

114 Packard Rd.
Stow, MA 01775

January 7, 2010

Dear Friends,

The enclosed document is a short version of my ordination paper. It references a longer paper.

The long and the short version can be accessed on the website of Colchester Federated Church (www.colchesterfederatedchurch.org).

Blessings,

Beatrice E. Manning, Ph.D.

Ordination Paper, Short

Beatrice E. Manning

Introduction

I begin this shortened version of a statement of my theology with a quote from Roger Shinn's "Confessing Our Faith," published by the United Church of Christ Press, 1990. I also write this shortened version at the request of the New London County Association Committee on Ministry. The specific topics covered are chosen by them and generally follow the UCC Statement of Faith. These topics should not be seen as the issues I see as the most crucial for the church in our time. We live in a troubled world filled with souls that hunger for God's love, for peace, for serenity and courage in the midst of struggle, and with many who hunger to be expressions of love's dwelling places. I prefer to start with the pain of the world, which I believe God continues to feel, and ask how the church's internal struggles with theology, Christology and ecclesiology can engage our world. Also I confess that the topics as they are labeled here are among the topics that led me to leave the church for a long time and the topics that in a pastoral role I have had to deal with the scars left on individuals and their families. I take the UCC warning about creeds very much to heart. The length of each section also follows the Committee on Ministry's suggestions. I encourage all to read the full document that lays the beliefs expressed here in context. It is in that document that you will get to know more of who I am, as is a required part of the UCC ordination paper. I believe that one's theology is dynamic and does not descend upon us but reflects our ongoing interaction with God. In the final section of the paper I identify what I see as pressing theological, Christological, and ecclesiological issues of the day and how these flow as expressions of our Statement of Faith.

I quote from Shinn (7),

...the history of creeds has its painful side. Arrogant people have slaughtered their neighbors on creedal grounds. Sometimes thoughtful people have been barred from the church because they questioned its creeds, while lethargic folk went on reciting the creeds without any trouble. Servants of Christ, living in his spirit, have suffered persecution by spiteful people who fanatically held to every article in an inherited creed. The United Church of Christ, aware of this history, chose to develop a Statement of Faith rather than a creed...the Statement of Faith is not a standard of objective authority in the United Church of Christ...The Statement of Faith is not a basis for heresy trials. No one is excluded from the church or denied ordination because of disagreement with it.

Shinn follows these words with a quote from Ogden Nash,

There are too many people who think that
Just because they have parishes or dioceses
It imparts infallibility to all their bias.

God as expressed in ancient creeds and in the UCC Statement of Faith

The statement about God in the UCC Statement of Faith is very short and simple, "We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ, and our God..." The differences between this statement and the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed are subtle but important. The earlier creeds

describe “God” as “Father” and “Almighty” and as the “creator” or “maker” of all-that-is. Except as noted, my beliefs are in line with the UCC statement (full text of the Statement can be found in the Appendix) and not the historical creeds.

The first important difference for me that is embodied in the UCC Statement is that God is described as an “Eternal Spirit” and not as a previous (there is no statement in earlier creeds concerning God’s “ongoingness,”), male (Father) “maker.” “Eternal Spirit” describes a God that existed before us and will exist after us. This God is always (eternally) with us. This God exists within creation. God is beyond us but always among and within us. That is my understanding of God.

The second important difference for me is that God is described as “God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God.” No such statement appears in earlier creeds; rather, they specify that Jesus is God’s only son. The UCC statement reflects a different relationship between God and Jesus. The God of Jesus is our God. Expression of the Trinitarian nature of God has become more spacious and accessible. Jesus is divine and led by the “Eternal Spirit.” But, we also have access to the divine “Eternal Spirit.”

The third important difference is that, unlike the earlier creeds that move immediately from a short statement about a “Father creator” to beliefs about Jesus, the UCC statement moves immediately from a short statement about an “Eternal Spirit” to the ways in which that “Eternal Spirit” remains involved with the world. You (God) “call worlds into being;” “create persons in your own image;” “set before each one the ways of life and death;” “seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin;” “judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.” This is the God I experience – the God that remains involved and the God with whom we are personally connected. I endorse these statements because they say much more than that we think God is there; for me they declare a God in whom I place my trust, my love, my confidence.

“Call worlds into being” implies that creation continues, reflecting the fact that new worlds as well as new creatures in this world continue to come into being and that God is the source of each and all of these new beings. In that sense, this description of God is closer to Tillich and me (God is not a being, but Being itself).

The inclusion of “create persons in your own image” is for me a most joyful addition to earlier creeds. It specifically recognizes the divine, the “breath of God,” in each of us. The only thought I have concerning this statement is that I believe we can consider that “the image of God” in the entire universe might apply to more than just “persons.”

The additional deeds of God mentioned return us to a Biblical base, which I applaud. They are actions reflecting a God “...abounding in steadfast love,” (Jonah 4:2), and whose will for the world is that we “...do justice ... love kindness...and...walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Christ as expressed in the creeds and Statement, and what it means that Christ is Head of the Church

The earlier creeds contain long statements about Jesus Christ -- many attesting to the nature of his being and his ascendance to heaven after the crucifixion. The UCC statement is much shorter and

does not make such claims. It begins, “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth...” No claims of “God’s only son” or “virgin birth” or “sitting at the right hand of God” are made. This is a significant difference.

“Crucified” is contained in all. The “powers and principalities” of the world saw Jesus as a threat in the extreme. This is important to me – not so much that he was crucified but that crucifixion and its modern day equivalents are the price we may be asked to pay if we truly live as Jesus lived and by what he taught. “Crucified” testifies to the “scandalous gospel of Jesus” as described by Peter Gomes. The Nicene Creed and the UCC Statement indicate that Jesus was crucified for our sake but neither says why he was crucified in terms of his actions or his preaching. I believe this massive exclusion (it excludes most of all the Gospels) results from the fact they were all written after Christians had become “the powers and principalities.” Jesus says (Luke¹ 6:20) “Congratulations, you poor! God’s domain belongs to you.” And in Luke 6:24, “Damn you rich! You already have your consolation.” Luke (6:21) continues, “Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.” and (Luke 2:25), “Damn you who are well-fed now! You will know hunger.” This was not what the Emperor Constantine, the first Christian ruler of Rome, wanted to hear. It was under his rule that the first creed (Nicene) was written in 325 C.E. The summary of Jesus’ teaching is that the world as he knew it would be turned upside down, under the rule of heaven. Our world is not much different in terms of the condition of the poor and hungry here, in one of the richest countries in the world, 1 in 8 people including 25% of our children live in poverty. Jesus is my “risen Savior” because of what he taught. He taught us to look beyond the power structures of our time – to totally invert them if necessary. I feel and treat these teachings as divine.

When we affirm that Jesus is the head of the church we are claiming a most amazing thing. This statement recognizes the inherent tension between what it means and what it takes to be successful in our world, and what it means to be faithful to a world that is not yet – a world nearly opposite what is. Because we have chosen to be faithful to the “not yet” world, non-conformity to this world is required. We are acknowledging our present day commitment to live in today’s world as the early Christian communities lived in theirs. Paul, in his letter to the Romans (NRSV 12:1-2) who lived within the very seat of human power at that time, may say it best, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

I think our place in this world must be much like the early Christians living in the heart of the Roman Empire. We live in one of the richest and certainly the most militarily powerful country in the world. That our church was formed here in the midst of that power further attests to the living Christ within us. While we often, perhaps usually, fail, the fact that we name Jesus as our head speaks to the presence of the living Christ within us and our commitment to God’s reign.

¹ This translation can be found in “The Complete Gospels” edited by Robert J. Miller, 1994 Polebridge Press, p.130-1. A short essay concerning this translation is found within this publication on page 448.

The Holy Spirit as expressed in the creeds and the Statement; and the Trinitarian relationship

The Apostles' Creed only states a belief in the Holy Spirit with nothing further concerning what that might mean. The Nicene Creed implies a Holy Spirit that might be seen as slightly unequal in the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is described as one who "...proceeds from the Father and the Son." The Holy Spirit continues from the Father and Son. Such a description implies a later arrival than the other two entities. Its high, but not clear deity status is affirmed, "...with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified." Interestingly, two lines after the "proceeds" line the Holy Spirit is described as having spoken "through the prophets." Such a description clearly places the Holy Spirit's existence before Jesus' appearance on earth. In this Creed, the equality of the parts of the Trinity has not been worked out. The relationship of the Holy Spirit to the prophets seems to me to be compromise language which allows recognition of the prophets, thus leaving them in the chain of succession of the tradition but differentiating them from Jesus, who, unlike the prophets, is seen as speaking for himself as God. The UCC Statement is not fully Trinitarian, and this is reflected by the fact that the 1981 General Synod asked that a new "collaborative" statement be devised to "affirm the triune nature of God" (Shinn 42-3).

For me the Trinitarian God is a communion of three essences which early church councils envisioned as persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). A God in internal communion embodies relationship and at some level *is* relationship. The internality of this God is relational. God's internal relationality spills over to all creation. Things/energies/essences/persons can only be understood in relation to others. The early Councils upheld a three-persona God, the parts being co-eternal, co-infinite, co-equals in eternal community. These Councils did not dictate how this relationality occurs or how it is to be explained. Our tradition offers us multiple ways to experience and relate to God, all of which are authentic. The characteristics of the Biblical, Christian God can only be experienced in relationship. Love, mercy, faithfulness, justice, holiness only have meaning in relation to something beyond one's self.

I believe that we can talk about a Triune God in ways that are accessible and understandable without the male exclusivity that had reasserted itself into the church by the third century. The Trinity involves relating to a source (of all), holiness within each and all, and a goodness that transcends each. I agree with Barbara Brown Zilmund (quoted in Shinn, 43) that there is important meaning in "the Trinitarian truth that there is one God *existing* in community" and that such a God "embodies the very nature of reality as relational or communal." If you wish I suggest reading the section on community in my full paper where you will find a deep expression of my commitment to building community and why I see it as crucial.

Sin and redemption; resurrection

Within the Christian tradition, the consistent answer as to why God joins humanity on earth is that humans became separated from God (sinful) and could only be redeemed by God's presence and action. For me at least two interpretations ring true. If one considers God totally separate from creation, only a human/divine being can reunite humanity with God. If, on the other hand, one considers God to be part of all-that-is and also part of each that is, then separation from God means that humans have become disconnected from the rest of creation and in some ways even from themselves.

It is this separation, this alienation, which is sin and from which sinful acts proceed. When we lose communion with any part of creation, particularly the least among us, we are in a state of sin.

The most malignant forms of alienation occur when communion is so broken that we commit acts of domination and aggression; indeed, we live in a world where these are all too common and we participate in them as we participate in the structures of our nation and its acts of domination and aggression, e.g., Iraq, Guantanamo, every act of capital punishment, any participation in paying someone less than they can live on (this can include household help, child care workers, church administrators) and when we provide our labor to companies making weapons of war and when we gobble the earth's resources knowing we are taking from those who are impoverished. It is this type of separation that requires redemptive reconciliation and such reconciliation cannot occur without liberation.

For me Peter Hodgeson, in *Winds of the Spirit* (269) offers the best understanding of reconciliation and resurrection. Since I cannot say it better, I will quote.

There can be no reconciliation without liberation...without the radical change in social structures that overcomes injustice and inequality; otherwise reconciliation is a phony peace. Likewise there can be no liberation without reconciliation, that is, without the healing of divisive conflicts and the acceptance of genuine differences; if differences tear us apart, emancipation is a hollow victory. We must strive with equivalent zeal for both love and freedom, both wholeness and emancipation. When they come together, 'resurrection' occurs.

When we envision reconciliation as tied to liberation, we can see redemption is a process – a process of transforming all human spaces in the direction of universal community.

Within the ancient creeds, "resurrection" involves Jesus arising from the dead to sit with God the Father in heaven. Such a definition takes Jesus away from us and the struggles of the world. The UCC Statement of Faith only deals with "resurrection" by referring to our "risen savior." The place of arising to is not specified. It is the Greek word "anastasis" that is usually translated as "resurrection." It literally means "coming to stand in the midst of." This is the resurrection to which I relate. Jesus has not risen to some distant, other-worldly realm. The risen Christ stands in the midst of our struggles for redemptive reconciliation with one another, ourselves and all-that-is. In this understanding, Jesus' human agency is not lost but continues to live within each of us. We must be the resurrection.

For me, the best recent example of experiencing the living Jesus may be Mother Teresa. While she is confessing to her superiors that her spiritual life is dry and she gets nothing from her retreats, confessions, and participation in Mass, she is doing her greatest work among the poor of Calcutta. She only sees Jesus in the faces of the poor and the dying. The agency of Jesus (much more important than his body) stands in the midst of all acts of liberating love. Reconciliation occurs when we can look into the eyes of the most dejected and into the eyes of our worst enemy and see Jesus.

That the cross remains the symbol of Christianity says, "The worst you have to offer will not stand." The power of the Roman Empire did not stand; the ossified and colonized religious power structure of Jesus' time did not stand.

Worship and sacraments, mission and witness through the Local Church

Worship offers moments to join with all-that-is and receive God's abundant love. The two UCC sacraments offer intensified moments of joining. Within this most imperfect world, we continue to have moments of perfect joining with all-that-is. For all our pain, for all our separateness, for all our brokenness, for all our cynical despair, we still witness and experience those moments. For me such a moment is perfectly catching a wave and riding it as it breaks right under my nose; and, as sure as anything, I am part of that wave and part of the ocean and part of all oceans and part of all-that-is. The wave is there for me to join. Its existence is the invitation. I only respond to the offer. These perfect moments cannot be suppressed -- not by cynicism, not by anger, not by corruption, not by greed, not by anything. They are unstoppable. They are repeating gifts and we need only catch them.

The communion table offers such a moment -- a moment when our being reaches through all the heavens to the entire universe as well as to the center of the earth, and is embraced. As with the waves, this moment exists by self-renewing invitation. This moment exists regardless of what harm we have done the moment before and what harm or betrayal or failure in courage we will do in the next moment. This moment is when we are invited to join perfectly with the peace of God -- when we are invited to join perfectly with all-that-is.

Baptism symbolizes the end of aloneness. Children no longer are only their parent's and adults are no longer alone. Baptism takes place with water -- water, that part of the earth that is never still, that part of the earth that can always overflow whatever bounds it; it is never a captive, that part of creation in which the slightest disturbance, a pebble, a breeze, the lightest of breath, creates a ripple that flows to all that try to bind it. The Didache indicates a preference for "living" (moving) water. For me "living" water most helps symbolize the living Christ among us and the joining of this new person into the body of Christ. By joining the body of Christ we are also to become part of Christ's ministry of reconciliation and the risks and dangers that involves.

The UCC Statement of Faith, unlike the ancient creeds, recognizes the role of the church and the "cost and joy of discipleship." To answer the calls to the church contained in the Statement involves true and continual acts of courage. "To proclaim the gospel to all the world" calls for the active involvement of all churches in establishing justice in the way that Hodgson suggests and in compliance with the teaching of Jesus, who called for nearly an inversion of the existing social conditions of his time -- a time having many similarities to our time.

Authority and responsibility in the UCC

The word "authority" is not much used in the United Church of Christ and hardly at all in its formal documents. It can be found four times in the Constitution and Bylaws and it is always used to grant authority downward. All uses follow the one found in paragraph 241. "The Board of Directors may grant *authority* (emphasis mine) to sub-units, ministry teams, or other appropriate entities, to speak and act on its behalf within its own broad policy statements and those of the General Synod of the United Church of Christ."

In form and in substance the Constitution crafts a polity statement that is relational and autonomous -- freedom within community. Paragraphs 9-18 affirm the local churches but they are carefully placed between paragraphs emphasizing covenant. The last two sentences of paragraph 8 read, "The Collegium (of UCC officers) provides a setting for *mutual accountability*, for *mutual reporting*, and for assessing the ongoing programs of the United Church of Christ. It shall reflect the commitment of the United Church of Christ to be an inclusive church." (Italics mine.) Paragraph 19 reads, "Actions by,

or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church.”

The UCC is best described as a covenantal church. A covenant is stronger than a promise, more inclusive and relational than a contract and more holy than either. That Christ is recognized as the head implies that God is part of the covenant. All persons and bodies covenant with one another but there is always the additional partnership of each and all with God. Reuben A. Shearers² describes the uniqueness of covenant in church life as follows:

When the United Church of Christ developed its Constitution and Bylaws...it did in fact develop a principle of order new in the American scene of denominationally organized church life...The new element was a covenanted relationship of autonomous units of church life – a relationship delineated but not regulated by a constitution and bylaws.

The accent within the UCC is always on freedom. Freedom here is best understood as “freedom for” and not “freedom from.” We are not free to disregard the positions of any other part of the church. We are free to pursue the work of the church which by definition is the work of Christ, the head, who stands in our midst.

I strongly urge readers to go to the discussion of the UCC in my full document. It is there that I lay out the dynamic tensions within which the UCC exists and which exist within the UCC. Its structure and actions can best be viewed within the conflicting pressures that are continually balanced by nearly every action or document of the UCC at all its levels from the local church, to the General Synod and the executive offices.

Pressing Issues

I have never united myself to any church, because I have found it difficult in giving my assent, without mental reservation to the long, complicated statements of Christian Doctrine which characterize their Articles of Faith. When any church will inscribe over its altar, as its sole qualification for membership, the Savior’s condensed statement of the substance of both Law and Gospel, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,’ that church will I join with all my heart and soul.

Abraham Lincoln

I believe the UCC may meet Lincoln’s criteria. I want to strive to help the church to continue to move in that direction. In our nation many have not been brought up in a church or feel like Lincoln when they remember the churches of their childhood. We must strive to make our local churches welcoming places for them.

In the church I often attend and act as a facilitator in small group ministry, I feel deep pain when I hear mainly distress from all members of our group concerning their experiences of Jesus as filtered through the churches of their youth and young adulthood. We must find ways to heal those wounds. We must find ways to make our church, self-described as the body of Christ, speak and act for love in the world.

² Reuben A. Sheares, “A Covenant Polity,” in *Theology and Identity*, Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, eds. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 71-72.

We must find ways to make our Statement of Faith a document to be lived, and we must live it. We must find ways to "...do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly..." We must find ways to challenge and overturn the oppressive structures in which we live. Minimally, we must personally find ways to live less by the measures of our culture and more by the measures of Jesus.

We must find ways to assist people in reconnecting to the holiness in their lives and help them live out that holiness. We must find ways to involve and aid those who are engaged in the struggles for justice but see the church not only as not helpful but as part of the injustice. Whenever our suffering can end some of the suffering of this world, we are, in the words of Martin Luther King, obligated to suffer, secure in the belief that God stands among us and the Godhead suffers all that we do.

Conclusion

I believe we must pay more attention to what Jesus said, and less attention to what our ancient Creeds said. What we believe about the essence of God or Christ or the Spirit or a Trinitarian God is less important than how we follow the teachings of this God.

Interestingly the ancient Creeds say nothing about human behavior. They dictate a set of beliefs "about" God and do not ask anything of us but to believe them.

I want to be the type of minister who asks her congregants and students to live lives that engage Walter Russell Bowie's hymn.

*Oh holy city, seen of John,
Where Christ the Lamb doth reign;
Within whose four-square walls shall come
No night, nor need, nor pain.
And where the tears are wiped from eyes
That shall not weep again.*

*O shame to us who rest content
While lust and greed for gain
In street and shop and tenement
Wring gold from human pain,
And bitter lips in blind despair cry
'Christ hath died in vain.'*

*Give us, O God, the strength to build
The city that hath stood
Too long a dream, whose laws are love,
Whose ways are brotherhood (sic);
And where the sun that shineth is
God's grace for human good.*

*Already in the mind of God
That city riseth fair;
Lo, how its splendor challenges
The souls that greatly dare,
Yea, bids us seize the whole of life
And build its glory there.*

Appendix

Statement of Faith

United Church of Christ

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior
Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being,
create persons in your own image,
and set before each one the ways of life and death.
You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness
and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will
declared through the prophets and apostles.
In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and
risen Savior,
you have come to us
and shared our common lot,
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the world to yourself.

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.

You call us into your church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
your presence in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen