

A Midwife of Transformation: *The Ordination Paper of Ava Bilton*

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.
Exodus 1:15-21 NRSVUE

I do not exist on the margins. Neither am I firmly rooted in the paradigmatic status quo. Instead, I find my being in the space between. I am called to stand in the threshold and birth resurrection. Full of uncertainty, the liminal space I inhabit is dry and barren according to the metrics of modern society - anchored in absolutes and allergic to mystery - but spiritually, it is fertile. I have arrived here because I can't bear to stand in the land of dominance and privilege, certitude and control, but neither have I suffered enough to claim space alongside those who are systematically and individually denigrated and oppressed. This threshold, if seen at all, is often ignored or misunderstood. Very little credence is given to what happens here by the many who lack the resources or courage to step inside, but for those who are ready and willing, I meet them here and midwife their journey of transformation as I continue to discern my own. As each of us becomes - resurrecting and resurrected - so does our world move inexorably towards the promise of *shalom*.

I am called to be with those moving from Maundy Thursday through the passion of Good Friday, the dark of Holy Saturday, and the resurrection of Easter Sunday. While this most certainly applies to attending to individuals in the midst of personal crisis and transformation, I particularly hear a call to address the institution of church. I have observed the many ways in which mainline protestant Christianity has entered its own season of death, and I hear a call to be one of the midwives who birth a resurrected church.

I. Statement of Christian Experience

Home and the Local Church

*This is why the Good has come into your midst.
It acts together with the elements of your nature
So as to reunite it with its roots.”*
- The Gospel of Mary Magdalene¹

I do not seek this resurrection ex-nihilo, but out of my life-long experience of participating in Christian faith communities. I have long been witness to and beneficiary of the infinite blessings of belonging to a community committed to the Way of Jesus. My calling is therefore rooted in my love for the people who have shaped my life, alongside a deep conviction that the way of Jesus is an essential response to the powerful empire in which we find ourselves enmeshed today.

My lineage includes familial, institutional, and spiritual ancestry. My father is a man of deep faith who continues to engage in personal and communal spiritual practice in worship, service, and devotion. Our relationship, particularly as I've gotten older, has held space for conversations about big theological questions and concepts. My mother comes to her faith through a love of music and a desire to serve. Whether singing in the choir, building a community garden, or starting a food shelf, she has lived God's love throughout her life. My maternal grandmother was a church visitor and was beloved by many throughout her decades of ministry to the aging, unwell, and homebound. By their example, my family has provided an anchor for my spiritual journey.

From childhood through adolescence, my family participated as members of the Presbyterian Church (USA). My institutional lineage is one of mainline Protestantism that is open and affirming. Like most 1990s Christian youth, I participated in Sunday School (The Promised Land), and confirmation, and went to lock-ins and on service trips, but by far the most influential spiritual leader growing up was Steve Jobman, the minister of music, who was openly gay and both beloved and celebrated by our entire community.

At ten years old, after a challenging and disruptive move from Dallas, Texas, I remember walking into Steve's youth choir rehearsal for the first time. He greeted me with an enormous smile, a folder full of music, and a seat in the front row. Steve and the music program at First Presbyterian Church created a space of belonging and acceptance for me that changed my life in a number of ways, the biggest of which was planting my love of sacred music and art. Music

¹ Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2002), 25

became central to my identity, and thus central to my concept of meaning. I feel things most deeply - most truly - when I am singing or listening to music. Under Steve's leadership, I became aware of the presence of the Holy throughout moments of music in worship - whether in a final note sung by hundreds of choir members, or in the beauty of a simple solo. The combination of the community Steve built and the artistry of our shared work laid the first framework for my relationship with the Divine.

In college, I shifted from the Presbyterian community into a United Methodist Church. St. Luke's UMC was a major player in Oklahoma City, offering shelter, healing, and spiritual community for thousands in the area. After initially joining as a member of their music internship program, I began to build relationships with different spiritual leaders within their church. I spent the summers working in their daycare. I moved in with one of their pastors after my house was swarmed by fleas. I became the director of one of their youth outreach programs. Along with my best friend, I joined a Sunday school class of wise elders. Just like Steve Jobman, the people at St. Lukes changed my life. My theology was engaged in new ways, and I began to see myself as a contributing person of faith with something real and meaningful to offer.

In 2014, I moved to Los Angeles and began attending Mosaic. My first Sunday there, all the greeters were so joyful, and everything was so cool and artistic that I was immediately on alert. This looked nothing like the churches I had grown up in, and it was suspiciously close to the megachurches that seemed to thrive on bait and switch tactics. I listened closely for theological discrepancies in the worship songs, and laid in wait throughout the entire sermon for the pastor to make some kind of theological claim onto which I could pounce. I was determined to find a flaw in this church that had all the dynamism and energy of a megachurch but mixed in inclusion and joy. I ended up attending Mosaic for the entire three years I lived in LA. I became a volunteer leader of their children's ministry and even went to Malawi with their global missions team.

Though nothing like the churches I grew up in, nor frankly like the United Church of Christ in which I seek ordination, Mosaic played a crucial role in my spiritual and vocational development. It was the first church in which I felt God move in worship on a regular basis. Throughout my three years in attendance, the leadership of the church evolved in such a way that I would no longer consider myself theologically compatible with its teachings, but I still believe there is much to be learned from the way Mosaic insists upon creativity and cultural relevance as

core tenants of its mission and vision. Mosaic's relationship to the immanence of Spirit and its passion for nourishing people's spiritual lives in such a way that they may have more meaning, more joy, and more hope modeled a version of church that I think millions of people are hungry for in today's world. Because of my time in there, I know the impact a vibrant faith can have.

I eventually found my way to the UCC after moving to Vermont in 2017. Though its worshipping life didn't speak to me with the profundity I experienced at Mosaic, its core theology and insistence on faith and action that acknowledges and attends to the marginalized and the oppressed has resonated deeply with my own understand of God and the Way of Jesus the Christ. I have particularly experienced that throughout my ministry with First Congregational Church in Burlington. In the summer of 2024, every single day opened and closed with "the ministry of the porch." Regardless of the weather, what else "needed to be done" or what resources were available, we poured ourselves out bearing witness to, praying for, nursing wounds with, feeding, and most importantly, listening to folks struggling with lack of housing and issues of addiction. It was a seminal season of ministry and an extreme testament to the necessity and potential power of the Local Church.

Regardless of where one stands on the ideological spectrum, we tend to assume an all or nothing perspective on the beliefs and practices that may accompany those who occupy ideologies different from our own. Winding my way through a diverse variety of Christian communities, I have been able to experience the great gifts of each setting and the truth that we have much to learn from one another. I wish to honor all these experiences by holding them as creative inspiration in the space between what was and what could be, making room for subtle shifts and integrations that can propel the church to generational transformation.

Education

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)
- ee cummings, i thank you god*

Since that initial experience of choir with Steve, music has been a core part of my life, so much so that in the middle of high school, I started looking for places where I could study more intensely than was possible in my local setting. In 2005, I left Iowa for the North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and spent my final year of high school

learning about arias and art songs, and falling in love with the art of creative collaboration. I pursued my bachelor of music degree in vocal performance at Oklahoma City University, and after graduation spent several years moving from opera into musical theatre and then into writing and producing original pop music.

My work with vocal music was full of challenges that felt personal and existential. Any artist will tell you it's a life of constant rejection. There is always someone more gifted and talented, and it's hard to internalize one's belovedness when the powers that be proclaim "not good enough." Studying music is far more than just learning how to sing, or even how to communicate through music – I think it's actually about learning how to be human.

When I eventually became a vocal teacher myself, I would often describe voice lessons as "therapy with a soundtrack." My musical education is an essential piece of my work as a pastor. Sure, I can play the piano or conduct the choir if we lose our music director (which I have!), but I also know how to weave together different creative elements and people to create a meaningful experience of worship. I learned how to build relationships and how to develop people struggling with crisis or challenge. Who I am as an artist and an artistic leader is deeply embedded in my ministry. It is an essential piece of the person God created me to be.

In the decade after graduating with my undergraduate degree, I considered going back to get a master's degree several times. I was accepted to the public relations program at Georgetown, and the social impact MBA at the University of Western Australia, but it wasn't until I understood God's call into ministry that I began to look seriously at theological education. In the fall of 2019, just after moving to Perth to be with my Australian husband, I realized that I had a calling to vocational ministry that required me to enroll in seminary. After much research I discovered that Australian seminaries are similar to Australian churches – only either Catholic or "Bible colleges." As neither proved a good theological fit for me, I decided to see what was available online and affiliated with the UCC. I am so grateful to have found Chicago Theological Seminary.

The faculty of CTS is very clearly designed to represent the marginalized and the oppressed. Not once did I study with a professor who identified as a straight, white, cisgender male. This was of extra importance for me because growing up, all ministers were exactly that. I didn't realize it, but my entire theological background had been from one singular perspective. Studying at CTS was like turning on a bright light in a dimly lit room. I went from only being

able to see what was right in front of me to experiencing the reality of the enormous depth and breadth of possibility in theology, religion, spirituality, and human experience. This paper is a testament to the fruits of that experience.

One morning in the midst of a Systematic Theology Zoom session, Dr. Joanne Marie Terrell, clearly exasperated, gently paused our class: “Be careful,” she admonished, “theological experience cannot be applied universally, but must be understood as a particular.” Indeed, this has stuck with me more indelibly than any other teaching. The idea that each person, each experience, is particular and cannot be universalized has had a deep impact on the transformation of my theology and ministry. Born into the absolutist paradigms of American society, the invitation to admit my own experience of being human as particular has allowed me to honor the experiences of others in the same way. Not only has this idea shaped my own theology, but it has given me the expansiveness necessary to offer others the space to develop their own.

Call to Ministry

*Let me make the songs for the people,
Songs for the old and young;
Songs to stir like a battle-cry
Wherever they are sung.*

*Not for the clashing of sabres,
For carnage nor for strife;
But songs to thrill the hearts of men
With more abundant life.*

- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Songs for the People*

In 2017, I began working for the First Congregational Church in Burlington. First as their Community Ministries Coordinator, and then as their Program Director, I began to experience life as a spiritual leader. My two years at FCCB was a transformative experience for both of us. Our time together showed me that love, belonging, truth, and meaning are values core to my being, and I feel them resonating most powerfully within healthy spiritual community. I began to see what a group of people, centered in and led by the Gospel could do, what church could be, and I began to see that I might have a role in this new way of being.

When I left the church in 2019 to be with my husband in Australia, I was open to where I might be called next. I had no idea it would be ministry until I began looking at employment

sites. It was then I realized that there was only one thing I could really see myself doing, and it had something to do with church. In my application for seminary, I wrote:

I am being called to lead a transformation rooted in the restoration of the Christian church, to bring about the remembrance and unification of the heart and mind, and to build bridges across generations, paradigms, and faith traditions as we move ever onward in the pursuit of shalom... I struggle with labels like pastor, minister, and chaplain, but I know spiritual leadership is the purpose of my path. I believe I have been created to hold space for people to find truth, meaning, love, and belonging. It has become clear that that space will look like a church of some kind.

After a life of participating in churches where the leadership was nothing like me, I still couldn't imagine myself as a minister even when applying to ministry. After worshipping in so many services that failed to connect me with God, I couldn't see myself spending the rest of my life going through the motions of traditional church. After failing to find theological common ground with the churches I found most spiritually fertile, I couldn't fathom the possibility that there might be a community in which I would be both nourished and accepted. Years of listening to podcasts, reading social media posts, listening to friends over late night glasses of wine, and loving a husband who bears deep and irrevocable church hurt has helped me to see that there isn't a particular church or ministry role into which I am called because I believe the exact framework probably doesn't quite exist yet. I'm not called to be a pastor, priest, or prophet, but an ecclesiastical midwife.

The 20th century mystic theologian, Howard Thurman, is credited for asking people to think of the intersection between what they love to do and what the world needs. I love to lead people in the experience of transformation, and I truly believe the world needs a church that is willing to be transforming and transformed: with worship as relevant as its theology, so grounded in solidarity with the marginalized that it finds itself weeping, open to the real and powerful movement of the spirit and committed to following *and leading* in the Way of Jesus. I am called to build a church that is the kind of church I have so desperately wanted to find – a community for those who have been hurt by Christians but are hungry for Jesus, where those who refuse to profess a doctrine can ask their questions and still belong, where brokenness is neither a qualifier nor a disqualifier, but simply an opportunity to let love in.

One of my favorite definitions of resurrection is: being that ought not to be. At this point in history, the church certainly seems like one of those things that ought not to be. And yet, isn't that exactly what the Shiphrah and Puah birthed? Thus, I sense the call of midwife of

resurrection, a woman who stands up to the status quo and births the being that ought not to be: a resurrected church.

II. Statement of Christian Beliefs

God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit

Creation and Providence, Judgement and Grace

The universe

is God's self-portrait

- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*^[1]

I affirm the orthodox belief that God is. Neither begotten, nor created, God is that which was in the beginning and forever shall be. At the same time, based upon personal experiences of prayer, I confess that God is naught - experienced in the Nothing at the edge of lucidity. I once heard Dr. Maya Angelou describe the Divine saying: "God is All,"^[1] and it is this phrase to which I tether my personal concept of that which we call God. Lying somewhere between pantheism and panentheism, I see that which Creates, Redeems, and Sustains,^[2] as that which holds the All, and that which is in the All - both deeply known, and wholly unknowable. In these antitheses is the Reality of the Alpha and the Omega: an Is that holds the most transcendent spectrums of the universe within itself. G-d is Yes; even (and perhaps especially) the no, G-d affirms.

In my own spiritual formation, the ability to move beyond the image of "God" as an anthropomorphic, masculine, militaristically powerful deity has been essential to reconnecting with my faith tradition and nourishing my spiritual relationships. Applying personal transrational experiences to an academic explication of G-d has led me to intellectually surrender to G-d's mystery while simultaneously affirming my heart-centered *knowing* of G-d's loving, creative, redemptive, and unitive character.

G-d Is. Then, what does G-d do? Having relinquished the anthropomorphic G-d for the dynamic, transcendent, immanent All-ness, the question of G-d's action becomes even more interesting. I understand God's actions as creation, redemption, and sustainment. This concept is certainly theistic: G-d is personal and involved in Creation, though not an all-powerful overlord. God does not wield judgement as weapon, but as invitation - a way of seeing that invites knowledge and discernment - rather than punishment. In the redemptive dynamic of our Creator

is where we find grace, the allowance and promise of transformation regardless of circumstance. All of G-d's action is in tandem with G-d's creation. In fact, it is important to recognize these actions are not on behalf of the world, nor are they done to the world, but through the world.

1 John 4:12 tells us: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us." Indeed the creative, redeeming, and sustaining actions of the Creator are neither mechanized in nor manipulated upon us, but manifested with and *through* us. As Delores S. Williams so profoundly stated, "God provided Hagar with a resource. God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before. Liberation in Hagar stories is not given by God; it finds its source in human initiative."^[8] This is providence. Indeed, Divine action is taken in relationship with humanity. While G-d is certainly *for us* (*pro nobis*), I have also found it to be true that G-d is *with us*. In fact, G-d cannot be for us without also being with us, Providence poured out and through Creator and Creation.

To be in relationship with the creative, redeeming, sustaining G-d who is in All and holds All, we must then learn how to recognize and enact that which creates, redeems, and sustains in ourselves, in our communities, and throughout creation - perfecting love via a diverse web of interdependent connections that forms the very substance of Presence (of G-d) in the universe.

Person of Christ, Incarnation, Atonement, Salvation, Resurrection

"As a revelation of divinity, Jesus' occurrence is a 'mattering' of time, dependent on webs of relation and timely placements that also occur through relations and in relation to other placements, other matters of difference... Jesus was a singular divine incarnation not because he was the One God in a single Everyman coat, but because divinity unfolded in his limbs into utter complicity in the world - as divinity ever does."^[3]

- Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*

The Gospels tell us that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish man, born to a woman of low economic status in the town of Bethlehem. She gave birth to her son in a stable, for there was no room at the inn, and laid him in a manger- a feeding trough. The news of this baby was brought first to poor shepherds. A powerful king was threatened by his birth. He was raised in Nazareth and was a *tekton* by trade. He became a teacher and healer and led his ministry out of Galilee. He shared a table with tax collectors and sinners. He healed the sick. He spoke truth with love. He was crucified for his political and religious subversiveness and unwillingness to accept the status quo.

These things laid out by the gospels are all part of the narrative built around the historical figure of Jesus. Though most scholars agree that elements of the story - especially details around his birth and childhood - are likely mythical, the scriptures do present a reliable account of who the person of Jesus was to his closest followers and the communities they inspired. From them we learn that Jesus was a poor Jew, he was concerned for and stood in solidarity with the plight of the poor and the suffering, and in his death he suffered unjustly as the result of a violent, corrupt institution of power.

I believe we must learn to recognize Jesus as more than a story we tell. We can be in relationship with Jesus precisely because of his particular incarnation. He doesn't have to be and cannot be reduced to myth or story - for we cannot be in meaningful relationship to those - but instead we can reclaim Jesus' mattering and remember his incarnation through a relationship with him even and especially in our lives today. In addition to providing our theological center and basis of praxis, our relationship with Jesus provides the basis for Christian community and gives us a framework for relationship with those around us.

While many point to the physical death of Jesus as the redemptive factor of Christian faith, I posit that rather than understanding the death of Jesus as the mechanism of salvation, it is truly the liberating actions of his life that we are to determine to be salvific.

“According to Williams, by his life, by his practice of ‘righting relationships’ and by his ministry of healing folks physically, spiritually, and mentally, Jesus demonstrated God’s intention for oppressed people to live abundantly. In killing Jesus, the human principalities and powers signaled their intent to kill his liberative, egalitarian vision. The resurrection represented ‘the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it.’ In his life, then, and not in his death, according to Williams, Jesus conquered sin by not submitting his moral agency to the powers that challenged his authority to transform tradition.”^[6]

If we give all salvific power to the death of Jesus, then we unwittingly remit all of our agency to the institutions responsible for the killing of the man and his vision. Instead, I believe must understand Jesus Christ as the One who saves by “continuously [learning] from the life that preceded it”^[7] In this is found both salvation and resurrection.

Christ is the life blood of the transformed and transforming community. Incredibly dynamic, this could never be limited to one man, time, or place. “Rather, redemptive humanity goes ahead of us, calling us to yet incomplete dimensions of human liberation.”^[9] Jesus’ life and

the ministry that surrounded it manifested universe-shifting transformation. He refused to settle for codes and practices that no longer realized the justice and compassion with which they were initially intended. Rather, Jesus, as the embodiment of a transformational G-d, moved through the world on a trajectory that shifted traditions on the basis of the great commandment - on the basis of love.

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? He was the embodied presence of a liberating G-d, fully human, who loved fiercely, and from a place of oppression stood in solidarity with and worked for the liberation of the oppressed. He died an unjust death and bore “witness *sacramentally* to the character of God: loving his own, *not* loving others uncritically and, most important, *not* being defined by his victimization but by his commitments.”^[10] The Christic spirit continues to remind us of our role in the liberating transformation of creation. In our relationship with Jesus, we can begin to recognize his demands on the way we live our lives. Coming to know the heart of Jesus, the transformative manifestation of G-d, moves us into the work of transformation itself. No longer bound by systems of negation, violence, or oppression, Jesus frees us for the transformation of structures and society itself. We don’t move from one status quo to another, but instead join Jesus on his transformative Way.

Revelation and the Holy Scriptures

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed.

- Alice Walk, *The Color Purple*

At my weekly Bible studies, we are reading through the Bible together. We started last year at the very beginning and are just about to embark on the Psalms. Central to my pedagogical philosophy is that there is no right or wrong way to read the Bible, but that it is a text that must be mined for meaning. I believe strongly in offering all who gather the tools to interpret and discern whatever Holy Scripture may be speaking into their lives.

I do not believe the evangelical tenant that the Bible is the sole, authoritative word of God. Instead, I have experienced the Bible as a collection of literature, history, poems, genealogies, memoirs, songs, letters, and legal documents that have been woven together to illustrate the relationship between Creation and Creator. Accounts transcribed from a vast

variation of people across centuries, cultures, and geographic locations, there is no way the Word can be understood with uniformity. It must be read with a careful attention to particularity.

There are, of course, wisdom texts from many other sources, and I don't believe that we should be limited to the Bible in our quest for knowledge of G-d. I am limited in personal experience with scripture outside the Christian tradition, but I don't want that to limit its validity in my theology. In the unique perspectives of sacred texts from a variety of times, sources, and perspectives, I believe infinite facets of the sacred are revealed. Text that speaks to humanity's struggle with G-d has wisdom to offer us as we continue to do the same.

Additionally, no theology can function properly without bearing in mind the lived experiences of people in this time and place. Revelation of the Divine through lived, embodied experience allows for a relevant, contextual theology which consequently forces people to notice their present reality and understand it in relationship to past and future realities.

It is within the body that we are able to realize the reality of our relationship to creation. It is where we feel the wounds of poverty or oppression, or exhibit the swollen detachment of privilege and excess. Experience is the location of relationship, where we come to know who we are and where we are going based on our suffering, loss, joy, and pain, and love. To see God, one must necessarily *be* human.

In seminary, we frequently discuss religion - that word from the latin *re-ligare*, to bind again. If religion is that which re-binds us, I suggest that perhaps we have become too bound up in it - overly rigid, and no longer able to see beyond self-limiting boundaries. As I experience greater resonance with theologies and practices beyond my Christian tradition, I have turned from religion to recognition. From the latin *re + cognoscere* - to learn, acquaint, or become familiar with - to recognize is to acquaint again, learn again, know again. It describes my experience of gnosis: that Spark of recognition which occurs when my soul is brushed by a melody, feeling, or truth that it knew *before*, or has *always known*. In many ways, revelation is a return to God, to what was hidden in one's own soul.

Just like the Divine itself, I believe that more often than not, this revelation *occurs*. Truth may be revealed in scripture or in sermon, but is just as likely to be revealed in tears, in a song, or in the *feeling* of knowing.

Humanity

Sin, Repentance, Forgiveness

It is the important work of helping the servant see through God's eyes, not his [sic] own.
- Jane McAvoy, *Julian of Norwich on Being Satisfied*

It's easy to conflate sin with value judgement, to organize sin around that which one assigns negative value - the "bad" action, word, or thought - to make sin the theological association for "wrong." This plays into the false dichotomies buried in the foundational frameworks of our capitalist patriarchy (and frankly, those patriarchies so present throughout the Christian scripture). Many "liberal" Christians prefer to offer a definition of sin as "that which separates us from Creator and Creation." Julian of Norwich used a framework of negation in her definition of sin that I found personally appealing. But for a theological framework, when I consider the state of our humanity in the midst of creation, Elizabeth Nordbeck's words ring most true: "[w]hat is sinful, of course, is the *absolutization* of denominational particularities."^[2] What we struggle to reckon with today is silver bullet "absolutism."^[1] When one discerns the solution to a problem, it must be applied universally. If a miracle is invented, it must be replicated - everywhere and all the time. When one decides God is Love, then God must *only* and *completely* be love, at the great expense of everything else G-d^[2] is. Nordbeck's work is within the context of her commentary on the United Church of Christ, but I believe it can be extrapolated out and applied to the dynamics that are breaking us today: division and polarization, marginalization, domination and oppression, othering. Absolutizing is a form of rigidity that leaves no space for the liberation of others. It concretizes one's personal experience and beliefs while invalidating all those that do not align. It plays with judgement and evaluation in ways that alienate and disenfranchise. And it is a practice of which all are guilty.

Absolutism, becomes responsible for a curious form of idolatry. People no longer worship G-d, but lift up their own *deus ex machina*, a rigid, algorithmic, puppet of moral pronouncements - whatever thoughts, beliefs, and actions are considered "correct" in their group or personal framework.

The case for this definition of sin is further solidified in the concepts of repentance and *metanoia*. Re-thinking, or going beyond one's mind or perception is the pathway from rigid absolutism to reconciliation and wholeness. What frees us from absolutism is the invitation to see the world beyond our narrow, fixed, and finite vision, and enter into the rich multiplicity of Divine reality.

Thus, forgiveness is not necessarily an action, but the invitation let go of one's absolutism and behold a new way of seeing that allows for reconciliation and wholeness to occur.

Prayer

Prayer is simply a conversation... The best conversations we can think of are, at heart, occasions of reciprocity... In encounters between unlike beings, speech is likely not the best means, or at least the only means of communication. We may still understand this encounter as conversation, but now the meaning of the word conversation must shift. The language must shift, and the temporal context must shift, and the spatial context must shift.

- Marjorie Proctor-Smith, *A Church In Her House*

The occasions for prayer are vast and varied. Often the term is conflated with practices including mindfulness, meditation, and contemplation. Prayer, however, in the Christian context, most often refers to an interaction between humanity and Divinity. Throughout scripture, we see this interaction as a conversation between God, or YHWH and the human characters in the narrative. Sometimes this conversation involves “props” – fire, floating firepots, doves, etc. – but more often than not, it is a simple back and forth.

As with typical human conversation, prayer has two main purposes: communicating to the Divine, and listening to the Divine. Communication to the Divine may be in the form of praise or thanksgiving, confession, supplication and intercession, or invocation. Whether we offer our gratitude, appeal for mercy, request healing and comfort, or simply ask to be in the presence of the Holy, there is a sense in most prayer that the dynamic flows from us to God/Jesus/Sacred etc.. There is also, then, the way in which the Divine communicates to humanity. Prayer as a conversation demands that we are listening for the movement, intention, and word of God.

Though it is most common to think of prayer as the thing we do with our eyes closed and heads bowed. I am more comfortable with a lived, embodied prayer. The conversation we continue with the Divine might manifest in our gestures, our actions, in what we notice in the world around us. We speak with one another in the way of the most intimate relationships: in all manner of contexts and formats, sometimes just as much in what is left unsaid, in our insecurities and vulnerabilities, each desiring to be known and loved.

Eternal Life

The worst fate, beyond which no greater punishment can be imagined, is the absence of movement, of warmth, and of change.

- Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*

The term eternal life is a bit of an oxymoron. Life as we know it in this universe is constantly changing. No living being remains in stasis but is constantly flowing and becoming into the next season, phase, or stage of being. Meanwhile, eternal connotes a lasting forever that as Oxford states is “essentially unchanging.” Therefore, the idea that this dynamic being which insists upon constant change is being modified with a forever quality is a challenging one.

I don’t find comfort in an unchanging reality, in fact, I find that idea terrifying. For me, eternal life rests in the invitation to move with the universe. To engage life eternally, one must allow oneself to move ontologically beyond each given set of circumstances and organically become.

One of the most profound and provocative lines from literature is Octavia E. Butler’s theology set out in her 1993 novel *The Parable of the Sower: God / Is Change*.²

Butler’s heroine/apostle proclaims that “Change is ongoing. Everything changes in some way - size, position, composition, frequency, velocity, thinking, whatever. Every living thing, every bit of matter, all the energy in the universe changes in some way.”³ This is true, there is a shifting - a fluidity - that is central to life. However, I don’t think it is as simple as shifts or changes. The difference between change and transformation is trajectory. God as change simply shifts or moves, God as transformation forms across a trajectory - a trajectory of love.

So then theologically, eternal life refers to the ongoing transformation of the world across a trajectory of love. The invitation to this eternal life is not a ticket to the heaven in the clouds, nor is it to bodily immortality, but instead it is an invitation to participate in the ever-transforming reality of creation. In this way we are not fixed or frozen in any particularity or universality, but are freed to continue becoming. We are truly liberated.

In my time with patients in the hospital during CPE, and with some church members who are facing end-of-life circumstances for themselves or for someone they love, I have found myself asking: what do you think happens when we die. Even my mom recently called to ask:

² Butler. *Parable*, 79.

³ Ibid. 217.

what did I think happened to dogs when they die. The truth is, I don't know. No one does. I do believe that nothing is destroyed or created, it is simply transformed. So, for me, life as I know it will cease to exist – perhaps more dramatically than that day I lost my job, or I married my husband, or we decided to move back to America, perhaps not – but eternal life means that I will simply be transformed into another iteration of being. I pray that it will continue to be along a trajectory of love.

The Church and the Kin-dom

Doctrine of History and the Second Coming

*These ideas are too different from those we have known
Must we change our customs,
and listen to this woman?*

- The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

The Church has always and will ever be multi-vocalic. It is made up of many humans in many circumstances of time and place experiencing multiple realities of the Divine and what it means to be human in relationship to all creation. Thus, Church history is vast and varied. To read it from one perspective is done so at great expense to all the others. To proclaim one trajectory or one throughline is to miss the richness that is the amalgam of spiritual experience we claim as our inheritance.

For many in the Christian Church, the doctrine of history runs parallel to tradition. As with the rest of the globe, both the narrative and the doctrine of Christian history has been held by those with the most power. Over the last fifteen-ish centuries, this has meant white men of means. As a midwife in the liminal space, my doctrine of history refuses to be of the fixed, dominant status quo – though I recognize the stories it tells as important elements. The doctrine of church history must include the voices from the underside as much as it does those who won the debate or the war. Church history must include the fragments of Miriam of Magdala in the same way it considered Tertulian's doctrine of the trinity.

Understanding the role of Constantine is essential if we are to understand the historical relationship of the Church with empire. When considering church history, the underlying question has often been one of authority. Who do we confer the power of the narrative to. Is it Constantine and Pope Urban, or is it Saint Francis? Whose judgement can be trusted? And now, are we willing to go back to the cave where Thecla was carved away and see what can be

restored? An inclusive doctrine of our history must include voices from the heretics, outside the structures of polity, and consider the multiplicity of the church over time and as it is today, but it takes effort to conceive and develop one as such.

In the *Ekklesia*, we are called out and assembled as followers of the Way. It has never been enough to profess one's beliefs and then remain, unchanged, until the bodily re-appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, just as God is able to exist for us through us, so does Christ come again – embodied throughout the movements of the Way. To wait upon the Lord was never meant to be an idle, passive stance, but an active form of service. Just as a waiter attends to the needs of their guests, so do we wait upon Jesus, serving the world he showed us how to love, and by doing so, ensuring the continued resurrection, in generation after generation. Christ coming, again and again.

Church and the World

Hatred often begins in a situation in which there is contact without fellowship, contact that is devoid of any of the primary overtures of warmth and fellow-feeling, and genuineness... It is easy to have fellowship on your own terms and to repudiate it if your terms are not acceptable.
- Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*

As Laurel Schneider reminds us, “theology is just a mind-game if it is not passionately engaged in questions of depth and meaning for actual people in actual circumstances of complexity in life.”⁴ This is why the church is so important. It enfleshes the reality, necessity, and trajectory of Jesus’ message of transformation - offering a laboratory of sorts for engaging these questions of “depth and meaning” in an attempt to make its God-talk real.

Indeed, as Thurman notes in his introduction to *Footprints of a Dream*, “the movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men [sic] often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires.”⁵ At its very best, the transformation of the hearts and minds of the individuals creates a church that responds to the movement of the Spirit of God - a movement that is so very often counter to

⁴ Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 115.

⁵ Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream : The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 7.

the pervasive paradigms of the era - and so as each one has been transformed, the whole church then seeks to transform the status quo.

The challenge so frequently faced by the church is how to be relevant to culture, to meet people where they are, and be appealing enough to engage with (or as Thurman put it, to be in fellowship with), those outside the church, while also allowing those who have been transformed to allow their transformation to move against harmful prevailing elements of contemporary society. To me, this requires radical humility.

As each of us allows the Spirit to move within our lives, as we begin to find healing, wholeness, hope, and goodness within ourselves, our capacity expands. A church which provides the tools and resources necessary for each one to move along their own trajectory of spiritual formation cultivates a people of deep faith and true humility. Personal experiences of the transformational power of God inspire a desire to offer the same opportunities to others – not out of a desire to fix, but to share.

The church can thus affirm the rights of individuals to discern their own profession of faith and framework for meaning making while also encouraging continued genuine warmth and fellowship with the world around it. As each member moves along their given pathway, so the church moves, and so too, the world will move, as long as we allow ourselves to remain connected and engaged with one another and with God.

The United Church of Christ and the Wider Church

But what about the United Church of Christ? At the half-century mark, has the “unfinished church” lived up to its initial commitment to be faithfully responsive “in each generation”? And where is it going as it marches toward a centennial anniversary?

- Elizabeth Nordbeck

Though the UCC itself was formed in 1957, the large majority of its churches were founded decades if not centuries prior by predecessor denominations. Many Vermont UCC churches were Congregational churches founded in the 18th century. UCC theologian, Elizabeth C. Nordbeck notes that “We are a church barely four decades old with a history that goes back more than 400 years. This fact... has several important consequences. One of these is a kind of

pervasive nostalgia.”⁶ Indeed there is often tension in our denomination between wanting to “grow” and an allegiance to our traditions. Due to their affiliation with Congregational churches, many UCC congregations are “lay-led” and encourage their members to take the lead on church activities both internally and externally. Many big decisions are made by congregational vote. This democratic structuring is less agile than other forms of governance and makes change or movement more challenging, but means that all voices are heard and acknowledged, and that and significant adaptations are made with majority consent.

Theologically, the UCC is considered to be one of the most “progressive” Christian denominations in the US. In contrast to churches with clearly delineated theologies (often based on the Bible as the sole, authoritative word of God), the UCC’s insistence on welcoming people wherever they might be on their spiritual journey means that this welcome becomes a sort of doctrine in and of itself. A spiritual and theological openness is characteristic of most UCC churches.

I think it is clear that the UCC, just as with its UMC and Presbyterian mainline protestant siblings is at an inflection point regarding the future of the church. Financial resources are no longer what they once were, younger generations are not giving to the church in the same way their parents and grandparents were able to. Buildings are older and difficult and expensive to maintain. Liturgical practices are often out of touch with the styles and formats young people are seeking to engage with. At UCC churches in particular, decades of emphasis on progressive values and metaphorical biblical interpretation has led to biblical illiteracy which can make it difficult for unchurched folks (of which there are many here in Vermont) and young people to find value and meaning in scripture.

The deepest challenge facing UCC congregations is in our (completely fair, in my opinion) discomfort with evangelicalism. Over the past several decades, voices proclaiming “conservative” interpretations of Christianity have been amplified so loudly, they have become the default association for the religion itself. Meanwhile “progressive” Christians have found it difficult to speak out regarding their faith, lest they be seen to be affiliated with cultural evangelicalism, or worse, Christian Nationalism. Unfortunately, in an effort to divorce itself

⁶ Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, “Covenant: Can This Idea Be Saved?” Prism 11, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 46, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001872192&site=eds-live>.

from hateful elements of Christianity, many UCC-ers in practice have distanced themselves from some essential elements of Christianity. As a side-effect, congregations have been gradually separated from the foundational tenants of our faith.

I believe the work of UCC ministers (including myself) is to develop a reclamation of our faith which reconnects congregations to their spiritual selves via scripture, lineage, and praxis (worship and prayer) in a new way. As Howard Thurman reminds us, this is Christian way: “There need not be only one single rebirth, but again and again a man [sic] may be reborn until at last there is nothing that remains between him [sic] and God.”⁷ This era’s rebirth should ultimately provide a theological basis for the existence and necessity of the church in addition to justification for its current praxis of outreach and social justice. This requires a theology prepared to interrogate the doctrines and traditions of the past, faith-fully reinterpret scripture for the present, and implement practices of transformation and communicate it in a culturally relevant package that meets people where they are in what is an increasingly overwhelming cycle of daily life.

Baptism and The Lord’s Supper

*Water: voice of grief,
Cry of love,
In the flowing tear.
Water: vehicle and idiom
Of all the inner voyaging that keeps us alive.
Blessed be water,
Our first mother.
- John O’Donahue, Blessing of the Water*

Like many of our traditions and sacraments, Baptism predates Christianity. Born out of Jewish Mikvas and Greco-Roman rites of purification, it made its way into Christian orthopraxy as an initiation into Christian community promising a new beginning, a new life in Christ. Now, centuries later, baptism is a sacrament that, like any other, can take on a variety of meanings depending on its context. It may offer a sense of belonging, it may be seen as a symbol of one’s death, burial, resurrection, and new life in Christ, it may act as purification from sin, it

⁷ Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter; an Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*, (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1972), 115.

can also be seen as a rite of initiation into Christian communion, and union with the body of Christ.

I was baptized as a baby. This was a beautiful act in which my parents dedicated my life to God, and asked the church to be a part of raising me as such. However, it wasn't my choice, I don't have any memory of that event. Later, when I was attending a nondenominational church on my own, I asked to be baptized by immersion. This time, it was my decision, and I would remember it. I understand and appreciate the longstanding tradition of infant baptism in most mainline protestant churches including the UCC. It is a powerful sacrament that allows a supremely significant event in the life of the church and the family unity – a new human! – to be celebrated and acknowledged. I am grateful my parents took the pains to baptize me (on Christmas, no less!). However, for the purposes of this paper that is intentionally considering liturgical practices from multiple traditions, I would like to make a case for baptism as a rite that we offer to those who are consciously able to make the decision to live their lives in the Way of Jesus. Please know, this is not me saying that I would not offer baptism to a family with a new child – as I said above, that sacrament is a gift – this is simply offering the theological basis for my own experience of baptism, which I feel I must be open about here.

Paul writes to the Romans: “Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (Romans 6:4-6). Indeed out of all the passages in the Scripture on baptism, this speaks to the power of baptism as a rite which acts as the external manifestation of the transformation we experience in our hearts through the Way of Jesus.

If we take the Gospel seriously, becoming a Christian is not a decision that can be taken lightly, nor can it be lived easily. The sacrament of Baptism, especially if done by immersion, is one of few opportunities we have in spiritual spaces to physically embody the transformation we feel within us. I believe that by creating the opportunity for people to more deeply engage with

spiritual rituals that support their intellectual and emotional experiences of spirit, the more powerful their transformation will be. We need physical acts that can tether us to a lived reality and remind us of the gravity of our stated purpose and beliefs.

As baptism allows the *individual* to experience the physical manifestation of their calling in Christ, Communion allows the *gathered community* to experience the physical manifestation of their calling in Christ. This is why it is imperative that the Table be open to all people. The Table is where we glimpse Kindom - all gathered, no one a stranger or guest, no one sidelined or excluded, all around a table of nourishment and blessing. This is a reminder of abundance as well as equity. It is a chance to be reminded of our shared experience of humanity and God's blessing over all of it.

The Ministry

*Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,
no permission from any king.*

*They came by their own authority,
their own desire,
their own longing.*

*Wise women also came,
at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labor,
crying out with her in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings into her ear.*

*Wise women also came,
and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.*

- Jan L. Richardson, *Wise Women Also Came*

The call to ministry rings throughout the Gospel, but no where more profoundly than in the Great Commissioning: ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the

age.” (Matthew 28:19-20). Throughout centuries of Christian domination and colonization, this passage has been wielded as a weapon over indigenous peoples all over the world, so let me be very clear: I do not believe that ministry looks like a conversion mission. Ministry is cultivating one’s own Created identity, gifts, and vocation and applying it through Jesus’ saving praxis of Love:

Love one another as I have loved you

Love your neighbor as yourself

And love the Lord, your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Moving towards the world in love, offering transformation, teaching compassion, equity, justice, forgiveness, healing, and love. This is what it means to be in ministry.

Often in organized religion, those participating in the congregation forget ministry is not the sole responsibility of the minister, but that *all* disciples are called out and commissioned. As Paul so beautifully reminded the Corinthians, “Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (Corinthians 12:4-7). This work of transformation and resurrection is not possible through the gifts of one individual – it takes a gathered body working through the gifts of all its members. This is what it means to be the Kin-dom of God. By recognizing and empowering the spiritual gifts of each person, we move towards the glory of the Reign of Christ: the wholeness of *shalom*, rich in its diversity and held by the spirit.

Specifically in regards to ordained ministry, the power attributed consciously and unconsciously to one with the title of minister is something to hold with reverence and humility. We are entrusted to offer wisdom, comfort, guidance, and calm in the thinnest of thin places. As a woman, leadership in ordained ministry means offering those things in the context of the wise women who also came. I take seriously the call to bear witness to suffering, to holding mothers, to crying out in pain, to weeping with those who weep, to attending to those who mourn, and to dancing, to laughing, to eating and drinking in delight and wonder at the glory of our Creator. I don’t see the process of ordained ministry as a way to create hierarchy of ministry, but as a poignant reminder of the power given to any with the title. It is a mantle of authority that demands ultimate personal responsibility and faithfulness to God.

III. Conclusion

Shiphrah begins to prophesy: "God has brought our people a long way. And I don't believe God has brought us this far to leave us... Our hands and our wombs will do God's work... We shall receive our freedom, dancing to woman-song if we trust in the might power of Shaddai, who drew us from her holy womb, whose spirit covers the earth."

- Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*

At least once a month, usually more, I listen as someone tells me the story of their relationship with religion. Rarely are they currently participating in the life of a church. Often, they grew up attending, but through some mix of circumstance, experience, and identity, they moved away from that form of spiritual practice. By the time they are speaking with me, they are aware that they are hungry for meaning, and searching for a place to provide community, insight, inspiration, and support. 95% of the time I cannot think of a church or religious community where I could see them getting their needs met.

The United Church of Christ, with its insistence on welcome and its theological openness is the only place I can imagine birthing the kind of spiritual community people are desperate for today. I believe that the UCC has the capacity to be open to the innovation of spiritual praxis in the same way it is founded on the openness to theological interpretation and belief. As the midwife of this new spiritual community, I can only imagine myself being ordained to do so in the United Church of Christ.

In the book of Exodus - the story which functions as a resurrection myth in the Hebrew Bible, bringing new life out of the death of enslavement - it is the midwives who open the narrative. Their faithfulness to birthing Hebrew children catalyzes the journey of liberation for all their people. The way won't be easy. Even in freedom, the Israelites wandered through the Wilderness begging to go back to Egypt. This is hard work. The Church never has been and never will be perfect. But, I love the ideals and values the United Church of Christ stands for and I believe I have a calling to ordained ministry that will help lead our church into its next generation of life. Reflecting on the UCC today, I see us as a church that is offering a version of Christianity that is free, whole, inclusive, and fully alive. I believe that we have the power to stand up to paradigmatic status quos and birth new life.

And so, as I stand faithfully in the threshold between what was and what will be, I contemplate God's gift to Shiphrah and Puah: *God grew their families*. Indeed this is the gift I seek, to grow *our* family. In my commitment to God's call to stand in this uncomfortable,

challenging, unknown space, I pray that the transformation we birth and the life we affirm won't just be for the pilgrims on their individual journeys, but for all of us, a new family- a gift for the death we refuse to allow, and all the life that will be born anew.