Ordination Paper for

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Pilgrim Association, Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ

Ecclesiastical Council

October 1, 2019

Hingham Congregational Church

**Faith Journey and Call to Ministry**

 When reflecting on my faith journey, a term that comes to mind is ecumenical. My church affiliations have included, in chronological order, the following denominations: Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ, Southern Baptist, Methodist, and a return to the United Church of Christ. Before my return to the United Church of Christ, there was a period of time where I described myself as “spiritual but not religious.”

From the earliest age I can remember, I unequivocally believed in God. While that conviction has remained, my understanding of God’s character has morphed over the years. As a child, I saw God as one to be feared and obeyed. This perspective started to shift when I started attending a Congregational church at the age of nine. I heard the qualities of love and grace being attributed to God. God was presented in a more personal, relatable manner.

As an adolescent, I attended a Baptist church. God’s unconditional love was emphasized, but I saw a disconnect between the characteristic of love and some of the teachings of the church. Being told that their set of beliefs was the only true understanding of God, Jesus, and the Bible, I tried to force myself to hold the convictions that I was being taught.

While in college, I attended a Methodist church that fell within the realm of the evangelical tradition. Later, my church involvement waned to a point where I only periodically attended the Congregational church of my childhood. With many of my beliefs in flux, I was not sure if I could truly call myself a Christian.

Reluctantly giving in to a persistent nudge to return to church, I started attending my current church home at Hingham Congregational Church. Once there, I quickly became deeply invested in the life of the church. As my relationship with God strengthened, the draw toward ministry that I initially experienced in college grew to a point where I could no longer ignore it.

Jumping back to young adulthood, I started college with the intent to study art and psychology but that plan changed once I took my first Bible class. Two important things happened during those four years. First, I was able to emphatically conclude that my beliefs do not fall within the realm of conservative Christianity. Second was the conviction that my ultimate path was to go to seminary and become a hospital chaplain. This idea was never suggested by someone else nor was such a vocation anywhere on my radar. It was as simple as one day not having a direction, and the next day knowing what God desired for me. There was a part of this conviction that I stubbornly chose to ignore. It was that I needed to gain more life experience before starting on that path. My desire to move forward overrode what I knew to be true and I started seminary right out of college.

While successfully finishing one semester of seminary, I felt the clutches of depression set in as it wreaked havoc on my inner world. I left school figuring that I would get myself sturdier and return in a couple years. As time passed, I came to believe that this would never happen. It could never happen. I was not worthy or capable and I had been foolish to ever think otherwise. The idea of chaplaincy lingered deep under the surface, but my warped conviction that it would never happen only brought me sorrow. That conviction and resulting sorrow were part of the torture brought on by the distortions of depression and other life challenges.

Soon after returning to active engagement with a faith community, the notion of going into the ministry reemerged. It could be best described as the still, quiet voice of the spirit. With time, there was nothing quiet about the Spirit’s prodding to move in this direction. I insisted it was wrong, I could not do it. I was incapable, unworthy, and misguided. Interestingly, when God causes something to grow, there is nothing in your power you can do to stop the growth. After two years of this internal argument, I shared it with my minister. A part of me hoped he would say he did not think going into ministry was the right direction for me. His response could not have been further in the opposite direction.

Throughout my three years of seminary, and during the last year of Clinical Pastoral Exucation and work as a youth minister, my sense of call has strengthened. While this comes in part from feedback from those who walk alongside me as in this period of discernment, the most profound reinforcing factor has been my personal experiences with God. Prior to the first Sunday at my field education site, I took time for private prayer in the sanctuary. In what was a profound experience of the spirit of Christ, I felt overwhelmed by the presence of God. I knew that, at that very moment, standing in front of the sanctuary looking out at the pews, I was in the exact spot that I was supposed to be. That spot was standing behind the pulpit. This was a surprise given that, until that point, I had been drawn toward chaplaincy. However, that sacred moment in the sanctuary, in combination with my personal experiences and feedback I receive about my skills in preaching and other church activities, leads me to the conclusion that my gifts will best be utilized in parish ministry. That being said, if the opportunity arises, I would be quite pleased to do some of both.

**At Home in the United Church of Christ**

 The benefit of having an ecumenical background is that it gives me a clear picture of other options for practicing the Christian faith. It is in knowing where I do not fit, that makes me clear as to where I do fit. Just as Jesus Christ is the head of the church, it is to the spirit of the risen Lord that I dedicate my life. I believe that the essence of God is communicated to Christians through the trinity of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. This, and the commandment to love God and love your neighbor, are my aspirational starting and ending points in all matters of faith, theology, and action. With this central conviction of the trinity being shared among all United Church of Christ churches, I embrace the freedom that individuals have to differ on their doctrinal stances on other theological matters. For instance, some people believe that Abraham was a single individual, just as presented in the Genesis account while others view the person of Abraham as a central figure to represent events that involved numerous people. I am of the latter view but I believe such matters cannot truly be known today and it is thus not a matter of one person being right and another being wrong. What is important is that we have the freedom to name what we believe as individuals and to determine what elements we hold as most sacred and meaningful. Just as God did not manipulate nature to make all people look and behave alike, there is beauty in the freedom afforded to members of the United Church of Christ to, under the guidance of the Spirit, hold various theological perspectives, govern themselves, and determine their own path. While I think independence and flexibility are important, the structure of associations and conferences provides the benefits of accountability and support. Being a covenantal church, we most clearly understand ourselves, our faith, our values, and our aspirations through relationship with God and with one another. Simply being in covenant with sister churches and the various layers of the denominational structure affords opportunities for support, challenge, and growth. When left to their own, churches run a greater risk of becoming stagnant or falling victim to wayward leadership.

**Personal Theology: God is Still Speaking, and I am Ever Changing**

 As is a saying in the United Church of Christ that, “God is still speaking,” does the logic not follow that the theology of God’s followers ought to be ever evolving? While the fundamental principles of the Trinity and the call to love God and neighbor stand steadfast, a growing heart and mind is ever changing. It is my prayer that aspects of my theological perspectives continue to morph as I age. If there ever comes a day where I think I have unequivocally arrived at the ultimate truth, it will indicate nothing more than a cessation of thought and growth.

**Scripture and Revelation**

 The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament provide the history of a people’s understanding of God, the natural earth, and the human condition. In this history, which was scribed by many different authors over a 1,000-year period, we find stories of God making Godself known to people in different ways at different times. It is my perspective that it is of no small consequence that all three major monotheistic world religions find their origins in figures of the Genesis account. While all scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), that is not to say it is dictated by God, or that all parts are to be taken as literal and factual. When approaching texts that may appear to be telling a factual, historical story, yet modern knowledge suggests otherwise, I focus on the principles behind the stories that are of relevance for us today. Additionally, as the Hebrew scriptures teach, and Jesus cites, the primary principle through which scripture ought to be interpreted is in accordance with the commandments to love God and neighbor.

 God’s revelation of Godself is not limited to any given time and place nor to any particular mode of disclosure. Just as God was made known to the ancient Hebrew people through visions, prophetic words, and miracles such as healings, God continues to speak to us in these ways and more. God is sometimes revealed through the words and actions of people. In speaking of how people treat each other, Jesus says in a parable, “truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). If acting justly unto others is akin to acting justly towards God, I think the logic flows that such actions display God’s character and will for one another.

**The Triune God**

 While the ultimate divine being is one, that one is made known through three manifestations: God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Though the term God is sometimes used to refer to the three in one, at other times it is used in reference to God the Creator. While it is common to use God as a reference to the Godhead—God the father/mother—I think this terminology can insinuate that Jesus and the Holy Spirit occupy a lower tier than the Creator within the divine order. In being conscious of the equal standing of Christ and the Spirit with the Creator, the use of the terms mother, father, and godhead are perfectly adequate. While “father” is traditionally used in reference to God, I include “mother” as it provides language that helps us to understand that God possesses characteristics that are traditionally ascribed to both the female and or male genders. I believe, adding the language of “mother” does not take away from the traditionally held view of God as male. Rather, it expands it to something more complete. Overall, God the Creator can be understood as the force behind all of existence. The Creator is the ultimate source of energy that propels the natural order through all time and space. With this description, I consider it to be vital to understand that God is more than just energy. The essence of God is personal, relational, and benevolent.

 I see the Holy Spirit as best being understood by looking at the Hebrew term *ruah*. *Ruah*, a feminine noun, translates as breath, spirit, or wind. As the breath of God, it is the divine life-giving force. This translation of *ruah* is used in Genesis 2:7 where God breathes the breath of life into Adam. As the Spirit of God, *ruah* inspires prophecy. As wind, *ruah* is the imminence of God that flows freely among and through one another.

 Jesus is the manifestation of God on earth in bodily form. As God incarnate, Jesus perfectly displays the qualities and characteristics of the ultimate divine being. Whether or not Jesus is of virgin birth (I tend to think not), the principle behind the story of his miraculous birth is indicative of the fact that he is no ordinary man. Jesus’ activities warrant the question, “What sort of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?” (Mark 8:27). Jesus’ divinity lay in that his actions and declarations are those of Godself.

 For me, the most significant of Jesus’ actions was his willingness to adhere to his convictions of justice, mercy, and righteousness to the point of being executed. Jesus’ crucifixion is an act of divine love. To say that God required suffering and sacrifice as a means to provide forgiveness is limiting of God’s abundant grace. Suggesting that Jesus had to die in order to break Satan’s influence over humanity sets the powers of evil as equal with the power of God. Jesus’ life and death provides a way—that is to say a path or an example—for humanity to follow for living out God’s call to live lives characterized by justice and righteousness. I see this as significant because of the way it relates to a way of living here and now, and not making the importance of Jesus’ life focused around a reward in the afterlife.

 As a Christian, Jesus life, death, and resurrection provide for me a path of salvation. By salvation, I am not referring to eternal life in heaven. While that may be a part of what salvation entails, my salvation through Christ has to do with my life here and now. It relates to the way, or path, that I mentioned above. To be saved is to see, acknowledge, and live according to the meaning and purpose of life as made evident by the character of God. In boiling down to a single word what that character is, is to simply say love. God is love and Jesus, in keeping with the law and prophets, teaches us to love God and our neighbors.

 God’s act of love in the life and death of Jesus extends through time in the resurrected spirit of Christ. The spirit of Christ was made known to his earliest followers and continues to be known and experienced today. Whether there was a bodily resurrection or not, the fact remains that Christ has moved and continues to move in the hearts and minds of followers of the Christian way.

**Creation and Providence**

 The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 provide an excellent example of timeless biblical principles versus literal, factual accounts of history. While I do not prescribe to the idea of creation in seven days, or even to intelligent design for that matter, I do believe there is a flow of energy that places God as the initiator of life. The string of verbs describing God’s work within the two creation stories points to God as the prime mover. A body in motion stays in motion, energy is continually being converted from one type to another, and so, as some lives pass, others emerge. The first chapter of Genesis repeatedly exclaims that each new thing is good. The climax of creation is the emergence of community. It was not good for Adam to be alone (Genesis 2:18). While God repeatedly declared things to be “good” it was not until after Adam and Eve were there amongst the created order that God declared the collective whole to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). God’s will for the natural world and humanity is for it to be good and beautiful and sacred. As the creation story portrays God’s providential activity, such actions continue through time. Manifestations of God within the natural order demonstrates God’s will for goodness and harmony in the world. I have experienced the goodness of God in nature while looking at the night sky from a mountain top in New Hampshire or seeing a bald eagle fly overhead as I paddle down a quiet river.

**Judgment and Grace**

 Despite God’s desire for goodness, I believe both humans and the natural processes within the created order are free to move either in the direction of the divine will for goodness and light, or drift away from it into the chaos of pain, darkness, and despair. The conditions of goodness, or light, and darkness can also be applied to groups of people in light of societal norms and practices. God’s judgment is associated with where one lands on the continuum of living according to the light of God verses the darkness of sin. Humans naturally hold judgments toward each other, but God alone has the full capacity to know the condition of one’s heart and soul. I believe the ultimate declaration of a person’s inner condition lies solely in the hands of God. Accordingly, it is my goal to withhold from making such judgements myself.

Intrinsically linked with this right of judgment is God’s lavishing grace. Despite the inclination of all people and all societies to fall short of fully living in the light (Romans 3:23), God’s benevolent and loving nature possesses an abundance of grace. I understand grace and forgiveness go hand in hand. While no part of the created order, or any individual (apart from Christ), fully matches the character of God, God’s grace allows for communion with the divine. The link between judgment and grace provides testimony to God’s commitment to be in covenant relationship with humanity.

**The Human Condition in Conjunction with God’s Response**

 Despite God fully exhibiting the qualities of love and grace, there exists a chaotic, destructive force within the natural realm. Evil is the label applied to this force and it is personified in scripture as Satan and his associated assemblage of demons. I believe that humans, in their free will, have the ability to choose what is good and just or to behave in a sinful manner. In one way or another, all people succumb to the characteristic ways of evil and fail to act in accordance with God’s willed order of love.

 While it is part of the human condition to sin in various ways at various moments, we, being created in the image of God, have the capacity to recognize our wayward actions and attitudes. With this recognition, we are called to consciously attest to our failures through repentance. For me, repentance involves admitting to God, oneself, and often others, the manners in which we have fallen short. More important than this act of confession, is the desire within one’s heart to live in accordance with the light of God and to make efforts to righting harmful patterns of behaviour.

 In all of God’s grace, forgiveness is granted despite our shortcomings. As we are called to recognize and confess our habits of waywardness, it is my view that the infinite nature of God’s grace is such that God’s forgiveness is not dependent on our actions and attitudes of repentance. Forgiveness can be granted in the absence of such penitence. Limiting God’s grace to the human capacity for repentance puts constraints of God.

 Prayer provides a manner in which to offer our confessions to God, but the tasks and benefits of prayer extend far beyond repentance. Prayer, whether silent our out loud, in solitude or in community, is a way for people to be in relationship with God. For me, this is the most important aspect of prayer. In addition to confession, prayer can involve petition, praise, and the sharing of one’s inner thoughts and feelings. Prayer need not be formal, but can be expressed in a manner that is reflective of a person’s true self. I have often shared with others that my personal prayers often consist of what I call “wobbly prayer.” That is prayer that comes out clumsy, is conversational, and even a little silly. In prayer, it is perfectly acceptable to express anger and frustration toward God. We see this in the Psalms where, within a single psalm, the writer can start with harsh words of anger. Even with this anguish and disgust, the Psalmist concludes with praise and thanksgiving. In all these ways, prayer is about connecting with God, being increasingly open to hearing the voice of God, and being able to experience the comfort of God’s love and grace.

 In relation to sin, repentance, and a life lived within or outside God’s intended divine order, comes the concept of eternal life. A small portion of the Hebrew scriptures, and the New Testament as a whole, were written in light of the eschatological mindset of the authors of these texts. This world view of a coming age of divine order was common in the first century. Eternal life is often associated with the idea that the soul of an individual will exist for all eternity in God’s heavenly realm. I believe there is some form of heavenly realm, but I also believe that its nature and workings lie outside the comprehension of our earthly intellect. As for what happens with the eternal souls of humans after death, I am open to the concepts of reincarnation, a soul attending to unfinished business, being involved in some sort of earthly task, or entering a state of rest in the spiritual kingdom of heaven.

**Jesus Christ, the Church, and the World**

 It is my understanding that an overarching purpose of the Christian church is to continue the mission of Jesus Christ just as his earliest followers did after his death and resurrection. Individual local congregations within the United Church of Christ provide a place for worship and Christian fellowship for all individuals within the community who wish to participate. As Jesus was receptive to all who came to him, the United Church of Christ, advocates for acceptance of all people regardless of race, gender, age, sexual orientation and gender expression, and physical or mental ability. There is some variation on specific issues from one congregation to another, but valuing justice is a shared trait. United Church of Christ congregations offer a place for nurturing and growth in the Christian faith and tradition.

 In following Jesus’ example as a social reformer, I believe that an important goal of the church is to extend its embracing spirit around the globe through proclaiming Jesus’ message in both word and deed. This is a message characterized by acts of justice and righteousness. Our faith tradition seeks to advocate for the rights of the oppressed in accordance with the tenet of faith that says all people are equal in the eyes of God and the church. Individual congregations within the United Church of Christ seek to proclaim God’s will to all the earth—that is to act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Overall, the church, at its best, is a source of light and refuge for individuals and for whole communities.

 As Jesus provided a path to follow that emulates the loving and benevolent nature of God, my belief is that an important task of the Christian life, and the Church as a whole, is to seek to follow in his footsteps. In doing so, the church and its people serve humanity as an outgrowth of their service to the triune God. During his earthly ministry, Jesus, while being a teacher and leader, also provided practical support to those with whom he came into contact. In this way, proclaiming that Jesus is Lord in word alone falls short of the full task set before us. In true evangelism, word and action are intrinsically linked.

**Sacraments in the United Church of Christ**

 The United Church of Christ recognizes two sacraments. These sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, were instituted by Jesus himself, and are performed as acts of service and worship of God. Among other things, I believe the sacraments to serve as identity markers. They are an outward expression of one’s allegiance to Jesus Christ. As ritual, both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, help individuals to be in communion with the divine. I value the way in which they provide a means of being grounded in the historic traditions shared by all Christians throughout history.

 Just as Jesus was baptized at the start of his three-year ministry, baptism (with the associated link of confirmation) provides us a way to declare ourselves as followers who share in the work of continuing that ministry. While infant baptism is the predominant manner of baptism performed in congregations of the United Church of Christ, it is the parents speaking on behalf of the child to welcome them into the fold of the Christian church. When adolescents prepare to affirm their baptismal promises at confirmation, it is important that confirmands are given the choice as to whether or not they wish to accept those vows. Care ought to be taken in ensuring confirmation is not presented as an expectation for which they must follow through. In my own experience of confirmation, I had no idea that my fellow confirmands and I had a choice in the matter. Sadly, in the recent past I have witnessed situations where great pressure is put on confirmands to go through with the process. As a whole, baptism and confirmation are intended as a declaration of one’s commitment to the Christian faith and fellowship of the church. Covenant relationships only work when held in honesty and made freely.

 With the sacrament of baptism marking the start of Jesus earthly ministry, his instituting of the sacrament of communion marked the conclusion. The fact that the Lord’s Supper is an outgrowth of the Jewish celebration of Passover often gets lost in the sharing of the bread and the cup. I believe that recognizing this link helps Christians to be rooted in their long-standing history of faith stemming from Judaism and the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Joining at the communion table serves to draw our hearts and minds to Jesus life and ultimate sacrifice. His willingness to die for the sake of his message of justice provides us with a reminder of the depth of importance that lies within his message and ministry.

**The United Church of Christ in a Pluralistic Society**

 As a denomination that emphasizes social justice, I believe that the United Church of Christ, has an obligation to foster supportive relationships not only with other Christian denominations, but also with followers of other faith traditions. The connections we make with other faith groups are especially important in the current sociopolitical climate of our nation. To be faithful to our call to uphold the dignity of those unlike ourselves and to act in a manner dictated by love of neighbor, I do not believe it is enough to simply be “in dialogue” with Muslims, Jews, and people of other faith groups. It is important to move beyond a place of tolerance and polite engagement to a place where we are actively engaged with people, supporting them in their quest to practice their faith without fear, and standing up for them in the face of discrimination and oppression. Whether our neighbor is Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, atheist, pagan, or otherwise, we are given the commandment to love them.

 There are aspects of ecumenical ties among Christian denominations that are sometimes easy to navigate, and at other times sources of challenge and frustration. We benefit from forming mutually supportive connections with other Christian groups. Though we may differ in manner of practice and theological understandings, there is strength in having a unified voice. The challenge comes when other Christian groups teach and advocate for things that are oppressive and discriminatory toward people different than themselves. For me, this can be a significant challenge. I ask God to help me to hold an attitude of love while standing up for what I believe is right. When acts of hatred are done in the name of God and Christianity, I believe we do have an obligation is to stand up for the victims whom they target and proclaim the boundless love of God. In this, we follow the example of Jesus who condemned members of the Jewish establishment of his day for lifting themselves up higher than others and excluding people based on an unjust system of beliefs.

**The Christian Ministry: Places of Calling**

 All followers of the path of Christ are called to live in service to God and neighbor. God grants to each person particular gifts and aptitudes. In conjunction with these gifts, I believe individuals possess the freedom, and responsibility, to build upon those innate talents and/or to foster the development of additional skills. The activities of ministry take many forms and different people are better suited for some tasks more than others. As the apostle Paul explains, the body has many parts, and each part is best suited for a particular function (1Corinthians 12:14-26). Eyes are needed for seeing and ears are needed for hearing. In the same way, members of the body of Christ, based on their gifts and skills, have different places where they can best be of service. All aspects of service are valuable for there are many ways of proclaiming and living the gospel of Christ.

 While all Christians are called to active engagement in living out the ideals of the Christian faith, some are called to ordained ministry. There is an element of this call that is cloaked in mystery for it is God that extends the invitation to the individual. I believe that the called individual has the option to say no, but they need to be prepared for God to not give up on the request. I have heard this from others and, given the twenty-something year gap between my initial experience of call and eventual acceptance of the call, I have experienced it myself. Though a privilege, ordained ministry comes with an immense amount of responsibility. The minister is tasked with being a spiritual leader, one who is entrusted with teaching the word of God, guiding others in their own spiritual journeys, and administering the sacraments. Ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ is a multilayered covenantal relationship between God, the UCC at the national level, its conferences and associations, the minister, and the local church congregations. While God is at the top, the other interrelated members are equally held together with mutual love and accountability.

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 If you told me when I nine that I would one day stand behind a pulpit and preach to a congregation just as my minister preached to me, in all shyness and awkwardness I would have shrugged the thought off as total nonsense for I should not even entertain such an idea. If you had told me when I was seventeen that I would one day be ordained, I would have thought you were not a “real” Christian for women could not be ordained. If you had told me when I was thirty-five that I was in fact going to go to seminary, it would have been like twisting a knife that had already pierced my heart for such a thing would never happen. Now I think it is best that I not tell God what things God should not, could not, and would not do. It is with tears of joy and trembling that I submit this ordination paper.