

An Ordination Paper

Changing Shoes on the Journey



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Foreword¹

Have you ever woken up as if out of a fog wondering who or what you are? I have had that experience. A conversation from the night before lingered in my mind and through my dreams, the gist of which was, how do you self-identify? Because as we all know others see what they see, but it is important that we be grounded in the knowledge of who we *really* are.

As I awoke, I thought of that poem by Aurora Levins Morales, "Child of the Americas."

*I am a child of the Americas... a child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads... I am Caribeña, island grown. Spanish is in my flesh, the singing in my poetry, the flying gestures of my hands. I am of Latinoamerica, rooted in the history of my continent: I speak from that body. I am not African. Africa is in me, but I cannot return. I am not Taíno. Taíno is in me, but there is no way back. I am not European. Europe lives in me, but I have no home there. I am new. History made me. My first language was Spanglish. I was born at the crossroads and I am whole.*²

I remember reading this and thinking *that's me*, but only parts of me. There is more to me than my ethnic makeup. "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of God's household."³ I am no longer on the outskirts looking in. I am a member of GOD's household.

I am a child of the diaspora, born into this religiosity at a crossroads... I am Roman Catholic by inheritance and tradition; I am Lutheran by baptism. And by my hearts choice and God's leading, I am UCC. I fit. I am only me and I know that I am Taina and African and European they are not mutually exclusive they are intertwined and merged and united. I am only me and I know that (for me) being UCC means I am Christian, love GOD, and walk towards God's purpose. They are not mutually exclusive or inclusive they are intertwined and merged some would say united in and by Christ's love.

Sometimes to grow we must acknowledge the change, the merging and realize that there is so much more to who we are than just race or creed or color of skin. We are loved by an all-powerful GOD who knows who we really are. And as members of GOD's household, we are GOD's children. "Who are you," you ask. And, I loudly respond:

"I am a child of God!"



¹ Note: though originally written to be part of my ordination paper, this foreword appeared in a journal called Tertulia 2012: I am Hispanic, I am UCC. An Intimate, Transparent, Open & Honest Discussion About Sexism, Classism, Racism and ONA Issues.

² Aurora Levins Morales and Rosaro Morales, *Getting Home Alive* (Ann Arbor: Firebrand Books, 1986). Additional information on Levins Morales can be found at: <http://www.auroralevinsmorales.com>

³ Ephesians 2:19 (NIV, 1984)

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With Bars on my Feet, I Walk Introduction

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.
1 Corinthians 13:11

I recognize that the shoes I walked in at different points of my life have left an imprint on my journey. While it might sound strange to use shoes as an analogy for my faith journey and theological perspective, I recognize that there is a correlation between the shoes that I have worn and where I now stand. I have walked many steps and worn many shoes, and with each step I have gotten closer to (walking into) my calling even as, at times, I have attempted to run instead!

Throughout my life, I have worn many shoes. In infancy I wore tall leather boots held together with a straight metal bar that seemed at times to hold me captive. As an adolescent I was confined to children's shoes until, as a quinceañera⁴, I was finally allowed to don the shoes of a young woman and change into high heels. In young adulthood, I was finally able to go forth on my journey, struggling with the weight of a calling I had run from while wearing combat boots instead of proper running sneakers. I recognize that there are many shoes in my closet, and each has prepared me for the responsibility of my calling. And today, finally, I know I can change into the correct shoes for each occasion, having already tried them on for size.

Due to a medical condition, the boots with the straight metal bar that I wore in infancy taught me stability, while holding me rigidly still. These shoes held me captive in much the same way as my church and my home held me captive in my early years. I grew up in a home that differed greatly from my church; these two polarized views left a mark on who I am. While

⁴ Translate Spanish to English: Hispanic tradition of celebrating a young girl's coming of age (coming out party at age 15 that includes a religious rite of passage ceremony).

in church, being appropriate and refined meant that I asked questions that were easy for untrained laity to answer. The acceptable questions were ones that related solely to what the Pastor had already deemed acceptable. But at home I was able to speak about God in a different way. Each of these realities fed my spirit, but much like those now outgrown boots, I grew out of that church.

I grew up attending a Spanish speaking Pentecostal church, where I was taught that women were not to wear pants, or earrings, or makeup. I learned that women were not church leaders, with the exception of teaching Sunday school and using their musical gifts. In that church, I was taught not to ask questions, though I would often forget: *“If Jesus is Mary’s son...who was his father? I know Jesus is the son of God, but I am the daughter of God, I want to know who his father is...because my father is Luis Mendez and the Bible says Joseph wasn’t Jesus’ father, so then who was?”* Often my inquisitive nature led to being asked to leave Sunday school or being put in *disciplina*⁵ by the Pastor for some infraction that I could not understand, during which time I was not allowed to sing with the children’s choir or recite scriptures in front of the congregation with my fellow classmates. This led me to seek guidance at home, which led to new troubles.

I grew up in a single parent household led by a woman for whom education was very important. In my mind, my mother was a superhero who could do everything from reading amazing books to building the bookshelves to hold them. When I would come home and tell her about my experiences in Sunday school she would tell me to pray and read my Bible, so that God would lead me to a response to my questions. This led to new issues in church: *“When I grow up, I think I want to be a pastor. I can be a Pastor and a woman. What Bible are you reading? I read about Priscilla in my Bible and she was a pastor,”* I challenged my Sunday school

⁵ Translate Spanish to English: disciplined

teacher. As an adult, I have continued to pray and read my Bible. Now, as I sit in my own Sunday school class, I have heard similar questions from my students and I encourage them to read, pray, think outside the box, as they seek their own answers.

In the church of my childhood I was taught that baptism was an important right of passage into Christian faith and tradition that would take place after I turned 12 years old. I learned that we were not baptized as children because baptism was a public testament of our personal faith. At home I learned that because it was a public authentication I should be doing a personal assessment of what that would mean. After going through my preparatory classes with my peers I choose not to be baptized into the Pentecostal church because though I was clear about my belief in the God of Israel, I was not a believer in their way of practicing my faith. Even now, I ask myself, are you ready to change your shoes? And while fully acknowledging that I will have to take the training bars off my childhood boots, I will walk in faith. This is the story of my call to ordained ministry.



Mis Zapatos de Quinceañera Ministry and Pilgrimage

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
Psalms 119: 105

As a young girl I grew up reading the Bible in much the same manner as I read the Jungle Book. I read the children's version first, slowly graduating from the Disney to the Rudyard Kipling version. God became a friend on whom I depend in daily life. I knew from my Bible readings that God created the natural world that nurtured my childhood reality on my great-grandparent's farm in Puerto Rico.

The first time I led Sunday school, my class included puppies, rabbits, chickens and all of my cousins. I taught them the lessons I learned in my Pentecostal Sunday school classes, telling

them simple stories about God's creation and sharing with them how we should worship God as Moses and his followers had learned in the desert. When my mother moved us to New York, God went with us! Years later I began to recognize that beam of fire and smoke as the Holy Spirit. I remember in moments of loneliness crying out to God and talking to the radiating cloud of fire that would appear as I would to my closest confidant. "And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night."⁶ Day and night the Holy Spirit was ever present to guide my life.

When I turned 11, my God went with me to a Lutheran Church, where I learned that God could be present not only in the fervor of impassioned worship, but also in the quiet-contemplative moments of my new church home! Suddenly, I seemed to have found a church that was not afraid to grow with me. It was in this tradition that my questions were not a hindrance or intolerable, but rather allowable. "Holy Ghost fire breathe on me!"⁷

When at the age of 15 I took Baptism-Membership Classes it was with a full understanding of what it meant to become a member of the Body of Christ. I was no longer afraid to question the church, much as Martin Luther had done. The moment of truth came when my Pastor asked me what I understood of communion and I explained that in taking communion I was remembering the action of Jesus in his final meal with the disciples, when he said, "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19b). Imagine my surprise at realizing that this was the wrong answer for the Lutheran Church for whom the elements shared at the Sacred Meal are consubstantiation rather than commemorative.

After an additional series of questions, I explained that in the moment that I put the

⁶ Exodus 13: 21 (KJV)

⁷ Song Breathe on Me by Clint Brown. "*Breathe on me, breathe on me, Holy Ghost power breathe on me, Yesterday's gone today I'm in need, Holy Ghost power breathe on me.*"

sacramental bread into my mouth it became the Body of Christ, which was broken for me. My pastor asked that I stop at that moment and discontinue my thinking because it was in that moment that I understood Jesus to be present. And thus, consubstantiation became real to me, and, on December 8, 1991, I became a baptized member of my faith home.

My mother allowed me to select my godparents: Vivian and Paco. They were selected because of my deep respect for their faith and vocational walks. Both were HIV/AIDS activists in the Latinx⁸ community for whom faith in God was foundational. Vivian was a Methodist and Paco was a Roman Catholic. When my mother travelled on business it was Paco who took care of my brother and me in and it was Paco who took us to Sunday Mass at his church, but always without his partner, Stu. Paco explained that the fact that he was gay was “problematic” in his tradition but it was his tradition.

In my heart I was relieved that in my denominational home (ELCA), gay was not a problem. But then, in (1994) the summer before senior year in High School I was elected as a delegate to represent the Lutheran Youth of the New England Synod (LYONES) at General Assembly in Kansas City, Missouri. It was while in Missouri that I began to hear grumblings and murmurs of exclusion of homosexuals from my denomination. After my return home, I noticed a change in sermons. Passages of oppression of homosexuality became prevalent, and suddenly my imagined safe haven was no longer safe for all. Because, I wondered, if homosexuals were now to be excluded, how long until females also would be excluded? And so began an unstable era in my life...

⁸ I am purposefully using the word Latinx as a re-interpretation of the words Latino (masculine), Latina (feminine), Latin@ (both masculine and feminine). Latinx is a gender-neutral alternate translation that is inclusive of all. Please read: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-people-are-using-the-term-latinx_us_57753328e4b0cc0fa136a159



Caminando Descalza o en Chancletas Ministry and Pilgrimage



*He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet
upon a rock, making my steps secure.
Psalm 40: 2 (NRSV)*

My shoes changed once more, except this time, like a sojourner I walked barefoot. The very ground upon which I had solidly walked all of my life was no longer steady. My friend (God), my favorite book (the Bible), my partner in life (the Holy Spirit) each was now a tool of oppression. And to find my footing I often walked with nothing separating my feet from the soil.

What followed was a dry season, where the soil around me was overgrown with weeds. For the next few years I was churchless, visiting my Bible only to cross out the passages that I heard used to hurt people. Whole stories were crossed out, as I cried about the injustice of God making a people whom God would not allow access to God. Were *those* people less than worthy of grace? I studied many faiths, wondering if there was one that really taught love. I tried having no faith. I tried studying Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Wicca. I tried Indigenous Practices. One day my brother turned to me and said, “everything you try works because in your heart of hearts you are calling out to the same God you always called out to. And God answers your prayers.” I aimlessly attempted to find God while running away from God. Recently I realized that my struggle was with language...interpretation verses translation, Daniel Migliore in Faith Seeking Understanding reminded me that, “Christians do not believe *in* the Bible; [but rather, we] believe in the living God attested *by* the Bible.”⁹

In 2004, after a ten-year hiatus from church, I visited an English language church in

⁹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991)

Hanau, Germany. In this church, the Pastor preached a message of hope for the ugly people (the disenfranchised), she said: “God don’t make ugly!” And like the girl of my youth, I wrote her words down in my notebook; and, like a child finding a lost toy, I laughed. A few months later, I returned to the US on vacation and visited a Pentecostal church in Connecticut, where the guest preacher from Guatemala said, “Yo se que tu eres alguien, porque Dios no hace porqueria.”¹⁰ I listened closely to his message, and once more made notes in my notebook. Later that week as I drove to Virginia, I shared with my mother the similarities between the two sermons. She asked me if I had re-confessed my heart to Christ, “Aaagh, no!” I responded. “If God is really talking to me, he has to prove it...”

A few days later, I walked into a Southern Baptist church in Woodbridge, Virginia. The preacher apologized because an emergency with the Senior Pastor had left him to pinch-hit a sermon earlier that morning. His opening line, “God don’t make garbage...” and that was the day that I recommitted my life to God, knowing that only God could call me out of the wilderness that I had been living in. “He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.”¹¹

My “barefoot” time away from church had given me an opportunity to grow. I had learned to nurture the community around me and welcome the stranger as a friend and family member while working in the United Services Organization (USO). I had learned to provide a home away from home for all who needed it. I wondered if I could find a church that was open to all, including those who like me had been told they were the ugly people.

By 2005, after 6 years of marriage, on the day of my divorce, I sat in my car weeping and

¹⁰ Translate Spanish to English: “I know that you are somebody, because God does not make garbage!”

¹¹ Psalm 40:2-3a (NIV)

alone before entering the courthouse, “God,” I asked, “do you even see me? Because I feel like I am invisible.” Later that day I stopped at a Chinese restaurant and as I read my fortune cookie, I laughed. “God looks after you especially,” it said. A personal love letter from God, in the form of a fortune cookie, because my God has a sense of humor.

I went back to school to complete my Bachelors degree in Business Management. The final project of my program was to use all of the skills I had learned throughout to create a strategic plan for a business issue of my own creation. I decided to work on the merger of two churches with historic ties. They were dually affiliated congregations with ties to both the American Baptist Churches-USA (ABC-USA) and the United Church of Christ (UCC). The older of the two churches was a predominantly European congregation who had started a ministry for the surrounding-predominantly Latinx community. The Latinx ministry grew and became a congregation with its own identity. As both grew and evolved their relationship changed. In the process of creating a strategic plan for a merger between the two was that my love of God and my business knowledge did not have to exclude each other.

In the fall of 2009, I walked across stage receiving my Bachelors in Business Management degree and I began to consider graduate school. I thought about following my love of books and business! I found a school that offered a dual masters program: Library Sciences and MBA. But as I began the process, my heart was not in it. I found myself remembering the dreams of my childhood, and as I talked to my congregation (Iglesia Bautista Congregacional de New Britain¹²) about taking courses at Hartford Seminary in order to become a better teacher and lay-leader of the Christian Education program, it seemed that the only person who was surprised was me! The kids quickly began to find questions that I might be able to answer in the future. I filled out the application thinking that it would take months, but in the spring of 2010 I was on

¹² Iglesia Bautista Congregacional de New Britain changed its name to Manantial de Gracia.

my way! My goal was to walk through this path and become a better teacher. When people began to ask about my calling, I would reply that God and I were taking this process one step at a time.

Seminary taught me that passages of the Bible can ask you new questions every day. I have learned that the more I research, the more I wonder. I have learned that every answer leads to new questions. I have learned that God hears my prayers, but that if I want to hear God, sometimes, I have to sit still and be patient. I have never regretted my decision to attend seminary.

Though I wish I could say my journey has been easy, it has not. As youth group leader, I have received calls in the middle of the night from parents whose children are in emotional need. I have prayed. I have sat and cried with children who did not have the tools necessary to succeed in school, because Mom could not afford notebooks and rent. And I have prayed. And I have grown angry, because Mom chose the club and a new outfit rather than the calculator that was required for a test. And I have prayed. I have sat and wept with a parent who had to cut a noose from a teenager's neck in order to stop an attempted suicide. And I have prayed. I have held that teen's hand as he shared his fears and concerns. And together with his family, we have prayed. Why do bad things happen to good people?

While it would be unrealistic to think of my time in seminary solely within the confines of good times, I have never doubted my call even as I have struggled with my own theodicy¹³. When I was asked to preach at the Central Associations spring meeting on April 25, 2011, using the Matthean passage: "You are the light of the world... In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."¹⁴ I invited

¹³ A theodicy is an explanation of how/why God allows bad things to happen to good people.

¹⁴ Matthew 5: 14a; 16-17 (NIV)

my youth group to attend and to pray over my sermon. I preached the sermon that the youth most needed to have the adults hear:

Our kids thirst for GOD and we tell them what we expect of a Good Christian Kid! They want to be stylish, in fashion and we tell them their bling, and their jeans are not church appropriate. They tell us about their new iPhones and we tell them, not in church! They tell us they heard an awesome song¹⁵ that spoke to their spirit and we tell them it's too loud or we don't get it!!

I invite you to imagine that you are thirsty and that your friend has a glass of water. [Or better yet] have you ever had a glass of water in your hand and you noticed your friend was thirsty?

In attendance that night was a young man who had attempted suicide. He more than most, gets it. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. But in the midst of it all, we can be present to each other. God does not use his/her/its power to stop bad things from happening; these things are *simply* a part of life. However, God gives us tools and people to get us through the inevitable pain of life. This young man stood from the beginning of my sermon until the end. As he later explained, “you are my Pastor and you needed my strength.” God is good, all the time! All the time, God is good!



Combat Boots Theological Perspective

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”
John 17:20-21 (NRSV)

¹⁵ Song Umi Says by Mos Def “*I don't wanna write this down, I wanna tell you how I feel right now. Tomorrow may never come, for and me. Life is not promised. Tomorrow may never appear, you better hold this very moment very close to you. Don't be afraid, to let it shine. Sometimes I get discouraged. I look around and, things are so weak. Sometimes I feel like crying. Sometimes my heart gets heavy. Sometimes I just want to leave and fly away. Sometimes I don't know what to do with myself. I feel like a man going insane. Losing my brain. Trying to maintain. Sometimes I don't want to be bothered. Sometimes I just want a quiet life. My Umi said shine your light on the world. Shine your light for the world to see. My Abi said shine your light on the world. Shine your light for the world to see. My elders said shine your light on the world. Shine your light for the world to see. My God said shine your light on the world. Shine your light for the world to see. I want my people to be free, to be free, to be free. All my people to be free, to be free, to be free. That's all that matters to me.*”

Even amidst the awesomeness that is God, there are times when I must change my shoes for a season and prepare to work the ground around me. It is in tilling the soil that I am most in need of the UCC Statement of Faith, being reminded once more of its Trinitarian assertions: “We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify.”¹⁶ Though the language is free of gender, it explicitly names the trinity as God, Jesus Christ, and Spirit. And that is what I believe in: God as represented by Jesus Christ and the Eternal *Holy* Spirit. While I celebrate the UCC’s openness to theological diversity, it is the language used in our Statement of Faith that most resonates with my understanding of my God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! I believe in Jesus Christ as being unlike the prophets and apostles and “the man of Nazareth...[in] whom [God has] come to us and shared our common lot.” This “statement is a testimony, and not a test, of faith.” And I believe because I must, and not because I may.¹⁷

God is The Revealed Truth that I met early on. God is “the way, the truth, and the light.” God is all-powerful, all knowing, all loving. God is the beginning and the end and everything in between. Both/And and Either/Or, existing simultaneously in and out of time and in-between time. God is Creator of all and not created. God is maker and not made. God is God.

For a time, being a Jesus follower (Christian) was problematic, was he divine or man? For some who speak of Christian eschatology they are speaking of a paradox that exists between the Jesus that has *already* come and the Jesus who has *not yet* arrived. This coexisting savior has already arrived and fulfilled prophecy by his blood letting, becoming the sacrificial lamb, acting

¹⁶ Shinn, Roger. *Confessing our Faith: An Interpretation of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ*. Cleveland: United Church Press, 1990, xi

¹⁷ Most UCC folks would say: “We come to the table not because we MUST, but rather because we MAY.” For me, it is a deep belief that sits still and leaves little room for choice. I BELIEVE.

as the scapegoat for all of humanities sins, though he himself is free from all sin.¹⁸ But, while Jesus lived, died and was buried, we still await his second coming that will finally be the end of our physical journey and the reunification of ourselves to God. Thus, assuring that God's abundant love will prevail against evil. We live according to the hope that "[God's] kingdom [is yet to] come,"¹⁹ and we will be reunited with our Lord and Savior.

As we discussed Jesus Christ's true identity in my Systematic Theology course at Andover Newton Theological School, we joked that he seemed to have been separated into two beings: "White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus"²⁰, the Jesus of History versus the Christ of Faith, the Jesus who reigns over Creation versus the Liberator of the Oppressed.

I believe that in order to *save* humanity from *sin*, God had to be responsible for conferring salvation, but in order to *justly* conquer humanities enemy, humanity had to be responsible for its own salvation. Thus God came to earth as fully human and fully divine, Jesus.²¹ It is the message and work of Jesus that should be more controversial than his Christology. After all, Jesus does not have sarcastic air quotes around his message to the oppressed! For it is in coming out of the tomb that Jesus takes us each also out of the [proverbial] closet, allowing our authentic self to be fully balanced: we are "neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus."²²

My concerns over the divinity of Jesus dissolved after I read a scripture passage in Spanish. In the Spanish language, the name of Jesus is intermeshed with that of Christ, Jesucristo, human and divine. Jesucristo becomes the cry of the oppressed in the Latinx context.

¹⁸ Norris, Richard. *The Christological Controversy*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980, 77

¹⁹ Matthew 6:9b-13 (NIV)

²⁰ Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. AAR Academy Series. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989, *Horizons*, 164

²¹ Norris, 54

²² Galatians 3:28 (NIV)

Not as separate comingled realities of one being, but rather as one who is, intentionally and authentically, fully both. And it is to that being, Jesucristo²³ that we are impassioned to cry out for justice. Our comfort then, is in the knowledge that liberation is necessary for all in our community, not just for some because he gets it. Jesucristo *es la respuesta*²⁴ even when we do not yet know the question.

Returning to the wider Latinx context, it is important to note that for most who are not enmeshed in our cultural realities there is a lack of understanding of the syncretism involved in our religious understanding. Due to the religious colonization of an oppressed society, often the *mujerista*²⁵ liberation cry is to all who might hear, secure in the knowledge that if her cry stops, even the stones will shout on her behalf.²⁶ Because the Latinx religious experience includes voices and hints from other cultures, European (Spain), Indigenous (Arawak) and African (Yoruba), there is an understanding that in crying all can hear her need for liberation. A popular cry of the Latina is, “si Dios lo permite o si Dios quiere.”²⁷ But her understanding of Dios (God) is at times closer to dios (god) as pantheon of deities rather than the prescribed notion of God the Father. Her cry though is more than an empty use of a phrase; it is a cry to a real God that is part of her lived reality.

²³ Jesucristo as used in the Spanish language is translated from Jesus Christ, but in using the conjoined name (for me) there is a unification of the power of Jesus the man as Savior God.

²⁴ Translate Spanish to English: Jesus Christ is the response

²⁵ Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, Fortress Press, 2003. The term *mujerista* is both a self-identification and a conceptual framework used in thinking and understanding people, ideas and movements. Latina women living in the USA who are aware of how sexism, ethnic prejudice and economic oppression limits their wholeness of life, use the term *mujerista* to refer to themselves as well as *mujerista* theology, a term used to categorize their faith and its role in their struggle for liberation from distinct experiences of subjugation. For me, this term is an evolution of language from Feminism which implied levels of access to privilege (and was a White Women's liberation movement), to Womanism which included African American Women (with their history of slavery and systemic oppression) to *Mujerista* which is about the liberation of all women, and includes those women for whom the English language and access to American nationalism has historically left by the way-side. Though historically about the intersectionality of Latina women, the *Mujerista* movement has been used by women of other ethno-cultural groups as an entrance into feminism.

²⁶ Luke 19:40 (NIV)

²⁷ Translate Spanish to English: if God allows or if God so desires

James Cone says that God meets humanity in the core of our need for God, in the situation that causes us to call out to God. For it is in the midst of that encounter that God delivers. Thereby, theology becomes a secondary step to the acknowledged need for liberation. “God does not do theology. Human beings do theology.”²⁸ God is the subject of the theology that human beings are busy doing. Jesus is the answer to a prayer we did not know we had cried out. Jesus is the answer to tears shed in moments of utter anguish. Jesus is the opening into our human struggle for a reunification into a true relationship with Divine Justice²⁹, which cannot exist independently of Jesus’ humanity. To know the God of the cross and of the resurrection is to be part of both the “suffering and the joy of the history of divine love that wants to transform all things.”³⁰ While it is the human Jesus that suffered, it is the divine Jesus that replenished our hope for an unexpected outcome. The understanding of Jesucristo as both fully human and fully divine allows for a wider understanding of that hope.

In the person of Jesucristo we mere mortals find an eschatological paradox that allows us to witness the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus as an event of promise, which has entered into history. The resurrection then, is an opening for those of us who claim to believe in the resurrection to journey with one another in seeking justice. It is in that entrance into this reality that we find a broken humanity in need of hope. We are left humbled and hopeful for the day when we, and our embodied injustice will be reunited with God.

Our Statement of Faith also says that we are called “to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table.” This is a reference to our celebration of the two sacraments: baptism and communion. And this also serves as a charge to *share* within the faith community.

²⁸ Cone, page xix

²⁹ In this case, Divine Justice is being used as a name for God.

³⁰ Migliore, Appendix B

The United Church of Christ believes that in baptism we “belong body and soul to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Within our denomination baptism also ranges in the amount of water used, with immersion and submersion both being acceptable practices. Baptism serves as an outward and visible sign of God’s grace, it is a unifying moment that connects us to each other and to God, in this act we join with the universal church, the body of God. Baptism occurs in the midst of community worship as a public communal promise to care for and nurture the individual being baptized. Through the sacraments we are reminded of our responsibility to love, support and care for the baptized and are further reminded that this responsibility has been extended to each of us through our own baptism. Through baptism we are forgiven, renewed and named people of God: “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.”³¹

At baptism we are conferred full participation with our local and wider church. While our UCC tradition often practices infant baptism with parents, sponsors, and congregants assuming responsibility for the nurturing of a child into the faith of the church, each local church may have a different understanding of how and when this should occur. For instance, some parents may not feel comfortable making a decision like this on behalf of their child and instead may ask to have their child publicly “presented” or welcomed into the life of the church (as a time for learning), with the decision to be baptized being made after reaching a level of understanding of what baptism means. The Book of Acts tells us that Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch reading the Prophet Isaiah while on a journey. Philip asked him, do you understand what you are reading? AFTER the eunuch understood, when they reached a body of water the eunuch asked Philip what would prevent him from being baptized, and Philip baptized him (Acts 8), baptism then is transformation through understanding. Baptism occurs within a worshipping

³¹ Acts 2:38 (NIV)

congregation and serves as an entry into Christ's Church. While some Pastors baptize "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," others use additional expressions of the Triune God.

We the many, who are different and unique, each special in our own way can all be people of faith invited to share in the sacrament of Communion with Christ, at Christ's table. Through the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine I am reminded of the willingness of Christ to be broken for me. I remember my faults and my struggles, and I remember my imperfections, and that those who are around me are equally imperfect beings, and yet Jesus willingly had his body broken for us (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)³². There is a rejoicing that happens at the Eucharist meal, in the remembrance that we are not alone, that the price for our salvation was paid in full with the shedding of Jesus' blood that we are loved and have been deemed worthy of redemption and mercy.

At Jesus' table sat his friends, including a liar (Peter Cephas), and a traitor (Judas Iscariot). This is a special meal, where no one is excluded by virtue of his or her baptism, membership, or denominational status the table is open to all. It is at the Communion table that we follow the example of Jesus Christ with his disciples, when he invited them to "take and eat."

And so we also share in this simple Eucharist meal of bread and wine, sometimes by intinction (dipping bread into the wine), other times by simply partaking of each element. The frequency of the administration of this sacrament differs, though many UCC churches do so on the first Sunday of each month. The meal served can be wine or alcohol free, bread, or gluten free.

³² I have given you the teaching I received from the Lord. The night Jesus was handed over to the soldiers, He took bread. When He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take this bread and eat it. This is My body which is broken for you. Do this to remember Me." In the same way after supper, He took the cup. He said, "This cup is the New Way of Worship made between God and you by My blood. Whenever you drink it, do it to remember Me." (NLV)

In my local church we have a number of adults who had gone years without communion because their previous church/pastor deemed them unworthy. We also have some parents who are not comfortable with their children-taking communion without being baptized or taking classes. In understanding these realities, we serve grapes as an additional communion offering. The grapes represent all who are unsure, unclear, new, discerning, or tasting the gospel much as a child would. Jesus experienced both baptism and communion in the presence of his community. He welcomed all who attempted to reach out to him. And it is together, that we also share in remembering God's loving acts through Jesus Christ.



A Perfect Fit
United Church of Christ

"if you want to buy me a gift (as if), don't buy me shoes. Yep, I said don't."
Patsy Clairmont, The Shoe Box: Walking in the Spirit

There is an image in my head that I often use to describe my personal understanding of the United Church of Christ as a denomination that is not hierarchically structured. I am sitting in a tub. I imagine the tub to be an old fashioned, claw-footed bathtub with only one spout and only one knob with three settings. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit flow through the spout into the tub and begin to slowly fill the tub from the bottom up to the top.

Without God, in all God's forms flowing into the lower part of the bathtub, the upper part of the bathtub would not reach a sufficient level of fullness to allow the water to reach past the lower part of our thighs in a seated position. Our denomination is the tub and in the tub each part of us is in need of God: the local church, the association, the conference, the regions, as well as the national setting. Each part needs to be impacted by that water, but it starts in the local level, slowly reaching towards the whole. In my understanding, this takes place through a covenanted

relationship in and with each of these groups. Understanding that we are each a needed part of the whole and that together we are stronger than alone. This has been the strength of the UCC since it's creation back in 1957.

The union of the Congregational, Christian, Evangelical and Reformed Churches models a covenanted relationship (a marriage) where each is needed and relevant in the midst of their diversity. In many ways, those differences that are most evident on a local church level call attention to a need for a national body that can act as a tub to hold different models in relation to each other as a covenanted body that is uniquely listening to God's call in many different autonomous areas of this reality. Complicated I know. The UCC lives in a creative paradox of tension between autonomy and covenant! This makes our relationships to each other difficult, local churches have the potential to be so different one from the other that often we can feel like strangers who have nothing in common. That is where a national body that authentically knows us can be most helpful.

In the same way that each drop of water into the tub matters and has worth, each denominational strand that went into making up the United Church of Christ offers a gift. It is from our Congregational and Christian origins that we can proclaim our local churches need for autonomy based on each congregation's independent thoughts. This strong need for autonomy was influential in our nation's founding principles which influence the relationship between church, civic structures and wider society on a national level. From our Evangelical and Reformed origins we moderate our need for autonomy with a sense of covenanted solidarity and call to social justice providing healing and relief. These covenantal social justice relationships led to the establishment of institutions of higher learning, hospitals, orphanages, and international mission outreach. As these four strands became two and finally one, our

understanding of pastoral authority is conveyed through empowerment and earned through embodiment.

Our relationships with God have no requirement of an outside human mediator (I can pray on my own behalf). While the Bible is our Sacred Text, it is understood that the messages contained in it are not finite, God is still speaking and we can still hear and learn. Education is an important part of our denomination, and we emphasize the Priesthood of all Believers. The responsibility of the functioning of the church depends on each person to step up where and when his or her special gifts are needed; and all of our gifts are needed!

We celebrate the local church as the place of autonomous meaning making, and we affiliate with other members of our denomination and local congregations through Associations and Conferences at the state and national level. Rev. J. Bennett “Ben” Guess often says that the United Church of Christ is a beautiful cacophony rather than a chorus. As Donald D. Freeman says in an article titled, *Autonomy in a Covenant Polity*, “Constituted by divine grace, what holds the United Church of Christ together from the human side are two things: 1) a common faith in ‘Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior’ and ‘sole Head’ of the church; and 2) sets of covenant promises exchanged by the units and persons of which it is thereby composed” (p. 3). We are united in diversity rather than in uniformity.

There are General Synod actions going back to 1963 that request that the denomination be recognized by other denominations and it set in motion additional ecumenical conversations and unions. My local church has struggled with ecumenical and interfaith practices within our more localized setting. During our last assembled review of our Constitution & Bylaws we created and fleshed out an article that reads: “this Congregation is in a covenanted relationship with the United Church of Christ and as such we will maintain ties of friendship and communion

with all local churches and organizations in the state, region, nation and beyond that are part of this denomination. As a local congregation, we will maintain ties of friendship and companionship with other expressions of faith provided these denominations, councils or fraternizations promote the Kingdom of God and *respect* our way of worshiping and *serving* God.” This then becomes our embodied understanding of what it means to be welcome in the Sacred Spaces of others.



Epilogue Conclusion

“...for we walk by faith, not by sight.”
2 Corinthians 5:7 (NRSV)

God called me; it took me a long time; and I finally answered! In the pastor shoes I wear now, I am called to minister. I am called to Pastor in the midst of intersections, often times between the roads labeled Race, Religion and Radical Inclusion. I am called to a space where many who enter are un-churched, or have been made to feel wholly unwelcome. I am called to be still and be quiet especially in the midst of the storm: in a club, at the bar, and at the church. I am called to resist systems of oppression and speak love to all: love to the ugly and the pretty and those in-between. I am called to be still and be vocal especially in the midst of the storm: in a closet and outside and all around. Where God’s people are, where God sends me: I am called to a ministry of presence in the midst of people’s truth and life.

I can buy as many shoes as I want and store them in the best of shoe storage spaces but without God’s grace, which protects and forgives us, I will never have shoes that don’t need fixing. God’s grace is the glue that holds our shoes together. I have tried walking without grace and I understand that shoes that are used often and thoroughly abused will always be in need of

The Master Cobbler!! I am not the Cobbler, but I have been gifted and prepared to be present to God's people. I have learned to walk in whatever shoes I wear and even with no shoes. As I walk on the path towards ordination that God has laid out and prepared for me, I plead:

*Merciful God, to you I pray,
for clear vision not of the distant future,
but rather of next movements.
I pray for steps made steady
and a pace made adequate.*

*Lord, I beseech you,
take my anger and my frustration
at the inequality suffered by your people,
and turn them into movements for justice.
I ask that the words of my heart and my mouth be the words you intended to be heard,
and that if they aren't,
God anoint the ears of the listeners to hear the message you did intend
rather than what I thought sufficient...good enough.
All these things and more I ask of You, God my God.*

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen and Amen.*