

Ordination Paper Part I

UCC's and My Statement of Faith

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:

He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.

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

He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

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

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of men, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him.

Amen

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

Amen.

I decided to use UCC's original Statement of Faith as well as the most recent Statement in this part of my paper. The reason for using the original Statement of Faith is that the newest one does not mention Jesus as "son of God". I personally believe that Jesus Christ is divine and that he is God's only begotten son, as John 3.16 says. Other than that I agree with what the newest Statement of Faith says, and I especially like that it is written in second person instead of third person ("you" instead of "God"). This clarifies the personal relationship we can have with God.

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

I believe that God is the only Creator of the heavens and the earth and all that is living here. I believe that God created the universe from nothing and that it was the Word spoken by God that created, because when God says, God makes. No one can know exactly how God created everything, but when it comes to this, Hebrews 11.3 says that "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." This means to me that the material is not eternal, but only God who created the material. God reminds us that we ought not to adore anything that has been created, but only the Creator.¹

I believe that that universe was created and exists to glorify God, its Creator, as Isaiah 43.7 and Revelation 4.11 tell us. I also believe that the universe exists to reflect God's character

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Doctrina Biblica*, (Miami: Editorial Vida, 2005), 125.

of goodness, justice and community. God is an almighty, all knowing and always near, and God has no limits. What was before the creation no one but God knows.

Everything that exists is the result of the divine will; the physical and visible as well as the spiritual or invisible. Everything that God created was good, because God's deeds are always good. I believe that every person is created in God's image and is therefore worthy not for what he or she does or becomes, but for whom he or she is [God's creation]. As humans we need to take care of each other here on earth and everyone has the same value in God's eyes. Everyone is a perfect image of God's perfect will.

As God's creation we as humans have our own free will to follow God and to follow our own desires. God shows us through the Scriptures what is right and what is wrong and it is our job to try to understand the will of God.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

Our biggest commandment is to love God over all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Everything that is not done out of love is worthless as 1 Co 13 says. God is a good God and wants everyone to have a purpose in life and to be saved as says 1 Tim 2.3-7. As a church we are called to live out God's love through words and deeds so that people other people also want to get to know Christ the Savior. The most important that I see here is that God's will is to save and restore. I understand God's Shalom as God's perfect welfare for everyone.

We have a God who is righteous. Through the Old and New Testament God has declared God's will for peace and righteousness for all humanity. God used prophets and also apostles to show the desire, and today God is using every one of us to continue the message of peace and

justice through God. Our task is to continue preaching and living according to the Scripture and it is not our task, but God's, to judge people and nations.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

God came to us humans through Jesus Christ who is God's son. I believe that Joseph accepted Mary as his wife and assumed the responsibility as the earthly father of Jesus, even if Joseph knew that this birth was different from others. As a man, Jesus Christ shared everything with other humans, and as God's son Jesus Christ died for the sins of humanity. I agree with Moltmann who says that the virgin birth of Jesus is not a basic element of our faith in Christ according to the New Testament.² We can see that the most important is his life, his death and his resurrection. However, Grudem touches three points that harmonize a lot with the rest of the New Testament. He says that the virgin birth reminds us about that salvation can never come by human effort. Salvation is supernatural and comes from God. He also says that the virgin birth is what made possible the union between the divine and human in one person.³ The only human collaboration is represented by Mary who says: "I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done according to your word".⁴

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

The church was born on the day that the Holy Spirit came over the people who were gathered together, as Acts 2 tells us. The Holy Spirit is the counselor, the guide, and the renewer

² Jurgen Moltmann, *El camino de Jesucristo* (España: Ediciones Sigueme), 2000, 121.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Doctrina Bíblica*, (Miami, Florida: Editorial Vida) 2005, 230.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Esbozo de Dogmática*, (Sal Terrae, Santander: Editorial Clie) 2000, 117.

of the church. This is one of the reasons I see to how the church can still be contemporary and fresh after so many years. To me the story of the Pentecost is one of the most fascinating events that the Bible tells us about. It is surely an event that changed the disciples from being lost and scared to being people of courage and power. Even Peter, who denied Jesus, is now speaking without fear. It is the Holy Spirit; the spirit of God that translates the Gospel into people's cultures and ages. The Holy Spirit creates an intersection between the divine and the earthly and brings people together in a new way. This is when people can live together in covenant, bound together by the Holy Spirit.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

Being a disciple is a joy because when you know God's will you know that there is no better life than to follow Christ. It is a joy to see people being transformed by the power of God through our words and the work we do for God's kingdom and it is wonderful to live in the communion that only Christ can create between different people. Being a disciple also has a cost. Many times we as disciples of Jesus Christ have to talk and act against what we see is injustice in the world, and sometimes we have to pay a price of not being accepted by many. As Christians and as disciples we are called to serve others. Jesus Christ himself came to serve and not to be served as Matthew 20:28 says: "... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." When Jesus washed his disciple's feet in John 13: 12-15 he showed them an example of servant hood. This example is something that is not that popular in our world where most people look for their own benefits.

When it comes to proclaim the Gospel I believe in proclaiming it in a holistic way. I understand salvation as salvation by accepting Christ into our heart (heart representing the most inner part of ourselves). When we receive Christ we become God's children as Rom 1.12 says. But proclaiming the Gospel is also about working for justice and peace in the world, and these all go hand in hand. We can see the powers of evil at work when there is no justice and no equality for people, but instead oppression and no freedom of choice. I believe that we as Christians are called to work in these areas. For some local churches this means to open a pre-school for poor children or to open a healthcare center for people that cannot afford healthcare other ways. For others it means to give classes in child education, counseling women, etc.

In UCC we practice baptism of infants, children, youth and adults. The baptism marks their acceptance into the care of Christ's Church and it is the beginning of a Christian life. My personal belief is that baptism into Christ is a public testimony of someone's faith and I would therefore prefer to baptize a person who is old enough to make his or her own decision to follow Christ. We invite people to Christ's table when we have communion. It is important to realize that it is not our table, which means that we are not the ones who decide who can participate and who cannot. When we share at his table we remember everything that Jesus Christ has done for us, his death to reconcile us with God and his resurrection that shows the victory over evil.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

This part of the Statement of Faith talks to me about a God who is with us always when we put our trust in God. God's grace overcomes all sins, but it is important to confess our sins and our shortcomings (1 John 1.9). We will not always be able to live the way God calls us to

live, but this is where God's grace comes in, the grace that we receive without deserving it. We need the power of God in our work for peace and justice in our communities and around the world, because in ourselves we are not able to do what Christ calls us to do.

I believe that Jesus Christ is going to come back one day and that those who trusted him will live with Christ forever in God's realm where God's shalom finally is complete and where there is no more injustice, racism, illness, or death, because God self will be reigning forever.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

Amen.

Knowing that God is in control from beginning to end, it is with joy and thankfulness I give God the glory and recognize that God has the power and not any human being. The earthly powers are temporary, while God's power and glory are eternal.

Ordination Paper Part II

I would like to start linking the history of the United Church of Christ to about 2000 years ago when a small group of Christian believers started to meet as we can read about in the book of Acts. They took care of each other and saw that no one had any needs and they shared their belongings with one another. They preached the Word of God in words and deeds. Ever since, Christians all over the world have started new movements time after time, when they have seen that the church has gone too far astray from what it was meant to be the church from the beginning. Many of the movements have been formed when groups from different backgrounds have come together and formed new movements, reflecting all of the former movements in their theology and practice.

I would say that it is the same thing with the United Church of Christ. Followers of Christ saw the need for unity in a church world that had come so far from its beginning. The United Church of Christ (UCC) was born on June 25, 1957 and is therefore historically a young denomination. UCC was formed specifically from four roots or traditions: The Congregational Church, The Christian Church, The Evangelical Church, and the reformed Church. The Congregationalism came from the English Tradition while the Evangelical and Reform Church tradition came from Switzerland and Germany. The result of the creation of the new United Church of Christ itself came after many years of sharing and discussing theology and practice among pastors and synods. One of the issues was about the role of the minister. The congregational Churches accentuated the preaching role of the minister while the evangelical and reformed church emphasized the pastoral role of the minister, like nurturing families, education and pastoral service.⁵

Coming out of these four traditions (Christian, Reformed, Congregational, and Evangelical), we as the UCC have some characteristics from all of them. As Christians we declare that we are part of the Body of Christ, who is the only head of the Church. As reformed we affirm the authority of only one God. We also believe that we are justified by faith. Every believer is part of the priesthood and we believe in Christian freedom. The two sacraments that we celebrate are baptism and the Lord's Supper. As Congregational we see the congregations as the basic part of the United Church of Christ. We do not practice any hierarchism, but instead everyone is at the same level, both members and the pastor. Everyone is called to serve just as Jesus Christ came to earth not to be an authoritative leader, but to serve. Christ's authority came from God.

⁵ Louis H. Gunneman, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, New York, Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1977, 23.

All different structures of the UCC are in a covenant relationship with each other. This means that instead of legal agreements we base our relationships on trust. As Evangelicals we proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ not just in words but also in deeds. The implications are that our worship services focus on our relationships with the community and we engage in many services towards the community.

I believe that the covenant relationships are especially important to emphasize as every church is autonomous. An autonomous church living outside a covenant would easily become independent and could also easily get astray from the rest of the UCC churches, and therefore become an isolated unit of the church. I think the covenant relationship helps us respect and support each other even when we do not always agree on every point of view. It also makes us accountable to each other as local churches, associations, conferences, as well as the Synod, as these covenants are based on biblical principles about God's relationship to us in this world. These are covenants that I understand as even more binding than a written contract, because they are based upon trust in every situation. In the Bible we read mostly about covenants between God and the people, but we can find that Robert Brown, a puritan leader that is part of our history, began talking about covenant with one another in the late sixteenth century. He said that "the covenant with God is the primal covenant from which our human covenants are derived and by which they are shaped"⁶.

Paraphrasing 2 Co 8.5, Jane Fislser Hoffmann says in her book *Covenant* that Christians first give themselves to God and then to one another. We are then linked to each other through the grace of God. When we understand this, I think we also understand some of the beliefs of the United Church of Christ. The one I want to mention first is "In essentials unity, in non-essentials

⁶ Jane Fislser Hoffman citing Robert Browne in her own words in her book *Covenant*. Jane Fislser Hoffman, *Covenant*. Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 2008, 33.

liberty, in all things charity". We might not share every belief and/or every theological interpretation of Scripture, but we can still be united and still belong to the same church family. The second one is the basic motto of the UCC which is also a part of our emblem (taken from John 17.21); "That they may all be one". I understand this motto as an important part of the covenant. This again is not about being one in every thought, but it is about being one in Christ and Christ's Spirit. What unites us is the Love of God that has to run through everything we do. Without love we are nothing, as we can read in 1 Co 13.

Suddenly it also makes sense to me that we have testimonies of faith instead of tests of faith. Of course there are basic beliefs, but these are already explained in the characteristics of the United Church of Christ (and in the Statement of Faith, see part I of this paper). During the many years of our Christian history, creeds and confessions have been written and agreed upon. The United Church of Christ respects and recognizes these, although not as tests but rather as testimonies of how God is at work all the time. This idea now leads us to the point that God "has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word." It was John Robinson, the Pilgrim pastor from what would be the Congregational tradition, who said this. This statement has also been the base for the recent UCC campaign "God is Still Speaking". Many churches and people in the United Church of Christ believe that even if the Bible was written in a certain context we can read our own context in to it, and receive new light for new understanding of God's word for today.

There are four covenanted ministries in the UCC. These are Justice and Witness Ministries, whose executive minister is Linda Jaramillo, Local Church Ministries, where Rev. Stephen L. Sterner was chosen as executive minister, The Office of General Ministries where John Thomas just finished his period as General Minister and Geoffrey Black is starting as the

new General Minister. The Wider Church Ministries has Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte as Executive Minister. This ministry is in partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Common Global Ministries which is the worldwide mission program of both denominations.

People who have been trained and serve in the church are recognized, lay leaders as well as administrative workers and pastors, but they are still part of the same priesthood of believers and still part of the servants that every Christian are part of. The person that serves as an usher in a local church and the General Minister are both servant of Christ and are at the same level as people. Every person, every congregation, every association, and every conference, as well as the General Synod live in a responsible freedom when it comes to belief and action. This works only because of the covenant relationship that exists on behalf of all parts.

The United Church of Christ is proud of being first at many things (either the UCC itself or they heritage). The Congregationalists formed part of the earliest forms of democracy with their self-governing congregations and election of their own ministers. The Congregationalists were also early in taking stand against slavery in 1700. Lemuel Haynes was the first black minister to be ordained in 1785, the first woman pastor, Antoinette Brown was ordained in 1853, and the first openly gay minister, William R. Johnson was ordained in 1972. In 1976 Rev. Joseph H. Evans became president of the UCC, the first African American leader of a racially integrated church in the US. In 1995 UCC published the New Century Hymnal, which is the only Christian hymnal that has the same amount of female as male images of God. There are many more examples, but for the purpose of this paper I will part II here.

Part III

I grew up in a warm, Christian family. My grandparents on both sides of the family were active Christians and most of their children and grandchildren have followed in their footsteps.

As a young, Christian person growing up in Sweden, I was active in Sunday school (as a student when I was a child and later as a teacher), youth groups, choirs, church band, scouts, etc. Most of my friends were also Christians from the same church and from different churches and denominations. Personally I did not care so much about the denominations, but what interested me was what they did and what they taught in the different churches. I grew up reading the Bible in a very literal way. If I questioned something, the answer was usually “just read it as it is written”, but I was not always comfortable with that answer. It seemed too easy and too hard at the same time, and I remember that certain passages that I read in the Bible did not always make sense to me in today’s world. After a while I learned to interpret some passages taking the culture into account.

In some cases it seemed to me that the church got stuck in details and forgot to see the whole picture. Some of those details that the churches dealt with were if women should be pastors and/or priests, if someone who had been divorced could become a pastor, if someone who had been baptized as a child had to be baptized again when they made their own decision to believe in Christ, and if everyone has the possibility to speak in tongues. I remember myself wondering why God would not want women as pastors when God wants everyone to know about the Gospel of Christ. Even if my home church in Sweden accepted female pastors, many other were still arguing that only men could be pastors.

When I was 19 years old I decided to go to Peru to learn more Spanish and to learn about the missionary work. What I did not know then was that this trip would be the beginning of something that would change my life forever. I saw the work of the missionaries and I saw the joy and hardship when they served God. I was amazed about how many lives had been transformed by the work that they had started many years ago when they said “Yes” to God’s

calling for their lives. Even if they lived a much simpler life in Peru than they could have lived in Sweden they were so grateful and dedicated to the ministry. I also saw the practical consequences of their faith and how their faith led them to reach out to people in every area of their lives. During this year I looked poverty directly in the eye, both material and spiritual, and decided that I wanted to dedicate my life to serve others in whatever way God wanted me to serve.

Several years later my family and I went back to Peru. I worked with a Peruvian organization, and my work was in the area of conciliation and domestic violence. I met so many people in situations of conflict and abuse, and at the same time I saw how little the churches in that town did to help the people in these areas. It seemed to me that the church divided the spiritual life with their daily life and struggles instead of seeing the work of the church in a holistic way. I specially remember two examples that struck me and made me angry.

The first one is about a lady in the church who remained seated when the time for communion came. I did not know her well so I did not ask her personally, but when I had a chance to talk to the pastor I asked him why she did not participate in the communion, being that she was in church every week. The pastor told me that she was divorced and could therefore not take communion. If she would take the communion she would eat and drink judgment over herself. The next situation was when a woman in the church came to me crying, telling me that her husband was cheating on her with his ex-wife. He was also treating her children badly and she wanted to leave the house and go stay with her parents for a while. She was confused. I told her that I believed that her decision to take her children and stay with her parents was good. She agreed, but the problem was that the pastor had said that if she left the house she would be the one who left her husband and therefore the sinner. She was supposed to stay in the house and if

he would leave her that would then be his fault and she would then be free to go. I struggled with the Bible texts that the pastor had given her as base for his suggestions, but they didn't make sense to me. Could Jesus really want someone to stay and be quiet in an abusive relationship? I did not see that the church offered any real counseling, and I started to understand more and more what legalism was.

I believed then that I would be working the rest of my life in a parachurch organization, because I did not see a good example of a church that worked holistically with the people. My plans were to study and be a family therapist, but God's plans were different. I am so glad that I came to Fuller Theological Seminary where I learned to integrate theology with everyday life and everyday concerns. I was thrilled with the counseling classes, my family therapy class, and urban ministry classes. The call from God to work in Church ministry became more and more clear. There is so much we could do as pastors within the church. When my husband and I came to the United Church of Christ, I was also positively surprised how the theology and practice went hand in hand and made sense in daily life. I met many people who are committed to ministries that serve people in the community, and while others are stuck in discussions they are out working based on God's love for all people.

My desire as an ordained minister is to share the love of Jesus Christ with people who are struggling in their relationships and/or in their families. I believe that Christ's love transforms lives and makes people whole; ready to follow as disciples and to serve by doing Christ's will revealed in the Scriptures. The Bible must make sense and our theology must make sense to people. By the way, I'm convinced that the divorced lady and the abused and cheated on lady would have been welcomed to the table in the United Church of Christ!