

Perspectives on Theology, History & Polity,
and Ministry as Experienced on My Faith Journey

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Personal Statement of Faith

What I Believe About the Bible

I believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. I believe that God used different people and different forms of writing to help all people understand their hope in Christ. I believe that parts of the Bible are stories and that other parts are specific commands or guidelines written to help all people know how to live their lives in the will of God. I believe that there are many passages in the Bible that were written for the culture and the understanding of the day in which they were written. Although inspired by God, humans held the “pen” and so there is margin for interpretation (just as there is today). I believe that because God created us with brains to think, and provided the Holy Spirit to help us on our spiritual journey, we must seek out the truths that God is affirming for us in this day and time. That is, in my mind, God Is Still Speaking.

Other Sources

I believe that there are other spiritual writings from other faith traditions that are a means to accomplish the same “goals” that the Bible teaches; reliance on a higher power, love for humankind, and an insistence on justice.

The Trinity

I believe that God exists and has being in the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit,

The Father as the creator of Heaven and Earth and everything in it,

The Son, Jesus Christ, whom the Father sent to earth as the Savior and Redeemer for all who will put their faith in Him,

The Holy Spirit, the one who was promised to be a holy comforter after Jesus was raised from the dead.

I believe that it is important to remain sensitive to all people regarding the use of gender-specific terms when discussing the Trinity, remaining as inclusive as possible.

Jesus

I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, and died as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. I believe that during the three days of his death that Jesus descended into hell to conquer the evil one. I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead so that all humankind can be with God in heaven for eternity. I believe at the appointed time in history, Jesus will return, and take those who have believed and put their faith in God to heaven.

People and Sin

I believe that all people are created in God’s image.

I believe that when Adam and Eve acted opposite of God’s direction, all humankind became separated from God.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

I believe that all who confess Jesus as Lord, acting in faith, will be saved.

I believe that Christianity is not the only means whereby humankind can be saved. I believe the God I serve has revealed the truth in other faiths and terminology that will accomplish the same results; eternal life with God.

I believe that once a person accepts God as their Savior, nothing can separate them from that love and provision. A person can certainly fall away from God along their spiritual journey, but God does not reject anyone.

The Church

I believe that the Church is to seek out and implement the teachings of God. The church exists as a safe environment where all people can know God's love and experience peace and acceptance. The Church is a means whereby God's will and purpose is shared. The Church should facilitate help, hope, justice and support in life's challenges. The Church is comprised of people who will facilitate positive social stability in the community and the world.

Heaven and Hell

I believe that Heaven is a real place and that all who believe in God will be there at their appointed time. I believe that God will make the decisions regarding every "qualification" necessary to experience eternal life.

I believe that Hell is a real place and that those who make the distinct choice to live in a manner that is in direct opposition to God's/A Higher Power's teaching and will, will experience eternity there.

My Evolving Theology

I believe that God continues to broaden my understanding of the beliefs that I have previously stated. I have found great comfort in knowing that our still speaking God refines my theology. My desire is to become even more fluent in the many ways God reveals a living and relevant message for all people through constructs and views that differ from my own. One of the important facets that has drawn me to the United Church of Christ is that many differing views and understandings are encouraged and accepted. I rejoice in the opportunity to see Christ revealed in people and value many perspectives with an open heart and mind.

My Faith Pilgrimage

My religious background is very diverse indeed. As a baby, I was baptized in the United Presbyterian Church in Winslow, Arizona. As I remember, it was just understood that our family would attend church and be involved in the life of the church. The church placed a high value on liturgical and traditional approaches to worship. We attended the church until I was in junior high school. Two different senior pastors led the church during my childhood. The church was 98% white, blue-collar workers. Hence, a white pastor was appointed to serve the church. Winslow is very near the Navajo and Hopi reservations, so the church's mission and outreach was to strive to include the Native Americans into the life and ministry of the church. The senior pastor taught higher education classes at the College of Ganado, thus facilitating a connection for mission work. These mission and "inclusion" efforts did not really flourish due to the resistance of many of the congregants to be open and inclusive. The pastor may not have been able to build a solid foundation for this type of mission endeavor before it actually began. I also believe that the Native American people were slow to respond because of a language/cultural barrier which could have been bridged by leadership who could speak the language and fully understand the culture. In an effort to address the deficiencies of the church and its outreach to the Native Americans, Presbytery appointed a senior pastor who was a highly educated, Hopi native. His father was the

Chief of the Hopi tribe. Certainly this would be the key to a strong and successful mission effort, equating to church growth. Unfortunately, the cultural barriers between the senior pastor and the congregation caused even more difficulties. His administrative skills, or lack thereof, did not facilitate growth from either direction. The church dwindled in numbers and has now closed. From a theological standpoint, my time in the Presbyterian Church helped me to understand that God is love, the key to communication with God is prayer, and one should try to do good works and help the people around them come to a saving knowledge of Christ through faith. The corporate worship experience was very liturgical and formal. As I recall there was a tremendous amount of reading of text, high church music, and a somewhat “institutional” feel. There was very little room for an emotional connection or the understanding that God is not in a distant or far off place. God is one with whom we can have a very intimate and personal relationship.

In my junior high and high school years, I attended First Baptist Church of Winslow, a Southern Baptist congregation. In a small town with limited options, especially when it came to church life, I wanted to go to a church where kids my age were. They had a great youth program, an awesome music program, and a preacher who was very dynamic. He seemed to preach and teach from the heart, something that I had not really experienced in the Presbyterian Church. As a person in my early teens, I was searching for a place to belong. I knew from a very early age that music was my passion. I found that, in the church, I could use the gifts that God had given me to really affect people in a spiritual way. I began to understand that I needed to have a personal relationship with Jesus. I needed to be saved in order to come to a full knowledge of God and have a place in heaven. I embraced the fact that the Word of God and everything in it was a guidebook for my life, and that Hell was a real place that I would go if I did not live in accordance with God’s will. The dots were connected for me regarding the fact that Christianity and serving the Lord was an everyday way of life and not just a Sunday morning proposition. But, I also came to understand that ALL people may not be included in the family of God. Homosexuals, those who have difficulty with substance abuse, those who have been in jail, women, unwed mothers, those who are divorced, and a myriad of other people will not have a place in the kingdom or at the church either.

After my divorce and coming out as gay, I was literally shown the door of the Baptist church. I was dismissed from my position as an Associate Pastor and told that the congregation was praying for my salvation because of my homosexuality. After a few years of complete disassociation with any organized religion, I had an opportunity to join a United Methodist Church that was an open and affirming congregation. I worked in their music department while continuing to heal from the divorce and the spiritual damage that I had experienced. I served in three Methodist churches for the next 11 years in various capacities. I became music director in two of the churches and was allowed to preach and serve communion.

I am relatively new to the UCC Denomination and am learning and comparing my experiences of the past to my current religious understandings. I believe that the United Church of Christ challenges me to think about what I really believe more than the other denominations of which I have been a part. Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist churches have subscribed to a method of telling their congregations what to believe. I have found that the UCC church would encourage an individual to really think about their belief system and understandings. I have learned three things while I have been a Member in Discernment:

1. Although the UCC is still very young as a denomination, the church has been on the cutting edge regarding its commitment to embrace all people in all walks of life. I did not realize how politically active the church has been and the stands that it has taken regarding the abolition of slavery, the rights of women and the acceptance of women in ministry.

2. The UCC continues to be deeply ecumenically committed, bringing churches and organizations together for common causes. In other denominations of which I have been a part, ecumenism seems to be optional. The UCC seems to understand that if we all come together, more can be accomplished.
3. In the reading of the last portion of *The Short Course in the History of the UCC*, I see the beginnings of a commitment to recognize marriage and family (regardless of sexual orientation) by the building of a curriculum and education that will help people understand that relationships should have no bearing on basic human rights. As the UCC, we should be on the cutting edge in the development of pre-marital counseling, marriage, and family counseling for the LGBT community.

My Understanding of the History and Polity of the United Church of Christ

As I think about the history of the United Church of Christ and its evolution as a welcoming church, it is important to consider the definition of "welcome". Webster defines the word as follows: *to greet (someone) in a warm and friendly manner; to receive or accept (something) with happiness or pleasure; to greet hospitably and with courtesy or cordiality; to accept with pleasure the occurrence or presence of.*

From the Reformation movement, and the realization that all people should have access to the Bible in a language they could understand, John Wycliffe translated it to English. That very act then inspired individuals like John Hus to not only continue the idea of access to scripture, but also spur the idea that Christianity was led by a spiritual and holy God, and not a mere human in the form of a Pope. Later we see by the efforts to continue the Reformation made by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, a broadening of access to the Christian faith. Each may have differed in the way certain facets of works and worship played out in the church but all three furthered the idea that people needed a better and more inclusive way to "do church". Because of the social upheavals going on at that time, people in all of walks of life needed to be welcomed and accepted into church life and provided with accessible theological resources and teachings. They were striving to lay the groundwork for a healthier society through grace, faith, and acceptance through Christ.

Through the Evangelical movement in Germany came an understanding that if there was going to be a fully accessible religion, the personal needs of the people would have to be addressed. People would have to have help and be given the tools to deal with what was going on in daily life, outside the four walls of the church. Through the ideas of leaders like Philip Jacob Spencer, the welcoming circle was drawn wider by proclaiming that there can/should be a warm and friendly manner about the Christian experience. Not only could one be built up in the faith, but that there was something positive that could be gained from self-discipline.

It seems to me that the Congregationalists tended to be a bit more concerned with the organizational aspects of church and the letter of the law than meeting people's spiritual needs in some aspects. While we see a great many advances in the welcoming of different races to the mix, Native Americans were ministered to by the likes of John Eliot. He would want to have them convert to Christianity and abandon their own faith traditions. There was continued progress on getting the scripture translated into native languages so that there could be access to the faith/teachings. African Americans were, although limited in their ability to participate, admitted into church membership. It was a slow but steady commitment to tear down the barriers that would see the seeds of unity and a unifying church sprout.

By the time the Christian church was formed, people had crossed the frontier. There was a desire to simplify all aspects of church life. The Bible was their only necessary guide. A good Christian character demonstrated by a life lived by faith in God would be good enough for membership and a seat at the Lord's Table. The Christian Church promoted the idea that one was welcome to interpret scripture, and that their

conscience could be their barometer for right and wrong. They believed that there was unity of all followers of Christ.

Understanding that the merging of faith traditions, churches, theologies, and organizational structures is never easy and is never complete, all of these cords committed to bind together as the UCC. The commitment of an understanding that ALL people from ALL facets of human existence deserve access to God's holy church was acknowledged in Cleveland in 1957. There was a striving to fully embrace every aspect of the definition of "welcome". Some of the body "greet in a warm and friendly manner". Some of the body "greet hospitably and with courtesy or cordiality". These two definitions are what I consider the bare minimum when considering that we say "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, all are welcome." Some of the body can "receive or accept with happiness and pleasure". I consider this to be the definition and the goal of a welcoming church/denomination that the ever-widening circles should encompass. To "receive" might imply that something is brought to or delivered to, or to get something for which we have been preparing. To "accept" might imply a reconciliation, an accommodation, an undertaking of the responsibility for. So, if we are going to carry on the welcoming that our history would indicate, then with God's help, we had better be ready to undertake the responsibility to love, be in communion with, provide for, and accommodate ALL whom God will deliver into our unifying and spiritual care.

The major theological foundation of the Reformed Church tradition, led predominantly by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin held that the Bible was the only necessary authority, the ultimate Word of God. There was no need for any church leader such as a Pope to interpret scripture or add to it in any way. There was an understanding that a person need only be justified by grace through faith in God. No amount of works and deeds would lead to a particular standing within the kingdom/church.

Reformed churches tended to steer away from the idea that the elements of the Lord's Supper were somehow transformed into the body and blood of Christ. They believed that the elements were to be taken as "remembrances" or tokens of the work that Jesus did and His presence with the followers of Christ. However, the mid-19th century Mercersburg Movement which took root in the German Reformed Church viewed communion with more of a "Lutheran" connotation. In his book "The Mystical Presence", John Nevin wrote of the real spiritual presence of Christ in the elements. Further, the Mercersburg Movement affirmed Christian unity through its view of the Reformed Church as not so much a corrective of Catholicism but a natural continuation of the "Church Catholic" in its authentic and faithful form. They also lifted up the sovereignty of God over creation, and thus the role of the church as a vessel of God's purpose on earth to transform and redeem.

The Reformed church leaders developed a systematic approach to the Christian life. The ideas that the institutions of church (communion, baptism, and discipline) were thought to be the way in which a successful Christian life would be maintained.

Strong organizational church governance existed and strict guidelines whereby membership was granted, leadership was elected, and the theology that pastors were to teach were all characteristics of the Reformed Church.

The history and polity of the Reformed church has shaped the current UCC in that we continue to accept the Bible as the ultimate authority and the Holy Word of God, and that individuals are justified by grace through faith. But we differ in that membership is open to all. The UCC subscribes to the understanding that The Lord's Table is open to all who are followers of Jesus Christ and that the elements are tokens of God's presence and love for all.

The major theological foundation of the Evangelical Church Tradition had its start with the order from Fredrick William III and continued under the leadership of John Spencer. The Evangelical church tradition believed that the Christian experience was something that could be had in everyday life. Additionally, they were concerned about the social well-being of the greater community and believed the church should offer help and guidance. They did this by consolidating boards, programs, and other organizational structures that would push Christian education and even a women's missionary union forward.

The Evangelical and Reformed Churches melded together their understandings of autonomy and authority and embraced the idea that there is a "reality of a kingdom of grace". This entity would see as their goal to become the Church universal and that this church would give access to the Word of God in the broadest sense. They were themselves the product of a uniting of Lutheran and Reformed traditions in Prussia in the early 19th century, and brought into the UCC a vocabulary and way of doing theology that tended to be accepting of diverse perspective and held Christian unity as a core value. The history and polity of the Evangelical Tradition has shaped the current UCC in that we take to heart a warm and welcoming attitude. We believe that the Christian experience is a daily experience. We also hold fast to the commitment that the church should offer help and guidance in all aspects of the social well-being of the community.

The major theological foundation of the Congregational Church tradition held that it would determine the social organization and the political dynamics of communities. This was a far-reaching structure in that only church members could be active in the decision making and voting privileges within the community. The Congregational church was committed to the furthering of Biblical teaching and seeing that Christianity spread. However, they insisted that the indigenous peoples forsake their own religious beliefs in order to embrace Christianity.

Congregational Church tradition insisted that clergy and other leadership be highly educated. It was organized in a congregational polity, where the autonomy of each setting of the church was respected, and they also introduced the notion of covenant as the relationship which binds these entities together. Communion would be preserved. The nurturing of a concern for human rights was also a hallmark of the tradition.

The Congregational church history and polity has shaped the current UCC in that we believe that the church should further the Gospel and that there should be a structured approach to solve human rights and concerns of justice.

The major theological foundation of the Christian Church tradition held six unanimously affirmed principles: Christ as head of the Church; the Bible was the source for rules to live by; good Christian character should be the only measure for active membership and participation in the church; individuals can interpret scripture for themselves; "Christian" is an appropriate name for the followers of Christ; and, that Christians should seek unity at all times in order to maintain an effective voice in the world.

Through these principles, the Christian church tradition was able to effectively open its doors to the Afro-American population, bring together the community at large, and begin a number of mission opportunities throughout the world.

The Christian church history and polity has shaped the current UCC in that we embrace a freedom in Christ, that there is freedom with order. We are a people who believe we serve the world most effectively when we serve through the strength and unity of the church. Christ is the only Head of the Church, and that through unity of the Spirit and direction of God, the world will become a better place until we are ultimately united with Christ in eternity.

What It Means to Be a United and Uniting Church

Ultimately, the church is made up of people whose commitment is to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). God through Jesus Christ, calls all Christians to be united as one (John 17:21), so that we might be the visible church in the world. It is on that foundation that a united and uniting church can focus on the mission of the church: to stand with those who have no voice, to help those who are poor, marginalized, held as prisoners, or alienated from society in any way. The people of God must seek out existing ways or even create new ways where by people may be liberated from the political, socio-economic, or spiritual distresses that exist in the world.

To desire to be the catalyst for unity requires an understanding that at some point there was disunity. There was certainly disunity among each of the four traditions that formed the United Church of Christ. The Congregational Church held fast to the commitment that the mission of the church should never be clouded by conflict regarding how the organization and business of the church should be handled. The Christian Church held tight to the commitment that unity in Christ would pave the road to resolve all conflicts. The Reformed Church brought with it the ideas that the power of God through His people would be able to transform the world and that there was a need to rethink and make amends for the failures and shortcomings which occurred in its history. The Evangelical Church brought a strong sense of ecumenism. Attention to the proper inclusive and carefully crafted language utilized to unify people and the church organizations through creeds and scripture was important. To unify these four traditions for the furtherance of Christ's work, there was a need to reconcile the divisions that previously existed within the body and the struggles that would come as a result of further unification within the four traditions, and any potential entities that would express interest in uniting with them.

In order to begin the reconciliation process, good spiritual principals were employed including reflection of, and a turning away from, exclusive beliefs and structure set up by the founders that would be roadblocks hampering the mission of the church. There was an acknowledgment that because of human involvement, mistakes and failures had contributed to the divisions of the past and would potentially get in the way of the mission of the church in the future as well. Therefore, a reliance on biblical, theological, and liturgical renewal through the leadership of the Holy Spirit would be necessary. These were building blocks that helped to unify the church.

Because we are a body, ever growing and ever learning, we can only strive to become one Church of Jesus Christ as we individually live toward unity. If the individual members do not embrace full inclusion and acceptance of all, and embrace the idea that God is working His purpose out in every individual, then complete unity will never exist. As members of the whole, an understanding exists that as we shift directions, make agreements, and participate in dialogues between ourselves and other bodies of faith (interreligious groups), we may very well become a different looking organization depending on the requirements of our mission as dictated by the needs of society at any given time in history. We will be called to an accounting of our faith. We will be called by God to make "pronouncements" about issues within our mission field, and it will require us to be unified in Christ.

It is on these foundations that the many ecumenical and interfaith ministry opportunities are based. God has called many confessional bodies together to accomplish His will: that all people come to a saving knowledge of Him through faith in Jesus Christ. As the UCC works with others to create a unified structure whereby this calling can be the most effective, an emphasis on maximizing a nurturing of the commonalities among the ministries is paramount. The creation of educational materials and worship opportunities, collaboration on initiatives that will give witness to our stance on justice, equality, human rights, and freedom around the world are keys to the success of this calling. As Dr. Timothy Downs so aptly put, "We will

experience unity by being agents of redemption, by listening and discerning toward unity, and aspiring to become the church of Jesus Christ rather than attempting to overcome arguments.” What I observe about these developing involvements is that it is not important what the differences are. It is important that an open and honest dialogue exist and that a covenant be entered into that expresses the agreements, the ministry objectives, and that places Christ at the center and the focus of the relationship(s). These covenants are always future and growth oriented. And although these types of relationships may not be for every entity (African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church as an example), or every person who may or may not agree with a local church’s mission statement of faith or constitution, they are encouraged to make the decision to participate as God gives direction. God is still speaking. In His perfect timing and with the interaction of His people, there is still history to be made.

There are 38 Conferences within the United Church of Christ. These are made up of delegates elected by the congregations within certain geographical boundaries. The Conferences elect officers and appoint committees to carry out the work that will help to benefit the local churches within the conferences, ultimately strengthening the witness of the UCC. Most of the conferences are subdivided into Associations. The Associations concern themselves with how to assist local churches within its boundaries. That assistance can be organizational, financial, or by carrying out business transactions referred to it by the local churches within its boundaries. Some Conferences do not have Associations within them (Florida, Illinois South, Minnesota, Pacific Northwest, Penn Northeast, Rhode Island, and The Southwest Conference). In these conferences, work that would be done by the Associations is carried out by the Conference.

The role of the conference in the United Church of Christ is generally more broad than that of an Association. The Association tends to the credentialing and disciplining of ministers/ministerial partners, assisting in the organization of new local churches. They can make suggestions/recommendations/requests either formally or informally to the Conferences or General Synod. The Conferences generally have a salaried staff to more fully carry out the business and programs that would promote unity, further the mission of the church, and strengthen the witness of the UCC. The Conferences may very well be the intersection or the immediate link (Rollin O. Russell) of the local church to the General Synod, and the General Synod to the local church. The assessment of the overall well-being of the church and its lateral relationships are a part of the role of the Conferences. The Conferences are tasked with the responsibility to interpret and implement mission to the local church and the ecumenical bodies that make up the united and uniting church. Conferences also receive financial contributions (undesignated) and works with the General Minister and President to establish agreements regarding the distribution of those funds for Our Church’s Wider Mission and their own support. The coordination of the work and witness, along with counseling local churches and their ministers in order to provide help and encouragement, is also included in the role of Conferences.

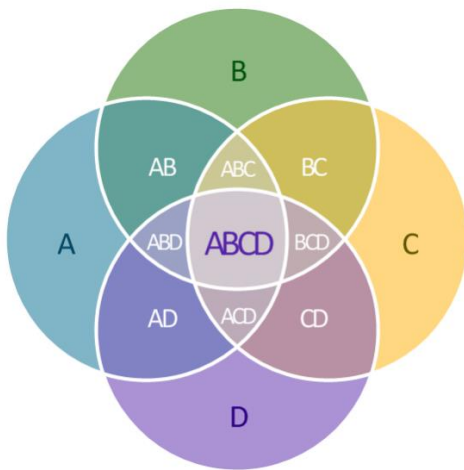
As I think about the “growing edges” between our church and the Conference, I see so many possibilities. I believe that the Southwest Conference has risen to the challenge as it relates to the topics of immigration and sanctuary, along with that of standing beside refugees. A part of the Church of the Palms Open and Affirming Statement that is yet to be formulated deals with these three topics. I know that as God gives us strength and wisdom, we will grow to agree that these are important considerations that should be added to the statement. The Conference speaks very encouraging words regarding immigrants and immigration policies. There has been an emphasis placed on building bridges between Muslims and the local community by providing education about Islam. The Conference offers several opportunities for our churches to become involved and ready to stand in solidarity and advocate for these “neighbors”. Some examples of these opportunities are:

1. The work with Stop Operation Streamline and other immigration-related issues,
2. The work with the Building Bridges Initiative which seeks to build relationships between Christians and Muslims in local communities around the country.

Additional “growing edges” seem to be the great support the Conference provides to the new churches that have recently begun. Rebel & Divine UCC is a ministry whose mission it is to support the health and wholeness of at risk LGBTQ youth and young adults. The covenant among the churches and Conference to make this postmodern church a reality is remarkable. Food, finances, clergy resources, worship resources and many other support items help all who are involved become more enriched. The commitment to develop youth programs for all ages is a major focus in the Conference. A plea for Boy Scout Chaplains and a launching of the Youth Outdoor Ministry seek to minister to all age groups within the Conference. A growing awareness of the ministry opportunities of those who suffer with mental health/physical disability issues and their families has been given much attention throughout the Conference. Classes are offered that would promote a safe environment that would include all people. This ministry calls for a covenant to care for and provide accommodations, advocacy, and support no matter what the special needs are.

Certainly, it is through the covenant our local churches and our Conference share that allows these ministries to exist. We agree together that in order to be a united and uniting church, we are challenged to build a right relationship with all human-kind and with God.

The General Synod encourages, interacts with, supports, offers direction to, and is certainly responsible for each of the other three bodies that make up the diagram: The Local Church, The Associations, and the Conferences as seen below. No circle is larger or smaller than the other, demonstrating that there is no particular hierarchy. Yet all are connected in covenant to create and carry out ministries that would fulfill God’s mission.



The role of the General Synod of the United Church of Christ is to enable the Church (made up of the local body, associations and conferences) to carry out God’s mission in the world. The General Synod does this by seeking to discern the call of God regarding that mission; articulating the mission to the wider church and then through its various organizational structures, listening to and offering suggestions, invitations, and challenges regarding how each of the covenanting entities can engage in the mission together.

Although the General Synod represents and speaks to the local church, associations and conferences at the national and global setting, its role is to ensure that all facets of the church are equally represented and are heard. The General Synod relates to each as it maintains accountability and organizational responsibility but does not attempt to tell each what to do or how to accomplish ministry functions and calling. Rather, the General Synod would offer support-ways-means but never invade the autonomy of the other entities. The General Synod seeks to guide conversations and determine how to build relationships between the UCC and other ecumenical organizations, confessional bodies, interfaith/interdenominational entities in order “that they may all be one”.

My Growing Understanding of the United Church of Christ

We are a church that has come from four rich traditions. These traditions have held close their individual use of the sacraments, organizational structures, and senses of mission. However, each understood that to more

fully and effectively unite, they would want to focus on their commonalities; a commitment to keep Christ as the Head of the Church, entering into covenantal relationship so that the church might experience an interdependence and an accountability in every setting (local, association/conference and synod). Ultimately, the UCC's desire is to do everything possible to nurture a climate where the world will see one united church as an effective means for ministry. We are a church committed to radical hospitality, inclusivity, social justice, advocating for all of God's creation even when society does not agree. In some circles, the UCC might be seen as "[pandering](#)", and using certain cultural or political happenings as a way to *grow* the church. It seems to me that we are being consistent with Christ's teachings to meet people where they are on life's journey, to share hope, to love and to invite all to be a part. We carefully and mutually agree to organize ourselves in such a way as to be accountable to each other under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

My Calling in This Present Time and Place

Because I believe in Christ and want to share the love and hope that is in me, I would attend and seek to serve in a variety of ministry opportunities in a local church. That type of ministry is available to anyone who loves God and wants to help others on their spiritual journey. Indeed, everyone is called to be a servant of others and to love as Christ loves. God has placed within me a deeper awareness that through a unique set of gifts and the mysterious empowerment by the Spirit, I am called to give my life to the church.

Caring for the Sick and Homebound

The Church of the Palms, Sun City, Arizona is my church home. It is one of the more progressive churches in Sun City. There are two UCC churches in Sun City - United Church of Sun City and The Church of the Palms. Sun City West is the home of Desert Garden United Church. The Palms is the only Sun City UCC church with an ONA statement, for which I am grateful!

The Palms opened its doors in the late 1960's and has had six Senior Pastors, the last one serving the church for 17 years. With the arrival of our new Senior Pastor, it is time to re-vision several of the ministries of the church. The first I will discuss here is the Care Ministry. Originally, Care Ministry (Care Team) was designed for those of the church who are home bound. They are still members of the church, are still giving financially, and supporting in other ways as possible, but are not able to come to the church campus to worship. The "ministry" has been allowed to reduce to a craft group that makes gift baskets for the home bound for birthdays and holidays. Cards are sent and calls are made on a regular basis. The chairperson of the group has directed the Care Team to provide a monthly report that only reports how many calls, cards, and baskets are made. There is nothing substantive regarding the well-being of the person, if they have been ill, hospitalized, or otherwise incapacitated. Up until now, a comprehensive database has not been created or utilized reflecting the status of those who receive the services of the Care Team. When the new pastor came on board, and we discussed my role as a MID/assistant pastor, we agreed that I would become the staff liaison to the Care Team. Our home bound members have been added to the data base. Notes on all visits made to the home bound by myself and the Care Team members continue to be updated. Going forward, we will make sure that the home bound have access to communion, recordings of the worship services, and devotional materials. Although cards and calls and gift baskets are great and help the home bound know that they are thought of and loved, real ministry runs deeper. The team provides spiritual support, transportation to appointments, assistance with end of life arrangements when there is no family, the family is a great distance away, or in some cases when the family has disconnected with the home bound person completely. We will also strive to make sure that there are other resources available such as legal counsel, adult protective services, and advocates or counselors to help with a wide range of personal issues that the individual may have

For the last several years, our Board of Evangelism has headed the organization and implementation of the church's Fall and Spring rummage sale. Another event they organize and implement is a "Salad Spectacular" which happens after worship in July...the dead of summer in Arizona! And finally, they host "Bring a Friend Sunday" which is held in September when most folks are returning to Arizona for the winter. Although these are great fellowship opportunities, they are not necessarily getting the job done regarding evangelism. Yes, we have high numbers of guests who will attend on those Sundays, but there is little done in the way of follow up with them after the event. Each visiting person who attends these events should be provided with information on the church, a letter of appreciation for attending, and a personal visit. Call it "old school", but nothing takes the place of a more personal touch. Helping the guests understand the other ministries and activities of the church is important along with making a spiritual connection with the church's members. Everyone who comes to the rummage sale should leave with that same information on the church as well as an opportunity to leave their contact information requesting a contact from one of the pastors or staff. Perhaps it is "marketing" to some extent. But, it is important to help people understand that we are there to help and are interested in caring for them.

I believe that these two ministries will strengthen the relationship with the UCC because when our church becomes known for the care it provides to the home bound and their families, along with quality evangelism that reaches out into the community in vital ways, the hope is that growth will occur both numerically and spiritually.

Caring for the Creative, Artful, and the Marginalized

I have been a Christian and in church life for as long as I can remember. My mother and grandmother sang in the choir. That was my first exposure to music and the important role it plays in worship. In the early days of my life in the Baptist church, a team of evangelists came to the church for a week of revival. The music evangelist had a great voice and a deep understanding of God through the scriptures. He also demonstrated his caring for people of all ages and walks of life. Unlike so many other evangelists and singers or music leaders who had been through our church, seemingly doing it for the "show", this man loved God and was inspired to live a life reflective of God's love for all people. It was during that week that God began to speak to me about using the gift of music in that very same way. Not necessarily as an "evangelist", but through full time ministry in the local church.

As I attended Grand Canyon University, the calling was even more specific as God opened the door for me to work with music and student ministries. It was in preparation of Bible studies and camps that I really began to understand the importance of being equipped through the knowledge of scripture and theology in order to provide the students and families with the tools necessary to navigate in this challenging society. It is not all about being "up front" or "in the spot light".

Personal events disqualified me from ministry in Baptist circles after 10 years of service. I was divorced and had come to the realization that I am gay. Naturally, that was not going to work in many denominations and religious settings. The next several years were difficult for me because the prevalent question was, "How can I love God, be loved by God, be called to ministry, and have that ministry affirmed, but be disqualified?" All the while, God was speaking to me and preparing me spiritually. I now know that there is a time to lead and a time to be quiet and trust that God will make a way.

Doors opened for me to return to music ministry through the United Methodist Church, where I served for another 10 years in various capacities. As I have shared in other posts for this class, I came to understand that I would never be accepted into the full life and leadership (ordination and pastoral ministry) of the UMC because of my sexual orientation and belief that God loves and affirms all people. It is for these reasons that the

United Church of Christ is the setting that God has afforded to me. It is within this context that I will be able to minister through music, the spoken word, offer pastoral care, and equip those who God entrusts to me and our church. As I begin my third year in the UCC, God has affirmed that calling in many ways, none more meaningful as through people who will tell me, "I needed to hear your perspective." "We need your voice and your presence with us as we seek justice and acceptance as LGBT Christians." "God has changed/is opening my mind about... because of you." For that, I am truly grateful!

Caring for and Equipping the Entrusted

As a young child worshiping in the Presbyterian Church, I remember "The Moment for Missions" stories read by different people in the congregation. There was an emphasis on giving money to the missionaries who were in far off lands trying to help people have a better life by learning how to farm or learning different technical skills. Later, in the Southern Baptist Church, I recall when different missionaries would come back on furlough from having been to Africa or Peru. That was the first time I was able to make the connection with a real person about what it was like to be in a different country. I began to understand a bit about the poverty and real difficulty living in places other than America. The missionaries who were members of our congregation were able to put a fine point on the fact that people in the countries where they ministered were actually risking their own safety by professing Christ or being in attendance in a Christian gathering. It was clear that the number one focus of the missionaries I knew, was to present the gospel of Jesus Christ and to baptize those who would confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. Secondly, they were on the mission field to help the people within those communities they served to better themselves by building better homes, schools and getting a basic education. As I reflect on it now, I believe that there was a focus on "Americanizing" or at the very least highly encouraging a Western influence way of thinking and living. I am confident that, although much good has been and is still being done. I don't remember much discussion related to working ecumenically or partnering with other groups or denominations to broaden the scope of ministry unless there was a crisis such as a natural disaster.

I have discerned that the differences I see are those of partnering with other denominations, inter-religious groups in order to minister to all facets of the communities to which our missionaries go. The emphasis on uniting these bodies into wholeness of faith, of Gospel, of Word, and ultimately Church is a new idea for me regarding mission. I just took for granted that as long as each denomination was doing their part, then the work of "winning souls" was getting accomplished. It never occurred to me that the world needs to see Christians united and in harmony to be really effective.

The missions of justice, liberation, and reconciliation are new ideas to me in the sense that I didn't realize that there were actual guidelines and processes for them under the umbrella of "Mission". It requires the acceptance of people without restriction. I grew up in a denomination that had an intolerance for those who are gay, who do not come into the country the "right way", those who marry outside of their racial profiles, and the list goes on. So, I am delighted and encouraged to see that "mission" encompasses the totality of creation. A Paul Tillich quote that says it best:

“a moral action is an action in which we actualize ourselves as persons within person-to-person encounters. Its principles are the love whose backbone is justice; the love which, though unconditional itself, listens to the concrete situation and its changes, and is guided by the wisdom of the past.”

The Future of My Local Church

As I reviewed the Statistical Profile PowerPoint and the Congregational Vitality and Ministerial Excellence Survey Report and reflected on my calling to ministry at The Church of the Palms, the same recurring thought was present: our congregation may love the pastors of the church and look to them for Biblical knowledge and some good worship experiences. But, when it comes to modeling the role for real community leadership, community involvement motivated by something other than growing the congregation numerically or financially, and running a multi-faceted business based on well-articulated faith principles, we have room to grow. Although clergy tend to possess many good leadership skills and qualities, we must broaden our perception of ministry to include communication styles that reach beyond the religious lexicon and make faith principles accessible in all areas of the community. While it is extremely important to be visible in the church setting; locally, ecumenically, and inter-religiously, it is also important for clergy to assume leadership responsibility in secular organizations to demonstrate a walk of faith and spirituality that could revolutionize the way the organization(s) conducts business.

In early 2017, it is my hope that I will be the first, openly gay Associate Pastor at the church. I would also say that reflects change similar to that of the UCC. It had been decades since The Palms had a Member in Discernment or had anyone affiliated with the church who was attending seminary. Now there are two in discernment and two in seminary. The church is very supportive of each of us. Although it seems to be reflective of the UCC as a whole, I would like to think that we have helped in keeping those numbers from sinking lower.

It is unfortunate that The Palms has struggled financially as has the attendance of the church. There are several contributing factors: the economy, the aging of the congregation, attrition, certain dissatisfaction with decisions of the church like adopting the ONA statement, the retirement of a beloved pastor, and the list goes on. Because of those factors, our giving to special offerings, missions, Conference and National support have all declined. Because the newly retired pastor did not really meet the topic of stewardship head-on (people gave to the church because he had a high “approval rating”), when he left, the church finances dropped even more significantly. While that is normal for a church in transition, the foundation was not firm relating to the spiritual principles of stewardship. I am hoping that aspects of my ministry there might help to spur communication and stability in this area.

When it comes to the state of Youth and Young Adult Engagement in the UCC, we are reflected in the “not a priority” piece of the pie chart. Because we are based in a retirement community, that is not even a conversation within the church. This is an alarming fact. As a united and uniting church, this is a tremendous opportunity for ministry and outreach. Although it might be difficult to imagine teens or young adults actually making The Palms their church home, there are still ways in which these demographics could work together to carry out the mission of God in the community. The location of the church is just on the eastern edge of Sun City, just across from Peoria’s young adult neighborhoods.

We are fortunate to have a full-time pastor with paid program support. I am hoping to continue as a bi-vocational Associate Pastor and reach out to the younger facets of our nearby communities.

Visioning Across the next 10 years

We have just installed our new Senior Pastor as of November 6, 2016. He has brought with him many great ideas and a sense of direction that he believes God is leading him to implement. As we have met and discussed the ministry opportunities at The Palms, I believe that God has definitely inspired and gifted him to lead the church into a period of renewal and revitalization. One area that we discussed even before hearing it in

the interview with Ann Ralosky and Mike Piazza is this idea of “Do not apologize for being a boldly, unapologetically progressive Christian congregation.” While I never subscribe to the dismissal of ideas and opinions that differ from my own, many of this group do not support many key values of the United Church of Christ in the setting of The Palms: ONA, marriage equality, racial discrimination, and immigration issues to name a few. The recent election seems to have strengthened that belief system. There is also a prevalent attitude that stewardship is a thing that just happens and that it should not be discussed or focused upon, especially in a worship service. We will utilize the materials that our Designated Conference Minister has shared as a part of the Mission and Church Vitality Committee. It breaks down what the motivations for giving should be, educates the leadership on how to prepare and educate the generations to come from The Great and Silent Generation, The Boomers, GenX’ers, The Millennials, to the GenZ’s.

There seems to be more connectivity with how happy a person is within the church setting and their commitment to the amount of their giving of time, talent and treasure. We will use the next 12-18 months to help people shift that ideology to a more spiritually focused one. We give because we love God, because there are needs far beyond the walls of our church, and because we are thankful for the blessings we have received through Christ. Not because we believe our church leaders are doing a good job and we agree with everything that is happening within the church. All the while, the leadership will focus on building the momentum of those congregants who value the mission of the church staying focused on the leadership of the Holy Spirit. We will help the church as a whole, understand that The Palms may not be the place for everyone, including ones who are currently members. Ann Ralosky made the statement in her interview with Mike Piazza, “you will not be the church for everyone, but you will be a life-line for enough.” We say “all are welcome”. While that is certainly true, not everyone who comes through the doors and even joins the church may be in the right place. We have operated under the assumption that we are doing something wrong if someone gets upset and leaves the church. What we need to do is rejoice that the Holy Spirit has spoken to them and bless them on their way. I believe that once these issues are addressed, the core of The Palms will be even more accessible and effective in its mission and covenant:

In the love of truth and the spirit of Jesus, we covenant together, with each other and with God, to seek to walk in his ways, known or to be made known to us: joining in worship, seeking to responsibly serve the mission of the church, growing in our understanding of the faith, being mindful of the spirit of historic Christianity and of God’s continued guidance.

Christ alone is Head of the United Church of Christ.

The United Church of Christ embraces a theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God. The UCC has roots in the "covenantal" tradition—meaning there is no centralized authority or hierarchy that can impose any doctrine or form of worship on its members. We seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith. The UCC therefore receives the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as testimonies, but not tests of the faith.

As we work to strengthen our stewardship and radical hospitality issues, we will take the next five years to create a full complement of educational opportunities that will help us to be more spiritually grounded. As a church, we have not offered the types of educational programming that would help those new to the UCC, new to church life or those who have been disenfranchised by another faith community understand that God loves them

and offers hope and eternal life. We will utilize the following UCC resources and additional content to accomplish this:

SeasonsEncore

Kerygma

Resources from Progressive Christianity.org. First, engaging in an existing group and then forming our own.

As we work strengthening our stewardship and radical hospitality and spiritual growth opportunities, we will also take the next ten years to create outreach programs and points of entry for The Palms that will result in steady, incremental growth for the church and presence in the community. The Palms will become a community-wide resource with the ability to provide services or connections to services geared toward helping senior adults with dementia, the beginning stages of alzheimer's, navigating the healthcare system, end of life directive support, grief counseling, legal assistance, Veteran's care, transportation, nutrition, and care-giver support. Although the church currently has aspects of each of these facets of ministry, the community is lacking a "one-stop" shop of comprehensive resources for seniors and Veterans.

As we continue to work on strengthening our stewardship, radical hospitality, spiritual growth opportunities and our outreach program/entry points, we will use the next 15 years to develop an inter-generational, inter-faith ministry among teens and senior adults. There are three high schools within a 20-minute drive of the church. Mentoring, tutoring, life-skills development, job-skills development, and discipleship opportunities in an open and safe environment are plentiful. Likewise, students can assist senior adults with computer, internet, cell phone skills, household tasks, and other errands. Naturally, strict guidelines and oversight would be put in place to ensure the success of these programs.

In the next 20 years, with God's leadership and direction, The Palms will continue to strengthen the ministry programs and opportunities as outlined above, monitoring and adjusting as necessary. We will continue to support our Missionary, Mark Behle, and will seek to be an even greater resource for him and the ministry that he provides in Lesotho, Africa. He will be nearing retirement at that point. It is hopeful that we will be able to assist his replacement in even greater ways financially. It would be exceptional to actually take a group from The Palms to that mission field to get a real hands-on experience of the great ministry opportunities that exist. To my knowledge, a mission team from the church has never seized that opportunity.