

The O'ahu Association
of the United Church of Christ

invites your prayers for and presence at the



Ecclesiastical Council

for the Purpose of Examining

Frances Wong

for

Ordination into Christian Ministry

Sunday, March 22, 4 p.m.

at

Waiiokeola Congregational Church

4705 Kilauea Avenue, Honolulu

Quorum is required; **RSVP** to Diane Weible by March 13
by email at dweible@hcucc.org or by phone at 791-5633

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Member-in-Discernment
Church of the Crossroads and
Oahu Association of the United Church of Christ, Hawaii Conference
December 12, 2014

ORDINATION PAPER

Section 1: Personal Journey

My life flows on in endless song;
above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn
that hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
how can I keep from singing?

~New Century Hymnal (NCH) #476,
attrib. Robert Lowry, tune: Endless Song

I have always heard God's music—always—both within me and surrounding me. The music found me and found its own echo in my soul. My call came during elementary school. I became certain that the path of Jesus Christ was the only path I was able to take and that, some day and in some way, I would be able to serve God “formally” and that my singing in response to God's music would be service, among other things, as an ordained minister. I recall some time in third grade having a certainty of being both object and subject, observer and observed, with a vastness in my tiniest cell, a vastness reaching out to the edge of the universe, and being a part of that vastness, awash in God's love. Some time in the fifth grade, I recall God's insistence that all Christians, me included, must really look at the suffering and injustice in the world and be in God's service to confront and change the injustice and to ameliorate the suffering. God's calling was and is both comforting and insistent in equal measure. The comfort is heard as soothing but complex music; the insistence is strongly rhythmic and driving, driving me forward to a life of service. In this ordination paper, I will share my background and beliefs that have shaped the echoing music in my soul.

Born in Hong Kong and coming to Hawaii at age four, I am technically a first generation immigrant but I effectively grew up as second generation, i.e., our truly first-generation parents

expected us to speak English exclusively, do well in school, and fit in. We were poor; both parents worked long hours. As the first born (and a daughter), I have been mothering since elementary school because my siblings are much younger and I have been working for wages since I was 12. I attended public schools from first grade through college; to answer the local defining question of identification (“eh, what school you went?”), I attended Kauluwela Elementary, Central Intermediate, McKinley High School, and University of Hawaii (earning an undergraduate degree in Education with special emphases on special education and behavioral psychology).

Growing up in Hawaii is a blessing, a chance to be deeply immersed in diversity (e.g., class, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation) . . . but much depends on experiencing this diversity with a modicum of respect and tolerance. Hawaii is certainly not a utopia. Prejudice, fear, and ignorance exist here just as everywhere else and this microcosm has sensitized me to how much “work” it takes to be Christian in a pluralistic society. No one group can correctly assume that their rituals, language, metaphors, and beliefs will be understood by other groups. We all must work hard to listen to each other with open hearts and open minds. We also must work hard to “mine” our own traditions in order to bring our best selves to the conversation. I was fortunate that respect and tolerance were taught in my family and the churches I grew up in.

Our extended Chinese family is strongly united but very diverse, including in religion. Children were expected to be raised in a church but not any one particular church. Our extended family includes Episcopalians, Catholics, Protestants, non-denominational Christians, Asian traditions, “spiritual but not religious,” earth based faith traditions, and atheists. Because we are family, we honor the choices made even though we may not agree with those choices. We also all grew up practicing Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist beliefs and rituals, particularly those that venerated our ancestors and stressed the importance of family unity. Every year during Ching Ming, my family continues the graveside practices that honor those who have gone before us.

The way of life and values taught by the Chinese, Asian, and Pacific Islander influences in Hawaii define me and I treasure them deeply: (a) life on earth is relational and fragile; (b) communication is oblique, multi-layered, and only partially dependent on language; (c) the basic unit is the family or the group (past and future generations are included) and even individual decisions are made in this context; (d) values are taught more by example and story telling than by lecturing; and, (e) art, mythology and metaphor are as valid as text and rational thought. My

Chinese influences specifically taught me the values (and expectations) of the importance of a cohesive family (including ancestors), hard work, education, security, and practicality. One downside of my Chinese influence is the ethnocentrism that I have absorbed. We are the Middle Kingdom (the only one that counts between heaven and earth) and we have the longest history of achievements. The saving grace in all this is that Chinese people are quite hospitable, adaptable, and love food. Those saving graces have allowed the Chinese culture to be amalgamated into what we now call “local.”

Sadly, I am divorced after a long marriage. Both our children were adopted. Our son died in 2000, a few months after he had graduated from high school. His birth mother carries the muscular dystrophy gene and passed that on to David. Our daughter is now 27 years old. Elizabeth is an amazingly wonderful and talented person and continues to work hard toward living independently.

After law school at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, I returned home to be among family and accepted a job offer from a private firm with a record of accepting public interest cases on a pro bono basis. After 5 years of private practice (criminal defense and civil litigation), I was appointed to the Family Court as a part-time judge by Chief Justice William Richardson. I retired as a full-time judge in 2009 after nearly one decade in the criminal division of the circuit court and nearly two decades in family court (with one and a half of those decades as that court’s administrative circuit judge). I continue to work for the Judiciary on a part-time basis.

Judges are leaders in the courtroom and within the Judiciary. Additionally, family court judges must also be community leaders. Despite the popular view that judges have plenty of power and the ability to simply mandate that certain things be done in a certain way, the reality is quite different. All judges must be sensitive to human dynamics if they wish to craft lasting solutions. Whether with a jury trial or judicial administration or changes in a community system, collaboration was my “default” position. In and out of the courtroom, I try to help others work together toward common goals. I provided leadership over diverse groups of people working toward systems changes. From this point of view, a judge (similar to a minister) is a “servant leader.” A judge must lead but that leadership is in service to the law of the land and the needs of the people. Similarly, a minister’s leadership is in service to both God and humanity. I also believe that both professions require the same sort of honest, humble self-awareness that

prevents both the “white collar syndrome” and the “black robe syndrome.” Both syndromes blind persons to their own humanity.

After returning home from law school, I joined Church of the Crossroads in 1977. Crossroads stands alongside two other churches that have shaped me and my faith—First Chinese Church of Christ (Congregational at the time) and Good Shepherd Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod).

First Chinese gave me an indispensable foundation in Christian character formation and a close familiarity with the Bible. When I was in elementary school, First Chinese required a teaching of “creationism.” I could not reconcile that concept either with my faith or my understanding of science so I left and joined Good Shepherd for the simple reason that one of my best friends went there. Good Shepherd was my church home from intermediate school through college. We were a small congregation dedicated to living out our faith and identity as Christians through worship, supporting each other and the community, particularly our Liliha neighborhood. As small as we were, Good Shepherd began (and continues to operate) the very first non-profit preschool and day care in the Liliha area after we discerned a great need for those services in light of the overwhelming presence of two-working-parent families. Good Shepherd taught me not to underestimate God by assuming that small churches can only do small things. While attending school on the mainland, the Missouri Synod was deeply fractured after a national schism. The remaining entity that kept the label of “Missouri Synod” became increasingly arid, insulated, and dogmatic. After returning home from law school, my then husband and I decided not to return to Good Shepherd because it had remained with Missouri Synod.

We joined Church of the Crossroads for its diversity, inclusion, and social activism. It was, at that time, a church in decline but it was clear to us that the Holy Spirit had continued to blow through that community as evidenced by the amazing witness of its remaining members. It has been a blessing to be a part of that church family. A marvelous series of ministers both nurtured me and, particularly the women ministers, provided me with inspiration for the journey. Gloria Kibbee, Edith Wolfe, Faith Jackson, Barbara Grace Ripple—all taught me different facets of being a *woman* pastor. As much as I similarly admired our male pastors, I believe it is important to have not only diverse role models but role models with whom you can identify.

Crossroads also provided the right sort of community for my profession. During many of my years as a judge I was involved in developing programs and policies to address the needs of certain groups in our community such as abused and neglected children, domestic violence victims, and special delinquent populations. Crossroads grounded my work because Crossroads grounded me. The work was difficult and often daunting because the problems were so large and entrenched. Crossroads nurtured the Christian hope and nourishment required for that journey.

Coming full circle, my work as a judge will provide hope and nourishment for my journey as a minister. The organizational, planning, and problem solving skills gained as a judge will be useful to my leadership work within a congregation. My knowledge of the community's needs, strengths, and resources will assist the church to fulfill various missions in the community. I can continue to nurture my role as a "servant leader."

Section 2: My Beliefs

*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that
you may know how to answer everyone.
~Colossians 4:6 NRSV¹*

Paul teaches us that using gracious salty speech will let us know how we should answer everyone. This will be a comfort as I try to articulate what I believe in. I do not have to know everything and I do not have to know "the" truth so long as I approach my listeners with grace and season my words with honesty.

God—The Trinity

We know God is holy and yet God cannot be wholly known. God cannot be fully understood, explained, perceived . . . held . . . except in small ways revealed through relationships and symbols. As humans we have to respond to and believe in something tangible that gives us insight into the ineffable, the mystery. But, we must be constantly on guard to remember that our language and symbols only point *to* God and are not to be mistaken *for* God.

The Trinity is a marvelous doorway to a full Christian life. For some, God is further represented as a father, a male being. I can accept that and I think that God is also much more than that—more than one gender, one role, more than we can imagine. For some, Jesus is represented as one human being in human history who lived and was crucified. I can accept that

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

and I think, if we accept that Jesus is God, then Jesus is also much more than that. For some, the Holy Spirit is that presence that moves through human history. I can accept that and I think it is perilous for any of us to be overly confident in our ability to name, claim, and tame the Spirit if we believe that the Spirit is God.

Throughout history, men and women have depended on their traditions, reason, and experiences as guides. Holy texts were incorporated into societies as additional guides. Similarly, John Wesley (a Protestant reformer) developed what is now called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a way to discern our Christian faith, that is, the four pillars to our continuing discernment are scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. We depend on *scripture* to anchor us, *tradition* to guide us, *reason* to be our symbolic bridge between the known and the unknowable, and *experience* as our inescapable context. All of these pillars ground my love of God as Holy Trinity and my joy with the concept of a Trinity.

Let me first explore each of the Three. God, as I have noted above, is simply not wholly knowable. Every adjective works to limit God, including our favorites—he, she, father, mother, lord, king, creator. Even so, I find that I need adjectives. I need words and images that give me glimpses of a greater reality. When pressed to say what God is to me or the simpler “do you believe in God,” I can only share metaphors such as music, a far-off hymn, the smell of a baby’s head, visual art (not necessarily just art deemed “religious”) that evoke a response to beauty. I can also share harsher metaphors such as the incessant crash of the waves at Kekaha on Kauai, the inevitable flow of rushing pahoehoe, the collapse of a spent star resulting in a supernova. All of these point to something much, much greater than our humanly perceived world.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth

~Genesis 1:1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

~John 1:1

The beginning is also beyond our knowing although quantum physicists and astrophysicists are discovering beautiful new concepts that allow our wonder of the beauty of creation to deepen. Besides creating a world and a world that was/is hospitable to us and our fellow creatures, God also gifted “the Word” to us and, better than that, a “Word” that was not meant for one class of people (for example, only those people who can read) but for all of us. That Word was not a book. It is Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth and Galilee, Jesus of the cross, the resurrected Jesus, Jesus our brother. The historical Jesus’ ministry,

actions, and teachings inform my beliefs and behaviors. The resurrected Jesus is the one with us in our daily lives; Jesus is found in the trenches, in the workplace, in the slums of Calcutta, and in Honolulu's Chinatown. We know who we are and who we are becoming because Jesus of the Bible and Jesus of the world is our example. Jesus is both here as well as our eschatological hope; not a hope that is beyond our sight but reachable and glowing at the horizon.

My favorite part of the Trinity to relate to is the Holy Spirit—the unpredictable trickster, the comforter, the guide that can only be followed intuitively and, often, ambagiously.² The Spirit surprises us continually. The Spirit (“the word of the Lord” I Kings 19:9b) tells poor Elijah, all alone and running for his life, to go to Horeb to encounter God. Our familiar metaphors slam into that mountain—a great wind, an earthquake, a fire—God is not found in these powerful forces. Instead, Elijah encounters God in “a sound of sheer silence” (I Kings 19:11-13). The unexpected form of this encounter reminds us to stay awake, be aware, do not presume to know God. The Spirit most certainly surprised everyone at that first Pentecost. Instead of silence, “. . . from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them” (Acts 2:1-4). This drama became part of the Christian story of Peter as the church's institutional founder.

God as Trinity underscores the relationality of our faith. Godself is a relationship. We are Christian only as we are in relationship with God and with each part of the three—opening our hearts and minds to serving God's creation; following Jesus' lead in love; making enough room in our lives for guidance (and to be surprised) by the Holy Spirit. We are Christians only to the extent that people recognize that fact by our relationships with others—not only because we are commanded to “love . . . your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37) and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39) but also because “as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34-35). We are to follow Jesus' example and act out this love by being in service to one another (John 13:14-17).

In addition to the Bible passages in the previous paragraph, the importance of relationality is deepened by the interaction of scripture with tradition, reason, and experience.

² “Ambagious” means roundabout or circuitous. I found this great new word while I was looking up another word. Yes, I am *that* kind of nerd—highly distractible when looking through a dictionary!

My traditions and experiences are not just based on the European world of the Western church but also on the cultures and teachings of Chinese, Asian, and Pacific Islanders. These influences are enriching. Asian traditions transcend simple binaries such as—God is male and therefore God is not female. For example, the Korean-American theologian Jung Young Lee writes: “The Trinity is meaningful to me because I think in Trinitarian terms . . . based on yin-yang symbolism, which is rooted in Asian cosmology. Yin and yang symbols are nondualistic, relational, and complementary.”³ Because yin *and* yang include each other, the “and” is a “connectional constituent” that creates a third component, hence, a trinity.⁴

The Bible

The Asian cultures and religions which many of us in Hawaii grew up with are not initially taught from “a” text or “the” text. We grew up learning from stories, examples, discipline, and lived experiences. The texts that do exist in Asian religions are voluminous (the Confucian Analects, the Hindu Vedas, the Buddhist Sutras, the Tao Te Ching), subject to lifelong study, and, while authoritative (although authority varies with different groups of practitioners and believers), are not generally treated as direct revelations from God. Neither do Asians use these various texts as a yardstick to measure people. Rather, the more likely measures are the actions of a person and the consequences of that person’s decisions.

My Kumu Hula taught us that there are at least two and often more layers of meaning for the lyrics of our hula mele. The first layer, the literal words of the mele, is obvious and it is the layer that the choreography follows. The last and deepest layer (*kaona* or *kauna*) is not usually taught. Instead, the Kumu must deem the haumana (the students) ready as well as worthy to receive the most important teaching or meaning of the song.

Nathaniel Bright Emerson, in 1909, published an extensive study of what he called the “unwritten literature of Hawaii,” that collected and analyzed oli and mele. I include a lengthy quotation that bears directly on my discussion of the Bible.

The reader will note the . . . frequent use of euphemisms and double-entendre. The double meaning in a Hawaiian mele will not always be evident to one whose acquaintance with the language is not intimate⁵

³ Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 213.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵ Nathaniel Bright Emerson, *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 38 (Washington Government Printing Office, 1909), 69, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20299/20299-h/20299-h.htm> (accessed September 9, 2014).

The translation here given [of oli and mele] makes no profession of absolute, verbal literalness. One can not transfer a metaphor bodily, head and horns, from one speech to another. . . . The cry for literalism is the cry for an impossibility; to put the chicken back into its shell, to return to the bows and arrows of the stone age.⁶

It is especially necessary to *familiarize the imagination with the language, meaning, and atmosphere of a mele*, because the Hawaiian approached song from the side of the poet and elocutionist.⁷

Do I believe in the Bible literally? Yes (just as I dance to the Kumu’s choreography of the lyrics), and I also believe that the practice of Christianity requires the sort of hard work that Kumu Hula demand of their haumana in order to reach deeper meanings, the *kauna*, not readily apparent from the literal treatment of either the mele or the Bible. For example, one of my favorite songs is “Lei Hali’a,” sung by Keali’i Reichel and written by Puahea Nogelmeier. The first line of the chorus is “Adorned with a lei of fond recollection” (“he ohu i ka lei hali’a”). That line can be danced with very straightforward and literal movements for “adorn,” “lei,” “fond,” and “recollection.” However, in order to dance this well, the dancer must have in mind more than just wearing a lei. Similarly, our “job” as Christians includes reading the Bible seriously and deeply, while recognizing that we are not intimately acquainted with the original languages and contexts of the Bible. The writings in the Bible were originally oral, transmitted from speaker to speaker (not unlike Hawaiian chants). These oral teachings and stories were eventually written down and written in different versions spanning hundreds of years. Aware of this history, we must approach this job with humility and openness. Like oli and mele, the Bible abounds with metaphors and symbols. So, we also have to bring our imagination to this job, and to “familiarize the imagination” with study of translations, notes, and commentary so that we absorb “the language, meaning, and atmosphere” of the passage.

We love the Bible as the Christian’s holy text. But we must never confuse the Bible (not any of our favorite versions!) with God. We must not assume that our limited human understanding can be “the” final and correct interpretation of holy text. I love that the Bible is messy, wild, and real. I love that God calls us and invites our dialogue, yes, even to the point of rejection, when we are called to be prophets against the text itself and to misuses of the text.

⁶ Emerson, 88.

⁷ Ibid., 154-155 (emphasis added).

Walter Brueggemann celebrates the Bible as “*a peculiar witness to the elusive, irascible, multi-layered, multi-voiced holiness that can effect agency in the world.*”⁸

The Church

The church universal, i.e., all believers of Christ, is a gift from God given to enable us to better perceive and live the way of Christ. It also forces us to recognize that God and God’s church is far greater than just our denominations and our local home churches. Christian faith and practice requires relationships and community. This gift of God provides us with the context to become more fully human, more faithful Christians, and the wideness of this gift forces us to let go of sectarianism and exclusivity.

The Protestant church is smaller than the church universal but is also a gift from God. This is the church that nurtured me and formed my Christian identity. This is the church I hope to serve as an ordained minister. The church provides a context for living through worship and liturgy. The church provides a human institution to strive to do God’s work in God’s creation. As with all human institutions and endeavors, the church is flawed and halting. In spite of this, I have been and continue to be a whole hearted supporter of the institution. Together, we can do God’s work much more effectively than we can alone or isolated. I believe that God blesses our efforts, performed prayerfully and faithfully and ever mindful of the need for repentance, regardless of the outcome. Moments before he was assassinated, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador delivered a homily that gave us this assurance: “We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses; that God wants; that God demands of us.”

The Local Church and Practical Theology

The ministry of all believers finds its voice in the local church. I believe that the local church will and must continue to exist and grow with vitality in our communities. Anyone looking “objectively” at Crossroads in the late 70’s could have reasonably predicted a fairly quick demise after its catastrophic fracture over offering sanctuary to soldiers resisting the Vietnam war. However, the remaining members were confident that Crossroads offered spiritual gifts that people needed and, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, Crossroads hung on and grew. Individual faith communities are large ohana that work to form the Christian

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary, “Why the Bible Continues to be Indispensable for Us,” as presented to the Disciples Seminary Foundation, July 2013.

characters of both children and adults through worship, liturgy, education, contemplation, action, mission, and hospitality. Jesus made it clear that we are to do God’s work together, in community. Far from being formed by cookie cutters, each local church, like each of us, is wonderfully distinct and idiosyncratic. This is a good thing so long as we do not equate our distinction as “the” cookie cutter.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.
~1 Cor. 12:4-7*

God calls us to use our gifts to minister to creation and all within creation. For me, “social action” is not a choice but a mandate if we are faithful to Jesus’ command to love one another. When appropriate, this “social action” may have to include what some might consider to be “political action.” Archbishop Romero also taught that: “When the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.” And, Paul exhorts us to “[p]ut on the whole armor of God” for our struggle is “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:11-12).

Christians must claim the Biblical narratives of Jesus’ love, non-violence, and political canniness. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. urged us to take on tough mindedness and tender heartedness, to be ethical non-conformists after the example of Jesus, and to “bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying.”⁹ Dr. King lays before us both eschatological hope and an eschatological horizon demanding justice: “Jesus reminds us . . . that [‘the transformed nonconformist’] recognizes that social change will not come overnight, yet [we] work . . . as though it is an imminent possibility.”¹⁰ Pastors must preach and teach that to fight terror (at home, in schools, our communities, the world—including state sanctioned violence by law enforcement, by our own government) is to do God’s work. Laity and clergy must work together to learn how to:

(1) *Be attentive*. Know the data, the facts. It is Jesus’ insistence, “Pay attention to what you hear” (Mark 4.24). (2) *Be intelligent*. Rid yourself of prejudices, of myths, of “This is what everybody says.” (3) *Be reasonable*. Marshal the evidence, examine the opinions, judge with

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Cleveland: Collins and World, 1977), 13-20, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

wisdom. Here community cooperation must replace the Long Ranger. (4) *Be responsible.* “Do something; act on the basis of prudent judgments and genuine values.”¹¹

The importance of humility must be embraced: “God needs us, but only because God wants to need us, wants humanity to cooperate with divinity But remember, even our cooperation is grace, is a gift.”¹²

Section 3: The Sacraments—Communion and Baptism

I believe that Communion is a sacrament that allows us to enter into the past, present, and future of Jesus’ ministry. We live through that meal in the upper room so that we can claim Christ’s current presence in each person and Christ’s promise of the realm to come. Accepting Jesus’ invitation to this meal, we are then called to carry Jesus’ mission out to the wider world. I believe in “radical hospitality” so that our table is truly open—open to our children, visitors, and ourselves in whatever state we find we are in on Sunday morning. I do not believe that the sacraments can be “understood” just with our intellect. Therefore, I do not believe that anyone needs to pass a test in order to receive Communion. However, I do believe that Communion calls us into intimate relationship with God and the community and, therefore, everyone answering the invitation should have some awareness and appreciation of the sacrament according to their age and their abilities. The church must nurture this awareness cognizant of our many different ways of learning and knowing and must look beyond written text in order to use different media and art forms to offer a larger palette to enable deeper understanding of mystery. In the end, young and old, brain smart and life smart, we take and eat, take and drink, and accept. We can only humbly accept the gift that God gave us in the crucifixion and resurrection and live accordingly.

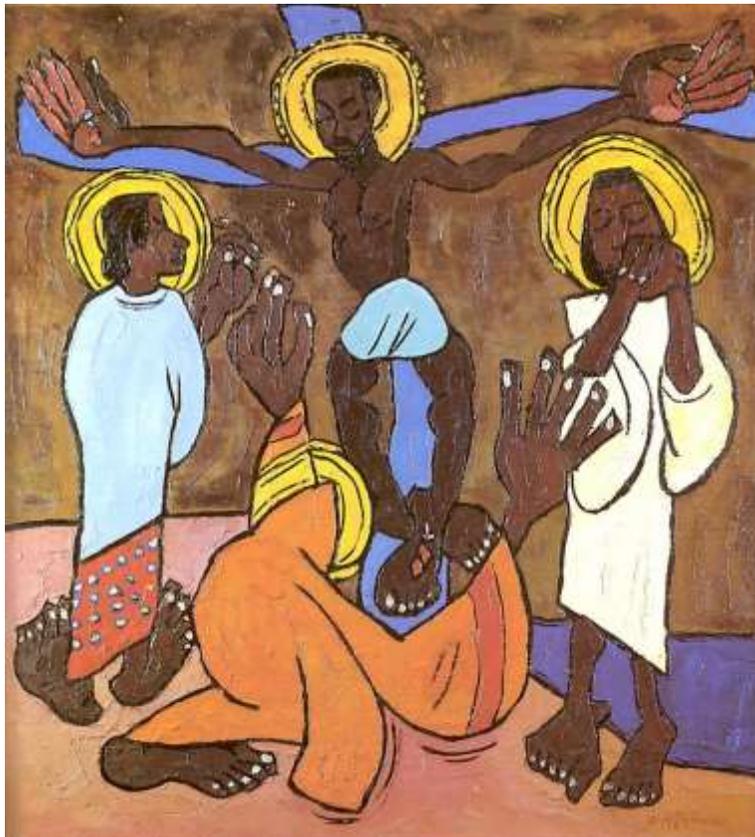
Celebrating communion brings us face to face with the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection—little wonder that the UCC Book of Worship, like the early Christians, regard communion as integral to all worship. God gave us the gift of incarnation in Jesus, a wondrous and loving act. Rather than despair, the cross is a symbol of love, life, death, and resurrection—love and life beyond death. The “punch line” is not a God who allows his son to die horribly but

¹¹ Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., “Terror Next Door: A Homily on Extreme Fear in Our Midst,” in *Surviving Terror: Hope and Justice in a World of Violence*, ed. Victoria Lee Erickson and Michelle Lim Jones (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002), 256-257. At 257, Burghardt quoting theologian Bernard Lonergan (citations omitted, emphasis in the original).

¹² *Ibid.*

a God who knows us, reaches out to us anyway, accepts the evil we are capable of (the crucifixion), and loves us anyway and thereby forever linking the cross with the resurrection.

The crucifixion, for me, is all about God's love, God's incarnation, and much, much less about Jesus as the sacrificial lamb. The crucifixion is about both relationship and hope. Jesus took the time to forgive another on a cross next to him. Jesus made sure that he took care of his mother at the end and acknowledged his love for her, for the other Mary, and for his beloved disciple. After those acts of love and mercy, amidst his own suffering, Jesus—God incarnate yet puzzled about God-self—cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34. God’s own answer to that anguished relational question came at the point of death and it came in the form of resurrection.



Jesus and the Three Marys, William Henry Johnson, ca. 1939

The painting by American artist William Henry Johnson, entitled "Jesus and the Three Marys," is one of my favorite depictions of the crucifixion. There is deep grief, yes, but also peace, defiance, love, strength, caring for one another, hope now, and hope to come. It depicts that moment after Jesus’ cry of affliction when the sure certainty of the Resurrection took root. When we say, “take . . . eat . . . drink,” “this is my body . . . my blood,” we break ourselves open

and fully accept God because we know that we are fully accepted by God. At the cross, nails were hammered into human flesh and driven through real muscle, tendon, bone and drawing real blood. At communion, the elements do not become a part of us as much as we become the elements—at that point when the sure certainty of the Resurrection took root.

Our baptism symbolizes our life, death, resurrection, and new life with Jesus our Christ and enfold us in the church universal. “‘Baptism is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift.’ It is ‘a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the church of every time and place (129).’”¹³

I believe that baptism can occur at any time in a person’s life, including infancy. Baptism marks the end of our belonging to the world and the beginning of our belonging to Christ. More than a personal or family event, baptism is also a sacrament of the church and, whenever possible, should be celebrated in the midst of the community in a service of both Word and Sacrament. The baptized child should also go through a course of study later in his/her teen years and be confirmed during a church service. The adult candidate should go through a course of study appropriate to his/her abilities and level of familiarity with Christianity. This course of study cannot be cookie cutter and must not be a “quick and dirty” way to gain another member. The purpose of this study is not to produce homogenized members but to ensure that the new member has the basic foundations to be an engaged and joyful member of the body of Christ. Churches can no longer assume any seeker has a certain “knowledge base” or Christian “skill set.” Even those who “grew up” in a church may have no understanding of the iconic events in the Old Testament or basic Christian symbols such as body, blood, bread, wine, and water. Of course, these are life-long studies but our job (both laity and clergy) is to help the seeker to begin this understanding.

Whether the congregation favors immersion, pouring, or sprinkling, the symbol of water should be visibly invoked with gusto. The congregation must pledge to the newly baptized that their faith and life journeys will be supported and sheltered by the church and they will be loved.

¹³ These quotations are found in the UCC’s Book of Worship from the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

Section 4: United Church of Christ History and Polity

Even though our national denominational polity is in the midst of a Board structural change, the local church will remain the fundamental decision maker. I hope that there will be future changes requiring more accountability of the local churches to each other and to the regional and national bodies. I think absolute “autonomy” is a false sense of independence. It is akin to the false image of the “rugged individual.” Like a family, each of us must be responsible for ourselves as well as every other family member. I believe that, while local church autonomy is our strength, we all need to foster a deeper sense of commitment to all of the levels and entities of our denomination.

The UCC came into being before it had all the answers, before the matters of unity in belief and administration were sorted out, before, I think, they knew what they were really doing! I love this about our denomination. The primary desire to unite was based on Jesus’ call to unity, to be one body, “because God’s mission is diminished by our divisions.”¹⁴ The courage and audacity of uniting simply because of the need to bear witness by following Jesus’ command is liberating and invigorating. “Out of the United Church of Christ engagement with the social and ecumenical issues of the late-twentieth century world, an ecclesiology has emerged that is characterized by three emphases, covenant, community, and mission.” This “mission” refers to the work of God outside the doors of the church. It does not refer to the “mission” in the “missionaries” who converted the Native Hawaiians. Prof. Randi Walker, a well-respected UCC historian, purposely chose the terms “UCC emphases” and “style” rather than “identity” and “dogma” in order to underscore our denomination’s relative youth and lack of hierarchical pronouncements. Instead, our identity is held in tension by “covenant, community, and mission.” This is both a tenuous and an exhilarating state, demanding much of both laity and clergy.¹⁵

The UCC *Book of Worship* recognizes and affirms the many strands that inform the UCC style beyond the originating four denominational strands in 1957. I especially agree with two points made in the Introduction: “All that Christians are and do, corporately and individually, is worship, liturgy, the work of praise and thanksgiving (2).” The UCC “is a church of European origins [and] . . . also a church of Black, American Indians, Hispanic, Oriental, and . . . women

¹⁴ Randi Jones Walker, *The Evolution of a UCC Style: Essays in the History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2005), 189.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

and men, ordained people and lay people, single people and married people, children and youth and adults . . . (6).”

However, the contemporary UCC style of radical inclusiveness and openness must uncomfortably co-exist with previous actions and pronouncements that marginalized and caused harm to the very groups listed. Hawaii is a colonized community—this fact serves as the “elephant in the room” for our denomination and our Hawaii Conference and it is important to name it. The New England missionary society and the United States’ colonizers depended on each other to make their respective jobs more effective. The missionaries swept through Polynesia sowing Christianity very persuasively. Hawaii bears the economic and cultural realities of colonization as evidenced, in part, by the lack of diverse industries and agriculture and the predominance and reliance on military spending, the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiians in prisons, and the high numbers of Native Hawaiians suffering from obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

Regarding past and ongoing wrongs worked by religious groups, John Cobb correctly notes that all traditions have strengths and weaknesses but that we are only diminished if we fail to acknowledge our failings and seek repentance.¹⁶ For example, the UCC’s apology to the Native Hawaiians was a bright moment for our church. Does it “fix” everything? No. Might it be “too little, too late”? Perhaps. Was it an act of great humility and a true cry seeking forgiveness from the people wronged and from God? Yes.

I am proud to belong to the UCC. Certainly not “proud” in the sense of “Boy, aren’t we better than everyone else,” but proud of the UCC’s risk taking on behalf of Christ, deep rootedness in the Christian scripture and tradition, strivings toward inclusiveness and diversity, strong sense of mission, and nimbleness. It is my fervent hope that my ministry as an ordained minister will also support the UCC “style”: “peace with justice, being open and affirming, multicultural and multiracial, anti-racist, and accessible to all, as well as the call to practice radical hospitality, early truth telling, and evangelical courage.”¹⁷

¹⁶ John B. Cobb, Jr., “Multiple Religious Belonging and Reconciliation,” in *Many Mansions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 25.

¹⁷ Clyde J. Steckel, *New Ecclesiology & Polity: The United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 73.

Section 5: My Call and Ordination

I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin;
I see the blue above it;
And day by day this pathway smooths,
since first I learned to love it.

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
a fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am Christ's—
how can I keep from singing?
~NCH #476

A Protestant belief that is particularly pronounced in the UCC is the priesthood of all believers. As exemplified by my home church, a positive consequence of this policy is the development of a robust laity. The Church of the Crossroads is lavishly blessed with members who can do just about everything. So, with talented laity like this, why ordained ministry? I think Clyde Steckel puts it well: “. . . the essential being of the church does not require an ordained office, but its well-being does.”¹⁸ “Protestant traditions hold that the pastoral office is a gift from the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit in order that the church can fulfill its calling as Christ’s body engaged in his mission in the world.”¹⁹ I agree with Prof. Walker’s assessment that the clergy’s authority “rests on much more than a principle. It rests above all on a relationship of trust.”²⁰ I hope that I will be able to, with the help of the Spirit, continually renew this trust, with congregations as well as with God, as the basis for my leadership and my authority. God’s calling is a gift, my responding to that gift will be flawed but I respond confident of the source of the gift. Ordination will be an echo of my baptism—a trust relationship between God, a church, and me.

On a personal level, I have a settled belief that the echo in my soul that I cannot help but keep singing is a call to ordained ministry. I am open to what and where God might lead from this point forward. I entered seminary very sure about wanting to serve a local church. I am still sure of that but, with my internship at Kaiser Oakland Hospice, I am now also open to being lead in the direction of chaplaincy. I am not anxious about these possibilities; I am excited.

¹⁸ Steckel, 92.

¹⁹ Ibid., 91.

²⁰ Walker, 102-103.

On a professional level, ordained ministry means that I will bring to my service a body of knowledge from my seminary schooling that will continue to expand with further study. When I think about the question of who are my “go to” theologians, I actually think first of my professors at the Pacific School of Religion. Besides a body of knowledge, they have also taught me various avenues of and resources for further learning. All of this will be important in both the local church and chaplaincy. I do not want to sound like a mini-professor but I believe that, in and out of the church, people have a thirst for knowledge that seminary training can encourage. I also believe that an important part of a pastor’s work is Christian character formation for all persons in the church. I would not dream of setting myself up as “the” role model but I will strive to provide guidance and leadership so that we can all do this together.

Besides knowledge, my life and other professional experiences will augment my ministry as ordained clergy. I feel that as a responsible family member and as a judge in very busy courts, I have gained specific skills to assist my ministry such as: organization of systems, collaborative problem solving, embracing different types and temperaments, patience, and baking for potlucks.

I am a person of multiple belongings who, nevertheless, can proclaim to follow Christ’s way, to be a Christian. My Chinese upbringing was infused with an awareness that life is greater than just our individual selves, our own limited perceived realities, and our perception of present time. The Buddha’s classic lesson that “my teaching is a method to experience reality and not reality itself, just as a finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. . . . [a] person who only looks at the finger and mistakes it for the moon will never see the real moon,”²¹ is a compelling “fit” with my Christian practice and faith. I think Jesus taught with parables to keep us mindful that the text we love is not itself God but a means to know God deeper and deeply without mistaking the pointing finger for the moon.

I have practiced Iyengar yoga for over 20 years. Although I do not believe in the Hindu pantheon, I do honor the teachings of dedicated yogis and I find my yoga practice prepares me for deeper meditation and prayer as well as keeping my mind in the present and my body attuned to the world. I have danced hula for over 30 years. I believe in some of the supernatural phenomenon manifested in Native Hawaiian religious traditions. Like everyone else who grew

²¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 213.

up in Hawaii, I speak of Pele as a being—something a bit more than myth and more than a natural phenomenon. I do not believe this taints my Christianity since my Christian beliefs are neither challenged nor modified by my acceptance of Native Hawaiian teachings. I have played taiko (Japanese big drum) for a decade and a half and have absorbed Japanese culture with its modern Buddhist/Shinto/secular blend. This learning has further strengthened the amalgam of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist beliefs and practices of my Chinese heritage.

For Cobb, multiple belongings can be problematic if one's Christianity becomes something that is co-equal with the other identities and does not serve to define your primary identity; a Christian is called to define his/her life (and life's decisions) according to Christ's teachings.²² I believe that Christianity does indeed infuse everything in my life and I also recognize that the different influences of my life are difficult to parse.

I have no choice but to bring all that I am right now to my vocation as an ordained minister. With God's guidance, judgment, and grace, I will grow in this vocation—developing certain gifts, pruning other traits, and learning new skills and habits of the heart. With God's assurance by my side, well . . . how can I keep from singing?

God calls humanity to join
as partners in creating
a future free from want or fear,
life's goodness celebrating.

That new world beckons from afar,
invites our shared endeavor,
that all may have abundant life
and peace endure forever.

~NCH, 563, Ruth Duck,
tune: Endless Song

²² Cobb, 22-24.

Gratitude for and mahalo to the Important People in My Ordination Process

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