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UCC Denominational Polity
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Ordination Paper

Section 1: My Personal Call

My first experience doing ministry was my senior year in high school. I was involved in Young Life, and several of my friends had started helping out with the middle school version “Wyldlife.” At first I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be a mentor with Wyldlife because of some sort of drive to do ministry or because there were cute girls who were also leaders. At a camp retreat, during a time of silence, I reflected and prayed on it and then asked the Wyldlife leader if I could join the leadership team. My experience was only for one school year, but very positive. I was recovering from a severe muscle movement disorder; I would have violent spurts of jerking in my arms a couple times a day, and I also had facial spasms that rapidly opened and shut my eyelids. For several years this prevented me from doing well in school, participating in sports and having “normal” social relationships. Needless to say, high school was often a struggle where I was alienated and teased. My friends tended to be good guys who also had atypical obstacles. My best friend was adopted with his two brothers at ages 5, 4 and 3 by a kind Mormon couple. Shortly after the adoption, his new mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and fought for 13 years before dying a month after her youngest (my friend) graduated from high school. This high school experience gave me a unique perspective on and understanding of life that continues to shade my ministry.

At the time I started with Wyldlife, I was on a medication that suppressed the dystonia, but still had many of the markings of a social misfit: an apathetic approach to school, recreational marijuana use and good taste in music. Young Life was a safe place for me to begin forging social relationships, and start making friends with kind, accepting and somewhat “normal” friends. But I didn’t exactly fit in perfectly – so when I asked to be a Wyldlife leader, the youth minister was a little hesitant and very surprised. He made the right decision and welcomed me to the leadership team. I played guitar for the youth meetings and helped organize the various games and mixers we did with the youth. Naturally, I had a way of relating to and dealing with the “problem” boys. They felt comfortable sharing themselves with me, and didn’t feel like I would judge them for their bad social behavior. I remember giving one kid a ride home and talking to his mother in his driveway. A single mother in a town of affluent, nuclear families, she was appreciative of the support Wyldlife gave her son – who was struggling at the local middle school – and the model that I was setting for him (although this made me uncomfortable, because I truly hoped her son would avoid my past and current behaviors). Sadly, the year after I moved away to San Diego for undergraduate school, I learned this boy was expelled for having a “hit list” of people and teachers he hated. Knowing the boy, he was not a Columbine-like threat, just an awkward teen who was picked on in school and had deep feelings of resentment. I felt a little guilty, wishing I could be there for him during that time when he was surely excluded from the entire community, including Wyldlife.

My first year at San Diego State University I wanted to expand my faith and get more involved in Christian organizations, but was disappointed with the Christian culture

on campus. I rushed the Christian fraternity but decided it was too conservative for me. I briefly attended an orthodox Presbyterian church that led Bible studies on campus, but had a much too liberal theological upbringing to make it a spiritual home. After an encounter with the International Church of Christ, a borderline cult that was actively recruiting members in the dorms, I gave up entirely on finding a place to worship in San Diego. I worshipped with my parents at Manhattan Beach Community Church (UCC), the church I grew up in, when I was in Los Angeles visiting for the weekend and just stayed home Sunday when in San Diego.

Several things changed in my life when I was in college. First, I started to enjoy school again and began to excel. My health was better and I felt like I was getting a fresh opportunity to succeed. In high school I had to listen to books on tape and had severe vision problems when my eyelids were furiously twitching, and once liberated from that limitation, I took up a new passion in reading and writing. I majored in English and philosophy and eventually became Editor in Chief of the campus newspaper.

The age twenty was a big year for me. I became the editor of the opinion section, my first real leadership position and paying job. I was in charge of a staff of about 15 passionate writers, and I maintained a weekly column myself. I organized and evaluated content, and mentored new writers in the style of an editorial (an art, if you ask me). The Opinion section thrived under my leadership, attracting new and good writers and winning several state-wide campus media competitions.

In addition to this professional success, I was starting to get good grades. And, best of all, I had a girlfriend. Cassie was a friend from high school who was going to

UCLA. We started dating over the summer between sophomore and junior year and quickly fell in love. She is smart, beautiful and fit in with my family. She gave me confidence and focus, truly inspiring me to be a better person. As a Catholic who conceived of worship and Christianity different from me, she challenged me to be more tolerant and understanding of other conceptions of the Holy. She admired my intellect and writings, and gave me the gift of love and acceptance.

I have a strong social conscience and pointed convictions about free speech and the role of media in society and on a college campus. As the editor of *The Daily Aztec*, I cherished being able to execute that vision. Being a leader in service of my convictions was so rewarding, I knew that I could never do anything else. The thought of a “regular” job, one I wasn’t passionate about, was anathema to me. But it became increasingly clear to me that journalism was not the right profession for me, although it was certainly an option. Although I personally hated *being* a teenager, I felt called to work with them. Teaching and youth ministry were two ideas that I had floating in my mind. I applied for Teach for America, thinking that after two years of service I would either remain a teacher or use the educational rewards to attend seminary. I could use the time for discernment.

Cassie was excited about me becoming a teacher – the profession she chose (she graduated a year earlier than me because I stuck around SDSU for a fifth year to double major and be editor of the paper). But I was already starting to be called to the ministry. Initially, Cassie was not very supportive of the idea, and not sure if she’d be happy as a Protestant minister’s wife. I was worried that going to seminary would be the end of our

relationship. Yet, seeing her experience in a teacher education program gave me doubts about teaching. When Teach for America rejected me, I discarded my plan B – which was to teach in an inner-city school anyway – and joined Americorps. I was accepted to work with Habitat for Humanity of Greater Los Angeles. Since I would be close to home, MBCC offered me a part-time job working with middle and high school youth.

My year with Habitat was extremely rewarding and fostered a passion for service-oriented social justice work. I find manual labor satisfying, and particularly enjoyed days when visible progress was made, particularly when framing, roofing or hanging drywall. As someone with strong interpersonal skills, and an almost impulsive desire to share myself with people (and have them share with me), I was well-suited to lead groups of volunteers for long days of sometimes tedious labor. My favorite experience was traveling to New Orleans to help the Habitat affiliate there (it had about a hundred volunteers everyday and desperately needed skilled leaders to keep up) and doing roofing for a week with teenagers from a Texas YMCA. Although having teenagers on steeply pitched roofs in the summer heat made me nervous, I connected with the youth and their leaders. They invited me to the New Orleans YMCA (where they were staying) to swim in the pool and eat dinner. It was a pleasant collision of the two ministries I had been doing all year (youth work and Habitat). If there was any doubt about attending seminary in the fall, it was only so I could stick around and build homes for another year.

When choosing a divinity school, I eventually narrowed the schools down between Claremont School of Theology and Harvard Divinity School. Claremont offered an attractive package and was close to home. Although she wouldn't make promises one

way or another, I was worried that Cassie would not move to Boston. Having been together four years, I wanted to get married soon and did not want to delay the process by three years. But Claremont was too convenient. It did not challenge me, and did not present the physical, emotional or spiritual journey that Harvard did. I knew my call demanded my best, so I took the risk to come out to Boston.

Harvard has given me a lot, but it has come at a high price. Cassie and I eventually broke up: She decided she couldn't move, and the distance – coupled with my longing and her hesitation for marriage – took its toll on the relationship. We broke up on Good Friday my second year at Harvard Divinity School, and I've yet to fully discern the theological meaning of that. Perhaps heartbreak and the suffering that accompanies it is something I needed in order to have new life – better relationships, personal growth and a greater understanding of life. Indeed, I believe I can be more present to others now in their relationship difficulties and know that the joys and pains of my relationship with Cassie will enrich future relationships, romantic and platonic. Other relationships in California were strained by the distance, but my friends and family have been very understanding.

Despite the costs, I have great faith that leaving home was the right decision, and part of God's plan for my life. I have been exposed to great ideas and great people, and have learned many things about myself and my call to ministry by being committed to the more difficult road. For my calling is truly a journey – an ongoing event that cannot be seen as static. It is shaped not only by the paths I have chosen to follow, but the people I have had the pleasure of traveling with. I know in my heart, if I choose my road based on

where God's spirit calls me, and if I treat those I encounter with love and kindness, God's grace will shine upon me and the Lord will be my shepherd.

Section 2: My personal theology.

Introduction

My faith is service oriented, and does its best to follow Christ's commandment, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn 13.34 NRSV). At its core, it's pluralistic. My best friend growing up is Mormon, one of my best friends at Harvard Divinity is an Orthodox Jew and my father's side of the family is Catholic. I also have close Presbyterian, Unitarian, Humanist and atheist friends. Religious tolerance, ecumenism and inter-religious cooperation are not some abstract ideals to me – it is the fabric of my family and friends. I love these people in my life, and love them for their character and hearts, which is inherently tied to their faith. I cannot in good conscience reject their worldviews, when those very worldviews light up my life. When I read in 1 John 4.16, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (NRSV), I hear a call to religious understanding and cooperation with all those who live in love – for God is with them, regardless of the labels we put on ourselves.

However, I do not wish to diminish the importance of theology, or the significant and substantive differences between worldviews. On the contrary, faith shapes the essence of our characters and has immense personal and social ramifications. Far too often, a classically liberal theology (one that is non-creedal and allows liberty of conscience) falls into the trap of moral relativism. In its blanket approval of diversity, it

looses sight of God's will and justice. Evil and injustice are ostensive realities in this world, but aren't found in religious, ethnic or other social divisions, but are rather found in people and institutions that place love for money, love for power or love for comfort above love for others. In a world where children are forced into military service for the interests of a powerful few, I am not shy about making distinctions between right and wrong. A faith that truly loves and seeks to serve others must have a strong sense of justice and mission.

Although I am a self-admitted pluralist, my personal faith is decidedly Christian. I see the world through a Christian lens. I seek guidance in the wisdom of the tradition, and I encounter the Holy in the language of the God of Abraham. Although I do not believe the Bible is the *inerrant* word of God, I certainly believe the scriptures are divinely inspired and grant them a great deal of authority in my life. The good Lord also speaks to me in my life experiences, particularly my experience in serving others. But nothing informs me more than my relationships with other people, and I recognize God's Spirit easily in them. My heart is shaped by these factors, and other manifestations of God's grace, so I have a great deal of confidence and trust in my moral compass.

Statement of Faith

Faith statements are loathsome when they are used as "tests" for "admission" into the Christian fellowship. Far too often they are perverted to enforce conformity and futilely confine the Holy Spirit to tidy categories. However, they can be used beneficially for understanding one's sense of purpose and mission as an institution – I couldn't imagine serving a church that didn't have a well articulated faith and mission statement. This

extends to my denomination – I would not serve the UCC if I didn't think it had a solid understanding of its mission and beliefs. Faith statements also give people a chance to reflect on their theology and find common ground with their brothers and sisters in Christ. In the spirit of this, I intend to go through the UCC's Statement of Faith (original version) and use it as an outline to explore my personal theology.

- *“We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:”* This statement has been since changed to embrace gender neutral language. Although, in general, I embrace gender neutral language in worship and hymns, there are times when it fails to capture key theological concepts. Jesus Christ related to God as to a Father. There is something rich and intimate about this conception of God, a unique blend between love and authority. As someone who has an excellent relationship with his father on Earth – I consider him my greatest living role model – I easily identify with the conception of God as Father. God is certainly big enough for multiple simultaneous conceptions, and I most often think of God in terms of an “Eternal Spirit,” that is infinite and non-anthropomorphic. However, it would be a shame to lose the conception of God as father – and be uncomfortable addressing it in worship – because of historical patriarchy.
- *“He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.”* I have a great reverence for, and interest in, mythology. I think myths have the ability to articulate spiritual truths about the world that cannot be spoken in any other literary genre. So, when I say I read the

Creation stories in Genesis (too many people forget there are two...) as myths, it does not diminish it in anyway in my mind. The Creation myths capture the human condition profoundly. It articulates our perception of design to the universe, our sense of exile, the burden of labor and the dilemma of moral choices in truly unique ways. Since I do not take them as “historical” truths, I am free to believe in evolution with one addendum: The creation of this world is not arbitrary, nor is it a random process of selection. The Eternal Spirit of God has guided the creation of the worlds (note the use of the plural in our faith statement) and of man to God’s design and image. Most importantly to us, I think, is that God sets before us the ways of life and death. That is, we are moral agents with free will, given choices between right and wrong, life and death, fulfillment and destruction. What I like most about the Creation story is how it tackles our knowledge of good and evil, and our daily struggle with moral choices.

- *“He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.”* My personal conception of sin is very similar to Paul Tillich’s idea of sin as “alienation from God.” To Tillich, and to me, sin is not an action but a spiritual state of being. Often, things we point to as sins – lying, murder, infidelity – are actually manifestations of a broken spiritual state that is alienated from God. I believe in original sin in the sense that humans are naturally born into a state of alienation from God, and that humanity is in a fallen condition. But I also believe the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ place before us a path to righteousness. In loving and serving others, we are granted grace. We overcome our selfishness, our

aimlessness and our sin (alienation). His love saves us because it inspires that very love in our own hearts, where the resurrected Christ dwells.

- *“He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.”* For people with a steadfast belief in a benevolent, loving and merciful God, the idea of God’s judgment can be a difficult subject. Old Testament stories of the Lord’s wrath – floods, plagues, and annihilation – don’t seem to depict a God of Love. The common notions of Heaven and Hell as an eternal reward or punishment based on a short time of decision are also incongruous with a loving and just God. However, far too often, instead of re-conceiving God’s judgment in a harmonious way to God’s peace and love, we ignore the subject. But to ignore God’s judgment is to ignore God’s will; they are inextricable. I believe that it is not only necessary to preach and address God’s judgment and justice frequently, but also best done in terms that focus on liberating the oppressed and victimized, and not in terms of punishment. For it is in the deliverance of the poor and the marginalized where God’s justice is found, not in the destruction of the wicked. A theology of liberation not only has a strong Biblical basis, but is a theology in harmony with a God of love and a Christ of sacrificial service to others. Liberation theology helps us discern God’s will, which unconditionally informs our call as Christians and the mission of the Church. In this process of discerning God’s justice and will, it is important for us to listen to the “prophets and apostles.” Not only the prophets and apostles of the past, but also the prophetic voices in the present and the future.

- *“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.”* I have a relatively high Christology – Christ’s humanity is important, and should not be lost, but it is also important to acknowledge the divinity of Christ. While I am unsure about the virgin birth as a historical truth, I believe it on a mythological and narrative level. Jesus is only part human – he has come to share our lot, and to live his mission as a human being so that we too can live our mission as humans. But he is also God’s word and will manifest in human form; a perfect example unattainable to us. In many ways, the virgin birth attempts to explain the miraculous break Jesus makes from the fallen condition of humanity, allowing him to be an example of a more excellent way and a beacon of grace. His crucifixion and resurrection show the intimate relationship between suffering and revelation; grief and joy; death and rebirth.
- *“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.”* This is one of my favorite sections of the faith statement because it acknowledges the living tradition of Christianity and makes room for the progressive nature of the UCC. All people of each generation are invited into the fellowship of the Christian church, and this makes it a dynamic and shifting tradition. Orthodoxy often attempts to freeze and authorize a particular conception of the church, but the Holy Spirit does not allow us to place static boundaries around our church. It continually calls us into renewal, and makes the Christian faith a journey instead

of a destination. We should not fear change that is generated from the Spirit and Advocate of the Lord. This openness and process of renewal, if done lovingly, should be a process of unity and harmony instead of division, because our commitment to the Holy Spirit binds us in covenant with “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.”* One of my favorite preachers of all time is Phillips Brooks, a 19th century Boston Episcopal preacher. He once preached: "Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you yourself shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God." In this quote, Rev. Brooks eloquently expounds the cost and joy of discipleship. The Christian road is not an easy road – it demands much from you, and you should accept the burden willingly. Pray for strength and success, not comfort and exemption. But, in taking on God's work instead of passively praying, God's power will become something no longer external and miraculous, but the miracle of God will dwell in your heart and in your life. Foremost in doing God's work is “being his servants in the service of men.” From my perspective, that service includes proclaiming and sharing your faith with others, spreading the good news

of Jesus Christ and being vigilant in resisting corruption and opposing injustice. To do this effectively, it is important to establish and sustain communities of good will. The two sacraments of Jesus Christ, baptism and communion, ritualize and enact this vital need. Baptism buries one to the death (destructiveness) of the world and resurrects them into life in Christ. But it is also an important social marker into the Christian community and an intense vow of faithfulness. Communion is the divine meal that nourishes and sustains faith, feeding all believers. I take both sacraments to be powerful symbols, ritualistic expressions of divine truth, and therefore reject sacramental doctrine that is overly literal or legalistic (e.g. full submersion baptism being the only proper baptism, or transubstantiation). Although the theology I present here would seem to demand baptism before communion, I strongly believe in an open communion with absolutely no restrictions. All who wish to share in communion are unconditionally invited to the table – although personally I think it makes sense to be baptized before taking communion, I do not believe a minister has the power to deny communion and make judgments about who gets a seat at Christ’s table. Historically the Eucharist has been used as a means of control and enforcement, which is antithetical to its radically open nature.

- *“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.”* This portion of the faith statement emphasizes that we are in covenant with God, and that although the

Christian call is not one to an easy life, if we do our part, God will do the God's. God promises forgiveness, grace, courage, and eternal life – in essence, God's divine presence in your life, at all times and forever. I believe I have already addressed sin, grace, struggle, justice and peace, so I will skip to the theological concepts of eternal life and God's kingdom. Again, as a "literal" truth, I am uncertain about eternal life. I do believe each person has a Spirit that endures eternally after their death, but I do not think it resembles our consciousness or even what we would consider our self-identity. However, as the virgin birth seeks to explain the Christ's miraculous break from humanity's fallen condition in a mythological and literary way, eternal life does something similar. Because we do have an everlasting spirit, Heaven and Hell are concepts that help us understand how our actions and decisions in life have eternal consequence. It simultaneously makes our mortal lives immensely important (as a time of choice and judgment), without preventing life from becoming an end in itself. It articulates how our beliefs and deeds on earth transcend our own mortal condition. Although I see eternal life in somewhat spiritualized and abstract terms, I see the concept of God's Kingdom as materially manifest. God's Kingdom is infinite and eternal, and not limited to Earth, but is tangible and present in the world. On Earth, God's Kingdom is "structural Grace." In Liberation Theology, one of my areas of study and interest, there is a well-articulated notion of "structural sin," which is the ways that our social systems and institutions perpetuate, encourage and propagate sin. Liberation Theology's concept of "God's Reign" and the "Kingdom of God"

is similar to my own, which is the people, communities and structures that liberate people from the oppression of structural sin. Families, churches and other social organizations are the units of God's Kingdom on earth. Much of my ministry wishes to focus and growing a culture and community that achieves "structural grace;" structures that nurture life, provide opportunities and liberate people from oppressive economic and spiritual conditions. However, I feel as though this is only a small portion of God's Kingdom, and that the Reign of God transcends our time and our structures. Nevertheless, our communities in the here and now are an important part of that Kingdom.

- *"Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him. Amen."* It is always important to remain reverent, humble and grateful before God. I may have my own ideas of theology and the nature of the world, but ultimately I submit myself to God's will and plan and thank him daily for the gift of life and thought. My theology is not static, because it is always listening for God's voice in my life.

Section 3: Why the UCC?

There are many reasons I seek ordination specifically in the United Church of Christ. Foremost, it is the tradition that has nurtured my spiritual development my whole life. Growing up in the UCC, I have had the privilege of being involved in the UCC at the local, conference and national level, even at a young age. I have been active in my home church, Manhattan Beach Community Church, in various capacities since childhood. As a young adult I have served MBCC as a Youth Assistant, leading middle and high school activities and occasionally assisting in worship and preaching during the summer. I also

became involved at the conference level through Pilgrim Pines, as well as being a conference delegate at the 2007 General Synod in Hartford, CT. At the national level, I was involved in Justice and Witness Ministries' Young Adult Environmental Justice team, lead by Ken Brown. These varied experiences have nurtured my spirit and compelled me toward the ministry. It seems natural to me to serve the community from which you emerge. I have a great deal of loyalty in my heart to the UCC, and because of its uniting nature that creates space for diverse theologies among its congregants and clergy, I know that I will always have a home in the UCC.

Furthermore, I hope the call story and theological section of this ordination paper demonstrate a compatible theology and sense of ministry with the UCC. One important issue that has not yet been discussed is the nature of UCC polity, which I find both appealing and theologically sound. I have a great belief in the priesthood of all believers – the purpose behind my ordination is not to somehow separate me as “clergy” from the “laity.” It is rather to dedicate me as a servant and leader in the community. If, as a leader, I have more influence or power than the average congregant, that power is not directly from God or a product of my status, but rather loaned to me by the faith and trust of my congregation. As a parish minister in the UCC, you have no executive authority over the institution of the local church; your power comes solely from the trust of the congregation and their faith in your judgment.

I mentioned earlier in the theology section “structural grace” as being social systems of liberation and empowerment. Although UCC polity is far from a perfect institution (growing up with it, I realize the costs of the Church's commitment to local

autonomy and democratic national polity), it is an empowering institution that inspires lay leadership and values the spiritual gifts of all its followers. When the congregational model of church governance finds its way into societies that are authoritarian and oppressive, people are able to participate in an egalitarian religious community that values their worth and dignity. When a person is able to see themselves as a full participant in God's church, it is only a matter of time before they demand equality and basic rights in other areas of their life. The polity of the UCC relies on equality and lay empowerment, so it also fosters the education and civic engagement of its participants. Literacy, particularly Biblical literacy, is vital to the smooth functioning of the model.

The autonomy of the local church also allows the Holy Spirit to work in our churches in unique and powerful ways. UCC predecessor denominations were the first United States denominations to ordain an African-American and a woman, and the UCC was the first mainline denomination to ordain an open homosexual. The UCC (and UCC predecessors) has often been a pioneer in the history of the Protestant Church, primarily because we give freedom to the local church to follow their conscience and the prophetic voices in their midst.

However, it is important not to be oblivious to the costs of this model. When the Tsunami hit Thailand and other coastal countries, Catholic Relief Services initially pledged more money in relief than the richest nation in the world. Almost all UCC congregations did something, and there was a response at the national level, but our lack of centralized, executive resources sometimes limits our ability to carry out our mission quickly and effectively, or to combine our resources. There is also frequent in-fighting

and divisions over social and theological issues, which can be destructive to unity (the most recent example being the loss of the Puerto Rico conference). Yet, the Lord God in great power and glory could surely demand obedience, stamp out evil and run the world efficiently. Instead, we are given a conscience and freedom, and we are active moral agents that make choices which define our very existence. Dealing with the frustrations and inefficiencies that accompany local autonomy is a small price to pay to celebrate our free will and conscience in the polity of our denomination.

Why Ordination?

Because I place a great deal of faith in the idea of the “priesthood of all believers,” and see all of God’s faithful as capable of using the most of their spiritual gifts to preach the Word, teach their neighbor and even administer the sacraments of baptism and communion, I do not feel I need to be ordained to do these things before God. However, I see ordination as a vital covenantal relationship between the UCC, the local church I hope to serve and myself which up builds all participants bound in covenant. The following is what I perceive to be some of the expectations and promises of this three-way covenant:

1. The UCC and me:

- **What the UCC expects from me:** The Manual on Ministry is fairly clear what the UCC expects from me as an ordination candidate in a conveniently titled section “The Church’s Expectations of its Candidates for Ordination” (pages 28 and 29 of Section 3). It has four sections: Faith Affirmations, Church Loyalty, Knowledge/Skills and Personal Qualities.

When reviewing these sections, I am confident in my ability to fulfill these expectations, although in my Knowledge/Skills I am still growing in many areas (as I will certainly do my entire life), and my competency in some areas exceed others (My knowledge of the Bible, for example, is much more expansive than my understanding of stewardship, although I believe myself capable in both areas). But once qualifications are met, I see the actual covenant of ordination between myself and the UCC as one of loyalty to the Church. That is, I am expected to contribute my gifts to the denomination at a conference and national level and conduct myself in good faith as a clergy member of the denomination. Indeed, I look forward to fulfilling my end of the covenant between myself and the UCC as clergy. I hope to serve on conference boards and participate to some extent in the national ministries of the denomination. I will also use my voice in the local church to encourage conference and national participation.

- **What I expect from the UCC:** I also expect loyalty from the denomination. The primary way this loyalty would manifest is in support for my ministry and my personal welfare while doing it. This means advocacy in the workplace for health care, fair compensation, and retirement, as well as the compassionate and professional mediation of any serious conflicts. I also expect resources to enhance my performance at the local church in the form of positive peer relationships, guidance, networking, educational/curricular material and other forms of aid. I have already benefited from the support of my conference and

the national body of the UCC. My conference has been providing me with some financial assistance while I'm at Harvard Divinity School, and the Massachusetts Conference has provided an excellent mentor and denominational counselor to me in Rev. Elizabeth King. I look forward to continuing these affirming relationships as clergy.

2. The Local Church and Me:

- **What the Local Church expects from me:** This will vary based on what exactly it is the Church hires me for (Associate Pastor, Youth and Family Minister, Senior Pastor, etc.), but for the most part churches expect an intelligent, competent, compassionate and effective leader with a vision for ministry and mission that is compatible with their own. Whereas loyalty, on both sides, was a defining concept in the relationship of ordination between me and the UCC, respect is the dominant concept between the local church and its pastor. The local church expects a good steward of its community, who respects its church culture and traditions, and understands his/her relationship to the lay leadership of the church. I often hear colleagues complain about the difficulties of establishing boundaries with their congregations in one breath, without being fully aware of the two-way nature of boundaries. Unless a local congregation intentionally seeks a pastor to radically renew the church, it is important to respect the existing church establishment and structure, and to comprehend the conditions of your service to the church. This does not mean uncritically accepting practices in the church that are unhealthy or possibly

destructive, or avoiding innovation and enforcing the status quo. Rather, it means to do all things with good will and the utmost respect for the congregation you serve.

- **What I expect from the local church:** Likewise, respect, mainly for my position and personal boundaries. Respect, for the most part, is earned – but it also needs to be asserted. A friend of mine likes to quote Gary Habermas as saying that ministers have become “quivering lumps of availability” (even in this internet age, I cannot locate and confirm the quote, but trust my friend). I have seen good, committed ministers burn out because of an inability to enforce boundaries. This is most commonly caused by the long hours which accompany accepting every request of your time. Often, the best thing for the church as a whole is for the minister to reserve his or her energy and say “no” to non-essential projects and engagements. I refuse to allow my workload to encroach on my personal health and family life. I believe that congregations don’t want to overwork their ministers or selfishly monopolize his/her time, but often the minister is to blame for never being assertive about boundaries. The issue of respecting a minister’s boundaries – whether it is time or privacy – touches upon the issue of respect for the position of the minister in the church. Respecting a minister’s time and privacy is an extension of the general respect for the office. I also expect respect for my training, judgment and commitment to service.

Conclusion

As a person called to the service of Christ in the service of his faithful, both in the leadership of the “structures of grace” of the church and as a spiritual mentor to individuals of the congregation, the three-way covenant of ordination will empower me in this unique mission. As somebody with a talent and affinity for relating to youth and young adults, as well as a strong commitment to “hands-on” community service work, I see myself thriving as a youth minister or associate with an emphasis on youth and young adult ministries or the community service efforts of the congregation. My gifts in preaching, teaching, creative writing, and most importantly building and maintaining positive personal relationships will undoubtedly contribute to life of the local church I serve and the wider UCC, and I believe qualifies me for a wide variety of parish positions including senior pastor. Regardless of which particular title I hold in a congregation, it is my great hope to passionately and effectively serve this denomination as clergy.