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2nd draft ordination paper

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I can think of no better way to begin my ordination paper than to include parts of the essay I wrote to accompany my applications for attendance at seminary and for CFTS:

As one of the elective courses for my Master of Education degree, I attended the Maine Principal's Academy at Maine Central Institute in the summer of 1998. There, we spent quite a bit of time thinking about ourselves as leaders in preparation for writing personal and professional mission statements.

I chose to write one mission statement to govern both my personal and professional lives. In addition, I chose to write guiding principles that are my "bedrock." My mission statement is a prayer, and my guiding principles are very short indeed, but they truly represent me.

Mission Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

Let me see every day anew -- with the eyes of a child.

Let me touch gently -- with the hands of a loving mother.

Let me listen closely -- with the ears of compassion.

Let me speak with words of wisdom on my tongue.

Let each step I take be upright,

And let me always remember that

A single candle can defeat darkness.

Amen

Guiding Principles:

Honesty

Trustworthiness

And

Respect

In all things

Even as I was preparing for a secular career, God was moving in my life. I've come back to these two pieces time and again in my career as an administrator. Every once in a while, I look them over to see if they need to be updated, but they have stayed the same.

I have tried to live my mission prayer. My life has been one of commitment to people, especially children. I have tried to assure an honest, trustworthy advocacy for each child, a "seeing anew" each day. I have tried to provide guidance and support for

my staff, practice policies that foster the health and safety of all and help create and maintain a positive school climate and shared vision. My style is to “touch” gently and listen closely. I hope I have spoken wisely and walked in an upright manner. I have tried to do so. The last part of the prayer is difficult because it is not easy to be the “one candle”. God calls us to stand though, holding our light with strength and steadfastness. That’s when I pray unceasingly!

My background is much like yours. I was raised in a Christian home and was therefore heavily influenced by the beliefs of my family. My mom took us to Sunday School in her childhood church, Reformed Baptist at the time, and my dad and mom took us to his church (Congregational) for Sunday services. I could see two very different ways of living from my attendance at those two churches. While that could have been confusing for a child, my grandmother solved the dilemma for me with these words: “We are all on a train bound for the same place; we are just riding in different cars.” She taught me that there is more than one way of doing church. Both of my grandmothers taught me the wisdom of patience and discerning acceptance, and the importance of seeking hearts—both God’s and mine. They showed me that “religion” wasn’t a Sunday morning practice. It was something you lived.

My mom and dad made us “toe the line” as we were growing up. We were taught that you tell the truth, that you take responsibility for what you have done, and that you clean up the messes you get yourself into. We learned to value the people around us; none of us had much in the line of material things, but we shared what we had. In this manner, I was taught Christian ethics.

The idea of attending Bangor Theological Seminary first came to me in my early teens when my Uncle Bud (Rev. Arthur Woodward) attended in the 1960s. My whole family was very proud of him, and of course we followed his career through retirement. My Aunt Carolyn, his wife, attended BTS after his graduation, so she became my role model for women in the ministry. As a junior in high school, though, I was won over to teaching and prepared myself for a career in secondary education. After I graduated from high school, I stopped attending mom’s church and attended dad’s full time. I considered Sawyer Memorial Congregational my home church from then on. I married, became a mom, and tried to be active in my church while my children were growing. Like many of you, I’ve been a member of the church youth group, a Sunday School teacher and superintendent, a member of the Board of Deacons, the chairperson of the Board of Deacons, the Assistant Moderator, and, for a brief while, the Moderator. It seems to me, as I look back to those days, that God was laying the groundwork for a plan I didn’t know about yet.

For the past ten years, I have stood in for our pastor on several occasions. I didn’t ask for those opportunities, and quite honestly, don’t know how they began to come about, but increasingly, members of my home church began to offer them to me. One day as I stood in the entry shaking hands and offering hugs to the folks passing out

of church after the Sunday morning service, an event happened that changed my future. A woman looked at me square in the eyes and said, "You have been ordained by God." I didn't know what to do but thank her; I did, and she went on. Her comment stayed with me though, and now I think she saw something that I was not aware of...God had work for me to do beyond anything I had seriously imagined.

When we experience deep grief, we sometimes turn away from God and God's promises. If we work at it, we can see that time as a period of renewed building and strengthening of our relationship with God. In 1995, my husband was diagnosed with Agent Orange related cancer. Although we survived that incident, the next ten years seemed to be a proving ground for me and my family, and we walked many shadowy valleys. My husband and I had a wonderful opportunity to talk about our lives together during his illness, and one he told me that he expected me to become either a writer or a pastor...bless his heart, he even said I'd probably be both! I chuckled, and said, "Sure, Pack, that will be the day." He saw something I could not yet see. Pack died in 2004. I won't lie and say I have had unwavering faith throughout the time of his illness and during my life as a widow. I admit that I have been a "doubting Thomas" on more than one occasion. When that happens, I gain strength by remembering another conversation my husband and I had when he said, "Phyl, God has not forsaken me." He knew that God does not promise to exempt us from the pain and difficulties of living. God's promise is to be with us—guiding, leading, and loving us. And I know my husband was right.

I chose to take early retirement in 2006 and briefly anticipated living a life of ease pattering around my home and garden, but unexpectedly and rather forcefully, God let me know that retirement was on hold; my call was to be in a different direction. It was crystal clear to me that God intended for me to become a student again...I was going to apply for admission to seminary. I did not know what I wanted to do after receiving my degree; all I knew for sure at the time was that I would hold myself open to opportunities and possibilities trusting God to lead me.

I have answered the call from Sawyer Memorial Congregational Church in Jonesport to be their Pastor and Teacher. Today I come before this vicinage council as a candidate seeking ordination. Because I am asking for your support, I think it most important for you to know more about who I am and how I view my relationship with you.

If I had to choose one word to describe my overarching view of this vocation, it would be "covenant." I like Henry L. Hammonds's definition of the word—"an agreement, a bond, a commitment, a contract that persons in a Congregational Christian Church make in the Divine Presence with God and each other to walk in the way of Christian discipleship as the Lord's free people."¹ I would like to make that

¹ Arvel M. Steece, *Thoroughfare for Freedom* (Oak Creek, Wisconsin: Congregational Press, 1993), 83.

agreement with you...to serve God, to walk in the way of discipleship, to participate in the building up and strengthening of the body of Christ.

The Classical Categories

Our God is a Trinitarian God...three essences in one. We read of the beauty and power of creation in Genesis 1 and add to that, the statement of the gospel: John 1:1—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” We read that the Word became flesh. In the book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit sweeps through the apostles at Pentecost, the promised Comforter has come...three essences, one God.

I share the belief that God set into being the heavens and the earth and that every individual has immediate access to God. God self-reveals to us in many ways. We all can appreciate revelations through the natural order of the world, and we can see that God our Creator is self-sufficient, immanent, eternal, powerful, good, and wise. There is also that part of God revealed to specific persons by God or God’s messengers, not through the powers of reason. Its purpose is not general knowledge of God, but to bring humans into fellowship with God. It is then we can see that God is transcendent and righteous. Our knowledge of God is incomplete; whenever we think we might have our concept of God set down, we must realize that God is more. As we grow in our faith, we will have many opportunities to challenge and stretch, and to change and correct our knowledge of God, always seeking what is good and true.

Conceived by God and born of Mary, Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Sent by God to atone for our sins, Jesus willingly bore the punishment for the sins of humankind. He taught by word and example how we should live. His death and resurrection offer the way of salvation for all who would believe; He is Lord and Savior. As Congregational people, we believe that Christ alone is the head of each church: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” [Matthew 18:20] We are to listen and respond to Christ’s guidance for the church and for ourselves as individuals.

The Holy Spirit of God is the third person of the Trinity. Christ promised his followers that God would send One to comfort, reveal and guide them. That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. Congregationalists believe that the Holy Spirit can and does use any member of the congregation through which to speak and act; therefore, a Congregational church has no need of a hierarchy of ecclesiastical officers to explain God’s intent.

I believe that the original scriptures were Divinely inspired. The Bible is our standard for faith and practice. We may also use tradition and reason to interpret Scriptures:

A Congregational Church is gathered when a group of Christ-followers come together to seek common worship and common fellowship. The Church is gathered under the headship of Christ and operates under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Being a member of a Congregational Church means entering into a covenantal relationship with God and into a living fellowship with others. Each church is an autonomous, Christ-centered entity in mutual and intentional relationship. There is no “ranking” of churches or church officials in the Congregational way of governance; associations of churches may be formed to accomplish goals which churches might not be able to accomplish alone. Associations also bring together a gathered body of worshippers. Each church, therefore, should hear the voices of all its members before determining a course of action of cooperation and goodwill.

Salvation is given us through Jesus. Through His experience at the cross, Jesus “sought [us] and bought [us] with His redeeming blood.”² Through our belief in Him, we receive forgiveness of our sins and eternal life.

Pastoral Theology

Bangor Theological Seminary’s mission statement is on page two in my dog-eared copy of the handbook. The mission statement says that BTS is an ecumenical seminary in the Congregational tradition of the United Church of Christ. It states that BTS is committed to equip men and women for the work of Christian ministries, is committed to serve as an intellectual center for the continuing sustenance and transformation of the church and the world, is committed to provide for the study of religion, and is committed to embody a public ministry within the local communities of Northern New England. Even more than that list of commitments, though, I am drawn to what comes next on that page...five words from the book of Isaiah, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8)

Our motto comes from what is often referred to as the call of Isaiah. The scene is the heavenly throne room. At one point during his vision, Isaiah says that he is a man of unclean lips, and that he lives among a people of unclean lips yet he has seen the Lord. Lips are important in this section...in fact, Isaiah’s are purified in preparation for his prophetic mission. In verse 8, when God asks whom He shall send to the troubled world, eager acceptance pours from Isaiah’s lips, the words you heard in the Old Testament reading today. “Here am I. Send me.”

That is how I want to approach matters of pastoral theology. In covenant with God, I want to establish myself in the Congregational tradition; I want to work for a Christian ministry; I want to commit myself to be a life-long student of the Bible and my

²Eugene M. Bartlett, “Victory in Jesus” in *Hymns for A Pilgrim People* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2007), 338.

religion; I want to work for the continuing sustenance and transformation of the church and the world; and I want to do it with words of wisdom on my tongue.

In matters of ethics and social justice, I rely on Matthew 22:35-39. When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." He also replied that a second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The focus of Congregationalism is like that of Jesus...loving God, ministering to others.

Peay and Stapleton refer us back to *The Savoy Declaration* of 1658 for a discussion of the Sacraments:

Sacraments are holy Signs and Seals of the Covenant of Grace, immediately instituted by Christ, to represent him and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him, and solemnly to engage us to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.

II. There is in every Sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union between the signe and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.

III. The grace which is exhibited in or by the Sacrament rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them, neither doth the efficacy of a Sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of Institution, which contains together with a Precept authorizing the use thereof, a Promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

IV. There be onely two Sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Lord's Supper; neither of which may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word lawfully called.³

The Sacraments of Congregational Churches are Baptism and The Lord's Supper. Congregationalists practice both "infant baptism" and "believer's baptism." "Regardless of age, when one is baptized he/she is baptized into the church and incorporated into the body of Christ. Howard Rice and James Huffstutler point out that baptism has the same basic meaning for all who receive it: 'Baptism is something that is done to a person; no one baptizes himself or herself. Baptism is always a sign of God's grace, and no one earns or deserves baptism. People are baptized into the faith of the Church, not simply their own belief. For that reason, the Apostle's Creed is recited by the people, [or transferred into question format or adapted in some other manner] rather than some

³Steven A. Peay and Shawn P Stapleton, eds., *Worship Resources for Congregational Christian Churches*, CD quoting Williston Walker, compiler, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, (originally published in New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893) p. 397-8 (I do not know from which edition the quote was taken.)

local or denominational confession of faith. Baptism is the beginning of a life of faith, and the whole of life is lived in response to the grace manifested in baptism.”⁴

“Like Baptism, the celebration of the Lord's Supper (also referred to as Holy Communion or the Eucharist) is properly celebrated within the worship assembly following the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the Word. The theological understanding of the Lord's Supper and its efficacy varies widely among us, nevertheless it is important to recall the saying of Richard Baxter, ‘Nowhere is God so near to man as in Jesus Christ: and nowhere is Christ so familiarly represented to us as in this holy sacrament.’ In the Lord's Supper we are reminded that we are part of the Lord's Body and ‘partakers of Divine Nature.’”⁵

A pastor has certain responsibilities to the congregation, her family, her calling, the Congregational style of governance and polity, and to the official duties of the office. My first two careers have prepared me in some ways for my third career. Pastors must be flexible. That does not mean going against strongly held beliefs, it simply means recognition that there may be other and better ways of doing things. It also means that pastors must move from one situation to another and another either with a very good memory or a well-used organizer and lots of notes! I feel that, like teachers and principals, pastors must plan for family and community partnerships. When we are caring for our neighbor, it would be wise to remember that some of our neighbors live under our own roof. In addition to a commitment to the church and to the family, pastors must make a commitment to themselves. One person cannot “do it all” and certainly cannot “do it all in a day.” Pastors need to be careful about how many jobs and responsibilities they personally carry. As I face a career in pastoral ministry, I would expect that the people of a church would be somewhat like the faculty and staff members of a school. Both would have some very good ideas about how the teamwork of their organization could run. It would pay a pastor to listen to them.

The Congregational Way is one of Faith, Freedom and Fellowship. In the section above, I spoke to matters of faith, so here I would like to address freedom and fellowship, two elements that could be challenges for a Congregational Church. Both have their basis in the foundational belief that each church is its own complete unit. I believe that the freedom of the Congregational Way is freedom from an ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is freedom from the test of a creed or statement. More importantly, though, it is “freedom to...” It is freedom to examine ourselves. It is freedom to work out ways that enable us to uphold our covenant. It is freedom to establish and improve upon relationships. Because of the nature of covenant, it is, however, freedom that comes with cost: voluntary responsibility and accountability. In many ways, this freedom is much tougher than having a checklist of rules to go by. The final thread in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

the Congregational Way is fellowship. I read once that the Israelites had to spend 40 years in the wilderness so they could learn how to get along with each other and with God. Getting along with each other, enjoying being in the other's presence, caring about each other, talking things over together...these are some of the elements of fellowship. Fellowship creates relationships, and relationships with God and with fellow believers are the essence of Congregationalism. Fellowship doesn't mean bossing each other; it means listening, it means asking opinions, it means offering help. It means the sometimes slow process of consensus building; in a case where unfortunate things have occurred, it might sometimes mean admonishing. In short, it means loving your neighbor as yourself.

A church probably has written job descriptions of some sort for the officers and committees of the church. Gathering that information is what a pastor should do first in order to fulfill official duties. Reading the minutes of board meetings would allow insight into past practices and procedures.

Spiritual Life

Pastors must do more than serve others. Pastors must remember that above all, they serve God, and they must, therefore, must make provisions for their own spiritual nourishment.

My mission at seminary was to become better versed in the Bible, to explore and deepen my Christian walk, to be willing to learn, and to be a good friend. During my first week there, I met four amazing women who have been far more than classmates. We formed a "team" of support for each other, and that continues today. I found a verse that seemed to apply to our situation, and we reminded each other of it often— 1 Thessalonians 5:11—"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." Our band of five has certainly expanded to a fuller fellowship, and I leave seminary as most pastors do, with a strong network of brothers and sisters in Christ.

I expect to use this network, the network I form at County and Association meetings and the network of local pastors to strengthen me.

The Church has a place in addressing social issues of the day. We are called to care for the widow and the orphan; we are called to do for the "least" in our communities. With loving hearts, we must address the sensitive issues that face our congregations today. We may not all agree on the details of how will address the issues, but if we love God, we will care for God's people. I believe that my mission statement and guiding principles fit quite well with these intentions.

In Congregational polity, Christ is the head of each church. When I think of that, I am reminded of the early Christians who met together, worked together, and worshipped together bound by their love for Jesus. I am reminded of our forebears who couldn't live in the confines of an ecclesiastical hierarchy and who sailed from their homelands, their families and all they knew in order to walk in the way of "Christian discipleship as the Lord's free people."⁶ I am reminded of you who seek to follow God's light, and who have forged a covenantal community that maintains autonomy and unity while it recognizes diversity. I am reminded of these things, and I want to be a part of them. I would like to serve God, to walk in the way of discipleship, and to participate in the building up and strengthening of the body of Christ as an ordained minister with recognition, not just from Sawyer Memorial, but from the Washington County Association of Congregational Churches and Ministers, the Congregational Christian Council of Maine, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, in short, from the wider body of the church universal.

⁶ Steece, p. 83.

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