According to Central Association MACUCC guidelines this paper, written in conversation with the UCC Statement of Faith, should demonstrate the candidate’s ability to articulate the historic Christian faith and locate his or her own faith in relation to the ecumenical and Reformed tradition.
Faith Background

I was born in 1962 into a Protestant family in the north of England. As a child, I was loved and nurtured by my proud parents and my devoted grandparents who lived nearby. I received an intensive Sunday School education, attending both my mother’s Methodist chapel and my father’s Parish Church, which belonged to the Church of England. I chose to be confirmed in the Anglican tradition at age 11, but later changed my focus to Methodism with its active youth ministry in our community. I often attended pre-breakfast Sunday communion with my father and I regularly visited homebound parishioners and nursing home residents with my mother.

During my teenage years I encountered the social gospel for the first time and came to realize that I was privileged in my comfortable home life and access to excellent education. I did not have much exposure to other ethnicities, faiths or even much of the rich diversity in the Christian faith until I began college. At that time, I was exposed to conservative evangelical Christians in one group and radical liberal Christians in another, as well as students of other faiths and races. Meanwhile, the majority of students on campus had little interest in religion. I had to learn to find my own balance, in the type of Christianity I embraced, how much of my faith I wanted to share. While I had always been taught to be inclusive of people of other races and traditions, I now had to learn how to put that into practice. I found my refuge and the opportunity to explore these questions in the local Methodist/United Reformed Church with a lively student group, where I met my husband. I was able to continue the exploration, in Methodism, when we moved to Cambridge, England after graduation.
In 1987, when we moved to the United States, my husband took up a position as a postdoctoral research student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). I found employment as a software engineer in a “startup” company. Although we continued to attend church, going to the Harvard Epworth Methodist Church in Cambridge, MA, I felt less need to rely upon God. I allowed my prayer life and my faith in God to flounder. I believe that God used this time to give me a perspective on my childhood so that I could begin to discover that having faith was not just about pleasing my parents or my parental image of God.

In 1989, when my husband’s program came to an end we moved back to the United Kingdom (UK). However, our new working environments in England were disappointing. My husband had hoped for a career in research, but found that funding was inadequate. I was working in at an electronics company whose environment was not welcoming to female engineers. We found ourselves homesick for Massachusetts and the upbeat “can do” attitude of the people of the USA. Moving back to Boston, I was able to resume work at the same company and my husband went back to a research post at MIT. Having decided to settle in the United States we looked for a home in which to raise a family.

Sherborn, Massachusetts seemed like the ideal location, with its bucolic environment and excellent school system. A 45-minute drive from Cambridge, we continued attending the Harvard Epworth Methodist Church and our first two children were baptized there. We liked the progressive, inclusive theology of that church and feared we would not find the same in the suburbs. However, when our first child was three years old and ready for Sunday School we decided that we must try our local church
and began attending Pilgrim Church in Sherborn, Massachusetts, United Church of Christ (UCC).

Since that time my family has been active in Pilgrim Church and I have grown to love this church, with its vibrant ministry to children and youth; its support of the needs of the sick and the elderly; its service opportunities for adults and youth; its connection with a predominantly African American church in Boston; and its rich program of music and arts. I have served the church in many various ways, most recently as co-moderator and then moderator. In those roles I developed an understanding of the UCC and the Congregationalist tradition of governance. I sometimes feel a little “at sea” without the regular recital of a creed or fixed liturgy, but I appreciate the freedom my church gives to its members to develop their own faith walk, wherever they are in their faith journey. I believe that the UCC Statement of Faith, as it is generally used in a descriptive way, provides an ideal balance between the dictates of doctrine and creed, and the looseness of self-styled belief. I believe that there are truths, although we mortals can only image them as in a mirror viewed dimly, as St. Paul says (1 Corinthians 13:12). The UCC statement of faith describes the mainstream Protestant Christian perception of God’s truths to which I can subscribe.

Response to the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith

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

The UCC statement of faith begins with a description of God as the one whom Christians meet in the person of Jesus Christ and whose presence they experience in the
world as the Holy Spirit. While the statement embraces the triune nature of God, it shies away from making a declaration of the classical Trinitarian formula: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. Personally I support the use of a Trinitarian formula in worship, but, I prefer to use inclusive expressions, such as “Creator, Christ and Spirit” in order to counter the patriarchal leaning of the classical formula. Having taken classes in both Systematic Theology and the Sacraments, I am convinced of the need to maintain the use some of the Trinitarian formulae in our churches.

One need for a formula is very practical and aids the UCC in its mission of embracing ecumenism. A baptism administered in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will be recognized by the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other Christian churches as is, hence, baptism into the church worldwide.¹ The second need for at least periodic visitation of the Trinitarian formula is to remind us of our membership not only of the church worldwide, but also the church over history. For centuries Christian thinkers debated and wrestled with the notion and formulation of the Trinity. A human expression of the eternal, infinite God will always fall short, but the Trinitarian formula is the product of profound reflection on the relational nature of God. It reflects God’s relationship with Jesus Christ and God’s continuing presence and activity in the world.

While I honor the truths of other faith-views and I deeply respect my Unitarian Universalist friends’ spirituality and convictions, I have come to believe that if one is to claim Jesus Christ as Son of God, and savior, then a Trinitarian understanding is necessary. My Systematic Theology professor, Mark Heim, used to pose the question “who is God when God is home alone?” As we conceive of God as love, a verb and an

¹ I have heard “The One whom Jesus called Abba, Father; Jesus the Son; and the Holy Spirit” used in baptism, which skillfully avoids referring to God, categorically as “Father”
action, then even before the creation of the universe God existed in relationship. I believe this relationship can be explained by the Creator’s relationship with Logos, the Word, who was made flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As Jesus promised his disciples, God continues God’s activity, God continues “speaking”, and God continues companionship with us in the world through the Holy Spirit. I believe that when the loving communion of the three persons of the Trinity is a model for our worship and our discipleship God is most fully present in our communities of faith.

**God creates:** *You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.*

Understanding God as Creator of the whole universe is essential to my faith, though this is more nuanced than a belief in what is called “intelligent design.” The statement proclaims that God “calls the worlds into being,” a present tense action which elicits a response. God has not only placed planets in the cosmos, God calls and continues to call all that has life, including humanity, to be a part of God’s creation. I believe that when people create things such as: works of art and music; inventions that improve the quality of life for people; poetry and prose; communities and habitats, they join God in creation.

The story of the creation of human beings in God’s own image is troublesome for many, particularly those who have a very close relationship with non-human animals and the natural world. Those who are troubled by this notion often imagine that humanity created in God’s image precludes other creatures being in God’s image, and sets the precedent for arrogance and superiority of humanity over the others. They become even more incensed when the creation story is used to justify humanity’s abuse of the natural
world, by declaring that God has given humankind dominion over the world. I think the UCC statement of faith addresses these concerns very well, by declaring that God “sets before each one the ways of life and death.” That is to say, humans are not necessarily more beloved to God than the other creatures, but that they are conscious of themselves and their relationship with God in a way that the other creatures are not. They are also aware of the facts of life and death. This is an interesting interpretation of the creation story in Genesis, where it is the disobedience of the first humans which leads to their knowledge of good and evil, and hence life and death.

For myself, I find the explanation of the fallen-ness of humanity, and indeed the whole creation, an important image for understanding tragedy, sin and suffering. If God, the creator, is good then there has to be some explanation for the fact that human beings sometimes behaves abusively toward one another, other creatures, and the natural world. An explanation is also needed for why it seems that the natural world does not operate in the “good” way it was originally created. I accept that the story of the Fall, in the book of Genesis, demonstrates this truth: God the creator is good, and though God can only create what is good we live in a fallen and broken world.

**God seeks to save:** *You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.*

I believe that the UCC statement of faith rightly describes God’s saving action as ongoing. I agree, also, that the thing we are being saved from is sin itself. I have found that it is very common in UCC congregations for members to take issue with the notion that they sin. It is not so much that these church members think they are perfect, but they associate the word “sin” with dreadful, unforgivable things. While it is true that some of what people do is dreadful, and may be considered unforgivable, sin can be understood as
anything which holds us back from a full relationship with God. I believe that it is appropriate to couple aimlessness with sin, as in the statement of faith. While North Americans are generally not known as being aimless, but rather over-busy, I believe God saves all people from all kinds of aimlessness. Whether it is from the resignation to living in sub-human conditions, or from a life of hyper-busyness lacking any clear focus, God seeks to save us. God seeks, also, to save all people. Not only the people of the UCC, or the United States, or the Western Hemisphere. God continues to seek out humans of all places, and restore them to a loving relationship with God-self.

It is my experience that the present-day believers in my own congregation have much more difficulty “accepting that they are accepted” than they do understanding what is necessary for discipleship. In my northeastern UCC church of the Congregational tradition, I observe that members are over-burdened with a sense of responsibility. One writer I consulted in my Systematic Theology reading, Daniel Migliore, suggests that in the present-day USA the desire for approval is universal, as is anxiety over being rejected: “the quest for acceptance and drive to succeed border on idolatry in our competitive society.” 2 I believe the doctrine of “faith not works” has a great deal to say to this mindset. A message that may speak to the many gripped by the drive to succeed comes from Tillich’s sermon: “accept that you are accepted.” 3

God judges: You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

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3 From Paul Tillich’s sermon “Shaking the Foundations”
The prophets of the Hebrew scriptures were the ones who had the courage to “speak truth to power.” They observed the ways in which wealth and power was maintained at the expense of the weak, poor and powerless. They railed against kings and leaders who ignored the needs of orphans and widows. They spoke out, on God’s behalf, against the idolatry and disobedience they witnessed in the culture. God continues to call God’s people to witness against the principalities and powers of evil. I believe that everyone will ultimately stand in the light of God’s judgment, and each of us is called to confess his or her own sins. But I also believe that while evil begins in the flaws and failings of individuals, it can become pervasive in human structures. As Walter Wink observes nations, cultures, and other human-made structures and institutions will almost inevitably manifest the principalities and powers of evil.4

In my opinion, there is no shortage of evidence of the presence of principalities and powers in our world today, for example the cover-ups in the leadership of organizations in which there has been abuse of children by priests, teachers, and other authority figures. Current day prophets and apostles partner with God to challenge systems of abuse and oppression. Some examples of these are the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and the Roman Catholic Women Religious of the United States who stood against the authorities of their own church on the side of the marginalized women to whom they minister.

The systems of power and abuse grow larger and more insidious with the increasing globalization and complexity of today’s world. Those of us who have the advantage of privilege and relative wealth are inevitably a part of these systems. I

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understand that this is our “corporate sin” and that we are called to both confession and repentance. If we are to align ourselves with the prophets and apostles, we must seek to stand in solidarity with the ones who are oppressed by systems and structures. In our society these include those such as the unprecedented number of people incarcerated in US prisons, poorly paid and unskilled workers, and those who are unable to find affordable housing anywhere close to the places where they work. This is the continued work of Christ, who lifted up the poor and marginalized to give them hope.

**God comes to us in Christ:** *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.*

When we understand God’s desire to save humanity from sin we are left with the question of how that is achieved through the crucifixion of Jesus. My understanding of God’s saving work is grounded in the incarnation of God in Jesus. I believe that God loved God’s created and fallen world and wanted to draw all people to God’s self. In that endeavor God entered into the human condition, subject to some of the depths of human fallen-ness: an unwed mother with no decent place to give birth; a family on the road, subject to the demands of an occupying force; a people under siege.

I believe that God’s love was so great that living in the human condition was not enough. Christ, God’s Word, also died the death of a condemned criminal. He was tortured, spat upon, and abandoned by his friends. The intent of his execution was to restore an uneasy stability in the occupied territory of Jerusalem: that is, Jesus was a treated as a scapegoat.
Professor Mark Heim demonstrates in the book “Saved from Sacrifice”, the crucifixion is a paradox, “Jesus death saves the world, and it ought not happen.”

Throughout history humanity has responded problems of our own making by seeking out a scapegoat who is typically a member of marginalized group. In the stories of sacrifice in ancient mythologies attention is focused on the stabilizing effect of the sacrifice. But in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, sacrifice is shown for the violent act that it is and the victim is made visible. In the passion narratives, the focus is entirely on Jesus and his band of followers, as they make their way to Jerusalem where Jesus will endure the cross.

In the crucifixion, it is as though God is playing a trick on the world. Firstly, Jesus is the incarnation of God. The world is tricked into ending sacrifice by attempting to sacrifice God incarnate: it is God who is on the cross. Secondly, the gospel does not end with the death of Jesus, because Jesus returns, as judge, in the resurrection. Even if humanity wanted to convict someone for the killing of Jesus, it would be impossible to do so, as there is no body. And even though humankind might be condemned for this event, and the disciples for their desertion and denial of him, Jesus returns with the words “peace be with you” (Luke 24:36 and John 20:19). It is the ultimate act of mercy and forgiveness.

These words of mercy and forgiveness are extended to all who would hear them, even today. We are invited to accept the forgiveness of our sins by being reconciled with one another and with God. Christ-crucified bridges the gap between people who would otherwise be kept apart. Even as scapegoating continues in this time and this culture, Jesus identifies with the persecuted ones. Marginalized people, such as those who are homeless,

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are our culture’s scapegoats. When we recognize Christ in these people we are reconciled with him and with God.

**God bestows the Holy Spirit:** *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.*

The Pentecost story in the book of Acts celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Christian community. This story typically marks what we call the “birth of the church”, and yet the Spirit is mentioned as present through the events of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as in the gospels. It is my belief that the Spirit was and is widely available to all creatures, throughout the ages and throughout the cosmos. And yet, there is something very significant in the Pentecost story for the Christian church. This narrative event marks the understanding of God’s expansive invitation and salvation to all peoples and all nations, regardless of cult or tribe. This is the beginning of the church worldwide. There is a movement to disembody the spiritual from the body of the church in present day North America: the “Spiritual but not Religious” movement. I believe that the Holy Spirit is indeed available to people, whether or not they come to God by way of Jesus and the church, but that opting for the Spirit without religion is to deny the Holy Spirit’s power to act in the world through community and history.

I believe that the Holy Spirit does indeed create and renew the church of Jesus Christ. Many Christians today are crying out for the renewal of the church. Church attendance is down, significantly around the nation especially in mainline protestant denominations like the UCC. There is what some describe as a “mass exodus” of teens
and young adults out of US churches. The over-busyness and competing demands of the culture seem to be driving this decline.

This issue is pertinent for many UCC congregations in which the most loyal members are of the “builder” and “silent” generations. These age groups tend to support the church out of a commitment to institution. They enjoy tradition, and find their comfort in structured worship services with intellectual sermons and Western European hymns. Meanwhile, many of the young adults of our culture are turned off by hard structure and Eurocentric music. They are less interested in institution, there are many demands on their time and they need a compelling reason to give of their time and energy to any particular group. They seek out experiences that speak to their emotions, imagination and spiritual core, as well as their intellect. They have learned to recognize a lack of authenticity in churches where the values that are preached are not the values that are lived. Many UCC congregations face the challenge of maintaining their committed older membership, while reaching out to younger generations, many of whom have little experience of church.

The solution to this problem is not clear, and yet I believe that, if we look, we will discover the Holy Spirit at work seeking to renew the church in this time and place. Churches will need to engage in genuine spiritual discernment, and wrestle with the problems of resistance to change, if they are to heed the Spirit’s call. When struggling with this problem, I often think of Jesus’ parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24. There are people who want and need to be invited into our church: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. This may mean re-imagining church for groups who feel alienated by the dominant culture with its traditional church buildings. On this theme, Jeffrey Jones
suggests posing the following “New Questions for a New Day.” Instead of asking, “How do we bring them in?” we must ask, “How do we send them out?” Instead of asking, “What should the pastor do?” the more important question is “What is our shared ministry?” Instead of asking, “How do we save/help people?” a better question might be “How do we make the reign of God more present in this time and place?”

coming of the Holy Spirit like a dove upon Jesus, when he was baptized in the River Jordan, but we who live in the Common Era know the end of the gospel story. We know that the baptism Jesus was speaking about also involves his death on the cross. Yet, I still find the rite of baptism one of the most beautiful things of the church.

I believe in the baptism of infants, especially since my husband and I brought all three of my children to church for baptism when they were babies. But I also understand the perspective of those who favor the baptism of believers. I maintain that infant baptism is not an indoctrination of innocents, nor is it making a decision for them. It is an affirmation of the membership of the body of Christ, for all, regardless of their mental or intellectual capacity. Baptism is the entrance to membership in the church worldwide: I was baptized in an Anglican church, my husband and first two children were baptized in Methodist churches, and my youngest child was baptized in a UCC church, yet we are all members of the Church universal.

For me, baptism is central to the worship service, it is a congregational affair. I believe that baptism affirms, for all Christians, their journey with Christ. It relates us to our ancestors in the faith, binds us to the church of the present time, and claims for us a place in the body of Christ to be realized on the last day. The celebration of baptism in the church is ultimately a matter of hope for me. We celebrate the hope that the church of Jesus Christ continues on, from generation to generation. We celebrate that parents continue to bring their children into the church, showing their hope for the future. We celebrate God’s continued love for the world. We celebrate God’s continued activity in the created world.
Through my study of the sacraments, I have come to value signs and symbols of baptism. I find value in the stirring and pouring the waters for baptism, the need to revisit the biblical stories of water and baptism with the congregation, and the image of emerging from the waters of baptism. I understand the passing through the water as a sign of death and rebirth in Christ. I identify baptism’s connection with God’s grace in the fallen-ness of our world, in which we are all caught. I have come to value the anointing of the baptized into the “priesthood of all believers”, that they become, like Christ: prophet, priest and royalty. This is a liberating and yet weighty calling.

I believe that God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, meets us in the person of the risen, living Jesus Christ in our celebration of communion. I believe in an inclusive communion table, because forbidding anyone to come to the table may stand in the way of grace. However, I think that congregations need to reflect on the fact that welcoming all who are present in the church at a particular time does not necessarily make an inclusive table. In order to be inclusive and welcoming, work must be done in the world to break down barriers of prejudice, geography and status, so that the marginalized do not feel alienated. This is an ongoing work.

I regularly invite all people present to receive communion when I serve. I serve children and infants, according to their parent’s wishes, as well as anyone who is cognitively or physically impaired. I believe that the only qualification for receiving communion should be hunger: hunger to be reconciled with those from whom we are estranged, hunger for a closer relationship with God, hunger to know Jesus better. This hunger can be felt and expressed in many ways, not only verbal.
During freshman year in my undergraduate college I regularly attended a mid-week lunchtime communion. This was a small gathering of students, and was presided by the Anglican chaplain to the university. The chaplain brought a simple lunch of bread, soup and cheese along with the communion elements. I remember that this took place in a small basement room in the university library and that we simply sat around a table. This event helped me through loneliness, homesickness and academic struggles. The chaplain and my fellow students fed my body and soul, with lunch, prayers and fellowship. I was comforted to feel a part of a greater whole and able to put my problems into perspective. My hope is that when and if I am able to serve communion, the participants will experience that same communion with God, with the world and with one another.

**God promises:** *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.*

At times it may seem that God does not promise anything meaningful. We cannot guarantee that a person’s life will be any better as a believer than not. There is no guarantee of prosperity, health or security. All the promises named in the statement are intangibles. Yet I believe that they are the things humans ultimately hunger for most of all: forgiveness and acceptance, courage in the struggle, God’s presence and companionship throughout all things, and eternal life with God. Pastoral work will inevitably lead to discussions about these things. People facing the end of their earthly life may ask questions about whether they will go on to heaven. They may have anxieties over past wrongs they have committed, and broken relationships in need of reconciliation. Those who are mourning may wish for reassurance that their loved ones
are safe with God. If I am to become a pastor, in these situations I would offer the hope that we all will move from our earthly life to life in the fullness of the presence of God.

On the occasions when I have invited someone to church, I have been surprised how often the response has been “I feel unworthy” or “I don’t feel good enough”. In my experience forgiveness and acceptance are things almost all people hunger after. When I talk to some people who say they no longer believe in God, I hear that actually the God they did believe in has abandoned them. They have not learned of God’s promise to accompany us through life’s trials as well as joys. They may even have picked up on an inaccurate theology that says that trials are God’s punishment for our wrongs.\(^7\) I believe it is incumbent on Christians, particularly those of the UCC who claim the promises named here, to work toward a church in which those who once felt rejected will be welcomed in.

*Discernment of Call*

When I first came to the United States I knew nothing of the United Church of Christ. I was convinced that the Methodist Church was my ideal church setting, and I did not foresee moving into a different denomination. However, it often happens that God has plans for us we cannot imagine. For a long time I had experienced a nagging call to share more of myself with my local church, and the church worldwide, in my response to God’s wonderful grace in my life, which I experience in Jesus. I had been aware that the Methodist Church in the UK provided for lay people with the gift of preaching, the opportunity to become “local preachers”. I thought that had I remained in the UK, becoming a local preacher would have been my call. Ordained ministry seemed far

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\(^7\) In reply to this kind of theology, in his “Eulogy for Alex”, William Sloane Coffin declares that when his son, Alex, died and “waves closed over his sinking car”, “God’s heart was the first of all hearts to break.” PBS Society and Community: William Sloane Coffin posted on March 5\(^{th}\) 2004, [http://www.pbs.org/now/society/eulogy.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/society/eulogy.html), (accessed February 25\(^{th}\), 2015)
beyond my reach and quietly I regretted the fact that I no longer had the opportunity to become a local preacher.

Meanwhile, the pastor of my UCC church invited me to share a reflection in a Good Friday service. My path to preaching had begun. After that time, my pastor became seriously ill with cancer. In order to support the congregation through a difficult time and keep us together in prayer, I created an email prayer circle for the pastor. In time, I extended this ministry to include all the pastoral concerns of the congregation. The weekly letter included a focus scripture passage, some reflections and suggestions for prayer along with a list of celebrations and concerns. I continued this ministry for about eight years. Our three interim pastors all suggested that I think of attending seminary, but that was not a possibility as my part-time job and caring for our family filled my time. Subsequently, I served on the search committee that called our new settled pastor, and he also asked me to explore the possibility of attending seminary. When my husband’s company went public I no longer needed to work part-time, so I resigned from my job. Having spent a year with my family, I decided I was ready to begin studying and applied to Andover Newton Theological School. I enrolled at the Andover Newton Theological School (ANTS) first as a Special Student, and then as in the Master of Divinity Program. I graduated in May of this year.

Since beginning at the school, I have preached regularly at my home church, and provided pastoral sabbatical coverage including officiating at two funerals. I have led retreats and small group ministries, and performed organizational leadership as co-moderator and moderator. I have had the opportunity to celebrate communion by special
license at my home church as well as at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center, where I did CPE, and on a regular basis at Old South Church, during my second field education year.

As I continue along this path, I am convinced that God is calling me to a ministry of word and sacrament in the United Church of Christ. My horizons have been broadened by CPE in an interfaith eldercare setting, where I learned to provide pastoral care for those of other faiths, and no faith. In my first field education setting, I learned to minister to a congregation in general and youth in particular, in a time of grief and uncertainty as their beloved pastor and leader had been taken seriously ill. In my second field education setting, I have learned what it is to play a part in the leadership of a vibrant, growing faith community. I have practiced the art of creating a welcoming worship space, and a sound and inclusive liturgy, that will hold even the most insecure visitor. Through these different settings I have also learned something of the breadth of the UCC.

As I mentioned, I had liked the progressive, inclusive theology of the Harvard Epworth Methodist Church and I valued the Methodists’ early inclusion of women into ministry. I was pleased to discover that the UCC and its foundational denominations were of the most progressive in the USA in terms of ordination of women, people of color, and all LGBTQ people. The local UCC church I attend is not the most progressive, but progressiveness is not my only criterion for a church. In my congregation there is a wide range of points of view and political diversity. Yet, there is a spirit of love among the congregants, which is fostered through the care many members provide for one another in times of need. There is also sense of partnership and mutuality when members get together to work on common projects, such as missions or committee work. Generally the
congregants love one another and they love the church, although they may not agree on everything. I love this congregation.

My local church is steeped in the Congregational tradition, and I was initially surprised by what I saw as a lack of authority afforded the pastor and the denomination. Now I have come to value the congregational spirit and the autonomy of the local church, with certain reservations. Sometimes congregational churches lapse into their historic “town meeting” style, and matters of congregational discernment are resolved by the loudest voices and the most dominant personalities. Leadership can guide such congregations to a discernment-oriented style, in which the quieter voices may be heard, and members may be encouraged to listen to the voice of the Spirit. I believe it is important to maintain that we listen to God in the congregational setting, rather than asserting our own opinions and preferences.

If in the past I had been asked to locate my faith in the Reformed tradition, my answer would have been simple: “of course, I am a Protestant.” However, I have come to understand the Reformed tradition means more than a one-time event. It means believing in a church that is both reformed, and continuing in the process of reformation. The UCC’s proclamation that “God is still speaking”, reflecting John Robinson’s declaration that “[t]here is more light yet to break forth from God’s holy word of truth” speaks to this continuing process. As is true in all institutions run and operated by humans, the Church is susceptible to the infiltration of the principalities and powers of evil. To deny this is to give the powers free reign. In our churches, we must always listen for the “still speaking” word of God. We may be called to change, in response changes in the culture, or because
the human tendency to sin has brought about corruption within our structures. We do so because, true to the Reformed tradition, we are both reformed and reforming.

I am pleased that I can identify myself as a true ecumenist. I am convinced of and committed to the Church universal. I was introduced to two different denominations as a child and I have always been in conversation with my Christian brothers and sisters of other traditions: Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Episcopal, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church to name a few. I celebrate my membership in the body of Christ worldwide, and I value my connection with the UCC in this time and place.

**Concluding Doxology**

_Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen._

_Amen!_