

The Starting of a Brand New Day!

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Introduction

I've seen it in movies, heard it in music, and even witnessed glimpses of it in the midst of hard times. The thing that I speak of is the liberating and exhilarating feeling of hope for a new start with new possibilities to be able to live in a brand new way. The jubilation of new beginnings, the healing of relationships, the light at the end of the proverbial dark tunnel of despair are all reasons for the soul to soar with delight. It is a wondrous time when we feel empowered to make new choices, experience the liberating feeling of forgiving and being forgiven and bask in the glow of possibilities.

One of my favorite movies of all time is the holiday classic "It's a Wonderful Life." One lasting image from the movie was of George Bailey running through the streets of Bedford Falls filled with the elation of knowing that he had been gifted with another chance to experience a new chapter in his troubled life. George's uncontained exuberance was an outward sign that he had been delivered from an undesirable fate and into a new reality. The jubilant feeling that comes with shedding layers of things, thoughts, and habits which inhibit growth and spiritual freedom is one in which I am quite familiar. It is something that I witnessed growing up in Chicago's inner city, something that I have experienced personally, and it is something that I hope to share with others as I seek ordination with the United Church of Christ. Like George Bailey, my spirit continues to soar through the world grateful for new opportunities and a new chapter. For me, it is the elation of leading others to that liberating feeling that comes with a new reality through the ways and teachings of Jesus Christ. So the recurring theme of this ordination paper is that of new beginnings. It is how I understand the Gospel, the mission of Jesus Christ, and how it is being lived out through the aim of the United Church of Christ.

This wonderful feeling associated with new beginnings of which I speak is something that I was exposed to early on growing up in a Southern Baptist church through the practice of testimony. Each Sunday, the walls of the church sanctuary trembled as the huge pipe organ accentuated the testimonies of former drug addicts, gang members, ex cons, etc. As a child I sat in awe seeing once feared criminals humble themselves before the congregation as they told their stories of transformation and new life. These were lives which had become free and clean of the reckless behavior that once plagued them and struck terror in the community. I can still recall being amazed at witnessing the life giving smiles and humility emerge victoriously from the rubble. I stood on tiptoes looking over the edge of the Baptismal pool watching them emerge from the waters to take in the breath of a new life to make different choices as a result of God's grace. Those new beginnings not only inspired me, but they offered hope to those on the other side seeking a way out of the downward spiral of crime and addiction. It is this same hope for new beginnings that I hang my theological hat upon.

It is with great delight and honor that I seek the joys and challenges of ordained ministry with the United Church of Christ. I identify this tug upon my heartstrings with the fact that the United Church of Christ offers that same hope for new beginnings but for any and all who seek it. I am drawn to the United Church of Christ because I believe that it not only offers hope for new beginnings, it does so in a manner which follows the radical inclusiveness as modeled by our teacher, Jesus Christ.

While my theological perspectives are richly saturated with the words "new beginnings," those words also hinge on the word hope. I was blessed to complete seminary and be exposed to numerous theologians in the process. And of those great people, Jurgen Moltmann continues to resonate with me in regards to a theology of hope. This is particularly crucial living in this

climate of fear and violence. Some would argue that to maintain hope for new beginnings for peace and justice are signs of naiveté. But Moltmann's suggestion that hope is a very realistic way of perceiving the scope of real possibilities is something with which I completely agree.¹ It is hope for new beginnings which can serve to confront this society where a disproportionate distribution of wealth leaves our brothers and sisters living in destitution.

While I do assert that my beliefs hinge on hope, mine is not a wishing well form of faith. This is not a form of belief which posits a wish and waits idly by for it to magically appear. Just as new beginnings do not come without hope, hope does not come without responsibility and action. Hope without discernment and responsible action gets us nowhere. And likewise, action without hope is also fruitless. Again this is where Moltmann and I agree that creative action which springs from hope is what is needed to create change in our world.²

I readily admit that hope for a new beginning is difficult in a world such as this. But hope is the very thing that can over time bring some calm to the stormy seas of our world. I believe it, because I have seen it. I have witnessed how the good news of the Gospel can instill hope in a brand new day and even save lives that would have otherwise been lost. But sadly enough, I have also seen those who have come to the church in desperate need of hope for new beginnings get turned away at the door. There were those who came with empty hands, an open heart, and many wounds yet continue to be turned away because they just so happened to be gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgender. They also happen to have an undeniable love for Christ. This is why I am so drawn to those United Church of Christ institutions which have adopted the Open & Affirming policy in order to extend welcoming arms to my gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender sisters and brothers.

¹ Moltmann, Jurgen, *Theology of Hope*, page 24

² Moltmann, Jurgen, *Theology of Hope*, page 35

So the United Church of Christ is taking the reigns by expressing our faith in a way that Jesus would have...being inclusive of all. It is my belief that Jesus' teachings centered ultimately on being in relationship with one another in community. It is in keeping with God's intent for us to be relational. The practice of exclusion is the polar opposite of what it means to be relational and inclusive of all. I believe that this was what inspired the Apostle Paul to say that we will find much greater glory in the ministry of justification than there is in a ministry of condemnation.³ Through the inclusion that Jesus taught, we find God's glory in relationship by nurturing loving relationships reaching out to the hurting human soul.

My Life's Journey

When I was a very young child, I experienced a near death illness due to multiple convulsions. Because of numerous bouts with illness and trips to hospital emergency rooms, I became a frail child and small for my age. This would later result in low self-esteem and a lengthy bout with body image issues. Noticing this early on, my mother was very intentional about bringing me to what she felt would be my saving grace...the Christian church.

My earliest memory of the Christian faith came through Stone Temple Baptist Church on the west side of Chicago. It was there that my mother and I went to morning services, contributed to the joyous noise for the Lord, and experienced fellowship mainly with the elderly community. When I became a teenager, my mother sought to attend a church that was closer to home and we began attending the First Baptist Church in the Lawndale community of Chicago. Though I found the music to be very energetic and moving, it was usually difficult for me to grasp some of the lessons that occurred in church. I knew that something very big had occurred in the lives of the former criminals who had become Christians and I wanted to experience that

³ 2nd Corinthians 3:9, NRSV translation

too but there seemed to be an obstacle. I later found out that the obstacle that stood in the way of staying onboard with the sermons and lessons was a condition called Auditory Processing Delay. Simply put, this is a neurological condition which makes the intake of auditory information difficult to receive and comprehend. Later it was believed that this difficulty could have been a side effect from my near death illness as a child. It explained why I was having difficulties in school subjects and also why it was so challenging for me during church lessons and prayer. It was a frustrating time for me because I desperately wanted to experience the feeling that I witnessed in the church.

Around that same time, I was also witnessing the ills of inner city living in the form of gang violence, drugs, and alcohol. My low self-esteem in relation to my small stature, had also become blatantly apparent. I was enrolled in martial arts classes to provide an escape from the inner city, to boost my self-esteem, and to learn self protection. I went on to earn a black belt in Chinese Shaolin martial arts, however this experience opened up something far beyond acrobatic moves and breaking boards. Under the leadership of my Sensei, Johnny Norman, I was instructed in the ancient discipline of meditation. This proved to be a break through in helping me to counter my bouts with low self-esteem. However it also deepened my experience of the Christian faith by removing obstacles that were in the way. This appeared to be something that could break down the Auditory Processing Delay challenge which made it so difficult to stay focused during sermons, lessons, and prayer. My keener sense of focus as a result of martial arts meditation was the building block that I needed to gain access to experiencing the Holy Spirit that I so longed for. I could listen to Bible passages being read and spend contemplative moments on them for extended periods of time.

To my dismay, however, my master teacher and confidant, Sensei Johnny later died of sickle cell anemia. His replacement brought his own approach which emphasized combat, competition, and destruction. This approach had reduced the holistic arts to breaking boards and countless sparring matches and tournaments. I searched feverishly for another martial arts temple which would come even remotely close to Sensei Johnny's holistic approach and found none. That being the case, I continued on with his teachings about making meditation and physical discipline a regular part of my day. It just did not seem right to allow that part of me to die.

I later discovered something that would provide an even deeper, more profound effect on my life. That discovery was hatha yoga. I was immediately drawn to the physical discipline, the meditative work, and later, the philosophy of dismantling the ego and practicing non-violence. Another thing that yoga did for me was very similar to my experience in martial arts, by deepening my spiritual life and my receptivity to prayer and Christian teachings through countering my Auditory Processing Delay. I was later to discover that these two spiritual practices of Christianity and yoga would be completely complimentary for me.

Meanwhile, one summer day during church, the pastor extended his hands in welcome stating, "the doors of the church are open. Who is ready to give their life to Jesus?" To my mother's surprise, I rose and walked toward the altar. This was something that my mother had prayed for numerous times but never forced me to do. She wanted it to occur when I felt I was ready. Having my faith enriched and my prayer life deepened, I felt very much ready. That summer, at the age of 18, I was Baptized and it was the start of a brand new beginning for me.

After high school, I enrolled at Columbia College and in 1991 earned my Bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts with a concentration in Music Instrumental Performance as a guitarist.

Another transition occurred at Columbia, however. I became introduced to new age metaphysical spirituality. This went on for at least three years and over time, the trendy sayings, the materialism, and the lack of focus for those in need became too much to tolerate. I found myself becoming fidgety during the heady sermons which emphasized creating prosperity in our lives. Where was the concern for the other? Where were the actions on behalf of the marginalized? And the surprising perennial question that kept arising in the deepest recesses of my being became “where is Jesus Christ in all this?” Disturbingly enough Christ was never once acknowledged. He was lost somewhere during the deification of motivational speakers who preached the manifestation of wealth through the cultivation of prosperity consciousness. Within I started to experience reminders of the things which had lifted me up in the past. I began to see my Christian roots, my martial arts teachings, my yoga discipline gently calling me back to the very things which instilled in me faith, hope, and love.

Another pivotal point happened in 1999. In a dimly lit room of Mount Sinai Hospital, I sat stunned after watching my mother take her final breath. My confidant, band manager, advocate, the one who brought me to Christ was gone. And then questions began to rise up within me. What happened to the person who had discovered happiness and contentment through the teachings of Christ? What happened to the person who prayed long hours on behalf of the plight of those in need? I realized that the dust of complacency had invaded my heart and I had lost touch with the very thing that gave to me a sense of liberation...my Christian faith. I did come back home to my Christian roots. And I did come back home to its complementary companion, my yoga practice. I began to find comfort and liberation in reading the Bible once again. I was truly back home.

In 2001, I was blessed to marry the woman of my dreams in Marie. Shortly after we were married, I began a tour in several suburban libraries offering lectures on yoga philosophy. Upon presenting at the La Grange Park Public Library, an audience member invited me to give this same presentation at the First Congregational Church of La Grange as an Adult Education class. Although I agreed to facilitate this session, I was somewhat apprehensive because I knew that some Christian institutions were accusing yoga practitioners of mixing Hinduism with Christianity. I nervously made my way through the presentation and prepared to weather an all out attack during the Q & A session that followed. Instead, I was embraced. I was invited to the La Grange church and was pleasantly surprised that it was progressive in its theology, yet it retained the same glorious praise that I recalled from my youth. My wife and I joined the church in 2003 and enjoyed numerous inspiring sermons and uplifting music. I had found a home denomination that would accept and embrace me as I was with using yoga as a tool to augment my Christian faith and prayer life.

In 2005, I became interested in counseling and explored a number of programs in psychological counseling. Being raised around the elderly, I was particularly drawn to working with this population to be a strong advocate for them. I also discovered that I had within me a desire to bring the spiritual into this work. I recalled the feeling that I had when I stood in the hospital rooms twice watching my parents die. I remembered the caring nurse who came and stayed by my side as I grieved even beyond her shift. And I knew that I wanted to do as she had and pay it forward. I wanted to be with those who were spiritually struggling and become a compassionate companion to them. I did not know what this meant until the interim pastor at the First Congregational Church of LaGrange suggested that I was being “called” to Chaplaincy. I enrolled at Chicago Theological Seminary in the fall of 2006 as a full-time student and

completed the Master of Divinity degree in May 2009. I had the pleasure of being taught by Dr. Robert Moore, professor of Advanced Pastoral Care and Jungian Psychology. It was Dr. Moore who was instrumental in helping me to examine ways that I could incorporate elements of my love for Christ and my yoga discipline into pastoral care in a unique way.

During the twists and turns that it took to get back to my home in the Christian faith, I have no regrets. I have learned so much that continues to enhance my faith in Christ and my love of the United Church of Christ. In my previous attempt to rebel against organized religion I found that I became the epitome of what was illustrated in Jesus' parable of the sower.⁴ I realized that the thick, rich soil for which my spirituality had taken root was already laid underneath me through my upbringing in the Christian church. In the end, it is what sustained me and eventually brought me back. I celebrate the truth that I am deeply rooted in my Christian faith and I am elated to be considered for ordination.

My Theological Perspectives

All of my emphasis on the liberating feelings that come with new beginnings now brings me to the true author of this view for me in Jesus Christ, whom I view as the Son of God. As mentioned numerous times, I equate the Gospel with new beginnings. In my opinion the new beginnings offered through the teachings of Christ cannot be separated from inclusiveness. I consider Jesus Christ to be the one who came along to redefine humankind's relationship with one another and with God. I believe that Jesus' message was as simple as this: love one another, practice unconditional kindness to those in need, make sure to forgive one another, and in doing so, we will be showing our love for God. I believe that Jesus came to teach us how to build the

⁴ Matthew 13:20-21

bridge over the chasm of separation in our relationships. Flowing through this chasm were selfish desires, emphasis on materialism over relationship, and the unwillingness to forgive.

I will assert that we human beings are prone to seeking self-gratification in numerous ways, not all of them healthy. In those pursuits, something else becomes weaker and eventually fails and falls away. For example, a man or woman who is so enamored with their career status or with obtaining that higher pay lane that the fabric of their relationship with their loved ones grows thin until it eventually dissolves. Another example is that of people who turn a deaf ear of complacency toward those who are suffering for the sake of their lush lifestyles. This is what Jesus countered. It is what led him to advise the rich man to sell all of his belongings and give the proceeds to the poor.⁵ I do not believe that it was sinful for him to be rich. I believe that the sin was that his wealth made him value relationship with others less. In the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith it states “He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.”⁶ My view of this is that the word death is equivalent to the breakdown of relationship. Jesus came about to bring us to that brand new day through teaching us how to be in right relationship with one another. Jesus addressed the fact that even in our attempts to experience holiness and self-righteousness, we can create division in our relationships. This is why he spoke of removing the log from our own eyes before addressing the speck in our neighbor’s.⁷ The aforementioned reference to the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith continues to shape the manner in which I live and minister to those in need. It is why I place so much value in cultivating and recognizing relationships.

⁵ Matthew 19:21, NRSV translation

⁶ <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/statement-of-faith.html>

⁷ Matthew 7:9 NRSV translation

I have been blessed to be hired as a full-time Chaplain at Good Samaritan Hospital. It has huge rewards and it also has huge challenges. It is not uncommon to get the “why” question posed to me from those held tightly within the throes of suffering and loss. I have come across some who either counter this with “it was God’s will” or “God works in mysterious ways.” While I do respect where people are theologically, it is not consistent with my concept of a loving God and for me that God does not use violence and death as a means for teaching us lessons. As opposed to a wrathful God who judges and smites, I believe that God is with us crying as we cry. I am a huge fan of the rock star named Sting. I feel that the lyrics in his song called “Let your Soul be your Pilot” epitomizes God’s relationship to us in our suffering with the words “let your pain be my sorrow. Let your tears be my tears too.”⁸ Jesus explains that divine love that God has for us with the lost sheep parable.

In regards to the topic of sin, I view it as anything which can separate us from the glory of God. The glory of God that I refer to is what I see in community, in relationship, in caring for those in need. It is the richness of our relationships which are even more augmented by acts of kindness, forgiveness, and hospitality to those whom we may not be inclined to make the offer. In a sermon to the Claremont United Church of Christ by former Executive Minister of the United Church of Christ, Reverend Stephen Sterner, he preached that anything that destroys relationship is an attempt at living in an incomplete state of God’s creation.⁹ I could not agree more. The reason that I believe this to be a sin is because I believe that it is God’s will that we be in relationship with one another.

⁸ “*Let your soul be your pilot*” from the CD *Mercury Falling* by Sting, copyright 1998

⁹ Excerpted from a sermon delivered by Reverend Stephen Sterner during Interim Ministry at Claremont UCC

The Bible

I do believe that the Bible can and always will be able to offer comfort and inspiration to those who take the time to discern ways it speaks to our contemporary struggles. I enjoy occasions when patients share enthusiasm regarding scripture. I also enjoy occasions when patients have light bulb moments when realizing that the Exodus story can also be their stories of escaping the entanglement of reckless behavior and low self-esteem. I feel great joy in the fact that some will apply Jesus' lessons about forgiveness to their own lives and respond by taking the initiative of mending broken relationships with estranged loved ones. These responses are indications that God is indeed still speaking.

While I assert that the Bible is a living document, I also believe that it consists of a group of accounts from those who have been inspired by God. So while I respect those who refer to the Bible as the word of God, my own belief is that it is the word of those who experienced God in their own unique ways. I do take into account that some of those ways were filtered through cultural and societal views. As an ordained minister with the United Church of Christ, I would teach that the Bible, while powerfully relevant to our struggles should be read with discernment. It means that we should keep in mind that many of the accounts written were done so through the cultural and societal lenses of those who wrote them in that particular period. I can recall times when I was a bit confused whenever I discovered instances in the Bible that are clearly contradictory to one another. That is because the individual authors wrote in ways that exhibited the manner in which they felt that God had been working in their lives. That work was colored by their world views during that time including gender and cultural biases. It is with this in mind that we can counter the on-going practice of taking certain passages out-of-context to use

as weapons in the culture wars of our day (i.e. same sex marriage debates, divorce, role of women, etc.).

The best way that I know how to illustrate my views on the authority of the Bible is to point to the word Christian, which means those who follow the lead of Jesus Christ. That being said, I prefer to take the Holy Scriptures much in the way as Jesus did in his time, by using it as a starting point, but then applying it to the contemporary times. He did not abolish Holy Laws but used them as a reference and then interpreted them for the current situations. This perspective is one that I hold because of instances where Jesus' words would go from "you have heard it said," to "but I say unto you." So being a follower of Jesus' lead, I also take this point of view by honoring the scriptures as a starting point in our contemporary times and struggles. However, I believe that the only way that we can do this is by maintaining heightened awareness regarding social justice and spiritual bondage to be able to apply them to our current times as Jesus did during his time. This is what I see carried out in the United Church of Christ.

The Sacraments

One Sacrament that I take great joy in is that of Baptism. For me, Baptism not only serves as an induction ceremony into the Christian family, it is an outward sign and celebration of a new beginning, a brand new reality through God's grace. It is a sign of death of the old, and the inception of a new life away from the ways which can keep us in spiritual bondage. I was baptized at the age of 18 by full immersion. I can still recall that feeling of being pulled up from the water and taking that refreshing breath and my vision becoming clearer from the water. In Baptism, we come up out of our old ways and take a new breath in the ways of life, in the ways of Christ. In Baptism, the ways of death fall away, we are cleansed, made new, given a new start through God's grace. The hope for a new beginning has thus been set into place and it is up to us

to continue on that path. It is a true celebration and I feel that it should be treated as nothing less. I also fully realize that the honor of leading and sharing in the celebratory act of Baptism hinges on my being vested with the authority of ordained ministry. As an ordained minister, I would relish the thought of presiding over the Baptisms of those who seek to put their hope in a new life into motion.

I must admit that there was a point in time when I felt some opposition to the practice of infant Baptism. My contention was that the child could not comprehend or agree with the magnitude of this act. But I arrived at a point of acceptance which is based upon my belief that Baptism is also communal and emphasizes the supportive role of the Christian community in the life of the one baptized. It makes perfect sense to me that the community plays a part in the Christian upbringing of this child. That is why there are pledges made, not only from the parents, but from the church community who are present for this wondrous event. I liken it to the common phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child." It also takes a village to nurture a follower of Christ. It takes the Christian community to be there, not only for the child, but for the parents as well.

Much in the same way as Baptism, I also view Communion as a celebratory experience. Through the act of Communion we welcome the spirit of Christ by breaking bread with our brothers and sisters on the journey. Jesus wanted us to do this to remember him, to remember that his spirit will never abandon us. For me this points to his words of encouragement for us to remember that he is with us always.¹⁰ And the memory of Jesus is the memory of his teachings to love one another, forgive one another, and practice hospitality even with those whom we would consider enemies. The Communion table is our time and place to practice those virtues in an outward and intentional way. That being the case, I am very troubled by the practice of

¹⁰ Matthew 28:20, NRSV translation

denying Communion to those who are not members of a specific denomination. Numerous times, I have consoled patients at the hospital as Eucharistic ministers passed them by because they were not a part of their denomination. This to me is antithetical to Jesus' emphasis on inclusion. When one is denied Communion, we are not reaching out to the marginalized, we are adding to the marginalized. Knowing the transformative (and even healing) qualities that Communion can have, it would be an injustice to those in need, those in pain, those reaching desperately to grab one ray of hope for a new reality. But also like Baptism, the privilege to provide this outward sign for those who sit on the outside, hinges on my ordination. It is my choice to be ordained within the denomination, which in my opinion models inclusiveness in beautiful ways.

Boundaries and Self-care

With the privilege of ordained ministry come great rewards and a ton of responsibility. So many people seeking hope are riddled with pain and it can result in vulnerability. It deeply saddens me to think about those who have gone to pastors for hope only to have that vulnerability exploited. While in the class, History of Christian Thought, Professor Ted Jennings shared a thought that caused the entire room to fall silent. He expressed the importance of engaging in in-depth holistic study of self, scripture, and ministry because vulnerable people will reach out to ministers during trying times. He went on to say that while ministers possess the power to facilitate spiritual healing, they can also ruin people's lives if not careful.¹¹ That was a sobering statement for a room full of bright eyed seminarians. I fully acknowledge that statement as I provide pastoral care for people in the throes of pain and disorientation at the hospital. One of the principles in hospital ethics is non-maleficence (do no harm). This is vitally

¹¹ Lecture by Theodore Jennings, Chicago Theological Seminary, Fall Semester, 2006

important to me when it comes to my interaction with those in need and I carry it over into my ministry. There is an abundance of pain in our world and I simply do not want to add more to it.

Through my 2-day training with the Chicago Metropolitan Association the topic of boundaries took on a much broader view. I also thought that it was good that we covered everything from inappropriate relationships with parishioners and imposing personal opinions regarding others from the pulpit, to administrative issues such as appropriate handling of church finances.

One of the Ordination Vows that really resonates with me is the one which addresses the handling of confidential information. What continues to come to my aid in regards to ethics is the extensive training in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (referred to as HIPAA) that I experienced in healthcare. Because of this, it has become instinctive for me to handle personal information that is shared with me with uncompromised care.

In the Ordained Minister's Code under the section regarding self and family, I was pleased to see emphasis placed on honoring commitments to family and privacy. While I do enjoy the pastoral care that I engage in on a daily basis, quality time with my wife, son, and stepsons is something that is sacred to me. I continue to enjoy dates with my wife, long conversations with my son during bonfires, and leisure time with my stepsons. Aside from spending time with my family, another thing which always helps me is my on-going practice of learning Baroque music for classical guitar. It is something that I love to do at home and I also love opportunities to share this gift with patients at the hospital during Advent.

Also within the Ordained Minister's Code, it was good to see an emphasis placed on physical well-being. Having been a yoga practitioner for over 20 years (and instructor for 8), I

reap its benefits and as a result I can comprehend how the physical and the spiritual are interconnected. That being said, I am passionate about engaging in pastoral care. I also know that in order to maintain my energy and spiritual focus, I place a lot of importance on maintaining physical fitness through yoga, weight training and mountain biking.

The United Church of Christ

A number of years ago I found myself overwhelmed by the fog of cultural battles of our day and the disturbing questions that came with them. Who should have the right to marry and who should not? Isn't any relationship which does not involve male and female an abomination in the eyes of God? Who is entitled to live in our country and who is not? Should women be allowed to experience the privilege of ordained ministry? Should we not settle our disagreements with other nations on the battlefield as opposed to initiating dialogue? But breaking through the fog of the culture wars and their troubling questions, I saw a bright beacon of light shining in the near distance by way of the United Church of Christ. Spiritually, this discovery meant that it was a brand new day! When I learned of such advances as incorporating an Open & Affirming covenant for churches in the 1990's, the beacon began to shine just that much brighter. I was completely unaware of that happy day in 1972 when William R. Johnson bowed his head to accept his call to ministry being the first openly gay person to be ordained. I also experienced the joy of finding within the history of the United Church of Christ the 1977 establishment of Disabilities Ministries via the General Synod.

One of the defining markers of the United Church of Christ is its form of governance. I witnessed that a few years ago as I attended my first association meeting. One of the things that I remember was sitting next to someone who at one point leaned over to me and said, "you'd

better get ready. It's time for the fireworks to start." What she was referring to was the lively voting debate that followed the breakout sessions. I did witness brief moments when tempers were high, I witnessed frustration other times and I witnessed a peaceful resolution at the end. What impressed me was that I did not witness an absolutist authoritarian on high dictating the decisions. What I did witness was each and every person share equal rights on the microphone. I witnessed pastors, in-care students, lay leaders, parish nurses, chaplains, and church members weigh in on these decisions, each with respect to the other's opinions. Although there were major points of debate, no one belittled the other or called rank in any way. That to me was a great illustration of the covenantal relationship within the United Church of Christ. This covenant is the agreement that Jesus Christ is the sole head of the church. I find great comfort and inspiration in that. It is as it should be.

Another thing that I find so attractive about the United Church of Christ is its emphasis on autonomy of the local church. The way that I understand this, is that each church makes its own decisions regarding its organization, the uniqueness of its worship, and its structure. These decisions not determined by a bishop or other hierarchical figure. It is determined by the church itself. But it also has the support of the conferences and associations to assist in its discernment. While autonomy is a beautiful thing and offers a lot of freedom to self-govern one equally beautiful piece is the covenantal piece by which local churches agree to extend respect and acceptance of the ministry of each local church, Association, and Conference. So while I am very drawn to the Open & Affirming churches, I know that one of the defining characteristics of the United Church of Christ is that each church has the right to adapt that component or not.

I attribute the above discovery to the fact that the United Church of Christ is the product of the interweaving of four religious traditions; Congregationalists, the German Reformed

Church, the Evangelical Church, and the Christian Church. The Congregationalists made contributions in the way of autonomous governance and covenant. It is this contribution that led to the covenantal relationship between all aspects of the denomination and this relationship. The Christian Church's influence on the United Church of Christ began in 1820 via the United General Conference of Christians. The result of this event brought about the United Church of Christ's emphasis on unity of all Christians as well as the importance of scripture interpretation. In keeping with our Evangelical roots, we live this out by way of preaching and teaching the Gospel and living this teaching out in our quest for social justice. The German Reformed Church empowered by its original inspiration of the Heidelberg Catechism continues to inspire the United Church of Christ's emphasis on pietism and it can be seen through its liturgy in worship. This all culminated in 1957 to form and define the United Church of Christ that we have today. Our Reformists roots continue to guide us in such principles as the justification by faith doctrine and the priesthood of all believers. And with the freedom of autonomy and our covenantal relationships with each institution, we carry out the act of the Sacraments.

Since being taken In-Care, I have enjoyed participating in the United Church of Christ by celebrating new ministers and churches, attending association meetings as well as the 2009 General Synod, and also through occasional pulpit supply. Whenever I have walked into the pulpit, I felt the greatness as well as the openness of this denomination and the freedom for me to breathe life into scripture which speaks to our contemporary times. I have had the opportunity to walk with my fellow denomination members and clergy persons as we took to the streets in protest on behalf of union workers. And I was honored to have been a part of the First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn's process of becoming an Open and Affirming Church.

Everytime a patient requests a visit I am enthused to carry with me the wonderful tradition of the United Church of Christ. I carry the United Church of Christ's ways of modeling the teachings of Christ by offering hope for new beginnings to any and all regardless of age, race, or sexual orientation. It is a tradition which reveres the contribution of both men and women in the pulpit, in hospital rooms, and behind prison walls sharing the Gospel, nourishing the hope of those in need through the Sacraments, and offering hospitality to all no matter where they happen to be on life's journey.

My Call

I do believe that God does tug on the heartstrings of some members of the church to further their education for various forms of ministry. For me, that form of ministry is Chaplaincy. It is within this role that I serve as an outpouring of God's love, compassion, and hospitality. Aside from providing pastoral care, I also have the occasional joy of leading worship and devotions with patients, families, and staff members. I celebrate others' gifts for healing through the act of blessing of the hands. What I have brought into my hospital ministry are the rich life experiences that I have walked through and the transformative moments that the Gospel has provided to get me to this point.

This past year has taken me a long way. I graduated seminary in 2009, was accepted as a Resident Chaplain at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital, and hired by Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in May 2010 as a full-time staff Chaplain. The fact that I have been so amazingly blessed is humbling to me.

There are numerous Chaplains in healthcare and many are extremely gifted with the art of making spiritual assessments and offering the gift of a calming presence during traumatic

situations. But as a United Church of Christ minister, I would bring to my Chaplain duties all the qualities of the denomination that I uphold. I bring the intentionality of social justice and advocating for those who would otherwise be considered in the way. I bring my passion for creating an open, affirming, and welcoming approach to my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters on their journeys. I also bring to my position the ecumenism and interfaith qualities which are so important within the United Church of Christ as I work with Pastors, Priests, Parish Nurses, Rabbis, and Imams. I am grateful for the fact that the United Church of Christ is my spiritual home which gives me the constant inspiration to perform ministry as I do in my role as a Chaplain. In this role within the hospital, it is my aspiration to become ordained so that I can move forward with not only teaching Christian spirituality, but I can be authorized to invite others to Christ's table of Communion and perform Baptisms for those seeking a brand new day within the Christian community. It is with great honor and humility that I continue to respond to the mustard seed of inspiration that God placed in my heart as an aspiring minister of the United Church of Christ. I long for a day when I can be ordained to allow the branches of the mustard tree within to grow so that I can serve as a resource for those that I provide pastoral care.