

Credo

BELIEFS OF A CHRISTIAN MINISTER IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE

by Marjorie Hall Davis

Abstract. This paper states the author's understanding of the doctrines of the Christian faith in the light of her scientific background and her interpretation of current evolutionary, neuropsychological, and other scientific theories. It contains the actual ordination vows and her response to them, based upon an outline of questions suggested by the United Church of Christ.

Keywords: adaptation; Christian doctrine; cultural evolution; Scriptures; suffering; Word and Sacrament.

In response to the ordination vows for United Church of Christ ministers, I develop in this paper a credo statement for a Christian living and thinking in a scientific age. Specifically, Christian concepts are interpreted in light of current evolutionary and neuropsychological theories. Although my thinking attempts to unite Christian thought and practice with contemporary science, I hope that it also will stimulate those in other religious traditions and with other philosophies of life to do the same.

Each section of the paper begins with two sets of questions in italics. The first set is the actual ordination vow; the second set consists of follow-up questions that help explicate the vow and guide the response. My responses are in Roman type.

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CALL TO MINISTRY

Before God and this congregation we ask you: Are you persuaded that God has called you to be ordained a minister in the Church of Jesus Christ, and are you ready to enter this ministry and faithfully serve in it?

I am.

Briefly relate a summary of your faith journey and your call to the Christian Ministry in the United Church of Christ. Within the context of the universal ministry of God's people, why have you chosen to seek ordination, and what particular gifts do you bring to this ministry?

My faith journey has been characterized by three main themes. The first theme is a continual reinterpretation of "call." This journey began for me as a child growing up in an American Baptist church in Wallingford, Connecticut. My baptism at age eleven was a memorable event in the church where my mother was a member. My brother also became Baptist, but my father remained Episcopalian. Upon entering high school I began to attend the Congregational church. There, with many of my close friends, I sang in the choir, participated in the youth fellowship, and helped with church school classes.

During my first two years of college I took several religion courses. I was involved in interracial, world relief, and local "shut-in" visitation projects. While reading the Bible for one of the courses, I had a "call" experience, which led me to consider seriously a major in religion followed by seminary study. I was advised of the option of teaching religion in a private girls' school. Few other options in religion were available to women at that time (the early 1950s) and the idea of ordained ministry never entered my head! I chose instead to transfer to a large university, to major in zoology, to prepare for teaching high school science, and to consider marrying a minister! There was no doubt in my mind about a commitment to ministry, but through the years I have continued to reinterpret my sense of call in the light of new opportunities and new life experiences.

While I was a university student working for an undergraduate degree and then a Master of Science degree in neurology and embryology, I became an "associate" member of a Congregational church. There I taught church school, led worship for youth, and participated in the college student group. I married a veterinary student, and taught science, first as a graduate assistant in the university and then as a high school teacher of biology, chemistry, and physics.

After moving to Granby in 1957 with my husband, Forrest, I became a member of South Congregational Church. There I taught church school and served on several committees. Most recently I chaired the Board of Deacons, served on the Search Committee, and have been an elected lay delegate to the Farmington Valley Association and to the

Annual Meeting of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ. My involvement in the church is only one way in which I have acted in response to my faith commitment. Other ways have included my roles as wife, mother of four children, community volunteer, neighbor, and friend. In the past ten years I have been involved in lay ministry in several roles: through the Connecticut Conference as a member of the Christian Education Committee and in family conference leadership, through Hartford Seminary as a member of the adjunct faculty, through the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science as a council member and officer, and through the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries as a corporate member. Presently I serve the First Congregational Church of Granby as a licensed minister of this association. It is only now, thirty-four years after that early "call" experience, that I have come to reinterpret my present appropriate response to be as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ.

A second theme of my faith journey has been that of "faith seeking understanding." I readily acknowledge that total understanding is a goal that I shall not achieve; nevertheless, my "interior" journey has been a quest along this path.

Perhaps it started, or was given direction when, as a graduate student, I had the opportunity to touch a "fresh" human brain in a laboratory sink and to feel its incredible softness. Willed to research, the brain had come with a cynical and angry letter from its donor, whose aim was to prove scientifically that there was no God! My graduate research explored the process of limb regeneration in the adult newt—asking basic questions about the essential conditions for life and growth. Ever since then, I have been engaged in the struggle to relate my inherited traditional Christian biblical faith to a scientific world view. My quest has led me to an exploration of process theology, especially the thought and work of John B. Cobb, Jr., and of evolutionary theory, especially the works of Gerd Theissen, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, its founders and leaders, and the journal, *Zygon*. I am indebted to many whose publications, teaching, and personal conversations have guided my thinking. Although they are not mentioned by name or in footnotes, those whose influence is especially reflected in these pages include John Bowker, Ralph Burhoe, Donald Campbell, Eugene D'Aquili, David Duncombe, Robert Evans, Philip Hefner, Luke Johnson, David Lull, Karl Peters, George Riggan, Anthony Stevens, Henri Nouwen, Letty Russell, Solomon Katz, Daniel Day Williams, and Walter Wink.

The sudden and unexpected death of our seventeen-year-old daughter, Beth, in 1982 led me to wrestle with the classic problems of evil and suffering and to experience the process of bereavement and grief.

My faith journey is, as always, "in process." I seek new challenges and new possibilities, especially for relating Christian theology to new understandings coming from the contemporary sciences.

A third theme in my faith journey has been that of "response to invitation." Invitations to move beyond my present experience, limits, and horizons have been forthcoming throughout my life, and much of my journey has been characterized by saying "Yes" and moving through open doors rather than by knocking on doors. The invitations have come from particular and significant persons who have challenged me to move beyond my own expectations of myself, to do graduate work first in science and later in theology, to serve on state and national bodies of the United Church of Christ, to teach for Hartford Seminary, and to serve in various positions of ministry and leadership, including my present capacity as Interim Minister of Outreach.

This occasion is a notable exception, for I am "knocking on the door," asking to be considered for ordained ministry. I would like the authorization of this Ecclesiastical Council to continue to do what I have been doing as a licensed minister: to carry on the ministries of Word and Sacrament. My hope is to continue to serve the United Church of Christ as an interim minister. I understand interim ministry in a local congregation to involve attending to the particular developmental tasks of grieving, reaffirming resources, discovering a new identity, and preparing to make a new commitment, while at the same time carrying on "business as usual." This process intersects with my own life journey of the past few years; thus, I bring to this ministry my own life experience. Other gifts that I bring include those of a global perspective, influenced by traveling seminars to learn about the work of the churches in East Africa and Latin America; of pastoral concern, of flexibility and adaptability to many areas of interest and experience; and of a commitment to ministry, especially as it is related to suffering and creativity.

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE BIBLE

Do you, with the Church throughout the world, hear the Word of God in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and do you accept it as the rule of Christian faith and practice?

I do.

How do you understand the nature of the Word of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments? What does it mean to accept this Word as the rule of Christian faith and practice?

Attempting to understand the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in an evolutionary context has brought me much new insight,

inspiration, and excitement. It has opened up for me a new way of appreciating the Bible.

I understand evolution to include not only biological life but earlier prebiological evolution and later cultural evolution. I understand the goal of evolution to be adaptation to the basic conditions of reality. Another way to speak of this is as the ongoing process of seeking relatedness and obedience to God. Continuous creation of life is a cosmic principle. It has worked to bring about more complex order and integration in the midst of entropy or the "running down of the universe."

In the human, the long evolutionary process of trial and error has attained consciousness of itself, and we try to make sense out of our experience. Through language, we communicate to others our interpretation of good and bad, cause and effect, and other knowledge necessary for survival. All great religions are systems of thought and practice which represent attempts to respond to God (or the basic conditions of reality); they are "well-winnowed wisdom," or "recipes for living." The development of our ancestors and ourselves during recent hundreds and thousands of years has been a transition from merely biological evolution to include also the radically new, transcendent, and transforming cultural evolution. Biological evolution continues, albeit very slowly, but cultural evolution has produced an information explosion, an immense treasury of literature and other written records, art, music, and artifacts which express innovations in science, technology, and government, as well as religion.

Biological evolution, working by natural selection, eliminates those genes that do not meet the necessary conditions for existence. In contrast, cultural evolution works by selection on the level of ideas. I understand the Scriptures to belong to this treasury produced by cultural evolution, as literature of the Jewish and Christian traditions which has stood the test of selection and been passed through succeeding generations. As a record of the history of a people and their perceptions of the action of God in their lives, the Bible contains information to help people decide how to live, in obedience to God and to God's commandments. It can be said to contain information which helps people decide how to live in order to adapt to the basic requirements of reality, in order to survive. It is likewise the history of a community's perception of a principle, force, or reality, conceived of personally as the ultimate power which acts in history. It is a narrative witness to changing ideas about God, based upon the experiences of particular people in particular times and places, and interpreted in language of the symbolic thought world common in those times and places (the "available believable"). Although that historically con-

ditioned symbolic thought world is not sufficient for many minds today, a continuity of human experience enables us to gain some degree of access to its meaning.

In the Scriptures, God's Word (Logos, Sophia, the logic or wisdom of existence) is mediated through human, historically conditioned words. However, since God is that central reality upon which we are dependent for our existence, the Bible is thus ultimately determined by that reality to which it is a response.

In the Old Testament, God became a God of the Word, rather than the image, in the covenant of Yahweh with Israel (Exodus 19:3-6), in the giving of the commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:1-17), and in the words of the prophets. Moreover, God's Word was to become internal and individualized, "written upon their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33 and Deuteronomy 6:6).

In the New Testament, God's Word was present in the man Jesus of Nazareth. In his person Jesus unlocked an access to new understanding and relatedness to God. He was fundamentally a new form of humanity, the counterpart of the first Adam (Romans 5:2-21), exceeding all previous human possibilities. In his person and in his teachings, he consummated the history of the people of Israel, embodied changes in conduct that the prophets called for, and demonstrated the direction for change in human behavior which is necessary for obedience to God (a complete adaptation to the reality of God).

Among the major themes in the changing understanding of the Word of God throughout the whole of Scriptures are the development of monotheism and a protest against the seeming injustice of suffering and death.

The development of monotheism in a polytheistic world was an event in the history of human trial and error aimed at achieving an adequate adaptation (obedience) to God. Through the Exodus and the exile which threatened Israel with extinction, a new understanding of the One God of Israel as the God of all nations offered the possibility of new life, despite the catastrophe which had been interpreted as God's judgment. This breakthrough to a more adequate understanding of God made repentance an alternative to extinction.

Throughout the Scriptures we see a protest against suffering, against its seeming injustice, its unfairness. Biological evolution takes place through selection, whereas cultural evolution supplements and attenuates the effect of biological selection by making life possible in conditions where genetic selection alone would not allow survival. Jesus seemed to have an awareness of human history in transition. He spoke of a new world coming to replace the old and of a new understanding of the rule of God already beginning in his midst. Might this be under-

stood as a transition between biological and cultural evolution? The transcending of genetic selection by the principle of God's love for all of creation would symbolically bring about a new era, the "kingdom of God" (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus called for love of the stranger, the outcast, and even the enemy. His acts of healing showed compassion for the ill, the weak, and the handicapped, those whose lives would have fallen victim to biological selection by genes alone.

The Word of God continues to communicate through the words of Scripture. Likewise, the Scriptures continue to serve as the fundamental basis by which to test new understandings of God emerging from the sciences and philosophy, and new norms of human conduct. Accepting Jesus as the Word of God establishes his life and teaching as a "model" for realizing human possibilities for relationship with God and with all of creation. The criterion of love of God, neighbor, and self becomes the basis of faith and practice.

THE MINISTER'S LIFE

Do you promise to be diligent in your private prayers and reading of the scriptures, as well as in the public duties of your office?

I do.

How do you practice your devotional life and what is the place of prayer in your life? How do you intend to find Sabbath and renewal within the context of the "public duties of your office," and how do the present (or future) demands of family life fit within the context of those duties?

My devotional life is characterized by variety. There is some time in most days which I could call "intentional" time for prayer or meditation. Two days a week this time is in a communal context—on Sundays in congregational worship and on Mondays in small group worship at the Pastoral Counseling Center of West Hartford where I am an intern. Most other days it is just after my family has left for work or for school. At these times, the content is most often in response to the life situations and questions of the people with whom I have been in contact, whether in a pastoral context with individuals or leading to a focus for worship. Besides the Scriptures, I often read books of prayers, sermons, theology, the *Christian Century*, *Science and Science News*, and various other periodical journals. Sometimes my reflections take form in journal writing.

Besides this "intentional" time, there are innumerable spontaneous moments of prayerful reflection, prompted by my environment, and an enduring, deep sense of "groundedness," which might be called a form of "unceasing prayer." In this context, prayer for me is an attitude of openness and responsiveness, an inner alignment to a felt sense of direction.

Sabbath and renewal come for me in small pieces, in moments of being alone, in meals with friends, and in continued growth through reading, conferences and workshops. I also find renewal in the "mindless" physical activity of household chores and in listening to music. I take my commitment to my family very seriously. My commitment as a parent is one of the reasons that I have not reached this point sooner. My seminary study was as a part-time, commuting student over a period of years. Our younger daughter's death and the subsequent illness and death of my mother, both while I was in seminary, caused me to focus my energy on the needs of family, bringing about a delay in completing my degree and in making a more formal commitment to the church. Our two older children, Paul and Anne, are now adults. Our younger son, Mark, is a high school sophomore.

I do not take lightly the difficulty of finding time for family life when both partners are involved in commitments to the needs of others outside the family and on call for unpredictable emergencies. My hope that we will continue to find ways is based upon our nearly thirty-year commitment to one another and to our mutual support of the needs, interests, and gifts of one another as well as those of our children and parents.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE: TRUTH IN LOVE

Will you be zealous in maintaining both the "truth of the gospel" and the "peace of the Church," speaking the truth in love?

I will, relying on God's grace.

Concerning the "truth of the gospel," what is your understanding of the doctrine of salvation—the person of Christ, the incarnation, the Cross and Resurrection, sin, repentance, forgiveness, judgment, grace, and eschatology? Concerning the "peace of the church," how would you deal with those conflict situations when you are called to speak the prophetic word of "truth in love," both in personal and social justice situations?

Concerning the "truth of the gospel," my understanding of salvation is as a new way of living, a way of living "in Christ" rather than "unto the self" (Romans 6:6-8). This way of living springs from a compassionate way of being in the world, in solidarity with others, rather than from a self-centered way of being in the world. In this fundamental attitude toward reality, one transcends biological and social competition, the "powers and principalities," the institutions and traditions of culture, and the need for justification through the law from fear.

I have spoken of the *person of Christ* as a fundamentally new form of humanity, one who was entirely and uniquely God-related. In him God's "will" and human will were aligned. His openness to the gift and demand of God in his personal life was such that God was as fully

immanent in Jesus as it is possible to be in a human being. As such, Jesus Christ was an agent, a medium of God's presence, the "likeness of God," the "son of God." In him was a vivid revelation of what God is "up to" always and everywhere in human beings and in all of creation. In the person of Jesus, biologically preprogrammed disposition to conduct is transcended by a new understanding of God. Jesus demonstrates a kind of love expressed as the principle of solidarity with the weak, thus contradicting the processes in nature and history which are oriented merely to genetic selection. In this love of Jesus, God is revealed as love. Only if this central reality, or God, is love, can the limitations of genetic selection be overcome. As the nature of God is revealed in Christ, the basic conditions of reality are such as to justify unconditional trust, like a child's trust in a parent.

What God *is*, in addition to what is revealed to us in Jesus and in creation, is finally a mystery. What we do know is mediated through the process of *incarnation*. In human genes, in the form of DNA, is incarnated the information necessary to meet essential requirements for life. Although Jesus was unique in his God-relatedness, God becomes incarnated and personal in each of us. The events of the *Cross* and *Resurrection* symbolize the cycle of evolving life on this planet, of creative transformation, of perishing and becoming, of dying and rising to new life, of sacrifice for the life of others. The act of transcending inevitably involves loss.

The victory of Jesus in the crucifixion was the victory of rejecting the possibility of physical survival at the cost of denying his claims about the basic nature of reality, about God and about human destiny.

While the nature of the resurrection is a mystery, we do know that a life-changing event happened in the lives of real men and women, and it caused them to perceive their own lives and the life of the world in a different way. They found their lives inexplicably transformed and empowered in response to an encounter with something which was "wholly other" and yet most "real," a power which persisted beyond Jesus' death. Jesus was perceived as alive in an entirely new way, as life-giving Spirit in the community.

I understand *sin* to be a state of alienation from God. The sense in which we all fail to live in a continuous state of God-relatedness stems from the constraints of our biological heritage, to which we must attend in order to survive, and from the limitations of our culture, since we cannot avoid being shaped by particular biases. We are prone to a perversion of authority, and every new liberation is followed by new forms of enslavement. Neither nature nor culture is bad, and to be human is to participate in both and to enjoy both. Yet this participation is the very condition which leads us continually into sin. Our "gift" of

biological life itself is given to us at the cost of the suffering and death of countless life forms which did not survive. Indeed, we are uniquely human *by virtue of* our biological and cultural gifts, and we are sinful to the extent that we claim freedom from dependence upon (or a final and perfect adaptation to) the requirements of reality (God). Human progress has come from our ever better understanding of nature's (God's) laws and our increasing ability to adapt to those requirements, rather than from our independence from natural law and from selection by God's judgment. Thus, alienation from God consists in seeking to make ourselves, instead of God, the center of meaning and value in the universe. It leads to further estrangement from God, self, and neighbor and to various forms of death. Human disobedience consists of a prideful assumption of independence from an ultimate authority (God).

God's laws and *judgment*, expressed in earlier religious language, seem to correlate highly with our increasing understanding of nature's unchanging conditions and laws which direct the processes of our natural selection. Life and the consequences of human behavior are judged according to the requirements (or constraints) implicit in the nature of reality. Death is the consequence of failing to adapt to the unavoidable requirements for living imposed by the environment, both external and internal. The biblical word of God's "wrath and judgment" as a response to human disobedience seems currently reinforced by the scientific word that the ultimate nature of reality is the judge of life.

However, *repentance* and reform are possibilities for avoiding adverse judgment. Repentance involves a radical change of behavior on the part of individuals or nations. Sacrifice of a wrong type of behavior is increasingly an alternative to sacrifice of life, and thus God offers "*forgiveness*" and the hope and promise of a new kind of life. Numerous feedback mechanisms on both the physiological and interpersonal levels allow for the correction of mistakes or imbalances (repentance and reformation) and forgiveness (the reestablishment of integrated interrelationships).

Grace is experienced as an infinite "fullness" at the "heart" of reality, making new life, integration, and enjoyment possible. Through no merit of our own, we have been given life and sustained in our living. We have been given the opportunity to be conscious co-creators with God, agents of continual creative transformation of the world, "ambassadors for Christ" (II Corinthians 5:20). Yet risk and errors are inevitable in the human search for more "obedient" patterns of behavior as life conditions change. In that sense, God's grace and God's judgment operate simultaneously as we assume increasing responsibility as co-creators with God.

All of the above must be understood in the light of the network of interrelationships involving all of creation. Thus, although sin and judgment are often felt to be personal, we are "our brother's keeper" (Genesis 4:9-10) in a systemic sense, and the nature of reality is such that many individuals suffer because of the "sins" of other persons or of the institutions and systems which affect our lives.

Eschatology concerns the end of our individual lives, the end of life as we know it on this planet, and possibly the end of the universe. Scientific theories postulate the end of life on the earth in either a "heat death" or a "cold death." They leave open the possibilities of a future implosion of the universe and subsequent "Big Bang" or a gradual dissipation of energy, as some hypotheses suggest. However, humans do not have secure knowledge of such "ultimates," so here I shall consider the more immediate questions of individual death and immortality.

I live in hope and expectation that death's word is not the last, that there is continuity of some sort beyond death, and that each life has an enduring value that is not lost. There clearly is evolutionary continuity of the human gene pool, even for those with no biological children of their own, as the genetic patterns are "resurrected" in new individuals, through kin. Where our lives have touched others, bringing about creative transformation, we participate in the continuity of the "risen Christ." Indeed, our influence on the world persists not only genetically, but directly or indirectly in the process of cultural evolution, whose immortality is a uniquely human phenomenon. It is also in some fashion persistent in the "energy flow," the very structure and dynamic of the universe. Metaphorically, we may speak of a "becoming" into God, a "resurrection" in the "memory of God," a participation in God's "consequent nature," as God "uses" the effect of our lives in the continuous creation and transformation of life. The full nature of the continuity of life beyond the death of our bodies remains unknown, but trust in God as the gracious giver of life, and the Creator and Sustainer of the life that we do know, yields for me a continuing sense of trust in a relatedness which transcends death.

There is an inevitable tension between the call to maintain the "peace of the church" and the call to speak the prophetic word of "truth in love." This is the tension between the unconditional love and acceptance which characterizes the pastoral ministry and the challenge to accountability which characterizes the prophetic ministry. My tendency is to approach conflict situations with the hope of creativity, with the hope of bringing about creative transformation of personal relationships and of social injustices. My style of confrontation tends to be gentle but persistent, attempting to preserve relationships while seeking alternatives to correct injustices.

To speak the "truth in love" is to love the oppressor as well as the oppressed, to speak with compassion rather than judgmentally. It is to act with pastoral concern for the insecurity and alienation underlying the injustice but with commitment to justice for the apparent victims and to share in the suffering experienced by all.

CHURCH FAITH AND ORDER

Do you accept the faith and order of the United Church of Christ; and will you show compassionate affection toward all who are in Christ?

I do and I will.

How do you understand the "faith and order" of the United Church of Christ, specifically concerning the Trinity, Baptism, Communion, Covenant, and Statements of Faith? What is your understanding of "The Church" (local church, covenant, the wider church), and how does "The Church" relate to the world (evangelism, social action, missions)?

I understand the *Trinity* to be a way of acknowledging the relationship between God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. God is ultimate, infinite mystery, unknowable without disclosure. God is known through the Word (Logos, Sophia), through Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the medium is the message; the nature of God and thus the "logic" or "wisdom" of existence is revealed in Christ. The Holy Spirit is the meaning of the message as it is received in all times and places. Jesus' promise of "another Counselor . . . the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16, 24) is realized in the experience of insight and power as a spontaneous presence which cannot be programmed or controlled, for "the wind blows where it wills" (John 3:8).

I understand Baptism and Communion to be sacramental rituals of the church. As such, they are symbolic acts which reflect a way of knowing, experiencing, and communicating which is more than verbal. Indeed, Word and Sacrament represent different modes (and capacities which develop in the evolutionary process) of knowing and communicating. The specialized functioning of the two hemispheres of the human brain can be helpful in understanding this distinction. The Word as a way to communicate "truth" tends to be expressed in rational, logical statements of fact, in many ways similar to "scientific truth" which may be subjected to experimental and historical verification. This mode of knowing and communicating is thought to be mediated through the neural structures of the left hemisphere. It is essential in the systematic expression of statements of faith, creeds, doctrines, and other components of theology. This paper is primarily a left-hemisphere project!

Sacrament involves a "wordless" mode of knowing, an experience of image, an enactment with symbolic meaning which transcends the

physical reality of ordinary material like water and bread. Its meaning is perceived intuitively and experienced symbolically. This nonrational, "deeper" sense of knowing is thought to be mediated by the neural structures of the right hemisphere; it is a form of knowledge by participation, by experience which defies verbalization but implies commitment. This "life of the spirit," or "religious experience" constitutes an encounter with the "sacred."

I understand *Baptism* to be a sacrament of belonging, of initiation into the Church of every time and place as the community of the *New Covenant* in Jesus Christ, transcending the "Old" *Covenant* of God with the people of Israel (Genesis 9:8-17; 17:2-8; Exodus 24:6-8). The use of water symbolizes participation in Christ's death and resurrection as well as a renunciation and entry into a new ethical orientation. It symbolizes new life given in the midst of the present world.

I understand *Communion* to be an act of remembrance and representation. In the experience of communion I encounter the brokenness of the world, my need for forgiveness for continuing to participate in the perpetuation of that brokenness, and the death of Jesus as an affirmation of the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the communal acts of eating and drinking with the gathered community I am reminded of my unity with other Christians in all times and places as equals, symbolizing the absence of interpersonal barriers in the coming "kingdom of God." I am re-presented with the call to be an agent of reconciliation both as an individual and as a part of the church.

My understanding of the *statements of faith* of the United Church of Christ is that they are contemporary testimonies to faith, attempts to affirm a confessional basis for our unity in commitment. They are helpful in establishing the identity of the UCC and in appropriating both historical and contemporary insights into our purpose for being a church which calls itself a church "of Christ." I am constantly reminded of the necessity for humility in the use of language. In its attempt to communicate, the language of faith uses symbols and metaphors, models and paradigms, just as Jesus used parables in order to intersect with experience and bring about a transformation of understanding and life-orientation. Any statement of faith, including this paper, inevitably uses symbolic and metaphorical language, and will communicate different things to different people, thus showing language's limited and fallible character even as it is also a powerful interpreter and a powerful shaper of experience.

I understand *the Church* to be a community of people gathered in covenant. We are united to one another and to God by our commitment to mutual support and critique in a common life-orientation which reflects a continuing response to the Spirit of Christ. This life-

orientation is a "new creation," a witness to and prototype of the "kingdom of God." As persons, we "become human" in community, through nurture in relationship with others. As we are partial "shapers" of one another, we also are able, to some extent, to choose that by which we are willing to have our identities shaped. Thus, to join with others in *covenant* is a voluntary and trustful act, an act of commitment which implies promise and responsibility.

In the United Church of Christ I understand the primary, whole, and autonomous units to be the *local congregations* which may, in turn, enter into covenantal relationships with one another for the sharing of insights and for cooperative action. As expressions of the *wider church*, beyond the gathered bodies of UCC members in assemblies other than the local church, I recognize our participation in the worldwide "body of Christ" of all time. This voluntary development of bonds among larger and larger communities of individuals is also symbolic of a commitment to eliminate oppression and exploitation among those with whom we share a common humanity.

Evangelism, social action, and missions belong together. They reflect a way of relating to the world which understands that we are not separate individuals with external effects on one another, but that we are constituted by our relatedness with one another; we are thoroughly social in nature. Thus, the welfare of one is ultimately the welfare of all, and the suffering of one is ultimately the suffering of all. Oppression and exploitation are selective processes within a society, allowing some individuals and groups a chance at life at the expense of others. In human cultural evolution, especially of religion, oppression and exploitation have often been selected against, so as to allow for non-coercive bonds among larger and larger communities of individuals, as in Christian communities which are internally motivated not to oppress or exploit.

I understand the church's mission to be commitment to participation in the mission of Christ, to the reduction of injustice and suffering, and to the creative transformation of individuals, nations, and institutions. The purpose of mission is to further the reconciliation of the whole world, including the whole realm of nature with which we are interrelated. It means becoming aware of how we share in sustaining and strengthening the structures of oppression and destruction which too often characterize our world, those which contribute to the widening gap between the rich and the poor and those which perpetuate inappropriate dependence. It means challenging the "powers and principalities" which restrict and distort our relatedness to one another and to God. Since evolution has reflected a tendency toward a greater capacity to experience pain, both physical and emotional, it means to

enter more fully into the suffering of others, to recognize solidarity with and responsibility for all of life, even for rival or weaker life, and to work toward the vision of the “Kingdom of God” in which the “dys-functional” (according to the world’s standards) are integrated. As we become more aware of the affinity among ourselves and with all living beings, not the least of which is our common genetic heritage, we understand that our solidarity with all humanity is in obedience to the basic conditions of reality (to God). The One and Only God of evolving biblical culture was God of the homeless Abraham, the fugitive Jacob, the enslaved Israelites in Egypt, the refugee Israelites in the wilderness, the deported and exiled Israelites in Babylon, and later of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, the imprisoned Paul, and the persecuted early church. Moreover, the understanding of God in Scripture moved from an ethnic favoritism based upon Israel’s chosenness to a universal sovereignty over all nations and over all of creation.

A Christ-centered orientation underlies my understanding of evangelism, social action, and missions. Proclamation of the gospel—the “good news” of the new way of understanding human life in relationship to God, the new option for human life revealed through Christ, and the power of God’s promises to yield great joy in life as well as the capacity to face ever more complex threats, dangers, and suffering—takes place through word *and* action. The message of reconciliation unconnected with deeds of reconciliation remains unconvincing and ineffective.

Proclamation of the gospel is motivated not only by our gratitude for the hope, love, and freedom, which are the fruits of this understanding, but also by the utter urgency for repentance and a change of life-orientation of individuals and nations in order to avoid the inevitable extinction of life if we fail to meet the requirements for survival.

Social action is the gospel incarnated in deliberate action aimed at working with the poor and oppressed as we together strive for changes which will reflect a more adequate obedience to God and further the goal of full human dignity and full humanity as well. However, inaction is also a social response with consequences. In other words, not to work for change is to give support to the status quo. We cannot be neutral.

My understanding of “mutual mission” requires that our words and actions reflect the spirit of mutuality, lest the work of Christ be distorted by paternalism, manipulation, self-fulfillment, or encouragement of dependence. Mutual mission is not a one-sided doing unto others but a mutual exchange of both spiritual and material resources. It includes a partnership of women and men, laity and clergy, and members of the global community.

In relation to other faiths, a Christ-centered orientation involves not a Christian imperialism but an attitude of respect for significant mean-

ing in other faiths which are also attempts to respond to God. Mutual openness at its best, as a trusting response to the ongoing creativity of God working in and through our interactions with one another, could bring about creative transformation of and within individuals and religions without requiring everyone to come within the Christian church. All human institutions, including the present form of the church, can become the objects of idolatry, and risk becoming the very “powers and principalities” which can block the coming of a new realm.

Finally, in the same spirit, I acknowledge my present statement of faith as one to be used as a springboard from which to continue to seek an ever more appropriate response to God.