

Ordination Paper

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Church of the Painted Hills

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## Preface

It would be very nice to be able to say that on such and such a date the skies opened up and an angel came down through those skies to call me into servitude and to form my beliefs, and my theological perspective. It would have made the writing of this paper much easier. However, the reality of things is far more complex than one can comprehend. There is no one moment or experience that takes us to our Spiritual climax, instead it is a life time of moments and experiences that form our understanding and reality of life. These are moments or experiences of joy and pain that with time can help awake in any person the inquisitiveness and curiosity of the beauty and grace of God as we build relationships with others, and endeavor in the journey of life while trying to make sense of everything. “We believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God, engendering love, strengthening faith, dissolving guilt, and giving life purpose and direction.” Therefore, it is safe to say that as our comprehension and understanding of life evolves and our interactions with others improve, so does our relationship and love for our Creator enhances and becomes a unique and personal experience. Consequently, developing and strengthening our spiritual formation, “that house not made by hands but eternal in the heavens” (2 Corinthians 5:1). Thus, reinforcing our pillars of Faith and Hope that can help us endure and withstand the trials of life while encouraging us to seek a life of servitude to God and others.

Here is my life journey, or at least a part of it, that has brought me to seek ordination with the United Church of Christ in order to serve the Church of the Painted Hills and to become a member of the Desert Heritage Church in Mesa, Arizona.

## My Spiritual Journey

My name is Carlos Sosa, I was born in Guatemala City on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1979 and was baptized in the Catholic Church. When I was five years old, my parents immigrated to the United States leaving me and my two brothers in the care of our grandmother; a woman of faith and strong catholic beliefs. My grandmother, Percy, along with my uncle, Boris, raised us and gave us a loving, stable and nurturing family. My childhood memories are filled with loving and joyous experiences of positive reinforcements, positive teachings, and an overall great sense of love, belonging, gratitude, and family unity. With my grandma and uncle, my brothers and I learned some of our most important life lessons such as love, empathy, compassion, gratitude, trust, and selfless service towards others, as well as to love and respect God and to seek His guidance during any endeavor. My grandmother also planted the seed of faith, causing my brothers, and I to become interested in Catholicism.

Due to my Grandma's teachings, at the age of 7 years old, I started attending Bible school and taking classes to complete my first communion. Hence, learning about God, Christ, Angels and Archangels was fascinating and captivating to me because it gave me a different view and understanding of the real meaning of life and creation.

Unfortunately, as I got older, I started losing interest in Catholicism because I started observing the judgmental, the greed and the flaws of religious leaders as well as the hypocrisy of some of the members of the church that were quick at criticizing and condemning but were unable to see their own faults or unable to help others during times of needs. Thus, causing me to stop attending church and to begin my own personal communion with God, and Christ in my own way.

After that, in the year 1993, my parents brought my brothers and I to the United States and we had to adapt to a new culture, lifestyle, and a family; since it had been about eight years from the last time, we saw our parents they had already a fourth child that we had never met. The transition to the U.S was hard at the beginning, having to adapt to a new family structure but also having to speak the American language made it more difficult to make friends and overall succeed in school. At this time, not only I was culturally shocked but suddenly I was also expected to rearrange all by spiritual beliefs and values in order to become a Mormon. Even though I was reluctant at the beginning to the idea of joining another religious group because of my past experience with the Catholic Church, I prayed to God for guidance and felt the need to give it a try.

When I first started attending the Mormon Church, it was fulfilling, and people seemed to genuinely care for God and others. I was also able to experience the intimacy with my Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit every time I was there. Therefore, I felt the calling to help during Sunday's Worship passing the Holy Communion. Unfortunately, once again, a couple months after I got baptized, I started seeing the reality of the church and again, I experienced criticism, condemning, favoritism, and humiliation which affected my connection and respect towards the congregation and the church. However, regardless of the negative experience with the church, I never lost my FAITH and/or LOVE for God. My desire to learn more about Christ's teachings became stronger than ever.

Due to this, I made my mission to never identify myself with a religion ever again but to embrace God and His Love in a very unique and personal way; thus, learning from different modalities that helped satisfy my soul and communion with God and Christ rather than a

religious dogma. Hence, I adopted the term Spiritual to identify my religious preference and my relationship with my Creator.

As a result, I became a Freemason and also started studying Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Metaphysics, Quantum Physics, Philosophy, and Holistic Health to explore more in depth about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Universe. Being exposed to these new spiritual methodologies expanded my mind, my soul and reinforced my faith, hope and love for God and Christ. This new way of being and living, inspired me to understand my life purpose and to have a great desire to be of service to others while building their strengths, giving them hope and enhancing their connection with their Divine Creator. Additionally, these new spiritual philosophies, forced me to analyze myself, to face my area of growth and to put my faith into action. Never again doubting God's will, even under the most difficult and uncomfortable circumstances; hence, surrendering my life and my being to my heavenly Father. (Who under my spiritual philosophy and beliefs is viewed as neither male nor female but who I referred to as a male pronoun because that was the word that I became accustomed to growing up.) Thus, becoming a man of faith, love, and gratitude. Consequently, I learned the value of being part of a congregation and the important role it plays in building a foundation of strong morals and values in order to create a better man. Therefore, my family and I started attending church again. Inland Hills Church in Chino, Ca provided our family with unity, strength and faith and gave me an opportunity to interlace my spiritual beliefs with the church beliefs thus strengthening me spiritually.

My family has also played an important role in my spiritual path. Ever since I met my wife, I knew she was the one God had chosen for me. My wife and I have been married for twenty-five years and are best friends ever since. Through our relationship, I have learned to

trust, and discern God's messages and will because when I have questions or doubts, I know that God will respond through my wife's guidance and advice. Therefore, there are no endeavors that I undertake before asking for God's assistance and then waiting for him to answer through my wife. My wife has become my light, my compass, and my spiritual partner. She compliments me in every way and gives me the strength I need to continue going even in the darkest times of our live. My wife and I are true companions who celebrate the blessings and work through the difficulties that life brings us. As Genesis 2:18 noted," Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." I am blessed to call her my partner.

Moreover, as a father of three amazing children, I have experienced God's blessings and unconditional love during moments of vulnerability. Due to this world crisis and times of uncertainty, I have learned to trust in the Lord to provide my kids wisdom, protection, and guidance to make good choices with their lives, and to always keep them safe from harm and the wickedness of this world. God's love and promises allow me to rest assured that my family is always in His hands doing His will.

Nevertheless, in 2016, my faith, strength and love were tested. I started having health problems and the doctors could not figure out what was wrong me. I got so ill, that I had trouble living a normal life. My health deteriorated so bad that I felt like I was dying every day. It was heartbreaking to see the person that I had become, and it was painful to see my wife and kids suffering. But no matter what I saw and no matter how I felt, I accepted my circumstances with love and faith, and I knew God had a greater plan for my family and me. I knew that through this experience, God was breaking me into pieces to reconstruct me according to His will and divine plan as a new man. Moreover, God used this moment of illness and inspired me to go back to

school to complete my bachelor's degree. In addition, through this illusion of illness, God taught me to be patient, a caring and loving individual, to be a man of service, to appreciate the present moment and to enjoy every life experience I have.

Coincidentally, as I experienced health problems, unexpectedly, people started coming to me asking me for guidance and help with their spiritual needs and life problems. I was never too weak or too ill to help and empower others. Additionally, many of these people were former military personnel that were undergoing Post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD, anxiety, or marital/family problems. Consequently, I come to believe as I was journeying through that time, God was preparing me for a life of service. At times it can be hard to describe God with words and is almost impossible to verbally define His will for our live. However, when God speaks to you and calls you into the ministry of His people about the power of His grace, healing, restoration, forgiveness, and love; one would answer, "Here I am!" Hence, I just felt a calling to become a clergy with the Church of the Painted Hills and serve as a Chaplain in the military.

In this I Believe.....

As a Christian, Chaplain's Assistant with the Unites States Army and as a Member in Discernment with United Church of Christ, I believe God to be the creator of everything that exist in both physical and non-physical forms. God, exists as three separate beings united as one; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father represents God the Creator, the Son or Jesus Christ represents God in human form, while the Holy Spirit represents God's presence and essence that exist in the non-physical form that we feel around us.

Additionally, I believe that Jesus is the begotten Son of God. God the Father, who became incarnate in the flesh of humankind, through the immaculate conception of the Virgin

Mary. Jesus is unique in that he was both fully human and fully divine. As a human he experienced much that every individual does, including pain and joy. His life, death and resurrection serve as our means of salvation and the way in which humanity can be reconciled with God.

Therefore, as I reflect upon my own sense and understanding of what sin and salvation is, I have come to understanding that sinning is not just a simple act of breaking one of God's commandments. However, sin can instead be viewed as the actions, thoughts and beliefs that separates us from the holiness and oneness of God while simultaneously creating a barrier that stops us from ever seeing and achieving our true divinity. In the same token, salvation can come as a result from sharing and constructing an authentic relationship with God as we invite Him into our life. When God becomes the life force that moves our thoughts and actions, we are finally able to break free from the chains of sin and suffering; hence, changing our life patterns and living a more Christ like life. Nevertheless, Jesus came to teach us the steps needed to achieve a true relationship with God. Through Christ's teachings, death and resurrection, the followers of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, live collectively in this world as the church and became the physical presence of Jesus Christ in the world today and as such represent the living Body of Christ, left in this world to continue His ministry to all people. Jesus Christ made it possible for us to attain such connection not only with the Holy Spirit but by developing a true and empower relationship with other people as we all journey through life and help each grow Spiritually. Subsequently, giving humanity through the gift of Servitude, the Hope and Faith to one day being able to live a more joyful and fulfilling life under the Grace and Love of God.



Jesus asks each one of us to love everyone, including those who are marginalized in our society. Christ's teachings encourage us to be people of justice, grace and love in order to advocate for those in need and to ensure their voices can be heard. This is why I believe the UCC to be a church that embodies the teachings and morals of God. UCC welcomes everyone regardless of race, sex, creed, and so forth. Personally, I feel blessed and grateful to be part of a congregation which greatly reflects the morals and values taught to us by Christ as we embrace and love all individuals. I am a person who aims to love and respect people for who they are not for what they are. I also embrace and accept new ideas while also understanding my own core values. These principles include believing that there is a value in all people and a value in the diversity of thought. As a Military Chaplain's Assistant and UCC Member, I accept, respect, and allow into my ministry the beliefs of the United Church of Christ. The UCC's Statement of Mission for example, states that the "embodiment of God's love for all people; to hear and give voice to creation's cry for justice and peace; to preach and teach with the power of the living Word; to join oppressed and troubled people in the struggle for liberation; to work for justice, healing, and wholeness of life." (United Church of Christ, 2022) I believe in the UCC's foundational theological traditions. Their beliefs and values are a part of my faith and calling.

Yet, my beliefs and morals also embrace the unknown mysteries of the Holy Trinity, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. For myself, I am certain that there will always be a great mystery to such things, and in the mystery I find a sense of comfort. The mystery that is God, pushes me to search for a deeper comprehension. I know that I will never gain a complete understanding, but I also know that in the searching, my relationships with God and with Jesus will deepen. These deepening relationships allows clarity and understanding in my call as they affirm my belief in a God of affection, grace and compassion. This for me, strongly affirms my

beliefs that Jesus came to us and went up on the cross, so that we may experience a new way of living that follows the example and morals set by Jesus. The presence of such a mystery is my personal motivation for my faith in the mystery of God. This only reinforces me to see the importance in knowing that God is still speaking and continually revealing his presence to me. This has been an important factor in my understanding to change, develop and deepen my values. In accepting the mystery of God, I discover that I remain open to the Lord's words and to the understandings of others. The mystery of the how the Trinity works and the mystery of how Jesus being human was also fully divine will continue to be that, mysteries in our lives.

In these mysteries there exists a sense of wonderment. A mystery that is always unfolding in the presence of God and in his creations. It is in the people around us, in their laughter, their pain, their strength and even their weaknesses. I view this wonderment of creation in things such as a flower, a sunset, a rainbow and also in the cries of the hungry, the marginalized, the abused, and the sick. In the mystery of wonderment, I can hear God's call.

### The Sacraments

As stated earlier, the Sacraments often make it important to have something tangible to hold on to as we contemplate our faith and its wonders. The sacraments offers us something concrete. Something we are able to hear, taste and touch. Additionally, we are also reminded to who we belong to as in we belong to God's love and grace. The sacraments help introduce clarity to the things that might seem beyond our comprehension and they also aid us in gaining a better understanding of who God is. Within the United Church of Christ we recognize two sacraments baptism and communion.

## The Baptism

From the very moment I knew there was life growing in me to this very day, I feel an overwhelming sense of wonderment and amazement in being a part of God's magnificent creation. I remember when I held each of my three kids for the first time and thinking to myself, "wow this is unbelievable." There will always continue to exist an element of mystery surrounding these amazing events. As I looked down at each of my beautiful kids, I felt a connection, though them I felt the beauty in God's creation. I offered them unconditional love and welcomed them in to my live and into my heart. They were mine and I was theirs, though not as objects, but by love. Even though as time passed, they would grow older, that deep loving connection would still remain. As someone whose parents weren't always there for him, this is an amazing feeling to share. We are welcomed into a community and named one of God's beloved children when we are baptized. We also receive God's unconditional love and grace. Through witnessing another's baptism, we are able to be reminded of the gracious gift that we received during our own. Funny enough, I was baptized twice. First time I was baptized as a Catholic when I was a baby in Guatemala and the second time was as a Mormon when I was a teen living in California. Though these are different Christian titles, I still view them as sharing the miracle and importance of baptism. Through both baptisms, I was able to become a part of God's community.

## Communion

Our other Sacrament is Holy Communion, which is also referred to as the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. This is a sacred meal based on the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. Through the act of communion, we are able to receive the grace of God and Jesus. We are called to reflect and analyze the past, present and future. The past is the death of Jesus and the new covenant he gave

to us. Not only are we reminded what Jesus did for humanity, but this is also a time to remember his life. We remember what took place during the crucifixion and the resurrection. We are also allowed an opportunity to observe our own lives and our relationship with God, Jesus and others.

During communion, when we reflect on the future we see a future of optimism and love offered to all because of the life and death we remember. In the partaking of the bread and the wine, we rejoin God's community. Furthermore, we make public our belief and hope in the future of God's promises. What makes communion especially beautiful is it unites us all as God's creations.

### The Bible

The Bible is the book of all books, a book that has changed our world greatly and impacted billions of humans. This book provides us with history, guidance, understanding, and a resource for strengthening our relationship with God. The Bible serves as an incredible guidebook for the past, present, and future. Though admittedly, it was written by human hands, much of its text is still inspired by the words and teachings of God and Jesus. Furthermore, it is always important to take into account the social and historical context in which the Bible was written. It should also serve as a guide for our present day to give an insight into the current political and social issues. Much of the Bible's theology is still analyzed and studied to this very day which allows us to understand God, God's creation and our role in it. Overall, it is a valuable resource that comforts and guides people, but it should also never be used as a weapon of dominance or judgment of others. This is a mistake many Christians throughout history have made unfortunately. Also the Bible shouldn't be the main focus of worship, as it should always be God.

### The UCC...

As stated earlier in the paper, I did not grow up in the UCC. I was originally a Catholic and then a Mormon for much of my life, but as I grew older I searched for a deeper relationship with God. During my journey, I eventually reenlisted in the U.S. Army and was guided to the UCC. I felt a strong connection to their Theology, their Mission Statement, their Statement of Faith, and their statement of “What We Believe”.

Although the United Church of Christ, founded on June 25, 1957 it is still relatively new. The UCC itself is actually young when compared to other churches but its background and beginning is founded on a unique and deep rooted history. The UCC unites four groups or as they are called, Four Streams. These Four Streams form a great diversity of Christian philosophies and individuals. The Four Streams were the Christian Church, Congregational Church, the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church. Eventually, the Four Streams would combine into two new churches and finally these two would join together on June 25, 1957 as the United Church of Christ.

Although the Four Streams brought together a diversity of ideas there were some beliefs held in common, including: a strong belief in the ministry of the laity, a belief in education as a process of lifelong learning, a Priesthood of all Believers, Christ is the head of the church, God’s sovereignty and the possibility for transformed life.

There are four settings for ministry in the United Church of Christ: the Local Churches, Associations, Conferences and the General Synod. From the Constitution of the United Church of Christ we read, “The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is

the local church.” (United Church Of Christ, 2022) The Associations hold standing of local churches and authorized ministers.

Conferences enable the cooperative ministry of the UCC in a geographical area and the General Synod oversees the national and international ministry of the church. The organization of the United Church of Christ represents a covenant between all the members, churches, Associations, Conferences and the General Synod. This covenant has the purpose of carrying out the mission of the church; offering support and guidance to one another and assisting in the accountability of all. The polity of the UCC offers something unique to the local church in that it recognizes its autonomy. This autonomy appears to offer a kind of freedom from the rule of others. However, it should be noted, that this does not include a freedom to ignore the other settings. It does offer a freedom to understand what is best and most timely for the church. These decisions need to be derived at through prayerful discernment; remembering that our authority comes from the sole Head of the church, Jesus Christ. Autonomy allows each church to speak for him or herself, but it also calls for each church and each member to listen to the other, including the other settings, offering a safe environment for every member to speak freely and seek a relationship. United and Uniting.

### United and Uniting

We believe the UCC is called to be a united and uniting church. "That they may all be one." (John 17:21) "In essentials—unity, in nonessentials—diversity, in all things—charity," (United Church of Christ, 2022) These UCC mottos survive because they touch core values deep within us. The UCC has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. Its overarching creed is love. UCC pastors and teachers are known for their commitment to

excellence in theological preparation, interpretation of the scripture and justice advocacy. Even so, love and unity in the midst of our diversity are our greatest assets.

Throughout its history the church has sought be united and uniting, bringing together a diverse heritage including many different racial, ethnic and national groups. This diversity continues to this day. It cannot be ignored, however, there have been times throughout the history of the UCC and there are still times that unity has not and does not exist, including today in regards to marriage equality and the possibility of each church becoming Open and Affirming. The tension between the United Church of Christ and each church which maintains its autonomy can become great. Currently, I serve a church that is Open and Affirming. It is through this process that I am receiving hands on, very real lessons, concerning the topic of covenant, autonomy and the church being united and uniting. With the awareness of not always achieving the desired unity it is still important to work towards that unity. It is a call to be in open conversation to seek ways to honor each other and to work together to help the individual and the church to discern the call that has been placed on them and it. As a Member in Discernment with the United Church of Christ, who is seeking to serve as a pastor for the Church of the Painted Hills in Tucson, it is important to affirm each member, recognize their values and celebrate each individual as a child of God while working to create ways by which we can build and maintain relationships. It is a call to continue the work of Jesus Christ in an imperfect world with sometimes imperfect results, but with a commitment to serve and move forward. We are called to be a united and uniting church. We are called to remember and honor our covenant. At this point in time, I cannot predict the end result of my Spiritual Journey nor I can predict what my journey will be with the church I serve. However, one thing that I am very certain is my mission of servitude and my commitment to my community, my church and its members. We are living

in a world that is very divided and full of conflict which has made people less tolerant to that which is different from themselves. Yet, as a Christian such conflict has taught me to see the beauty and value of diversity and the importance as a society to advocate for social equality.

Consequently, this has greatly reinforced my own comprehension of what it means to live in our covenant. The covenant which is not the task or duty of a religious group, but instead it is a relationship between all of us to make a change. Finally, we are all united by our divine relationship to Jesus Christ and God, despite any differences we may have as people.

#### Finding God and the UCC through the ARMY Chaplaincy.....

As you have read earlier in this paper, my life has been a journey of discovery. Discovery of self in relationships with God and how God has called me to different faith traditions and experiences. Throughout my voyages the presence of the Holy Spirit led me to find a path to be a clergy. After researching different seminaries, I found Sioux Falls Seminary, where I got in contact with Chaplain Farrell. Chaplain Farrell, a student advisor and mentor for the Master's in Divinity program, contacted me about my interest in attending the seminary. After speaking with him and explaining my spiritual faith and my aspiration to become a military chaplain, he referred me to Reverend Boyd the Ecclesiastical Military Endorser for United Church of Christ and as well as Reverend Sarah Lammert who is the Ecclesiastical Military Endorser for Unitarian Universalist Association. Successively, I reached out to both endorsers who took the time to guide me and share more about their church's faith. However, after speaking with Rev. Lammert the Holy Spirit and her wisdom was not speaking to me during our conversation. I left that conversation feeling unsure if the UU was a right fit for me and my family. Discussing this with my wife, she also felt the same. However, my conversation with Rev. Boyd, it was a different feeling, even my wife was happy and joyful that I had found my calling. Hence, I asked Rev.



Boyd to connect me with a local church close to my home. Rev. Boyd reached out to Pastor Derrick from Desert Heritage Church, since he was a military chaplain and he immediately contacted me. Having the opportunity to speak with Pastor Derrick reassured me that I had found my spiritual home. Pastor Derrick embraced my family and me and made us feel welcomed. Nevertheless, from the first time I spoke with Pastor Derrick, I felt this strong feeling of peace and joy in my heart; just like if God was telling me “here is, your promised land.” Though, this inspiration motivated me to be part of the Desert Heritage Church family and inspired me to wanting to serve my congregation and the wider church of the United Church of Christ in order to:

- Proclaim the gospel in all the world.
- To gather and support communities of faith in their celebration and mission.
- To labor for the creation and increase of God’s reach of justice and love in the world.
- To manifest more fully the unity of the church, all humankind, and the whole creation.

Such experience will forever remind me of our journey as individuals and what we declare as a church. The church is a place that reaches out to offer the nourishment of the love and grace of God to all and it is to be a beacon of light to all as was modeled to us by Jesus Christ. As we all are venturing in our own Spiritual journey, we all choose different spiritual paths but which at the end serve the same purpose that helps us to make sense of life, and brings us back to our Creator. Nevertheless, as we walk together in Faith and experience the gift of life, we delight ourselves with so much Diversity that can only be appreciated as we accept and understand God in His totality.

And so, as a Members in Discernment, I search to understand the Spirit of God in my own personal way. The Holy Spirit guides each one of us to enroll in the seminary school that will provide us with the tools and knowledge that will assist us in our Spiritual growth as well as guides us in the direction of the Church we are called to serve. Through our Spiritual journey, we cannot help but notice that there are many schools and alternative paths to become Ministers or Chaplains; however, they are all there to help us enhance our spirit, and to nourish our soul. The diversification in religious beliefs and traditions empower us to be inclusive of others and to be more accepting of our difference and our perception of Divinity in order to project God's unconditional Love. Nevertheless, regardless of which Seminary school or Church we choose to be part of, it will allow us to renew our old self with new knowledge and traditions that will allow us to be of service and a voice for others.

Consequently, Sioux Falls Seminary responded to God's call and has allow me to connect with Christ and understand Christian living through their M.Div. program. It has also giving the opportunity to expand my knowledge and background of the history of the United Church of Christ and its traditions. Hence, strengthening my understanding of the foundation and principles upon which the Church was built and the commitment to which I am swearing to uphold. A commitment, which we can build an ever evolving future of servitude and Love for others as I become an ordained minister for the United Church of Christ and a Military Chaplain with the United States ARMY to help and serve my Church of the Painted Hills, my community, my fellow soldiers and their families with their faith journey, their spiritual and emotional needs. God never cease to speak to the church and we are called to listen, be ready and then respond. "We are a people of possibility. In the UCC, members, congregations and structures have the

breathing room to explore and to hear ... for after all, God is still speaking.” (United Church of Christ, 2022)

#### Upon Reflection.....

Through my Military career, through my studies, through discernment, through prayer, through the events of each day and through the help of others I have worked to understand my beliefs and calling. Also through these past years there have been different theologians that have influenced me, such as Confucius, Buddha, Dr. Paul Leon Masters, C.S. Lewis, Dalai Lama and Dallas Willard. As a Chaplain’s assistant seeking to become an ordained Military Chaplain with the United States Army, the works of Fr. Francis P. Duffy during WWI and The four chaplains during WWII: Rev. George L. Fox (Methodist), Rabbi Alexander D. Goode (Jewish), Rev. Clark V. Poling (Reformed Church in America) and Fr. John P. Washington (Roman Catholic) have helped formed my calling and my inspiration to help. In this past year, serving as a Member in Discernment with Desert Heritage Church, I have turned to the writings of Barbara Brown Taylor and Philip Gulley for guidance and inspirations. Additionally, when I am required to help pastoring the church I turn to the UCC website and in particular the Samuel/Sermon Seeds and Worship Seeds when beginning to prepare a weekly worship service.

Nonetheless, there are others too that have influenced me and continue influencing me until this day with their great support, love, patience, wisdom and guidance. My MID committee: Bro. Joe, Bro. Robert, Sis. Gail, Sis. Carole, Sis. Mary, Rev. Dr. Barbara, Rev. Boyd and Pastor Derrick and my Sioux Falls Seminary Mentor Team Rev. Dr. Marcus and Chaplain Farrell. Who I am very grateful to have as mentors and part of my Spiritual journey. Through them I have witnessed the presence of God and I have received daily lessons about service, faith, strength,

patience, courage, wisdom, grace, and justice and inspire me to become the best version of myself.

As I have chosen to be of servitude, I am constantly reminded of the many blessings and miracles and that I experience on my daily life. Through every experience or every person I come across, I can see the empowerment and transformation that Jesus and God have accomplish in my life. The greatest lesson of Love and the ability to connect and sympathize with others are only some of the gifts that God through Christ has been able to manifest as I endeavor in my Spiritual leader role. Nevertheless, God has allowed me to understand His meaning of Unconditional Love and has taught me to seek beauty and positively in any negative experience as I learn to discern and accept that He is every aspect of my daily life encounters. Because only through my hard moments God has been able to shape me according to His will and transform my thoughts, actions and spiritual patterns.

The Journey Continues.....

### **The calling**

In life we each have our own calling set by God. Some of us are called to become pastors, priests, or nuns, while others are called to start a family. No matter what it is, each individual plays an important role in God's wonderful plan for us. As a result, I believe God has called me to serve as an ordained clergy in the United Church of Christ in order to be authorized to perform the duties of that calling with the Church of the Painted Hills:

- To preach and teach the gospel
- To administer the sacraments and the rites of the Church
- To exercise pastoral care and leadership

(United Church of Christ Constitution, Article V, 2022)

We are all called into the ministry of God, to follow Jesus faithfully and to be obedient to His word. I have become ready to serve and obey God and to follow the Divine plan He has assigned me to. In addition, I also understand that my calling expands past my local church because as an ordained minister I am called to the whole church. This call as an ordained minister in a local setting, establishes a covenantal relationship between the person, the local ministry and the broader United Church of Christ. It is a calling that requires constant and continuous discernment and understanding. The ordained minister has the continued responsibility to listen intentionally, with an open mind and heart, to discern the whisper of God so that he/she may comprehend the best way to serve his/her community, the United Church of Christ and the World.

### **The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers**

#### **1. EXHIBITING A SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION AND ONGOING SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

Throughout my spiritual journey I have developed a tremendous love for God and Jesus Christ. I made the promised to live a life based on Christ principles which can be seen through the genuine love, patience, empathy and compassion that I apply to any person I encounter on a daily basis. I make it intentional to live a life of servitude by placing God's will and others' needs before my own which has help me become a selfless individual. Hence, my family and I devoted our life to teach and learn Christ principles while empowering those who are struggling with spiritual faith and emotional needs.

Therefore, in 2014 my wife and I started a corporation called Heaven on Earth Holistic Ministry (California) with the intent to become a church. However, due to the lack of funding and support we were unable to obtain 501-C3 and could not proceed with our dream of

establishing either a non-profit or starting our own church. Hence, even without a formal church we still continued to support couples, families, and youth through spiritual counseling, life coaching, and mentorship to bring the gospel's good news of healing, restoration, and salvation.

Nevertheless, since God is the foundation of our lives, everyday my family and I pray to do God's will which has lead me to this opportunity to serve as a church pastor for the Church of the Painted Hill. Also, as a Member in Discernment I support Desert Heritage Church by assisting Pastor Derrick delivering sermons when needed and supporting the youth with youth messages.

Additionally, through my past health challenges God called me to serve others in need and to achieve healing through faith and the help of others. Since God has called me to ministry I have dedicated my time to becoming a good disciple by enrolling in seminary school, as well as to actively read and understand the scripture to discern God's words. I also follow, learn and practice what other mature pastors and my mentors teach online and in person. The Bible has become my life road-map, and my family and I fully depend on it to make life decisions. In addition, I actively seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to guide my life and my steps in order to stay on track with my life purpose. As such, when Rev. Barb contacted me the second time about ministering the Church of the Painted Hills, I was able to recognize and hear God's calling and regardless of my lack of ministerial experience I listened to the Holy Spirit and obeyed to proceed with all that is required to become God's servant. So, at this point of my life I am willing to take the chance to become God's hands, ears, feet, to help others find and connect with God, while appointed as a pastor.

## 2. NURTURING UCC IDENTITY

Nonetheless, as a Jesus Christ follower and believer, I affirm Christ to be the sole Head of the Church. Hence, as a Member in Discernment, Military Chaplain's Assistant, and as a

Christian, I made it my duty to inspire others into unity with Jesus, the son, God the father, God the spirit, and one another in order to collectively help each other find healing and unity with oneness. By being a man that embraces the uniqueness of others and focuses on their gifts rather than their differences has allowed me to cross societal boundaries that heavily divide us nowadays. I am able to build strong relationships with any person that crosses my path regardless of their religion, beliefs, nationality, race, gender or sexual preference. Consequently, by displaying Christian like behavior during our daily interactions I can eventually plant the seed of Faith and Hope to inspire them to follow Jesus.

Furthermore, as a MID, I actively support Desert Heritage Church and participate during their Sunday's sermons as well as during their fellowships. In addition, for the last three years, I have being part of the board of directors of Desert Heritage Church and support Pastor Derrick with delivering sermons and youth messages to the congregation. Likewise, in 2022 I have also attended UCC Southwest MID conferences (via online) and Clergy retreats (in person). additionally, I was part of the 2022 planning clergy team that help plan and develop the clergy retreat as well as assisted as a driver for the Nogales trip to Casa de la Misericordia and helped translate for Sir Lika during the event. In the same manner, this year (2023), I am supporting Rev. Renee with the planning of the MID gathering in Cleveland for the in-person event.

Nevertheless, as part of my commitment to embrace and uphold to the UCC identity, I completed a UCC polity class at Sioux Falls Seminary which emphasize on the history and theology of the United Church of Christ.

### 3. BUILDING TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS

As far as the mark of Building Transformational Leadership Skills, I can testify that I am currently working on developing this skill daily by diligently completing all the necessary school and UCC requirements in order to become a leader of a church and by allowing the Holy Spirit to move through me to transform my life and the lives of others within the church congregation.

Therefore, at this time I have minimal experience in strategically leading the future of God's church, and performing any church's administrative tasks. On the other hand, as a Sociologist, Special Education Teacher, an Army Chaplain's Assistant and a member in discernment for the Desert Heritage Church I have completed training and collaborated with the church or other professionals to bring intercultural awareness and sensitivity by being an advocate to those who are vulnerable due to income discrepancy race, sex, gender, and sexual preference in order to meet their spiritual needs and inspire them to live a Christian life. As a MID seeking ordination to ministered the Church of the Painted Hills, I find it essential to encourage leadership development of self and others through continuing education and lifelong learning as well as the application of Christ's Principles.

#### 4. ENGAGING SACRED STORIES AND TRADITIONS

In order to increase my knowledge and wisdom on the Bible, I dedicate time daily to the reading and understanding of the Bible. This set time allows me to learn and apply biblical principals in my daily living as well as to pass them on whenever interacting with others and helps me grasp the concept of the history of the Christian Church and how it relates to the present time. Furthermore, such knowledge and daily spiritual disciplines give me confidence to effectively preach the word of God. Thus, I have assisted Army Chaplain Wirtz and Pastor Derrick delivering sermons to their congregation in the past. These two experiences have increased my maturity and effectiveness in proclaiming and preaching the word of God and have



also given me the opportunity to bring life to sacred stories and traditions in worship, proclamation and witness.

## 5. CARING FOR ALL CREATION

The way that I currently care and show compassion for God's creation is by taking care of mine and my family's physical, mental and spiritual health. I take care of our physical health by providing us with a healthy financial security through my job as a Special Education teacher for my local school district and through the Army National Guard as a Chaplains' Assistant and Counterdrugs Task Force Specialist. These two jobs give my family a stable place to live and rest.

As far as mental care, I provide my family with a healthy and nurturing home environment that is guided by biblical principals, morals and values. And for spiritual health, my family and I attend church every Sunday, we participate in small groups, activities, and fellowship weather it is at Desert Heritage Church, at our local church or online. Furthermore, I meditate on the scripture and use it as a guide to make me a better human to feel compassion and empathy for God's creation. As God's creation I see my body as a sacred temple and I nourish it healthy foods, water, I get plenty of sleep, I work out daily, I spend quality time with my family and friends and I repeat a prayer seven times "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"

Moreover, as a Chaplains' Assistant my job is to connect and build relationships with soldiers and their families in order to ensure their mental health, well-being, and spiritual health is in balance. I do unit visits, and talk to soldiers to find opportunities to give them hope, faith, and to lead them to God's word. Nevertheless, when needing spiritual guidance or support, I

make myself available in person or on the phone as well as guide them to other resources that could provide them more in depth support. This allows other professionals and my supervisors to support me and be aware of other's needs.

## 6. PARTICIPATING IN THEOLOGICAL PRAXIS

Since I am not an ordained minister, I do not participate in theological reflection through UCC or any other leadership community. The only things that I have been part of is my own youth mentoring program where I get together with a group of young adults to do bible studies and reflections about bible passages and how that message can be applied in their daily living. Therefore, my experience with UCC theological practices and ministry are very limited as of right now.

## 7. WORKING TOGETHER FOR JUSTICE AND MERCY

As a Christian I understand that one of God's goal is to save and restore humanity, and a good way to do so is by reaching out to those who are experiencing injustice and oppression. Therefore it is important for me to be prepared and fully armored with God's strength, and wisdom to bring hope, peace, faith, and grace to His people. Consequentially, I majored in Sociology in college to be able to understand the many aspects and struggles that different societies face and the ways their injustices and oppression can be alleviated through God's word and healing and restoration promises.

That is why, I am an advocate for individuals with special needs, the youth, and people who are weary and vulnerable, I provide spiritual mentorship, empathy, and a safe space to heal and be understood. Nevertheless, when teaching in the classroom, I make sure that every student

with special needs receives the resources in order to succeed academically and emotionally. Thus, providing them with a sense of belonging to model a Christ like behavior.

Moreover, since working to overcome implicit and explicit biases in a church is important, it is necessary to first bring awareness to the members that God loves and accepts everybody for who they are, regardless of their differences He is willing to redeem anyone who truly repents and accepts Jesus as their savior. In the same manner, reminding church members that we were all created to God's image and as Christians we must welcome anyone looking for Christ.

In today's new world it is vital to instruct and teach church members with old and rigid beliefs to embrace change as well as difference among member and the community. We live in a fast-paced world that is constantly changing; hence becoming mentally prepared will allow the church to adjust to the community needs and spiritual beliefs. Consequently, creating an opportunity to plant new seeds of faith and hope which eventually will lead to future church members. Nevertheless as part of the Army National Guard Counterdrug Task Force, I work very close with coalitions to provide drug prevention programs to reach out to young people who are at risk of becoming drug users. Therefore, when I interact with youth, I use this opportunity to build a relationship of mutual trust, and interdependence in order to present God and Christ in their lives.

## 8. STRENGTHENING INTER- AND INTRA-PERSONAL ASSETS

Since self-care is essential in maintaining a healthy balance spiritually and emotionally, I have a support group that mentors me whenever I encounter personal challenges. Right now, I am part of a MID community group that meets once a month to support each other with our MID

process and shared some of our spiritual challenges. Additionally, I meet with my MID mentors twice per month to discuss any questions or concerns that I might have about my ordination process. They also serve as a source of guidance and inspiration when I lose sight of my ultimate goal of becoming an ordained minister. Likewise I have the support of my family, who I reach out anytime I need someone who empathize with any life struggles that I am facing. Such support system has allowed me to develop a network of individuals that I easily count with in order to maintain a healthy balance between my personal life and professional life.

My family and mentors not only provide the mental and spiritual support but also make me accountable for my thoughts, actions and behaviors. Having someone to encourage accountability, motivates me to engage in daily self-reflection and to live a life that inspires others to live a life with strong morals and life principles.

Nevertheless as a Soldier, I am expected to have strong moral character and to display the highest form of personal integrity in order to be a person of service and a good member of society. Likewise, as a Christian I am accountable to be a good role model and follow God's commandments and principles as well as the church's rules and expectations. Hence, it is in my nature to be a person of honor, integrity, and consciousness. Moreover, as a church leader in the Army National Guard, I am aware of the importance and value of God's people and it is in my best interest as God's representative to take care of His creation because by doing so, I am representing Him on this Earth. Furthermore, being aware that every individual goes through different stages in their lives, allows me to understand and tailor to their needs according to their spiritual, emotional, and cognitive development. As a special education teacher having daily interaction with parents, and school staff, I feel confident that I am well equipped to deliver any message to any audience. And as a Chaplain's Assistance in the Army National Guard, and a

MID I have had to deliver sermons in front of a crowd to assist my supervisors. Therefore, preaching, and teaching, and good communication are skills that I have been developing in different stages of my life.

### Boundaries and Ethics

Serving as an ordained minister is a great responsibility and is also a sacred trust between the people being served, the ordained minister and the church. Every time I walk into the church, serve in the community, or work closely with the association or Southwest Conference I become very aware of that sacred trust and responsibility. The Ordained Minister's Code provides the expectations of that position. These are words that should not be read once for comment in a paper but instead to become a part of the life of the one called. These words, this code when accepted, when lived out, speak to the necessary boundaries, ethics and self-care needed to be in trusted, effective and safe covenantal relationships that are a part of ordained ministry. This code is necessary to carry out the mission of the UCC and to lead a life worthy of the calling. (United Church of Christ, 2022)

### The Covenant

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6: 8) My faith has deepened and matured through my journey and I have found a strong connection to the United Church of Christ, its beliefs, Statement of Faith and mission. I have found profound meaning in the belief of a still speaking God after spending many years thinking God had become silent where I was concerned. I have heard the call and I humbly request to be ordained as a UCC Minister in order to serve the

Church of the Painted Hill. In that request I accept all the responsibility that is involved and the task to seek to live the life that is presented in the Ordained Minister's Code. "Whom shall I send....? Through God grace and love I will answer, 'Here am I; send me!'" As a Member in Discernment seeking ordination I look to that day when I can say, "I do and I will, relying on God's grace." (Ordination Vows, UCC Book of Worship)

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