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Privilege of Call within the United Church of Christ:

Perhaps, I thought, this church (the UCC) can be the one Christian denomination that will inspire, bring about and participate in the necessary reformation required to break the Christian faith out of its dying patterns, its no longer believable theological understandings and its medieval worship practices. Maybe this can be the church that will break the traditional Christian paradigm based on human depravity and transform it to a paradigm based on human wholeness.... Bishop John Shelby Spong¹

In 1965, I was in high school student at Suffield Academy, when I heard a fiery civil rights activist, UCC clergy, and chaplain from Yale University speak at our mandatory chapel service. I had previously made the decision to enter the Jesuits after high school. That chaplain was Rev. Dr. William Sloan Coffin Jr. I was impressed by his prophetic vision to social justice and commitment to the civil rights movement for African-Americans. He later became Senior Pastor at the Riverside Church (NYC)—a hybrid UCC and American Baptist Church. His talk started me on my journey for social justice that the Jesuits nurtured during the Vietnam War and then blossomed into my LGBT (and now green) activism and ministry. In 2000, I once again met Rev. Sloan Coffin, in a wheel chair with Soul Force in civil disobedience action at the Catholic National Basilica in Washington D.C., to protest the national Catholic Conference of Bishops and their stance on LGBT issues.² I had the chance to tell him how much he

¹ John Shelby Spong, Blog, July 31, 2012, <http://www.ucc.org/news/bishops-blog-a-salute-to.html>

² SoulForce, an LGBT civil rights organization was started by Rev. Dr Mel White after Martin Luther King Jr.'s practice of nonviolence civil disobedience and its commitment to "relentless nonviolent resistance." See: <http://www.soulforce.org/>

inspired myself, a young Catholic student in high school, with his unwavering commitment to social justice, fighting racism, sexism, and many other causes.. And of course, we both got arrested that day protesting and blocking nonviolently the Catholic Bishops meeting.

What Attracts me to the UCC and the Privilege of Call

Several theologians (John Cobb, Marcus Borg, Marvin Ellison) and populist writers (John Shelby Spong) are hopeful for the future justice and church work of the United Church of Christ because the church has passed through the cultural wars on gender and LGBTQI issues. It is not to say that the UCC is the perfect faith community, but it has freed itself from the above cultural wars sufficiently to engage a wide spread of justice issues from immigration, health-care, sex-trafficking, peace and non-violence, environmental justice, religious diversity, etc. I am familiar with the UCC, and UCC theologians starting with H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, to Daniel Spenser, Ken Stone, Laurel Schneider, and others. .And I am familiar with some of the UCC seminaries PSR, Eden Seminary, Lancaster Seminary, and Chicago Theological Seminary. I have colleagues who serve as administrators and faculty within these educational institutions.

During my youth, I myself felt myself called to the Catholic Jesuit priesthood, I was ordained in 1976 as Catholic Jesuit priest, but God had plans for me that I did not anticipate. I fell in love with another Jesuit four months later, and it took me two years through discernment and prayer to realize that God was calling me to be a priest and

spouse to another gay man, Frank. I joined MCC in 1995 and have remained a clergy/theologian and served as Pastor of MCC in the Valley, North Hollywood, CA.

The UCC describes itself “We are covenanted people.” It prides itself on earlier antecedent traditions from the Reformation to claim the biblical heritage and theologies surrounding covenant. Randi Walker notes, “The Congregational, Reformed, Christian, and Evangelical traditions all had within their understandings of the nature and purpose of the Church some idea of covenantal relationship both of the Church with God and the Church and its people with one another.”³ Jane Fisher Hoffman traces covenant as vitally important relation to Christ and church members to one another in UCC pre-history, but the notion of covenant entered the UCC formally with the 1959 statement of faith: “You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races...”⁴ The UCC is a network of local churches, whose congregational intellectualist/theological roots allowed the development of an ecumenical church based on the covenant relationship with Christ as the leader of the church. It has allowed the ecclesial praxis principles of “uniting and united” to form an ecumenical church that has created a space for theological diversities and multiracial and multicultural identities. Its ecumenical work is to unite all churches until all are united under the servant leadership of the risen Christ.

³ Randi Jones Walker, *Evolution of a UCC Style: History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ*, Cleveland, United Church of Christ Press, 2005, 133.

⁴ Jane Fisher Hoffman, *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ*, Cleveland, United Church Christ of Press, 2008, 35.

Personally, the servant-leadership of Christ as the head of the UCC and its intellectualist theological roots leading to the formation of an ecumenical church attracts me because Christ's call has been continuously expanding and widening—first, from Roman Catholicism and now the MCC—to a wider ecumenical church that will, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, lead to a “catholic” and united church under Christ's leadership. In my personal and communal discernment, I asked God in prayer: “Do we serve God's better separately or united together?” My discernment has affirmed the route of working together to serve God's people and creation.

So I add to the number of UCC definitions of the covenantal definitions with own:

A covenant is a personal communal relationship that begins with threefold divine community of love whose unconditional love and grace cannot be contained. It explodes into creation, expressed in the Incarnation of Christ, and through the Spirit in our spirituality—all working for the *theosis* of creation. Covenant is expressed in our faith relationship with God as a threefold community of love, our willingness to be in a love with God, the church, other communities of faith, and the biological community of life that is the earth. It is the willingness to surrender ego-centeredness for Christ-centered living for God and for all life. It expresses the willingness to work for the liberation and well-being of humanity, all life, and the Earth herself.

It is a definition of covenant rooted in the radical inclusive love and unconditional grace of the triune Godhead expressed in creation, incarnation, and the on-going greening and mischievous work of the Holy Spirit of radical inclusive love.

And I see the mischievous work of the Holy Spirit who inspired and sustain the trajectory of out of the box thinking and practice of the ancestral forebears of the UCC to let go of the primacy of dogma/doctrine for the primacy of praxis of charitable service,

justice, and unity in Christ. And I witnessed a similar journey in my own personal spiritual journey of being a faithful disciple to Christ of moving away from doctrine to the praxis of the liberating message of the gospel of Christ and following in the steps of Christ.

The UCC Movement for full inclusion of LGBT Christians:

I remember speaking with Rev. Bill Johnson in the 1990s, the first openly gay ordained clergy in the UCC, and he expressed his sadness that I did not enter the UCC when I was searching in 1994. I told him of the disinterested reception that I received from the Illinois/Missouri UCC conference leader in 1994. But UCC has come long way from then, and so have I. I have yearned for a long time to widen my personal and theological conversations on peace and social justice beyond solely LGBT/Queer issues. We have started to work on immigration issues, and four MCC clergy, including Joe and myself, attended an immigration/border immersion seminar for three days at Centro Romero October 2012. That began a commitment to expand intentionally my social justice horizons. The year before my husband Joe and myself joined a protest with Bienestar, a Hispanic LGBT organization in Los Angeles, over the incarceration of an HIV+ young transsexual woman by ICE. She was denied her HIV medications and died from poor treatment while in detention. For me, LGBT issues need to be in dialogue with other justice issues, and they are often included within them. This expresses my personal frustration of limiting justice to single issues rather than understanding them encompassing multiple intersecting connections to other social

justice issues. The Spirit has drawn me to engage in wider conversations on social justice than the MCC can provide for the foreseeable future.

Secondly, my passion for environmental justice and working against policies and practices leading to climate changes has led myself and MCC in the Valley to make the Earth herself a member of our church. We have consciously become a green church by first making the Earth a member of our congregation. From my research, reading, and teaching, I have come to agree with often repeated mantra of Christian moral theologian Daniel Maguire, "if present trends continue, we will not."⁵ Climate change is the great moral challenge in the 21st century. I have been impressed with the UCC Environmental Justice Program and trainings. At the UCC General Synod (2013) I was pleased by the passage of three resolutions: Mountain Removal for Coal Mining,⁶ the compromise resolution on divestment from fossil fuel companies, and the resolution to make UCC buildings carbon neutral by 2030.⁷ No other church have taken such a prophetic stance for Earthcare.

At the beginning of the discernment process, I took the UCC Green Justice Congregation survey, and MCC in the Valley scored 75 points, nearly the fourth level of the measurement.⁸ Two years later, we have scored twenty points above the initial score on green congregations. If you want to understand why I am so passionate about

⁵ Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), 13.

⁶ <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/gs29-4-MountainTopRemoval.pdf>

⁷ <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/gs29-2.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries/just-green-congregations.html>

green justice, watch on youtube the graphic novel, Earth 2100.⁹ It is a very sober projection of what lies before us if we do not reduce 90 million tons of daily carbon emissions in the next 5-10 years. I believe that God has originally covenanted with humanity and called us to become gardeners of life on Earth. I have grown in the last three years in my awareness of the profound interrelationship of all life on the Earth. I have started to write a green Christian theology, remain an active member of green interfaith group and California Interfaith Power and Light. Also I just joined the UCC justice and peace network. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit has led me to the UCC to work on environmental justice and other social justice issues—to bring LGBT/Queer theology into wider denominational conversations on social justice. MCC as a movement is just lacking these dimensions, and the inertia is holding back myself and my congregation in following and serving Christ more faithfully. .

Next Stage in My Life

I have served as Senior Pastor/Theologian at MCC in the Valley for decade as of June 2014. There have been several major accomplishments in the greening the MCC church with solar panels, retrofitting it for my efficient energy and water use, composting, water harvesting, gardening, and community advocacy for Earth Care. I will be 66 years old in May 2014 as the church and myself will be accepted into the UCC with dual standing that month.

⁹.www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI31a2L1Olw

One of the gifts of serving at MCC in the Valley has been the greening of my spiritual life and practice. We joined California Interfaith Power and Light and signed the covenant agreement to maintain our affiliation. The church received in 2011 a Green Oscar from CIPL for advocacy. In March 2012, seven religious protesters were arrested at the Federal Building in Los Angeles in a non-violent civil disobedience action to protest the inaction on climate change. At CSUN (California State University, Northridge) I have included educational components on climate change and the world religions' response to global warming in my World Religions, Buddhism, and Ethics classes.

I have given my notice to step down as Senior Pastor during the next 12 months for two reasons. The first is to honor a marital promise that I would follow my husband Rev. Joseph Shore-Goss, as he goes before an ecclesial council of the UCC this spring, and that I will follow him wherever his calling in the UCC leads him. I believe that is time for him to follow the next stage in his the evolution of his vocation as clergy. I will not use the term "retirement." I will retire from being Senior Pastor of MCC in the Valley. I will humbly serve and offer my experience and education in whatever UCC church that Joe serves, and I will continue to write the theological books I have yet to write. (see my blog: www.mischievouspiritantheology.com). I plan to give time over to my passion and reverence for life and Earthcare by assisting faith communities to become green and work for Earthcare to prevent or mitigate the impact of climate change upon humanity and other life on Earth. I seek the UCC call to privilege with a mission to work for Earthcare and assist faith communities to become green and

responsible in their care for the Earth. I believe the UCC recognition to become a missionary for the Earth will give credibility to instruct and assist congregations and people of faith to become more responsive to care for God's Earth.

In addition, I plan to assist that UCC to achieve its resolution passed at the UCC General Synod (2013), "On Making UCC Church Building More Carbon Neutral"¹⁰ I am designing an online training program as well as developing an online course on how to train congregations to become nearly carbon neutral. Rev. Felix Villanueva has offered me the opportunity to do online instruction on "Greening your Congregation" on the newly acquired Moodle platform for online courses for the LED program. I have been teaching online courses for the Religious Studies Department at California State University, Northridge, for the last eight years.

I have also spoken Meghan Pritchard of the UCC Environmental Justice Programs as Pilgrim Firs so to include the UCC elements into such trainings and not to step upon any one terrain. She welcomed the assistance. I can harness my skills as pastor and as university professor to work for Earthcare and help folks fall in love with the Earth. This is my passion to spend the rest of my pastoral and academic life as a UCC missionary for loving and caring for the Earth, and this is why I would like the recognition of UCC to a privilege of call.

¹⁰ " <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/gS29-2.pdf>.

Statement of Green Faith¹¹

Creation is not one thing and salvation something else; rather they are the one uninterrupted flow of God's communicative love. In other words, creation, incarnation, and the final transformation of creation are united in one act of Trinitarian self-giving or self-communication, and we call that self-bestowal by the word "grace," gift. God as a divine community of love freely offers God's self to creation and humanity, and God extends an invitation into conscious interrelationship. Incarnation is a Trinitarian physical event which encompasses two significant elements: It is not only a significant bestowal of God's love and grace to us and to creation, but also it characterizes the interrelatedness of the entire universe on all levels. The most creative western and Orthodox theologies point to the fact that God is totally relational, and that this divine interrelatedness is reflected in the universe, from microscopic to macrocosmic levels. And this is the work of Irenaeus describes as God's two hands in the world: Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The meaning of the Incarnation, "the word becoming flesh," is not restricted to human beings alone. Theologian Denis Edwards writes,

¹¹ This section is taken from two sources, and they are expanded into my essays: "Introduction" and "Grace is Green: Incarnational Inclusivities" in *Queering Christianity: Finding a Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians*, ed. by Robert E. Shore-Goss, Patrick Cheng, Thomas Bohache, & Mona West, Santa Barbara, CA, Praeger ABC-Clio, 2013.

The flesh that is embraced by God is not limited to the human. It includes the whole interconnected world of fleshy life and, in some ways, the whole universe to which flesh is related and on which it depends.¹²

God taking flesh in Christ has salvific significance beyond humanity to include the whole world of interrelated organisms. God's Incarnation includes not only Jesus but also the web of interconnected life starting from the first moment of biological life on Earth. God has embraced the whole universe of interconnected life and material existence. In fact, God's Incarnation brings incarnational change to all flesh, all biological life. New Zealand theologian Neil Darragh comments on consequences of "the Word becoming flesh" to biosphere, the web of interrelated ecological relationships that make up the Earth:

To say that God became flesh is not only to say that God became human but to say also that God became an Earth creature, that God became a sentient being, that God became a living being, that God became a complex Earth unit of minerals and fluids, and that God became an item in the carbon and nitrogen cycles.¹³

In the Incarnation, God added a novelty to the creation process of some fifteen billion years. God so loved the universe that God became material, taking on embodiment (John. 1:14 and 3:16). If the Greek "cosmos" in John 3:16 is understood not as "world" but as the "entire universe," the Incarnation becomes a realization of God's self-bestowal not only to humanity but to all biological life. God has transformed humanity by

¹² Denis Edwards, *Ecology is at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on the Earth*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2007, p. 58.

¹³ Neil Darragh, *At Home in the Earth, Auckland*, Ascent Publications, 2000, p. 124.

partaking of human nature, and we become participants in divine nature of Christ. God is embodied within creation so that creation may be brought into union with God.

A second aspect of my Trinitarian spirituality is the practice of open commensality of Jesus. This ritual is now repeated in our Sunday worship at the end of the communion table prayer with the invitation: "You neither need to be a member of this church nor any church nor even be a Christian. All God's children are welcome to God's table." In that simple ritual proclamation, there is embodied a profound declaration of the unconditional grace of God is available to all people, including queer folks. God surrounds all human beings from birth to death with redemptive love, compassion, and forgiveness. This gift of love is nothing other than God's self-communication of divine love and forgiveness. There are three distinct notions embodied in the ritual invitation to communion. First, God's grace is radically inclusive and wild without conditions. Secondly, no one is turned away from the altar, whether one is Christian from another polity or a non-practicing Christian or a non-Christian. Finally, every person is loved equally by God. This ritual invitation of open fellowship and communion expresses God's radical inclusive love.

The biblical scholar J D.G. Dunn noted that the two distinctive but overlapping features of Jesus' ministry were his table fellowship and the absence of boundaries.¹⁴ Radical inclusive love is grounded in the practice of Jesus' open commensality and the absence of boundaries. John Dominic Crossan notes that commensality is "the rules of

¹⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003, 599-607

tabling and eating as miniature models for the rules of association and socialization. It means table fellowship as a map of economic discrimination, social hierarchy, and political differentiation."¹⁵ Sharing a meal in the ancient world of first century C.E. Palestine was a form of inclusion, and refusing to sit at table with particular individuals and groups of people was a form of social exclusion. Eating together was thus one of the basic strategies for social formation. Particular Jews ate with their groups, and Gentiles ate with their own groups. Men ate with men, women ate with women. Segregated rules of etiquette and social hierarchy managed these groups' eating habits.

In the gospel stories about Jesus and his practice of table fellowship, he pushed the boundaries of exclusion to make them more inclusive and subvert hierarchies. He advises those with higher social rank take the lowest seats at table (Lk. 14:7-11); he advises that friends, neighbors, or even relatives who can repay the invitation. He instructs his disciples to invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, and the blind." (Lk. 14:13) In the Parable of the Great Dinner, Jesus gives us the example of the indiscriminate invitations of all sorts of people. (Lk. 14:15-24):

It is the random and open commensality of the parable's meal that is the most startling element. One could, in such a situation, have classes, sexes, ranks, and grades all mixed up together. The social challenge of such egalitarian commensality is the radical threat of the parable's vision ... And the almost predictable counteraccusation to such open commensality is immediate: Jesus is a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He makes, in other words, no appropriate distinctions and discriminations.¹⁶

¹⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, New York, Harperone, 1994, 79.

¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus, The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, 262.

The banquet vision of the Parable of the Feast affirms that God's reign is not about power but about non-reciprocal gifting of human beings with the abundant welcome of acceptance and forgiveness. Jesus' open commensality expressed a notion of "unbrokered egalitarianism," an open access to God and one another. Marcus J. Borg also highlights that Jesus practiced "an open and inclusive table," and he writes, "The inclusive vision incarnated in Jesus' table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself."¹⁷ Jesus invited sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and deviants with a mixture of poor and artisans into a fellowship meal that celebrated God's forgiveness and unconditional love.

Through this open commensality practiced at table in our churches, we re-enact and re-member the "wild and radically inclusive grace" of God as a divine community of love that tears down barriers and walls. This is the core practice of my queer and green, albeit, discipleship in following Christ. The open table practice led me to make the Earth a member of the congregation and welcome her to healing reconciliation with humans who have exploited, ravished, oppressed, and dominated her without forethought that we are harming her, a fellow member of the church.

¹⁷ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994, 55-56.