

THE ORDINATION PAPER OF CHRISTOPHER CORNELL

1 INTRODUCTION:

2 “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

3 -John 10:10 NRSV

4 “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of
5 God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

6 -Mark 1:14-15 NRSV

7

8 Over the course of the past five years, I have been journeying this road we call being a
9 “Member in Discernment.” The biggest pieces of that have been my seminary education, the
10 time I have served as Assistant and Youth Pastor at the United Church of Christ in Keene, my
11 Clinical Pastoral Education at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, and my ongoing
12 relationship with the Southwest Association Committee on Ministry. But there have also been
13 numerous other relationships, experiences and reflections that have encouraged my growth as
14 both a pastor and a person. This paper seeks to distill some part of that learning and to tell the
15 stories of some of the events that have shaped me. While it is incomplete, and I couldn’t begin to
16 put it all down on paper, my aim is to give you an overview of my theology, a picture of my
17 personal spiritual journey, and to share with you what I have been discerning over these past
18 years: that I am called by God to serve Christ’s Church as an ordained pastor.

19 Discerning this call has been one of the great joys of my life. It has been an exhilarating,
20 life-giving experience and I am in the debt of the many, many people who have helped me and
21 supported me along the way.

22

23 **A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

24 I was very nearly born into the UCC. Very nearly because it was several months after my
25 baptism that my parents left the Catholic church, so while I was baptized in the Catholic church,
26 I never knew it. My first church home was in the UCC. My father would become (and remains) a
27 UCC pastor, and I grew up as a PK (preacher’s kid). People often imagine that growing up as a
28 PK would make one particularly churchy from a young age, but that was not the case. In fact I
29 have often reflected (both as I have explored my call and as I have become a father) upon how

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30 church life affected me as a child, and the reality was that there was *less* pressure on me to
31 participate in the life of the church, not *more*. My father always let me know that the church was
32 there for me but always released me from the feeling that I was obligated to it.

33 As it worked out, I left the church at a young age: in spirit in late elementary school, and
34 in body before high school. But, I had been given a gift. It was not a rock solid faith, but an
35 ability to and a joy for asking questions about my faith. That has proven much more valuable to
36 me in my faith journey. It is a gift that I credit my parents with, and it is a gift that I hope both to
37 give to my children as a father and also to the youth I serve as a pastor.

38 I did leave the church. My high school years were focused on Atheism (of a particularly
39 angry variety) which eventually turned toward a curious agnosticism. In college and in later
40 years I explored the Unitarian Universalist faith, and for several years my wife and I made our
41 home in the UU church, where I found a great deal of beauty and truth. I considered myself a UU
42 and that is where I first seriously contemplated ministry. I learned a great deal from the UU
43 perspective. I learned about other faiths, and I learned about my own faith. I discovered a
44 spirituality that I had not known before, and I grew in my faith. But, it never did feel like home.
45 It offered all the wisdom humanity has ever had to offer, but still I found myself wanting
46 something. It did all the things I wanted it to do (social justice, community ministry, open-
47 mindedness), but there was a hole in it for me. I just missed something, and it took me a long
48 time to find that it was Christ.

49 I should back up a bit. This is the story of my personal faith journey, and while it is a
50 faith journey and that which is overtly religious is important to the story, it is also personal and
51 so includes so much more of life than the merely religious.

52 My first home was a loving home. The younger of two boys, I grew up with both of my
53 biological parents. My father was a UCC minister, and my mother was a nurse. We fought as
54 families are apt to do, but it was a family of love. If I could tell one story to illustrate what I
55 value from my upbringing, it is this one, and it is all the more appropriate as it is not a story I
56 knew until I was grown.

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57 In the days before cellphones one had to wait until they got home to tell their spouse they
58 had lost their job. Which is what happened one Friday evening when my father came home and
59 announced to my mother that he had finally quit his job. It was then that my mother told him that
60 her grant funded program had been cut entirely that day, and she too was without a job. To make
61 matters more complicated, we were all set to leave for vacation the following day. I do not know
62 what I would do in that same situation, but I would like to think I would do what we did. We
63 went on vacation.

64 Middle school and high school were difficult years for me. I attended several schools, the
65 public school, the school for *troubled* kids, the school at the adolescent psychiatric hospital, the
66 school at the adolescent rehab program. I had problems with authority and none of these
67 experiences ended well. By ninth grade I had been in and out of rehabs, mental hospitals, kicked
68 out of several schools; there seemed to be only one option left, and it was a really bad option. I
69 don't know what would have become of me had we taken that option, but I feel confident that it
70 would have not been good.

71 But then there was another option. A new private school which either saw something in
72 me or was just desperate enough for students that they accepted me, and so I began at the Elm
73 City New School. Their philosophy, as much as I understand it, refused to enter into the power
74 struggle, and for whatever reason I decided to stop struggling too. I got clean, I did well in
75 school. My life changed. A year later I would go to Simon's Rock College of Bard where I met
76 my beautiful wife, Tonya. We fell in love and never looked back. When we were eighteen we
77 got our first apartment together and, I at least, never consider the possibility that we would not
78 spend our lives together.

79 It is easy to tell this story and to wrap up neatly in a bow of divine intervention. It feels
80 like that sort of story, and it is so clean to simply say that God intervened and when I was lost,
81 then I was found. I believe God cared for me during those difficult times. I believe that God
82 cared that a young child was suffering from addiction and emotional turmoil, but many children
83 are suffering from addiction and emotional turmoil. It seems right to be the one to point out that
84 for me, a white boy from Connecticut with middle-class wealth and privilege, the solution was a

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85 very lucky break at a private school with exceptional faculty (faculty who, please don't get me
86 wrong, were living out a life changing ministry). But, for those who are poorer than I was, and
87 particularly for those who are poorer and darker in complexion than I was, there are far fewer
88 miracles.

89 I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities that I've had, and for the people who have
90 been in my life and who have given me those opportunities, but it feels like I can best honor that
91 by naming it as a privilege and not Providence.

92 After Simon's Rock, Tonya and I relocated to Atlanta to continue our educations, but we
93 found quickly that Atlanta was not the home for us and so relocated to Gilsum, N.H. We finished
94 our Bachelor's degrees, were married shortly after, moved to New Haven by way of Long Island,
95 (where my wife completed her Master's Degree) and became pregnant with our first child, Toby.

96 I pray that everyone meets someone who they can allow to know them fully. That I met
97 that person when I was only 16 years old, and that I knew it by the time I was 17 is a gift beyond
98 a gift. Tonya and I have journeyed through life together for 18 years. She knows me as
99 completely as anyone ever will, and she has been the biggest support in my life. I am eternally
100 grateful for the gift of sharing a life with her.

101 While in New Haven and New York I had been working for The Agfa Corporation as a
102 Field Service Engineer. As luck would have it, the company went bankrupt in my wife's final
103 year at Yale, shortly after the birth of our son. This afforded me the opportunity to spend the next
104 year of my life as a stay-at-home dad. We returned to Keene, where I eventually opened a small
105 business and where our daughter, Fiona was born.

106 I suppose I always knew that I would love my children, and that they would love me.
107 What I didn't expect was just how much loving and being loved by them would change me in
108 fundamental ways. I have two fabulous children. Parenting has not always been easy, nor have I
109 always been the perfect parent, but the relationships I have with them have changed my life in
110 some of the most foundational of ways. They have taught me more than I ever imagined they
111 could, they have brought me joy that I never knew I could feel. Simply knowing them has
112 changed my journey and shown me something of God.

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113 When my son was three, a pet frog died. To my surprise my son had a great many
114 questions about the dead frog. “Where does it go? “What happens to frogs and to people when
115 they die?” I had shockingly few answers. At the time I would have considered myself a UU, if a
116 lapsed one, and I gave my best agnostic answer to all my son’s questions. The answers worked,
117 and in many ways they are the answers I still give today, but in answering my son’s questions I
118 realized that I wanted to know more about a great many things of faith. For some reason I
119 thought I might find them in the church, and so one Sunday morning we went to church.

120 We went to the United Church of Christ in Keene, the church I serve today, and I found
121 something that I had been missing: it was something firm and solid, it was a promise of
122 something beautiful, it was Christ. It would be a while before I was able to identify as a
123 Christian, but at once I knew that something was right in my being there. On that first Sunday we
124 met the pastor, Gordon Ellis, who would become my mentor and friend. On that first Sunday,
125 standing in Fellowship Hour, I told him just how uneasy I was with Trinitarianism, and I think I
126 may have spoken the words “we probably won’t stick around too long.” They are words I cannot
127 help but chuckle at now. Gordon’s words have probably not been written down in list of best
128 phrases for evangelism, but they were effective. He said “Well, we’re glad you’re here.”

129 We spoke casually a few times over the coming months, and then one day he called me
130 up out of the blue. The church was having people give testimonies in worship, and he asked if I
131 would give a testimony about my faith.

132 I suppose I could have simply given a dry account of my religious life, I could have
133 phoned it in, and remained safe. But for whatever reason I chose to speak from my heart. I spoke
134 about all of my doubts and my struggles with faith. I spoke about my nervousness returning to
135 the Christian Church, and I felt like a bared my soul.

136 I love to preach. I have been told that preaching is one of my gifts, but gift or not I simply
137 love the process. It feels like staring into the abyss and dredging its depths. It feels like tearing
138 open your own soul for the world to see, and when I gave that testimony I felt that feeling.

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139 The people in worship that day were incredible. They affirmed me in all my doubt, and in
140 their affirmation I heard them saying that my experience was sacred, and that all my questioning
141 and worry was ok to lift up before God.

142 It was not long after that I got a postcard in the mail from Andover Newton Theological
143 School. I had been on their mailing list since my time considering ministry in the UU church.
144 This time it was an advertisement for their upcoming open house weekend. I would have tossed
145 it like all the others, but my wife said “you should go...at least you will get a full night’s sleep!”
146 Our daughter was an infant, and neither of us had slept through the night in ages. That was
147 enough for me. I registered for the event, and I went.

148 I spent much of that weekend in prayer and contemplation, some of which I will discuss
149 in more detail below, but suffice it to say that driving home I called my wife and told her that I
150 needed to go to seminary. My business allowed me to take the time to return to school, and we
151 thought we could make the schedule work, so I registered and began taking classes.

152 In my second year in seminary it was time to do my field education. It was a concern
153 because there were not any sites near our home, and while I was making the weekly commute to
154 Massachusetts work, I couldn’t imagine how I would add commuting three more days a week.
155 Very fortunately for me, the UCC in Keene decided to become a teaching parish, and I became
156 the official “Seminarian.” An incredibly insightful and dedicated group of people formed a
157 Teaching Parish Committee. This committee, with whom I still meet, has been a blessing in my
158 discernment process. They have supported me, helped me to discern my call, and helped me to
159 recognize my strengths. I am incredibly grateful for their continuing support.

160 It was only about a month into my seminarian year that one of the most life-giving
161 experiences of my ministry would occur. It helped to define my call in new and beautiful ways.

162 Several weeks before there had been a murder in our little town. One young man had
163 stabbed and killed another. After a vigil was held on the town common (immediately in front of
164 the church) people just stayed. Young mourners mixed with a variety of individuals, all of whom
165 effectively “camped” on the common. They were there for a variety of reasons, but at the time I
166 knew nothing of who they were. Anxiety over their presence rose in the town. Numerous letters

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167 to the editor were written, local business owners feared for their customers. Many called for their
168 removal, some went so far as to say they should be removed by force, a few even spoke of
169 vigilantism. Tensions were high. All that I knew (or thought I knew) was the common wisdom
170 that said they were all drug dealers, gang members and criminals.

171 During all of this, my mentor and Senior Minister had gone on vacation, which is why it
172 was to me that some folks in the church came with their worry, and asked me to “do something”
173 about the situation out on the common.

174 I had no idea what “something” might look like. I didn’t know where to begin, or what a
175 possible outcome might look like, and I was terrified of going out to that common to try to be the
176 one to act. But, new to this role as I was, I figured I needed to do something, and so one
177 afternoon I walked out onto the common to try to figure it out. I introduced myself to one
178 individual, we talked for a while, he explained to me a bit about who all of them were and why
179 they were there, and then the conversation came to an end. It had taken all the courage I had to
180 walk out onto that common, and I knew that if “something” didn’t happen now I would be hard
181 pressed to summon the courage again. As this young man began to walk away my, mind
182 scrambled with the anxiety of it all, and I nearly shouted after him the only thing I could think of
183 to say: “I’m from the church...and we want to help...is there anything we can do to help?”

184 He walked back over to me and said, “You know, we get a lot of crap from people saying
185 we are wrecking the common. We’d like to organize a clean-up day. Could you help with that?”
186 I said that I thought we could, and he walked me over to a group of people and began introducing
187 us. We talked or a while, made a loose plan for a clean-up day, and later that week one of them
188 brought me a flyer they had made for the event “Clean up the Common: Hosted by the United
189 Church of Christ in Keene, and Those Kids on the Square.”

190 We did pull off the cleanup day. “Those Kids” came together with a smattering of folks
191 from the church to rake, paint and repair the common, but what was more meaningful to my
192 growth was that I began to spend more and more time on the common with them. We would sit
193 out talking for hours at a time.

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194 One such time it was late at night and I was in my office doing school work. In need of a
195 break I went out to the common in the middle of the night. I found a young couple I had gotten to
196 know sitting together in the gazebo drinking 40's and playing cards. I joined them, and we sat
197 there for hours talking and playing cards. They told me about their housing worries as the
198 weather was turning cold, they told me about how they met and about their relationship. That
199 night I learned two very important things about my ministry.

200 The first was that while I had considered my call to be to the pulpit; to preaching and
201 teaching, *ministry* was not bound by the walls of the church. I learned that the ministry I was
202 called to was one that needed to span across the boundaries of those church walls. I learned that
203 the ministry I was called to *needed* to be on the common, in the alleys and at the shelter, just as
204 much as it needed to be in the pulpit.

205 The second thing that I learned was about how to trust in the Spirit, and perhaps that is
206 the more important thing. Looking back on the day when I walked out onto the common, I never
207 could have imagined that it would lead to this. There was no way I could have foreseen these
208 relationships and these encounters, but trusting the Spirit had opened me up to such gifts and
209 blessings. Those encounters changed my life and my ministry.

210 That experience was certainly the largest learning of my year as a seminarian, but I also
211 learned a lot about ministry in other ways. I got some experience preaching and leading worship.
212 I was blessed by a congregation willing to endure my often stumbling steps toward becoming a
213 preacher. I learned how to do pastoral care, how to sit with people in grief, how to lead a
214 congregation, and how to stand back and let the church be the Church. I learned, in large ways
215 and small ways what it means to be a pastor.

216 At the end of my seminarian year the church's Assistant Minister was ready to retire.
217 Very graciously the church offered me the position; however, it was a half time position, and I
218 knew myself well enough to know that if I was going to be in professional ministry I was not
219 going to be able to hold myself to half-time hours.

220 Another position was available in the church for youth ministry, and it was proposed that
221 the two positions be combined into one full time job. This was great because I wanted to be

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222 doing full time ministry, and I needed a full time salary, but youth ministry was something I felt
223 certain I was not called to. I took the job hesitantly, trying to put some of what I had learned
224 about the Spirit into action. I have been very pleasantly surprised.

225 I am now in my fifth year as a Youth Pastor, and I cannot imagine it not being a part of
226 my ministry. After several mission trips, countless retreats, a week at Horton Center, and more
227 time sitting in coffee shops with teenagers than I ever could have imagined possible, I have
228 learned that these young people have so much to teach me. I have had the honor of watching
229 them grow and mature, I have had the privilege of sitting with them as they wrestle with the
230 biggest issues of faith and life, and I have seen in them a spark of the Church that is coming.

231 In the Spring of 2014 I graduated from Andover Newton, and took the summer off from
232 the church to do my CPE at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center under the guidance of Rev.
233 Frank Macht. CPE taught me so much about myself and about ministry. It showed me a way of
234 doing ministry that was totally separated from the normal life of the church, and yet was
235 powerful and meaningful. I learned about myself, about my strengths and my shortcomings, and
236 I learned about the power of intimacy in ministry.

237 At this point I have four years of ministry experience, and it has been five years since I
238 began the Member in Discernment journey. Looking back, I can see that I am not the man who
239 began this journey. I have learned and grown in ways too numerous to mention. I have also been
240 supported by people too numerous to name. People often point to the unorthodox path of my
241 journey and question whether I have missed something because of it. My home church became
242 my internship church which became my employer, and it is true that had I gone a different path
243 there are other things I could have learned. Had I taken an internship in some other church, I
244 would have met other people, had other experiences, and grown in different ways, but I wouldn't
245 trade the experiences I have had for any of them. No doubt the future will hold new people and
246 new experiences, and there is no doubt that those will at time be intimidating and anxiety
247 provoking, but the foundation I have received in ministry has prepared me in incredible ways to
248 be able to walk into those new things with excitement and trust in what the Spirit is doing.

249

250

251 **A BRIEF THEOLOGY**

252 My theology revolves around two inter-related concepts. The first of these is Jesus’
253 Kingdom-of-God. The second is his teaching on the abundance-of-life. Let me first address the
254 latter.

255 **ABUNDANT LIFE & THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

256 I cannot say anything definitive about eternal-life. When people ask me whether or not I
257 believe in life after death, I tell them that in all honesty I have never been dead, and so have
258 never seen. For whatever reason, God chose to veil what follows life, I cannot begin to imagine,
259 and really it’s all the same. I do not know.

260 But I think Jesus knew something about how hung up we get about life-after-death, and I
261 believe he tried to teach us something about it, and that something he was trying to teach is the
262 abundance-of life, and it is about life *before* death.

263 There was a time when a lawyer came to see Jesus. This lawyer only had one question: he
264 wanted to know the secret to eternal life. Jesus asked him about scripture, about what he could
265 find there? And the man replied “Well, to love God fully...and to love my neighbor.” To which I
266 imagine Jesus sighing “ahh, yes. Do all that, and then you will live.” And sometimes I imagine
267 that after they had talked the man ran off and took his own advice: he loved God in all the ways
268 he could, and he loved his neighbors...all of them. And because he took his own advice, he
269 found a great many people to love, and because he found so many people to love, he found so
270 many people who loved him. Seeing all these people to love and to be loved by, whenever he
271 looked at the world he saw a place of love, and in that love he saw beauty and joy, and fullness.
272 When he died...whether it had been fifty years or just one...I wonder if he knew that he had
273 lived as deeply as he could, and somehow that depth is more important than, or at least just as
274 important as, its length.

275 We get very hung up on eternal-life, as if worrying that life might not go on infinitely is
276 truly the better choice than living life as deeply as we can. We have no control of eternity, and I

277 have no magic portal to see into its depths, but we do have control over the width and breadth of
278 our lives. We can choose to live them in the fullness of life and the fullness of love. We can
279 choose to love God in all the ways our heads and our hearts and our souls can imagine. We can
280 find people: interesting people, lovely people, beautiful people, broken people, lost people, and
281 we can love them all. This is not to say that *I* can choose this breadth of life, nor is it to say that
282 *you* can make this choice. In so many ways our choices are limited by the reality into which we
283 are born, and so it is important to clarify that when I say that “we have control over the width
284 and breadth of our lives,” much of the emphasis is on the word “we.” It is a reality we can
285 explore together, it is a way of being that we can choose. I believe that in this little interaction,
286 Jesus teaches us a great deal about his gospel and how to live it.

287 Love is a strange thing. I do not mean that lightly. Love is quantum physics in a
288 Newtonian world: it is strange. It does not behave well, it does not act appropriately, it does not
289 follow rules of procedure. Love is an unwieldy thing. It does not work well with logic or
290 common wisdom, it does not allow for basic calculations of self-interest, it makes us foolish.
291 With that in mind it is no surprise that we are so thrifty with our love. And yet, there seems to be
292 something within us that loves to love, there is something in us that loves to love wastefully and
293 abundantly. And that is the rub.

294 At times I wonder if that love-to-love that we seem to share as a human race isn't some
295 long lost vestige, some memory in our collective consciousness, written into our DNA trying
296 desperately to remember something we forgot long ago.

297 Somewhere along the way we began to think there was not enough. And somewhere
298 along the way we decided to take more for ourselves, which meant, of course, that someone else
299 had less. Everything else unfolds from there: empires and overlords, fear and anger. We build
300 our own kingdoms to protect whatever it is we try to hoard, to take whatever it is we burn to
301 possess, and we all fall in, bowing to these kingdoms and falling into our slots. It is a
302 phenomenon well represented in the Roman Empire, but so much bigger than that one kingdom.
303 It is the wisdom of the world that tells us that there is not enough, and so we ought to grab, steal,

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304 kick and scratch our way to hold on to whatever we can convince ourselves we possess. It is the
305 falsehood of scarcity.

306 But, love makes us wasteful. It causes us to forget the falsehood of scarcity, and with it
307 we remember something deep within our souls, a truth more powerful: the truth of *abundance*. It
308 is the simple claim that there is enough. Enough to go around. Enough to feed each other.
309 Enough to share. Enough to relax our constant nagging worry of scarcity and to rest in the
310 abundance of creation. Love unlocks that truth, and that is why love is so dangerous to the
311 kingdoms of the world. Love is wasteful, and it reminds us that there is enough, and when we
312 remember that there is enough, kingdoms and empires, all of our systems of control and
313 domination begin to fade away. They do not fade in a mystical, transcendental way; they do not
314 fade because their power base in the cosmic realm has been depleted; they fade simply because
315 the falsehood of scarcity that they have been built upon begins to erode under their feet. It is not
316 so much that they become defeated as they become irrelevant.

317 When Jesus taught of the Kingdom of God, he was not speaking into a vacuum. He was
318 not speaking to a people who came into the conversation with no experience in the world. He
319 was speaking to a very particular people in a very particular world. He was speaking to people
320 who, like us, knew all too well the reality of kingdoms and empires. Many critique the
321 “kingdom” language of Jesus, saying that it is too militaristic, that it depends too heavily upon
322 the systems of oppressive rule found in earthly “kings.” Despite this critique, it is also the
323 strength of the image. Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, precisely because it would cause us
324 to compare and contrast it with our own kingdoms. He spoke of this new Kingdom because it
325 would shine a light onto the inconsequentiality of our own kingdoms. He spoke of the Kingdom
326 because it would remind us that our kingdoms are all built on that great falsehood of scarcity.

327 Action oriented as we are, people ask: “How then do we *do* this new Kingdom of God?”
328 It is a good question, and an all so human question. On what shall we *work*? What must we *do*?
329 Where is the *action plan* to take us from our kingdoms to God’s Kingdom? And yet, Jesus’s
330 words don’t seem to give us this action plan. He gives us nothing to build, no government to

331 create, no system to model, no bricks to be moved. He says rather simply: “Repent, the Kingdom
332 of God is at hand.”

333 The word “repent” gets a bad rap. Somehow, one cannot say the word “repent” without
334 conjuring images of angry men on street corners holding sandwich boards warning us of
335 impending doom. But the word is really much more lovely than that. “Repent” tells us to turn
336 around, see things in a *new way*. “Repent” tells us to open our eyes, to clear the dust from them,
337 to chase away the foggiest of the dream and see where we are standing. “Repent” is a call to
338 allow truths lost in the depths of our souls to be awakened, and to remember the abundance of
339 life. “Repent” calls us to look again at the broken, weak systems of oppression and see them for
340 what they truly are: not evil super-powers, not satanic powers, not the all-powerful systems that
341 we allow them to be, but rather just the collective efforts of a scared humanity running in fear
342 from the falsehood of scarcity. Repent calls us to see that all the powers of the world, all the hate,
343 and all the oppression are temples dedicated to our fear, and built on the shifting sands of a lie.
344 “Repent” is as easy as opening our eyes, and as difficult as awakening ourselves from a bad
345 dream. It is as simple and as complicated as that. Repent, open our eyes, see things for what they
346 are, see the truth of the kingdoms we have built, and see the reality of a Kingdom built on
347 something other than fear.

348 That Kingdom is more than a kingdom. It is a new way of human existence, not a thing
349 we must *do* but a new way we might *be*. It is the Kingdom of God, and Jesus tells us that it is
350 not far away. It is not hidden in a distant future, it is not withheld from us until the afterlife. It is
351 “at hand.” It is present, and accessible, and waiting for us to open our eyes, see it and dare to live
352 in it.

353 Unfortunately, that is easier said than done. Like waking ourselves from a dream, it is so
354 simple, yet in practice so very difficult. But if we pay attention we can experience small
355 glimmers of this Kingdom. We can taste it in small ways, we can see it from time to time out of
356 the corners of our eyes. While I certainly don’t know the secret (how does a sleeping man
357 explain how to awaken from a dream?), I believe that Jesus showed us small ways to open our
358 eyes.

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359 In one of Jesus’s most concise teachings he says the Kingdom of God is like a woman
360 who took several weeks’ worth of flour and leavened it all. It is an odd thing to say, and I will
361 admit I had to be shown what it meant, and I am very grateful to the man who showed me. He
362 was homeless at the time and came rushing into my office one Thursday afternoon with the news
363 that he had been given a quarter of a pig by a family member. Out of my element, I asked him
364 why he was coming to the church with that news, and he explained that he needed somewhere to
365 cook it so he could feed people. We agreed that he could use the church kitchen and dining hall,
366 and two days later he and several of his friends showed up to begin cooking. After receiving the
367 pig he had gathered up a group of individuals and they had canvased the town for more
368 donations. They had gone to every restaurant, deli, grocery store and convenience store around to
369 find more donations, and with a hodgepodge collection of produce and bread they set about
370 turning this quarter of a pig into a feast. They had plastered the town with flyers, finding
371 everyone they could who might be hungry: at the homeless shelter, at the camps in the woods, on
372 Main St. and everywhere else they could find hungry people. As they finished cooking and
373 opened the doors people began to stream into the church. Hungry people. Old men, young
374 women, teenagers with track marks on their arms, children in strollers, they all came to the feast.
375 Everyone ate, some played music (a mic had been set up) others read poetry, a few danced while
376 others just sat back and watched the festivities. People cooked and cleaned and sang and ate and
377 laughed, and somewhere in the mix, time stopped and the world changed. It did not stay
378 changed, but in that moment the world was a different place. We were not afraid anymore.

379 That man, with his quarter of a pig, showed me something Jesus had tried to teach me
380 about the Kingdom of God. It is somehow as simple as a woman leavening all her flour or a man
381 cooking a quarter pig. It is a simple as feeding people and calling them friends rather than
382 strangers.

383 It is worth exploring in more depth the connection between “seeing” “believing” and
384 “doing.” Do we first see something, and then believe it to be true, and then change our actions
385 accordingly? Or do we do something, and then as a result come to see things different and to
386 believe in a different way? Or do we believe something, and allow that belief to shape both our
387 actions and our vision?

388 There are practical implications as well as philosophical ones. How do we engage people
389 in the life of the Church? Do we invite them to first believe like we do, and then once they
390 believe and see as we do, trust that they will act as we do as well? This is a common view for
391 churches to take: come and hear this sermon, sing these hymns, pray these prayers, and then you
392 will be moved to engage in the ministry of the Church. There is no failure in this logic, and for
393 many, many people it has been the path to the Church and it has been the path to Christ, but
394 perhaps it is not the only way to conceptualize the progression of our faith. For myself, much of
395 my own faith development flowed in precisely the opposite order. I acted in a particular way, and
396 as a result of my actions I came to see things in a new light and to believe in a new way.

397 Action can open our eyes to new understanding and to new faith, and belief can cause us
398 to act in a different way. This is true in the practical sense, but I wonder if there are other ways to
399 understand it philosophically. Does such insistence on causal relationships truly fit with our
400 theology? Does it fit with the words of Jesus that tell us that the Kingdom is “at hand?”

401 If I hate John Doe, I can explain it with relation to this causal understanding of the world:
402 John Doe hurt me, *therefore* I hate John Doe. It is a statement that is very much fitting with the
403 logic of the world. John Doe took my eye, therefor I will take John Doe’s eye. But, we might
404 remember that Jesus gave us a new commandment, and it was precisely to avoid this logic. He
405 said rather that we ought to love one another, and refuse this causal logic. If I hate John Doe, it is
406 because I *choose* to hate John Doe, and anything I might say about the injury I received in the
407 past, is nothing but my justification for choosing to hate. The same could be said of love. We can
408 create various systems to decide who is worthy of our love, or we can simply choose to love.

409 The point, is that the reality we experience is the choice we make in the continual process
410 of re-creation that all of us participate in, and in that process of re-creation there is no
411 differentiation between our vision, our belief and our actions. They are one and the same. If we
412 choose war, then we are choosing to believe in war, we are choosing to see its value and we are
413 choosing to act in a warlike way. If we are choosing peace, then we are choosing to see, believe
414 and act in accordance with that decision. If we say that we believe in peace, and yet our actions

415 are of war, then we might want to ask ourselves if we truly believe in peace (or perhaps there is
416 something we believe in more than peace).

417 The Kingdom of God is at hand. It is close by, and accessible. It and the abundance of
418 life are the gifts of God, and in them is the wholeness of the gospel. They show us a way we
419 might choose to live our lives on this earth, and it is a way that is in direct contrast to the systems
420 of power and domination that we build for ourselves. In my own theology, this is the starting
421 point and the foundation of my faith, and so it is the lens through which I see and understand the
422 rest of my theology. In the coming section I will briefly explore a few of the major theological
423 topics as I understand them through this lens.

424

425 **SIN:**

426 An important mentor of mine was fond of quoting Augustine saying that sin is “our
427 separation from God.” It is a good starting point for a discussion of sin, first because it reminds
428 us that sin is not a thing that we do. It is not the actions we take, it is a way that we are. It is our
429 fear manifested. Many of us grew up with the simplistic understanding of sin, which said that
430 “sins” could be a short list of things we ought not do: don’t steal, don’t murder, don’t covet,
431 don’t worship false idols, etc. Sin, is not these actions, rather sin is what underlies these actions.
432 It is the amorphous fear that draws us away from each other and away from God. I wrote above
433 (when describing the man with the pig) that the world changed on that night, and it did. But I
434 also wrote that it did not stay changed, and it didn’t. We left that night and people went their
435 separate ways. The trance was broken, and after fond goodbyes we all retreated to the world.
436 Some of us went to warm houses, others of us to the streets and the woods. There is a great
437 sadness in that. The world changed back, not because any of us decided we wanted it to end, but
438 because in our continual act of re-creation we chose a different way. It changed back, not
439 because any of us wanted to return to a world that was more callous, more harsh, but just because
440 it did. The world changed back “just because” and that “just because” is where we find our sin. It
441 is not any of our “fault.” It was not “done.” It is not a thing that any of us, or even God, could be
442 angry about. It is just a sadness, a deep sadness “just because.” Our sin is our separation from

443 God and from each other. It is our tendency to pull away from relationships even though we
444 don't want to; even though it is not in our corporate best interest. It is the deep sadness of
445 loneliness that we cannot understand and none of us would want to choose individually. It is the
446 "just because" of the world every time we try to explain to ourselves why it is that we hurt each
447 other so much, even though we do not want to be hurt. We (and again this is a very corporate
448 "we") chose to see more value in separation than we do in relationship, we choose to believe in
449 that separation, and we choose to act out our separation.

450

451 **SALVATION & THE CROSS:**

452 Jesus challenged the world. He dared to point out the frailty of our kingdoms and to point
453 us toward a life that was so much greater. He taught us of the abundance of life and invited us to
454 live in God's Kingdom. And so, "just because", we nailed him to a cross. It is such an ordinary
455 response that even now, two thousand years later we can understand the fear and feel it in our
456 hearts. We were afraid; afraid to have our kingdoms exposed, afraid to imagine all that we might
457 be, afraid to live our lives in the fullness that we are offered, and so we killed him. There is
458 nothing shocking or scandalous in this. It is so common that we might say it was the human way.
459 We react out of our fear and we lash out at each other. We hurt each other and kill each other in
460 big ways and small ways, and we have for all of our history. When God crashed into our world
461 as the Christ, this is exactly what God could have expected: humanity in all of its sad and fearful
462 brutality. The scandal is that God would choose to be with us at all, that God would come and
463 know the fullness of our pain and still respond in love. On the cross Jesus showed us that life is
464 more powerful than death, and on Easter morning God showed us that it was true.

465 Salvation is not a prize reserved for those of us who are lucky enough to believe the
466 "right" way about God, or Christ, or anything else. Salvation is the gift that Jesus pointed us
467 toward, and the promise that God kept on the cross to be in relationship with us even in the pain
468 and the ugliness of our lives. It is the opportunity that we have to choose to open our eyes, and to
469 live the fullness of life. It is God's willingness to look into all the pain that we have endured and
470 that we have caused and to still offer us that fullness. Salvation is freedom from the chains of

471 “just-because” that we have shackled ourselves with: it is an invitation to the whole world to live
472 in God’s Kingdom.

473

474 **GOD: CREATOR, CHRIST AND SPIRIT:**

475 I have a confession to make. I am one of those people who actually reads the comments
476 sections of online articles and blog posts. I say this is a confession because I have learned from
477 reading these that there is very little to be gained from such comments sections. Somehow in
478 these forums, we are reduced to something far lesser than the sum of our parts. We rant, scream,
479 and offer vitriol of every color and stripe. I have learned that no matter the topic of the original
480 content, eventually the comments section will devolve into a confrontation between angry
481 Christians and angry Atheists about the existence of God. I cannot speak for the Atheists, but I
482 do wonder about the Christians. What an odd way to spend the little time we have together.

483 I know a few things about God, and I wonder about a great many, and still more I cannot
484 even begin to wonder, so limited is my ability to consider that which transcends existence. What
485 I do know I have learned from Jesus, and I believe that in his life a great deal was revealed about
486 the nature of God. I believe that love plays a big part in it. I believe that life is, even though all
487 the tears and the heartache, “good” and holy and sacred. I believe that God and life are so
488 intimately intertwined that I cannot understand anything about one without the other. I believe
489 that God is about relationship, and that God *is* relationship. I believe that God is the foundation
490 of life, and, more importantly, God is the foundation of love.

491 God and life are like a river. There are water, rocks, sand and mud; there is movement
492 and interaction. There is change and growth, and yet the river remains the river. We can take the
493 water and, looking as closely as we might, we could not find the river in it, but the river could
494 not be the river without it. The river is the motion itself. There is a riverbed, and without it the
495 water would simply sheet across the open ground: the river could not be without the riverbed. On
496 the other hand, the riverbed is carved from the rock by the river itself: without the river, there
497 could be no riverbed. Somehow, it seems that God and life are like that. God as creator is not the
498 water or the rock. God is not the riverbed nor the river, but God is that which undergirds the

499 river: the movement, the current, the relationship between things which are smaller and yet are
500 formed into something that is greater. God is the call to come together, and the eddy that swirls
501 and over time changes the nature of the river itself as it eats away at the silt and the stone.

502 We can know God through the Christ, who was born in one particular way in one
503 particular place. We can know God through the teachings of Jesus, and through his life. We can
504 know God through the cross and through the manger: our God is a God like that. We can also
505 know God through the Spirit: the current, the wind, the tendency toward the new and the
506 beautiful. Lastly, we can know something about God by the un-knowableness. We can wonder at
507 the questions and wrestle with the unfathomable. In that, we can know something about God too,
508 because it reminds us that *knowing* will only get us so far, and so much will remain unknowable.
509 To say that I believe in God is not to say that I have God figured out. It is not like saying that I
510 believe in Mt Washington because I have gone and seen it, have stood on its soil and known its
511 grandeur. Faith for me is having experienced what I can of life, and yet still trusting that it is
512 good: that the foundation upon which it rests is good and even sacred.

513

514 **THE CHURCH:**

515 Life is a good, beautiful, sacred thing, but it is not easy. We come together to practice
516 being alive, to practice loving each other. We come together to support each other and also to
517 challenge each other. We come together to work together and also to play together. We come
518 together to hear a new word, to see a new light, to feel a new thing happening, but we also come
519 together to hear again the words that we have heard over and over again, yet still cannot always
520 believe: “it is good,” “we are loved,” “we are forgiven,” “you are the beloved child of God.” The
521 Church is how we come together to learn how to love God and love each other, and it is the place
522 from which we hope we can show that love to the world. The Church is how we try to figure out
523 how to be the body of Christ, and how to carry on Christ’s mission.

524 With all of that said, the Church is also a very human institution. It is flawed and broken,
525 it lives in sin and is in need of redemption. It is often lost and afraid, often forgetting its lofty

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526 hopes in favor of the worry of institutional management. Fortunately for us, God is willing to
527 love the Church in all of its brokenness, and to call it anew into the fullness of life.

528 The epi-curriculum which ran underneath my seminary education was to examine why
529 the Church was dying, or to put in other ways: why is the Mainline Church dying, why is the
530 Western Church dying, why is the Progressive Church dying? It was so common a question that I
531 do not recall a single course in which it did not come up in one fashion or another. Many who
532 find themselves entering the ministry at this point in the Church's history express anxiety about
533 the future of the Church, and many more question the wisdom of entering the ministry when the
534 prospects for the church appear so bleak. Certain aspects of this anxiety are warranted. I take it
535 as a given that the Church I retire from will bear little resemblance to the one I am ordained into.
536 Exactly how it will be different I cannot begin to guess. Will denominations fall away? Perhaps.
537 Will old institutions wither and die under the weight of their customs? Probably. Will the empty
538 carcasses of old meeting houses dot our landscapes, converted into high end condos and
539 shopping centers? Yes, many will.

540 In the early days of my Member-in-Discernment process, an older minister said to me "it
541 is good to know that the Church will be left in good hands." It was meant as a compliment and I
542 took it that way, but I wondered about his expectations and I wondered about my own
543 expectations for myself. Would I be the one to hold together this aging institution? Could I be the
544 one to keep it above water waiting for the day when I could hand its bulk off to the next
545 generation? I stand in awe of the leaders who have come before me, and who have held together
546 institutions which by many measures could have died long ago. Their strength is beyond me, and
547 try as I might I know that I do not have that type of strength. I do not believe that the Church is
548 dying, but I do suspect that what is coming for the Church will be so radical a transformation that
549 it will often feel like death. I suspect that we will see a time when it feels like the rafters are
550 coming down on our heads, and we will not know how to keep them up anymore and I know that
551 I will not be able to keep them up.

552 But I also suspect that no matter what happens to the Church people will continue to
553 recognize the sacred nature of life; they will continue to taste the Kingdom of God whether they

554 know a name for it or not; they will continue to marvel at the joys and the heartache of life; and
555 they will yearn to know those words that we have heard so many times, and yet find it so hard to
556 believe: It is good. We are loved. We are forgiven. You are the beloved child of God. And
557 insomuch as I have faith in the Church it is this: As the Spirit continues to blow, and the word
558 continues to be known in new ways, the church will be there with or without steeples and
559 sanctuaries and old drafty buildings to preach Jesus's gospel. With God as my strength that is the
560 Church that my generation will hand off to the next.

561

562 **THE SACRAMENTS:**

563 I worry there is a danger in thinking I know too much about the sacraments. I worry that
564 the mystery gets lost when I think I know all that I might know. So, here too I begin with this
565 disclaimer: there is mystery in the sacraments, and there is a part that we don't know; I
566 appreciate the part that I do not (cannot) know. Let me begin with baptism.

567 Jesus told us to baptize in the name of God. He did not tell us exactly *why* we ought to do
568 this, or what the *efficacy* of such baptism might be. He simply told us to do it. I have had the
569 honor of baptizing a number of people over the course of my brief licensed ministry. Some of
570 them have been infants, some children, others youth or adults. Each and every time it has been an
571 intense spiritual experience. To say that this is only water falls radically short, and yet to say
572 exactly what it is remains difficult. To explain my understanding, or at least a part of it, allow me
573 to quote from a sermon of mine entitled "Wet" which I wrote some months back. It is written as
574 a letter to a child on her baptism day, but in reality it is addressed to us all:

575 You are wet. Wet with these baptismal waters...just as you are wet
576 with the birth waters of God who created you. You are wet. Your hair is still
577 dripping. And no matter where your life takes you...no matter how intense the
578 heat...no matter how dry the landscape might appear...you are wet...and
579 there is nothing you can do to wipe those baptismal waters...those divine birth
580 waters from your head. They mark you...they mark you as beloved of God.
581 They mark you to remind you of all that you are and all that you are created to

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582 be. They mark you as the child of God that you are. And while your baptism
583 did not change any of that, perhaps it did change something. And here is the
584 really important part...here is the part that makes all the difference...here is
585 the good news...the life changing...world-inverting...mind-blowing...simple
586 truth...part of all of this. Here is what your baptism might open your eyes
587 to...

588 Everyone else, is just as wet as you. All of them...all of us...everyone
589 that God ever created...everyone who ever drew breath...in every part of the
590 creation...all of us: wet. Wet, with the birth waters of God...all of us created
591 by a God who is good...all of us created in love, and by love and for love...all
592 of us wondering if we are really lovable...all of us...worried that the darkness
593 is just too dark...all of us hiding in fear...all of us in pain of one type or
594 another...all of us lonely...all of us afraid...but all of us wet...all of us
595 loved.... All of us children of God.

596 Our second sacrament is different. While baptism is once and for good, the communion
597 table we keep coming back to. Perhaps there is something worth examining in that difference
598 alone. Whereas baptism says something about our inseparable relationship to God, Communion
599 speaks to our often fractured and changing relationships with each other. In communion we
600 practice how we might live, and like the woman leavening all her flour, or the man cooking a
601 quarter of a pig, we taste some other way of being in relationship. We set a table and refuse for it
602 to belong to anyone but Christ, and we insist that all people are welcome at it, no matter who
603 they are or where they are on their journey. How remarkable that is in and of itself! Where else
604 are we welcomed with such open arms? And what a remarkable statement about us that the
605 foundational act of our faith is not anything that we say or think or believe but rather what we do.
606 And what we do is feed each other. There is power in that.

607 A friend of mine, who is a good Catholic and likes to keep me honest in my (often times)
608 extremely progressive theology, questioned me about communion in our tradition. His question
609 in particular, after I was explaining why I do not believe in transubstantiation, was “if not in the

610 elements, then where is God in the Eucharist?" It's a good question. I explained to him that while
611 a Catholic Priest (at least the few I have spoken with about it) will gladly take communion, even
612 if nobody else shows up for Mass, in my theology it would be less meaningful to do the same,
613 because God is not in the bread or the cup any more than God is in the bread on our dinner table,
614 but rather in communion God is in the spaces in between us when we gather at this table. God is
615 in the relationships between people who come together to feed and be fed by one another, and to
616 dare to proclaim that this has something to do with the Kingdom of God. It is in that way that
617 while yes, communion is a memorial and a remembrance, it is also something beyond that,
618 something that tugs at our souls and points us toward new life and the abundance of life. What
619 exactly that is, I cannot fully explain. That is the mystery part, the beautiful part, which is, I
620 suppose, why I like the "I don't know," even if those words make us as uncomfortable as they
621 do. We feed each other, we take a moment, and a lifetime, to recognize God's love for us. We let
622 the simplicity of bread and water and wine mark this sacredness, even as it is a sacredness we do
623 not fully understand. We say "come and eat, come and be bathed in these waters." Yet, I suspect
624 what we mean is come and be loved, and come and be love, or more so come and see that love,
625 and this way of love, is true, it is real, it is at hand.

626

627 **MINISTRY:**

628 We are all called to ministry. Some of us are called to preach and teach from a pulpit,
629 others are called to teach in a classroom or nursery school, some are called to preach the gospel
630 as ER nurses, or dental hygienists, while others are called to preach as urban-planners, business
631 executives, community leaders, rabble rousers, food service workers, lovers, mothers, sales
632 associates, or any number of ways beyond count. We all have a ministry to which we are called,
633 sometimes within churches, and often outside of churches. But, what is the thread that ties all
634 these ministry together? What is it we are *doing* when we care for the hurt, or feed the hungry?
635 What is it we are doing when we tend to the young or the old, or the lost or the lonely?

636 I did my Clinical Pastoral Education at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in the
637 summer of 2014. A wonderful learning experience, I had many interactions that were meaningful

638 on many levels, but there is one interaction that I suspect I will carry with me for a long time to
639 come. The patient was a young woman who had been in a serious accident. I spent most of an
640 afternoon sitting with her fiancée outside the trauma room while they worked on her, getting
641 brief moments with her when she was finally stabilized and waiting for surgery. Her spine had
642 been injured, and at the time nobody was sure what the outcome would be. It was a long day for
643 everyone, and she was still in surgery when I left for the day. The next morning I went to find
644 her in the ICU.

645 That morning we talked for a long while, and she began to cry. When she began to cry,
646 her tears mixed with the remnants of blood and dirt that they had been unable to clean off of her
647 face, and she realized that being unable to move her body she could not wipe away her own
648 tears. She asked for help, and gently, hesitantly I did my best to dry her tears. I have no memory
649 of what it was that we said to one another that morning. I have no idea if she remembers the
650 interaction at all, mixed up as it must be with so many other memories in a fog of pain and
651 opiates, but I learned a great deal about ministry from that encounter. I learned about intimacy,
652 and a willingness to be in relationship with people. I learned that what separates feeding people
653 from *ministering* to people with food has nothing to do with the food but everything to do with
654 the willingness to be fully present, fully in relationship.

655 Somebody said “preach the gospel always, use words when necessary.”¹ I am a big fan of
656 words, we can do so much that is good with words, but it is that sentiment that defines ministry.
657 It is a willingness to preach the gospel through all of our relationships, and it is in those
658 ministries that we have the opportunity to experience the Kingdom of God.

659

660 **JUSTICE:**

¹ This quote is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, although my understanding is that he never said it. Follow this link for an interesting article in Christianity Today. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/mayweb-only/120-42.0.html>

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661 I will conclude this brief discussion of my theology with a short examination of Justice,
662 as it seems a fitting place to end. It has been said that “Justice is love writ large.²” That is to say
663 that while love is my ability to want the best for my child, justice is my ability to want the same
664 for someone else’s child. Thus, love and justice are not categorically different, but rather are
665 differentiated by their scale and scope. As I wrote earlier: love behaves strangely. It calls us to be
666 wasteful, and it causes us to forget or ignore the falsehood of scarcity and be willing to live
667 abundantly. Justice does the same. Unfortunately justice seems to have a harder time ingraining
668 itself upon our souls. Perhaps it is the effect of greater distances, perhaps it is our inability see
669 ourselves in the eyes of the other, and perhaps it is just our own biology failing to see the genetic
670 benefit to justice. Either way it would appear more difficult for us, but as these past few years
671 have shown us as American racism once again rears its head and shows us how quietly it has
672 been waiting, it is no mere theoretical benefit. It cannot be contained within the theological
673 ramblings of an essay: it is life or death, and it always has been.

674 When I made my decision to become a Member-in-Discernment and enter seminary at
675 Andover Newton Theological School, I had an experience in my prayer life that helped me to
676 finalize my decision. I was walking a labyrinth, contemplating faith and doubt, when I heard
677 Jesus’s words to us “Love one another, just as I have loved you.” As I write this final paper in
678 my in-discernment journey I think of those words again, and I see how well Jesus understood our
679 difficulty moving from love to justice (or to put it another way: our difficulty moving from the
680 love of those similar to us to the love of those different from us). He could have simply asked us
681 to love one another, but somehow in reminding us of his love, and God’s love (and who can be
682 more *other* than God our creator is to God’s creatures?) he pointed a way toward a justice resting
683 on the foundation of God’s love.

684 We are called to live in God’s Kingdom. We are called to open our eyes and see that it is
685 here. We are called to see that the powers of oppression are resting on a falsehood, and that they
686 are powerless. It is a Kingdom of love and it is a Kingdom of love writ large: justice. As I write

² I am uncertain who said this first. I have seen it attributed to Cornell West, and others. For myself I will always hear it in the voice of my professor Nimi Wariboko.

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687 people are calling out for justice in Baltimore.³ They are calling out because of Freddie Gray,
688 they are calling out for a world where basic dignities are not limited by race. They are calling out
689 for a Kingdom of Justice, and they are reminding us, Christians across this nation and across the
690 globe, that we need to open our eyes and see: the Kingdom of God is at hand. We can live in it.

691

692 **IN CLOSING:**

693 In many ways this journey has taught me about both the gifts and the shortcomings that I
694 bring into ministry. I have learned that I am a decent preacher. At least that is what people tell
695 me. Whether it is true or not, I have learned that I love the act of preaching. I have learned that I
696 love the preparation, the anxiety, the opportunity to delve into my own faith and to try to relate it
697 to others. I have learned just how powerful it is to preach the good news, to tell people about the
698 love of God, and to speak the promise of God's Kingdom. I have learned to love standing over
699 the abyss. More so, I have learned just how transformative it can be to give that opportunity to
700 others: to let others speak their own truth, and to stand back and watch the Spirit speaking
701 through countless other people.

702 I have learned that I am called in a very particular way to engage with the marginalized. I
703 have learned that I can be an effective minister not just in the church but outside of it. I have
704 learned that the Spirit is working in all kinds of places, and when I allow myself to open my eyes
705 to the Spirit it is life giving and soul healing.

706 So what's next? Will I begin a search for a solo pastor call? A Senior Pastor? A Youth
707 Pastor? An Outreach Pastor? Will I stay in Keene, or go elsewhere? Will I stay local or move far
708 away? I get asked all of those questions on a regular basis, and the truth is I don't know. I know
709 my call, and I trust that the Spirit will move in ways that continue to change it and to challenge
710 it. I will try as I am able to trust in the Spirit and to walk the path as best I am able. I will

³ The first writing of this paper coincided with the death of Freddie Gray. Now, the reference seems somewhat dated now, and yet sadly the point holds valid, even if names and details vary.

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711 minister in churches and outside of churches, in big ways and small ways. I will make mistakes
712 and I will try my best to learn from them.

713 I will end this part of my journey very near to where I began: I will try to love people, as
714 Christ loves us, and I will remember that my faith and my ministry are planted in the love of
715 Christ.

716 Lastly, I should say something about ordination: that is why we are here. I know my call
717 from God. I know it in my heart, and have committed myself to following it wherever it may
718 lead. I know that I will stumble and make mistakes as I do so, but I have faith that God will do
719 something through me. All the same, it is a frightening proposition, and one that I cannot
720 undertake on my own. I need the support of a loving community around me, which is where you
721 come in.

722 We can talk about *Authority* and *Ecclesiastical Order* all we like, and those are good
723 things to discuss, but at the end of the day what “ordination” means is that you all, on behalf of
724 the wider UCC, and on behalf of the Universal Church will choose to trust me and to support me
725 in my ministry. It means that you recognize my call and my willingness to accept it, and it means
726 that you are willing to follow it with me.

727 I would like to thank all of you who came today, particularly the Southwest Association
728 Committee on Church and Ministry and Executive Council, who have walked this journey with
729 me, and gathered this Ecclesiastical Council together. And also all of you who have decided to
730 be here as friends, loved ones, delegates, and representatives of the Body of Christ The support
731 you have all shown me has been deeply moving.

732 In closing I would ask that you prayerfully consider approving me for Ordination
733 Pending Call, but do not consider it casually. Too often we get lost in the bureaucracy of these
734 things. Too often we imagine that it is all so many words, and we forget that it matters. It matters
735 to the Church, and everything it is becoming, and it matters to the people who will take it into the
736 future. It matters because the Kingdom is at hand, and what we say and do will change our
737 ability to open our eyes and our hearts to it. So, please spend some time in prayer. Listen for the
738 voice of God. Seek God’s wisdom and God’s will, and vote accordingly.