invitations G-d has given me - a purpose and a passion has been a nagging feeling and hasn't gone away. Like Lauren Olamina, the protagonist in Octavia E. Butler's "Parable of the Sower" states, "I'm not creating anything new, i'm discovering what was there all along - antiquity, growth, justice, love, and liberation". And in that, learning what it means to bring others with me - summoning of all to better understand how to live a life knowing one is loved and what our collective roles as a church can be beyond charity.

In a consultation with a womxn i admire deeply, Dr. Grace Gamez helped me to understand my journey is one i've finally decided to "lean into" - the journey or the invitation to the still speaking G-d who continues to show me the presence and the call in all things and all beings. Saying yes to this invitation prior to COVID-19 and now deeply exploring this invitation in the midst of this global calamity, has led me to better understand my journey is one centered in liberation and justice through action and deep study of the written text. And, to understand my "divine" invitation is really one that centers G-d's Love to discover how to be with people in the spaces of the in-between of life to practice collective healing and to embark on the journey of understanding.

*For, "every time I understand a little more, I wonder why it's taken me so long - why was there ever a time when I didn't understand a thing so obvious and real and true. To be named is to be summoned into being and to name is to participate in this project of living," (Butler, 93).*

In my everyday practices, whether it be working with a progressive church in a conservative community, being a volunteer Chaplain to the employees of the Maricopa County Sheriff's office, working with an ecumenical state-based non-profit as a Social Justice advocate, volunteering on the Careline of the SF Night Ministry or inside

Perryville State prison, and finally being a co-leader of the Faith & Justice 2021/22 cohort, i'm always seeking faith and learning justice - which is another way of saying i'm pursuing a more beautiful, diverse, expansive, and liberating vision of Christian faith in the world in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

With all i'm engaged in, i've been a direct witness to many of those who are unhoused, identify as LGBTQIA, and others who have shared with me about their experiences of being harmed by a Patriarchal White American practice of Christianity. What i'm learning is that trauma runs deeper and can appear to be felt more intensely than what G-d's Love can. This breaks me open in a lot of ways. Because of those shared vulnerable moments, i'm continually looking for new ways in which the United Church of Christ can not only recognize our roles in those moments where we proclaim a faith that causes harm but also to help heal ourselves and then walk alongside others as they journey towards healing the trauma they've accumulated. The history of our denomination demonstrates we continue to evolve to meet the needs' of G-d's people here and today - for we honor a still speaking G-d - and this is a journey i embrace and am excited to continue to cultivate as a teacher and a pastor.

### **Theology of G-d, Jesus, and the Trinity**

#### *Who is G-d - Part 1: G-d is Justice in action?*

Personally, i embody (experience) G-d as a presence or an energy and the life i see in all living creatures. Right now, part of my call is to flesh out what it means to be comfortable expressing to "church folx" about how i don't only feel G-d's presence in a church setting. i feel G-d's guidance and G-d's presence in literature, in nature, in the moments of the exchange of Love and Grace with others, and in hindsight, even in the moments of consternation and harm. Of late, i understand how G-d's mercies are meaningless without G-d's justice. And the concept of justice has no bearing if G-d cannot be offended. i embrace the presence of G-d in all spaces and in all times - even if those times are prayers for, moments during, or reflections upon all while seeking justice in and through G-d's Love.

#### *Who is G-d - Part 2: G-d is Teacher?*



In the current practice of my faith, i find G-d invites me to be curious - to explore the Old and New Testaments in ways to help me to understand our history - where we as believers have come from to all the possibilities of where we can grow. Does my understanding of G-d need to happen like with so many stories of mystics or prophets - do i need to hear G-d speak to me directly to be a true believer or even a true teacher?

In Christianity, there are two very different creation stories and yet, there are two. The Gospels all have varying accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. G-d found and continues to find many different ways to help us remain curious (ie: Matthew 6:7-8) about who we are and why we are here and what it all means. As much as i'd like to credit our sacred texts for learning how to love and be in relationship with myself and one another to honor my belief in G-d, i know that has not had an impact on me - meaning i've not read a verse or a story out of the Bible and had an epiphany. In fact, it still doesn't happen, even in all my attempts. It's been the moments where i've chosen to allow myself to be open to relationships with myself and others; with the words and stories being read or shared; when i'm out with my feet playing with the soil and the smell of the trees fills my nostrils and the breeze brushes my skin; and when i've honored my curiosity by slowing down and at times, getting it all wrong where i thought i experienced epiphanies.

*Epiphanies, often post-experience and reflection, are relational. Caring for all of Creation is relational. Understanding how to care for myself emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically is relational. Providing hope to a broken world or for the people surviving brokenness is relational. For everything is both living and dying at the very same time.*

In my curiosity, i've discovered G-d is in the moments where questions are asked while not experiencing shame - G-d is knowing our inherent dignity. G-d is asking me to lean in and to invite congregants to experience G-d's presence communally and in the spaces of the in-between. And with this invitation, i'm provided an opportunity to view myself, not out of fear of being small, but a small part of something so much larger - in and on behalf of a denomination where the motto is, "G-d is still speaking".

*Who is G-d - Part 3: G-d is Change?*

G-d is Love. G-d is Change - "All that you touch You Change. All that you Change, Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. G-d is Change," (Butler, 1993). From a religious perspective, particularly from a Christian perspective and throughout our Ancient text, i've discovered the Love G-d displays through all the hard and traumatic stories to the acts of Jesus being truly present with people is how we must move forward. This is how we learn how to embody the Spirit. This is a type of Love that creates the conditions/possibilities for another way of imagining freedom. Freedom to be - Freedom to Love - Freedom to fail - Freedom to succeed - Freedom of Rest - Freedom to ask the hard questions and to be held - Freedom to explore what our relationship to power could and should be - Freedom to move beyond "history repeating itself".

While this Embodiment of Love or of Spirituality may be my call, i know it may not be the call of the congregation that calls me to serve them, and that is okay - for i believe in co-creating the conditions for a process of becoming and being relational to each other by breaking through the imaginary borders we have created to feel safe or to feel loved. This means we must move beyond ourselves and into a collective space for any of this to really work. We have to learn how to be vulnerable and held. Perhaps this means imagining a church which reaches beyond the building's walls and property, beyond our own hesitations and beliefs that were formed to deem who is worthy of the dignity of G-d's Love, and to grow through the hard and the good while embodying the Spirit of transformation and Freedom.

i believe the practice of slowing down allows me to explore varying types of theological reflections on what or who G-d is and those ruminations will evolve as i will. While my CV is full of activity, very rarely did i allow it to overcome me - all i'm engaged in, taught me how to allow time to embody what was being taught and storing away what might be useful later. i pray this praxis will invite the congregation i'm invited into, to integrate theological reflection beyond our shared time together and help to reimagine a way of living and practicing our Christian principles across all sectors of life - to build on what the United

Church of Christ has been and continues to be in our world - a denomination that seeks to repair brokenness and transform the ways in which we each hear and experience G-d still speaking.

#### *Who is G-d - Part 4: G-d is Comfort?*

Throughout my life, G-d has served as a source of comfort for me in times where i found myself lost or alone. i've struggled much throughout my life searching for what it means to identify as a Child of G-d. Early on i found myself really confused at why G-d was given the characteristics of a loving and all-knowing, all-powerful G-d who would allow bad things to happen to all living creatures on Mother Earth. And, at the same time, finding myself falling in love with the image of a Son who was amongst the sheep and the shepherders. But my theology and i matured and i can't wait for the opportunity to witness the same type of growth collectively with congregations i engage with.

#### *Who is Jesus and the Spirit?*

i'm fully aware of the long history of Christianity's debates and struggles with a belief and understanding about the divinity of Jesus and i respect, understand, and honor those beliefs (ie: the Council of Nicea, 325). However, the way in which i experience and understand Jesus personally and in the communities beyond Christianity's influence is that he was and is (through the Spirit) one of us and the divinity of Jesus is much like the divinity of each of us. While i haven't always felt this way, it has been in and through my interfaith work as well as my community-based organizing where my view of the divinity of Jesus has changed.

"Jesus is my homie." What i mean is, Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus' works as described throughout the New Testament are present in all the times my comrades and i seek justice in what appears to be a broken world. i believe we should model our lives after the stories we know of Jesus. And so, the importance of who Jesus was/is in history, for me, models the many people before and after Jesus' life who came about, took risks, and sacrificed every comfort to do the work in the name of their interpretation of their G-d. All of the prophets, movement makers, and martyrs who have made the history books (or the ones we're still discovering) are inspired to do the work they do because of their experience of G-d or a

higher being while living in a world that appeared to not honor the same commitments. For me, it's Jesus and the life he modeled that drew me into the work i want to do alongside others.

Even though we were created in the likeness of G-d, we witness throughout scripture time-and-time again how we falter and yet, G-d still loves us. To be loved by G-d is divine. i believe we are all divine - we are all called forth to be what God beckons us to be and to do for every living creature. And for me at this time, this means to re-imagine the ways in which we follow the path of Jesus before his birth all the way through the tomorrows still to come. It's imperative for me to have humility about the positions i hold and embark on for i'm not walking in other's shoes, i'm walking alongside folx in order to live in a way Jesus and so many before and after him lived. i pray as i continue on this ordination and pastoral endeavor, those i walk alongside will engage in the winding path of co-creating a sense of Freedom and Dignity for all those Jesus walked, talked, ate, and drank with, to see the divinity in all living creation - for that is the Spirit.

*i believe Jesus is indeed the head of the Church. Throughout all my lived experiences and my studies in Seminary and other theological avenues in interfaith circles, i chose to be a Christian and the life of Jesus, while he lived, is vital to how i choose to move in the world.*

In seminary, i was invited to think of the Spirit differently. It was here i began to understand the Spirit is the movement of Jesus' beliefs in G-d. It was in the prison i embodied the presence of the Spirit firsthand. The Spirit is the energy that moves through each of us and has the potential to engage us in a deeper way of living - a way of life that is a demonstration of an understanding of Jesus' life and ministry. i believe in the Spirit and know it is still very present in the world and i'm blessed to be witness to the magic of those moments.

### **Theology of Salvation/Atonement**

i don't believe in sin, at least not in the way traditional White Patriarchal Protestant Christianity interprets sin. i believe we all make errors and mistakes in our ethical and moral guidelines as well in the laws of scripture, but i don't subscribe to the belief people

who “sin” (break these codes/laws) should be shamed or told we are not worthy of G-d's Love. Personally, i believe “sin” invites us closer to one another in the process of seeking healing and a deeper connection with one another and with G-d.

The theologies that guide me in this understanding of “sin” are Liberation, Black, and Womanist Theology. And, when sitting alongside womxn who are serving unfair long-term or life sentences because of the impacts of violence and because of the ways in which womxn are deemed unworthy of salvation by a patriarchal approach of believing has changed the essence of who i was and am. i admire and attempt to model the work and theology of Ivone Gebara, particularly the theology found in her book, “Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation” which has guided me thoughtfully in working with those impacted by incarceration. She wonderfully states, “The problem that captivates my thinking is not the existence of evil, but rather the understanding of it, the way it is interpreted, and especially the role this interpretation has played in history and theology, particularly in relationship to women,” (1).

i write extensively about my experience inside the prison in my full-spiritual journey paper and i invite you to read those in order to understand how during that time, our lives were changed collectively, because we were able to explore the feelings of empathy, sympathy, individual beliefs, weaknesses, hope, confinement, an inescapable world, rape, acceptance, race, pain, famine, war and the cultural ways of living - by allowing the Spirit to move in and through us. Building on these shared feelings, we explored freedom versus unfreedom in relationship to our collective and individual understandings of “sin”. These discoveries ranged from how much do we understand the reality of the levels of poverty and the impact of poverty to our current lived experiences; how much our experiences and writings reveal gendered discrimination; and, how much of our experiences - where they came from and what their beliefs are regarding this idea of salvation and heaven – influence how we believe we are and will be seen. So many of the system-involved womxn shared how through our exploration of home and then of salvation, changed their thinking and began to experience a new way of existence, one contrary to - “living out a kind of destiny”, one designed by our American capitalistic and Protestant society where they may never be

viewed as someone deserving of salvation. They explored Freedom in a new way.

### **Theology of Sacraments/Baptism**

Sacrament in a sense is a symbol of something hidden and has great significance. I view the sacraments of Christianity as representing both the spiritual and the material - a way of connecting antiquity to modernity; the sacred and the earthly; the unwelcomed to the welcomed; and death and life.

*Sacraments sit in the in-between. Sacraments are an invitation.*

As I learned in my UCC History and Polity class, sacraments, simply put, are a covenant made between a person or a group of people between each other, sometimes the institution of the church, and more importantly, to G-d. According to the text we read, the term covenant did not appear to be a major "factor" in the UCC until the 1984 and 1986 Manual of Ministry and it meant a commitment between churches, ministers and other governing bodies (Walker p2509). This covenant took the shape early on as a way for each body to be in relation to one another and to the will of G-d - translated as G-d's grace for humanity. The sacraments of communion and baptism represented people's commitment to G-d and G-d's commitment of Grace and Mercy. These acts or rituals are not *us* doing something for recognition as much as it's *G-d coming to us* and giving us the space to explore our relationship with G-d and with people. The meaning is not just limited to these rituals, G-d finds many ways in which to extend Love to G-d's people.

### **Communion**

When we are invited to the table to partake of the bread and wine, I've embodied an array of emotions and meanings. When participating in the act of communion, I'm reminded of the way Jesus invited the disciples to gather in a meal together, despite any action leading up to his execution. I'm reminded of all those who have partaken in this sacred act as a way to remember and honor their traditions. I'm reminded of connecting the unseen to the seen - G-d and Jesus to us here today. I'm reminded of all the times communion was denied to people and how the United Church of Christ promotes an Open Table. I'm reminded of how Jesus referenced the symbol of the bread to his body - the nourishment needed to live a life

held in G-d's Grace and Love and how he referenced wine as a symbol of his blood - from the Earth we come and to the Earth we return.

Growing up, i was taught communion was the body and blood of Christ - it was not an image i wanted to imagine nor an act i wanted to participate in (at least not for the meaning i was given). i struggled with the idea that some Christian denominations celebrate the brutality of Jesus' death (as a way one must serve G-d) and communion seemed to be an extension of that brutality. While my feelings have changed, i credit it to the fact i currently serve as a volunteer pastoral apprentice with St. Peter's Ministry where volunteers are asked to serve communion to the system-involved womxn. i remember the first time i assisted in serving communion with my mentor, Deacon Gay... i was brought to tears upon looking into the womxn's eyes, handing them the bread and stating, "the body of Christ given for you". There was a palpable exchange of the Spirit in those interactions and it is one i still feel today - two years after the first time i helped to serve.

There is something special about this exchange and it wouldn't be possible without all of the variations and understandings of what communion means to Christians. We're invited to be one with G-d through the sacrifice of Jesus and we are invited to be one with one another here at this very moment. i'll never again allow myself to associate it with the violence surrounding the experience of Jesus' execution nor the exclusion of others.

## **Baptism**

In the United Church of Christ, the ritual of baptism is a sacrament representing an outward sign of G-d's Grace and through the ritual of baptism, a person is joined not only with the universal church but also with the body of Christ. In the "Practices of Faith in United Church of Christ" published by Local Church Ministries, it states baptism with water and the Holy Spirit is the sign and seal of our common discipleship. The act of baptism also marks the beginning of a new life of discipleship *with* Christ - both for the baptized *and* for the witnesses.

my theology of baptism centers around two "markers" - community and identity. i'll

explain a bit more below but want to invite us to pause to recognize that i am a continual learner of embodied spirituality and embodied healing - meaning, i pay attention to how my body feels in a space (physical and mental) in particular, when i am in relationship with others around me. While i've experienced/embodied the Spirit moving in and through a space and time of communion with the womxn currently incarcerated, i've not experienced a baptism in any form as most of my privileged journey of discernment came to life in 2019 leading up to the start of our global calamities.

Baptisms just stopped. i imagine so did most of the ways in which people practiced rituals, especially the ones in which help them feel community and to help them reconnect to their identity in the midst of so much change. What is the role of the sacraments and what does it mean for the communities we are called to serve? i tend to ask a lot of questions to help me discern what being a leader alongside folx looks like in a time where all living creatures are asking us to continue to grow in our spirituality and our practices of a spirituality that remembers us all - ancestors, us now, and our children. So please grant me the Grace to be curious around my theology of baptism.

### *Community*

In Seminary i took a class on the art of ritual where we explored not only the ritual, but the meanings that have been historically connected to it. We learned that rituals are soulful practices of taking an everyday activity and making it meaningful. We learned that partaking in rituals tied to antiquity is like taking a pilgrimage - a transformative journey to a special or sacred space and is defined by transformation. And, more often than not, partaking in that ritual helps us to leave one state of being or knowing and come back changed in some way. We were also invited to think critically about the "two-way venues" in which worship leaders and those who are recipients of the ritual, can contribute and examine the effect ritual has on our individual and collective faith and beliefs and how that impacts our world.

*In regards to baptism, i believe the meaning isn't just strictly tied to the person being baptized. There's also meaning found with those who are witness to the ritual and of course*



*for those of us who perform the ritual. While baptism serves as a visual sign and seal of G-d's Grace and Love, for me, it is also the beginning of a commitment to lead a faithful/filled life on many levels. Meaning, the ritual is a reminder to all of the church that this beloved being is now in the care of the church forever more.*

The verse that helps me better interact with this concept of baptism, is found in Acts 2:37-41. In Acts, Peter asked his followers for this necessary change in order to help them embody the breathtaking work of a G-d who will reveal a faithfulness to G-d's ancient promise now for us in the present moment. We're now asked to do more - to be *open and expansive* in our continued praxis of faith. To be baptized is to recognize a new call to follow G-d and not the call of the world. To be baptized is to join in community to model the life of Jesus in and through G-d's expression of Love. In this scripture, Paul is stating that being baptized represents an invitation to choose to live a life modeled by Jesus - one mostly spent amongst and with the community.

*i'd like to believe my theology of baptism happens when those who are receiving it and those who are performing it become curious [together] about what baptism is and means. Being in dialogue while exploring ritual - what an exciting opportunity to serve!*

### *Identity*

Now, what or how my theology of baptism or of the sacraments look or feel like in real time in 2023, right now, i can't say for sure beyond recognizing and honoring the very important invitation to be in covenant with G-d. What i can say is "the how" and "the what" of the sacraments of communion and baptism will be explored and practiced *with* each person that answers that invitation and will be an ongoing conversation *with* the congregation i'm invited into. i believe any good leader starts with getting to know one another, by inviting each of us to think more deeply about the sacraments under the protective umbrella of the United Church of Christ's theologies. How do we continue to communally lean into *G-d is Still Speaking* through baptism and communion is something that i'm excited to continue to grow in my theology and praxis.

In a recent sermon, Pastor David Felton shared a little about the identity of those who participate in the ritual of baptism and it resonated deeply with me. One of the things that he shared was how our understanding of baptism has evolved with the passing of time and the growth of culture or cultures that participate in the ritual act of baptism. He encourages us to think about the different ways that folx view the ritual and what that means for us.

As a single-mother, beyond my Methodist upbringing, my exposure to baptism was a sign of repentance, a washing away of the old (perhaps sin) and welcoming in the new (G-d's Love and Covenant). It was at this time in my life where i experienced a great deal of shame and was able to understand why some cultures hold this type of view on the importance of this ritual. But that is not what i choose to believe. i believe being baptized can be "simply acknowledging our identity is connected to G-d and we are a beloved child of G-d". Our obligation is not only are we in covenant with G-d, but now with one another... "We are empowered to do more and be more than we could ever otherwise think or imagine."

For me now, there is something comforting about the identity Pastor Felton alludes to and with what the United Church of Christ's belief in baptism is. Once you are baptized, the covenant between the baptized and G-d and the community is all that is needed and it doesn't happen in ritual format over and over again - just once.

*When i think more deeply about what this really means, is G-d meets us in the spaces of the "in-between" and it doesn't come through a display of shame or sin, it comes from G-d's ancient promise for each of us in the moment of baptism all the way to the present and future moments.*

We're invited to do more - to be open and expansive in our continued praxis of faith. And as a reminder, these sacred acts or rituals are not *us* doing something for recognition as much as it's *G-d coming to us* and giving us the space to explore our relationship with G-d and with people. The meaning is not just limited to these rituals, G-d finds many ways in which

to extend love to G-d's people.

*“What follows from this moment is neither utopian nor unrealistic, but a clear trajectory born of the sure exposure to the divine,” (Jennings, 38).*

### **Knowledge of 4 Different Streams of UCC**

When i was first introduced to the United Church of Christ in a more substantial way, i was invited to think about the United Church of Christ as the heart and the denominations that ultimately led to the creation of UCC as we know it now, as the chambers of the heart. What attracted me to the UCC originally was the Open and Affirming designation of a church my ex-wife and i began to attend.

We had attended a non-denominational church back in Philadelphia and loved the co-pastors and the way they invited congregants to engage with the majority of the text - all except for the texts used to shame same sex couples. When we moved back to Arizona, our first requirement was to find a church that accepted us and would marry us if the opportunity ever arose (this was prior to the 2015 Obama Administration's proclamation). The church we settled on was Open and Affirming and we attended as much as we could seeing we lived about 45-minutes from the church.

i was attending Seminary at the time and began to use my resources to learn more about who and what the UCC was. i learned how we believe in the oneness of all, the unity of diverse thought while knowing we need not agree to be able to worship together. And, there is a gift in being able to share our testimonies and questions all while exploring how to live in the Grace and Love of G-d. Since then, i participated in a history and polity class in the Spring of 2020 and learned the United Church of Christ came into being in 1957 - it was through the risk-taking of four separate denominations - Evangelical and Reformed Churches and the Congregational Christian Churches.

During the history and polity class, i found a likeness to how i was brought up as well as how many similarities there were to the type of community organizing i was introduced to. So for this portion, i'll share how two most influenced me - for better or worse. For

example, in the community organizing circles, i was being conditioned to practice the Zapatista, Black Panther, and the Young Lords approaches to advocating alongside communities. This praxis reminded me of how the Congregationalists approached slavery, prisons, and how those diagnosed with mental and physical disabilities were treated. i also saw/see value in the need for individual congregations or community advocacy groups to work independently and yet find ways to work cooperatively and support the work of others. i also admire the risks the Congregationalists took in adapting their theologies to the conditions related to time, space and place - thus breaking away from other Protestant theologies (ie: the Methodist and Baptist) that didn't align to where they felt they needed to go.

Growing up in the state of Pennsylvania, as a Methodist, we were highly influenced by the Reformed Church, whether it be through laws or culture or to Calvinist thought. i was taught to believe G-d blessed the United States because we expressed a religious discipline and a work ethic i've now come to understand is deeply entwined with capitalism. What i appreciate about the Reformed church is the tendency toward a unity in Christian thought while also honoring the diversity of thoughts and expressions while seeking justice for G-d's people.

While what once drew me to the UCC was the Open and Affirming designation, it has become so much more. Justice is the beating of the heart of the UCC and it is why i'm here, why i want to serve in and on behalf of the greater United Church of Christ. It's also ministries like the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries, where we fully explore varying abilities as well as our mental and sexual health and Faithful Action Ministries focusing on the environment and racial justice.

The gospel is not a "set-in-stone" document and neither is our denomination. Where we find ourselves in today's world, i believe we're beckoned to imagine a new way of practicing Christianity and i think not only is the United Church of Christ positioned to do this, but on an intra and interpersonal level, so are all those we come in contact with. And, i hope to find myself immersed and dreaming alongside people who gently push and guide me to think more deeply about what i think i know - to discover the freedom that comes from healing and transforming. i believe in the UCC's beliefs that we must seek to proclaim in

word and action the Gospel of Jesus, to work for reconciliation and the unity of the broken Body of Christ, and to seek justice and liberation for all.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout my Ordination Paper, Marks of Ministry, and other requirements, it was my intent to intimately share a little bit about myself while also seeking to demonstrate the desire for a partnership covenant - one that seeks to work together, learn together, feel together, succeed and fail together. i pray you see and feel my openness and desire to support the community i'm blessed to be called to serve in and on behalf of our denomination. i pray you see my faithfulness in the journey to follow the mission of Jesus and to struggle with and practice the gospel of Christ. For it is time for us to seek freedom for all. "Freedom requires patience with ourselves...it's the process of your soul learning to trust again - trust that it can rest and love and be still without being destroyed," (Riley, 189).

## **Works Consulted - Books**

*List of books read that enhanced my learning during the time of discernment.*

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### **Works Consulted - Podcasts**

*List of podcasts that enhanced my learning during the time of discernment.*

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Finding Our Way: Prentis Hempill. (2021-22).

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On Being: Krista Tippett. (2020-22).

Poetry Unbound: Pdraig o'Tuama. (2021-22)



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The Growing Edge: Carrie Newcomer & Parker Palmer. (2020-22).  
The Liturgists Podcast: The Liturgists. (2022).  
The Word Resistance: The Word is Resistance. (2021-22).  
Turning to the Mystics: James Finley. (2022).

### **Works Consulted - Theologians, Artists, Writers**

*List of theologians, artists, and writers beyond the list above who enhanced my learning during the time of discernment.*

Sherman Alexie - poet  
Vasu Bandhu - co-worker and Buddhist Monk  
Ann Begay - friend and activist  
Rev. Doug Bland - pastor  
Rev. Teresa Blythe - Spiritual Advisor  
Dr. Kenneth Bingham - writer and professor  
Walter Brueggeman - theologian  
Dr. Jason Brunner - professor  
Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon - Womanist Theologian  
Rev. Dr. Dosia Carlson - Pastor  
Eddie Chavez-Calderon - friend and activist  
Congregations of Beatitudes UCC, The Fountains UMC, and Encanto Community Church  
Dr. Gloria Cuadrez - friend and professor  
Dr. Peter Choi - pastor  
Rev. Christine Dance - friend and pastor  
Dr. Dawn Demps - friend and professor  
Pat Ezerski - Office Administrator  
Rev. David Felton - pastor  
Lucy Fredrickson - Local Church Committee  
Dr. Grace Gamez - friend, activist, Local Church Council

Dr. Alan Gomez - friend, activist, Local Church Council  
Thích Nhất Hạnh - theologian  
Freedom Haley - friend  
Cassidy Hall - theologian  
Rev. Tracy Howe - friend and pastor  
Zeffy Hutchison-Penn - son  
Natalia Imperatori Lee - Womanist Theologian  
Dr. Danielle Lewis - friend  
Rev. Rebecca McElfresh - pastor  
Debbie Manuel - friend and activist  
Dr. Christine Marin - friend and professor  
Norma Martinez - congregant  
Rev. Jim Meadows - pastor and Local Church Council  
Rev. Tony Minear - pastor  
Aja Monet - poet  
Ken Nyman - Local Church Committee  
Mercy Amba Oduyoye - Womanist Theologian  
Padraig o'Tauma - poet & theologian  
PSC Crew - thought partners  
Vince and Claudia Piano - mentors and Love Practitioners  
Cole Arthur Riley - theologian  
Esther Rings - Congregant  
Sally Rings - Congregant  
Mayra Rivera - Womanist Theologian  
Rev. Redeem Robinson - pastor  
Father Richard Rohr - theologian and pastor  
Deacon Gay Romack - Mentor and Local Church Council  
Bayard Rustin - scholar, theologian, & activist  
Rev. Katie Sexton - co-worker and pastor  
Evelyn Sowell - Congregant  
Rev. Myra Taylor - pastor

Templo Cristiana Central CPE program

Rev. Debi Thomas - theologian

Krista Tippet - writer & theologian

Emilie Townes - Womanist Theologian

Jae Tate Ujania - Therapist

Rev. Susan Valiquette - pastor

Robin Wall Kimmerer - writer

Rev. Ron Weatherly - pastor

Shaunynai Weatherly - friend

Max Weber - theologian/scholar

Ann Wheat - Congregant

Malcom X - Theologian

\*System-involved womxn incarcerated inside Perryville Womxn's Prison - Santa Cruz and Lumley Units and the callers of the San Francisco Night Ministry\*