***Introduction***

I have struggled throughout my life to translate my sense of vocation and ministry to a wider audience. Part of this struggle has been how intimate this faith journey has been for me and I have reserved such conversations for my closest friends and mentors. Part of the struggle is that I don’t really have a ‘calling’ moment, nor does a traditional sense of ‘calling’ fit my theology or experience of God. Instead I have adopted another framework from one of my favorite theologians, Howard Thurman. Thurman grew up in the racially segregated Florida panhandle and saw firsthand the ravages of tuberculosis. Reflecting on his memories of how TB tore its way through the underserved Black population of Daytona Beach, Howard Thurman took this experience and turned it into a positive analysis of the way God works in the world—that God is the *contagion* for love and life in this world and once you come into contact with this active contagious presence you better hold on for whatever comes next.

This ordination paper is a tracing of my contagion experience of the Holy. I offer this paper as a living landscape of the ages, places and people that have shaped who I am and how I approach ministry. I survey my life and share how my experiences shape particular ideas for me. I weave into closing sentences how I plan to carry those lessons and ethics forward into my career as an Authorized Minister in the United Church of Christ.

***Youth***

By the time I started 7th grade I had lived in three states and was beginning my fifth school since kindergarten. We had moved with my Dad’s jobs needs as he progressed through his hospital chaplaincy accreditations to become a supervisor following his seminary years. My mom was a school teacher and willingly relocated when needed as she’s always been adventurous and was searching for a good fit school wise for her as a teacher and myself and my twin sister as students. When we landed back in the Dallas area in the summer of 2000 we had a sense of being settled, a sense of returning home. Royal Lane Baptist Church played a big role in developing that sense of place and it is within this church family where I first began developing a sense of my role in ministry and church life.

We were members at Royal Lane before we had left for New Orleans and I had fond memories of that community, mostly from Vacation Bible School, wiggly Sunday mornings and a really great ceramic *Lion King* Christmas ornament I was gifted at some point. Returning there as a teenager I began to internalize the “yes, I’m Baptist, *but not that kind of Baptist*” narrative that engulfed progressive Baptist circles after the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in the late 80s. It was through the common life we shared at Royal Lane that I was instilled with progressive values and liberal theology during Sunday morning worship and Wednesday night dinners. The most formative time for me was within the youth group at Royal Lane, especially during our annual summer trips for youth camp and a mission immersion.

*Southwest Baptist Youth Camp*

A lot happened at those youth camps. Socially, it was a time where the tension of struggling to hold friendships over time and distance and the moniker of always being ‘the new kid’ washed away. Furthermore, we meet at Austin College in Sherman, Texas and for one week out of the year it was great to live a college campus life with all the perks and none of the studying. We’d stay up late in the dorms and have ice cream after every meal, including breakfast. We’d also have worship every night. And it was in these nightly worship settings where I saw the youth ministers who were chaperoning the groups in a new way. It was in worship where I saw what these ministers were trying to mold within our spirits. It was in worship where I first felt God reach for me and say ‘you’re going to do this too’.

*Royal Lane Baptist Church Summer Mission Trips*

As my spirit was being formed at youth camp, my critical political conscience took root on our mission trips. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship had begun a mission initiative in the five regions that held the twenty poorest counties in the United States. Royal Lane had some ambitious lay leaders who jumped at this opportunity and signed us up as a church to visit all five regions in consecutive summers. I participated in every trip. The regions we worked in were the Mississippi Delta in East Arkansas, the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, the Black Belt of Northern Alabama, rural Appalachia in Eastern Kentucky and the Lakota Nation in South Dakota. Through the services we performed and in the relationships we built with the people in these regions I began to understand the ways race and class play into the social fabric of our nation through the injustice of poverty and the violent and ongoing legacies of white supremacy. These trips introduced me to a powerful model of church engagement on social issues. I was aware that service trips have their limits in changing structures of inequality and knew that I wanted to go deeper into congregational efforts towards social change. All these experiences prepared me for the life I have pursued since those early, angsty teen years in Texas.

*Open and Affirming, and in Conflict*

The other major contribution of Royal Lane to my personal development was the role of LGBTQ peoples in our congregational life. I grew up following the leadership of gay men and women in our congregation who were Sunday school teachers, ordained deacons, camp counselors and mission trip chaperones. It was also a time of early lessons in the tensions and consequences that arise when a local autonomous congregation is in conflict with some of the ethics of larger denominational governance.

I was in high school when the CBF decided to award our church for our mission programming. We decided to send Garland Hamic, the chair of the missions committee and a key developer of our 5 year summer mission plan. However, while Garland was driving to Waco to receive the award he was informed on a phone call that someone had outted him to the CBF and that he could in fact not receive the award due to CBF’s stance on LGBTQ exclusion. I knew then that if there was a faith group that would deny celebrating the leadership of my close mentor I wanted nothing to do with that type of Christianity. I have been intentional about supporting the leadership of LGBTQ people in faith communities and have almost exclusively worked within open and affirming communities ever since. I know that I am a better person and a better minister because of the presence of LGBTQ peoples in my life. Embodying the Christian ethics of being open and affirming is a cornerstone of my ministry and church practice. I greatly look forward to continuing this on-going celebration of the contributions of LGBTQ peoples to our faith as I prepare to step out as an authorized ministry of the United Church of Christ.

***The South***

*College in the Upper South*

The stirrings in my mind and spirit through high school deeply influenced my college search. I knew I wanted to go to a school where students were engaged with their own sense of spirit and wanted to talk about these movements in their lives. Royal Lane had conditioned me in a liberal Baptist bubble and that was the veneer I brought with me to my first year at William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri. I was surprised by the conservativism I encountered in my classmates and even some faculty. I became more involved in campus organizing by the end of my freshman year when the student body failed to pass a LGBTQ inclusivity clause into our student bill of rights. Due to my experiences at Royal Lane, I turned to other concerned people of faith on campus. It was through this experience that the religion department became a home for me to expand intellectually and spiritually as I brushed up against more hostile elements of the student body and institution.

*Room to Doubt*

As part of my campus involvement I joined a group named *Diakronomina* that was facilitated by Dr. Horne of the religion department. It was a space to explore doubts about the Christian faith and we were encouraged to make our own theological constructs that helped us interpret our world. Our explorations into science and religion dialogue expanded my theological imagination. Our participation as a student group within the larger interfaith community of Kansas City gave me new experiences of how faith communities organize themselves. It was within these small group sessions, in addition to classes on historical biblical criticism and religious anthropology, that I saw how deeply religions structure our worldviews and societies.

*Becoming Liberationist*

The fall semester of my senior year our guest lecturer for the religion series was Dr. James Cone. This was a major institutional moment for William Jewell. One of the clauses of the endowment for the religious lecturer series was that a person of color could not offer the lecture. Our campus chaplain had to work diligently to navigate this change and facilitate Dr. Cone’s visit as the first Black professor to offer a religious lecture at William Jewell. Dr. Cone was very open that he had quit accepting offers to speak at institutions like ours in the 1970s due to the backlash from dominantly white audiences to his work integrating Black power principles into the liberation narratives of scripture and the life and resurrection of Jesus.

Part of what was negotiated for the visit was that students would be familiar with Dr. Cone’s work before he was on campus so as to have a more intentional, and hopefully less reactionary, conversation with our student body. Twenty students were selected to participate in a reading group leading up to the visit where we’d read Dr. Cone’s seminal work *God of the Oppressed*. I deeply identified with all of Dr. Cone’s criticisms of white Christianity and the church’s complicity in anti-Black violence over the centuries. This analysis was a missing puzzle piece of my life that I had struggled to articulate. I had never encountered any of this theology in any of my white peers, pastors or professors though I had been in ‘progressive’ Christian spaces for most of my life. My theological imagination absolutely caught fire not only for the new ways I was able to talk about who Jesus was and who God is but also for the introduction into the legacy of liberation theology throughout the hemisphere. It was through this experience that I knew I wanted to further study Black theology with Black professors and those commitments solidified for me that I was Nashville bound.

*Seminary in the Mid-South*

I arrived in Nashville in August of 2010 excited for the next stage of my development. While I was taking the core curriculum in Bible and Church History I eagerly filled the rest of my schedule with classes on theology and ethics, especially if the classes were being taught by Black or LGBTQ faculty.

*Unto You an Organizer is Born*

I was introduced to faith based grassroots organizing through Dr. Melissa Snarr’s class “Religion and Social Movements”. There was an experiential component to the course in that we were to spend significant time with an organizing group in the area. I chose to link up with two interfaith organizers, Angela Cowser and Pat Halper. They were generous with their time as they provided a foundation for how to approach Nashville organizing and in identifying growth areas for me, especially as an out of towner white Vanderbilt student navigating mostly people of color led initiatives. Through my time in this course and with Pat and Angela I grew more committed to the model of ‘relational organizing’ opposed to ‘issue oriented organizing’ and this analysis has remained a core piece of my ministry praxis.

A brief run down goes like this: Relational organizing comes out of community dialogues where folks gather together and explore the issues of their life they’d like to better. Decisions are made from these dialogues around the issues that have the most mutual interest from the participants and the communities they represent. Issue oriented organizing, on the other hand, begins with a targeted goal in mind and attempts to recruit people to the cause based on morals or other motivating factors. There is much overlap between these two models and indeed both methods are needed to be successful in achieving common goals, but the practical question remains—which of these models informs your ethics and how does that influence how you engage people on your concerns? Said differently, relational organizing begins with the human experience and grows from there while issue oriented organizing is a more top-down ‘we have the answer: get on board!’ model.

Many faith communities have the resources to be successful grassroots organizing hubs due to the highly relational dynamics that emerge from sharing a common life and a core identity. Furthermore, the religious values of human dignity and a spiritual vocation or calling mixed with the congregational practice of local autonomy are all needed components of successful grassroots campaigns. Where we as the UCC and other predominantly white progressive faith groups get tripped up is that we betray our ethics when we aren’t diligent with our methods. We approach an issue motivated by our values, but often trample over people in the process for the sake of being ‘right’ or ‘relevant’ or even ‘superior’. We repeat this mistake because we aren’t expanding who we are in relationship with and we aren’t working across as many lines of diversity as we like to think we are. This is the gap I want to immerse myself in as I move forward in my ministry. I want to share these ideas and experiences with others who are frustrated with church or faith but knows there is more to offer. I see the UCC as a ripe denomination to take the next step in being an effective denomination at living out our calling to sow justice and harvest peace, not replicate the harms we are trying to redress. I want to be a minister that helps this transformation at denominational, congregational and personal levels.

*Caring Communities of Equality and Grace: Glendale Baptist Church and the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America ~ Bautistas por la Paz*

As I was growing in my understanding of the latent power of congregations to be effective agents for social change I was also wrestling with my location within an institution that has such terrible legacies as Christianity and the Church. When it was time to discern my field education placement the last place I wanted to work was a church. But in conversation with my field education advisor, Rev. Viki Matson, she encouraged me to look into Glendale Baptist Church as they were ‘church, *but not that kind of church’*. I met with April Baker and Amy Mears and was encouraged by Glendale’s interesting co-pastor model as well as their own personal faith journeys that led them to becoming pastors. I left that meeting knowing I wanted them to be my mentors, being the amazing liberal Baptist women clergy that they are. Furthermore, Glendale has the distinction of being the only open and affirming Baptist congregation in Nashville. Furthermore, the fact that the church house is located just a few miles from the national headquarters of the Southern Baptist Convention appealed to my gadfly nature.

Committing to Glendale for that year opened the door for me to expand my pastoral identity by participating in the life of the congregation as well as the national and international partnerships that Glendale maintains. It was through April that I got involved in the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. I attended my first summer conference in 2012 and ended up serving on their Board of Directors for three years. Through the Peace Fellowship I was exposed to faith based social justice programming that was happening across the world. I have participated in many conferences and immersion trips with the Peace Fellowship, specifically in Cuba and along the US/Mexico border. These experiences deepened my commitments to racial justice and confronting white supremacy in all its forms, be it international imperialism, structural violence, interpersonal violence, within a congregation and even within the Peace Fellowship itself.

*Pastors as Mystics and Prophets*

My time at Glendale and within the Peace Fellowship deepened my commitment to working at the congregational level. I pursued this commitment through my coursework by immersing myself into the life of two prominent African American pastors of the 20th century: Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Junior. I wanted to learn more about how they did church, Thurman as a pastor of multiracial congregations on the west coast and a university chaplain on the east coast and MLK Jr as a social movement builder and prophet for the American conscience. I wanted to identify the pieces of their ministry that I could apply to my own context across the divides of race, time and tradition for the pursuit of personal and societal transformation. The transference of these tactics to my own ministry is an ongoing process and as I struggle and grow in my ministry the writings of these spiritual giants remain the deep well to which I return in times of both desolation and celebration.

In addition to Thurman’s scriptural analysis, where he is guided by the question ‘What does Christianity have to say to those with their backs against the wall?’, I am deeply influenced by his mystic spirituality focusing on the interconnectedness of all creation. Maintaining a close connection to people and nature is what funds my ministry. When I’m close and inline with these life forces I am at my best as a human and a pastor. When I am distant from people or disconnected with the nature around me I take that as a warning sign that I need to reassess and realign. Thurman charted this course of mystic as pastor for much of the 20th century and I think this model has untapped potential as we transition into the 21st century for people in search of a connection with the divine beyond institutions.

The contributions of Martin Luther King Junior to my identity as a Christian and praxis as a minister are countless. I am grateful to my seminary professors Dr. Lewis Baldwin, Dr. Juan Floyd-Thomas and Dr. Dale Andrews for their encouragement in my mining of the mind and career of MLK, and their patience through my swings of enthusiasm and angst in analyzing the role of the church in our world today. Dr. Baldwin helped me root King as a churchman before all else and Dr. Andrews helped me see the power in the sermonic moments of Kings career and what that legacy means for preachers today.

*My switch to the UCC*

From these experiences, I decided to see what I could learn from other churches and pastors and applied for a summer internship through the dually aligned Alliance of Baptist / United Church of Christ young adult program, Summer Communities of Service. I applied to work at Metro Baptist in Hell’s Kitchen New York with dreams of spending a whole summer in Manhattan, but was then placed in Centreville, Virginia at Wellspring UCC. Wellspring had been leading a forum on immigration in their community which led to opening an immigrant labor center, and as the only applicant that summer with any degree of Spanish I was sent to the DC suburb.

Wellspring and the Centreville Labor Resource Center was my first in depth experience within the UCC. The connections from those three months are myriad, with the largest being local congregations committing to bettering the lives of immigrants in their communities.

***Borderlands/La Frontera***

*Moving to Tucson*

Upon completing divinity school I knew I wanted some other experiences than the congregational work I’d been doing and was looking for professional opportunities to do more in depth organizing and social change work. I wasn’t convinced a church could provide that for me, and knew I wasn’t ready to step into full time pastoral work, so I cast my net wide. I had been on a student delegation to Tucson as part of an immersion course hosted by the non-profit BorderLinks after my second year of divinity studies. This was a life changing experience for me on many levels. I was going more in depth into Black liberation theology and had committed myself to analyzing and addressing the ways that we as a society continue to segregate ourselves despite the rhetoric of our national values and despite the social advancements we’ve made over the last 100 years or so. These thoughts were swirling in my mind as I confronted the wall along US/Mexico border for the first time. It was a visual reckoning of the patterns of social segregation I’d been lamenting. This experience expanded my thinking around race and social justice to include immigration rights and border issues as a core part of my justice work and identity.

At the end of the delegation I remember thinking to myself “BorderLinks would be the perfect place for me to work after divinity school.” I was ecstatic when I had the chance to apply to be a program organizer with them. I could continue developing liberation theology curriculum while facilitating small group immersion experiences to US/Mexico border realities and bring participants into a legacy of social change. I was offered the job and eagerly accepted. Despite not knowing anyone in Arizona or what I was really committing to either personal or professional I knew I had to say yes.

*“Turn up, don’t turn down! We do this for Mike Brown!”*

I moved to Tucson in October 2014, three months after the murder of Michael Brown and in the middle of the ongoing Ferguson Rebellion. Since that August I had been enthralled in the details of the nightly protest happening throughout the St. Louis area, both in the tactics of the protest and their messaging as well as the immensely violent response from local police forces and national guard troops. I had friends on the ground there who were from the area and who were coming in from across the US to support the protestors providing me firsthand accounts. I was witnessing the growth of a Black led social justice movement and having friends from diverse faith, race, gender identities and sexual orientations plugging in and increasing their risk for the sake of justice for Mike Brown and Black lives. It was my years of studies coming off of the pages of history and calling me to jump in fully. But I’d just moved to the southwest, away from the Black led movements I’d been involved in the southeast, and was at a loss as to how to support the Black Lives Matter movement in this moment from my new location.

The Fellowship of Reconciliation had supported a series of actions and protest in St. Louis named “Ferguson October” where leaders from the area were featured in media releases and on the front lines of demonstrations. I knew the FOR staff, Rev. Osagyefo Sekou and Gretchen Honnold, from our friendships of a few years, but that October was the first time I came to know Rev. Traci Blackmon. When FOR made the call for support that following November anticipating the non-indictment of Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson I knew I had to say yes.

I wasn’t surprised by the racism that was coming to light from the heat of street conflicts in Ferguson. I knew Missouri’s legacy of racism from my time in college and had been aware of the Black Lives Matter movement since its inception following the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. I was surprised by the intensity of the militarized response to the Rebellion and how in the face of all that violence and intimidation the protestors were fully alive and fully motivated to ensure justice be a living thing in their communities after losing one of their own to another senseless death. In my talks with Rev. Sekou that November we connected on how the Ferguson Rebellion was a moment we’d both been waiting for, a moment to call America to conversion for its racist past and present so that we could exercise racism out of our future. Grief and anger were the motivating energies to take the streets but liberation from evil was the guiding ethic. I internalized Rev. Sekou’s theological analysis of the moment: “The spirit of the living God is shining through these protesters. In 2014 in America God is Black and poor and queer and has tattoos and is chanting ‘F\*ck the Police’. Jesus isn’t going home when curfew comes. God is calling us to repent for our racist violence into a new way of being by making justice known in Ferguson.”

The lessons and experiences from my week in Ferguson that November have profoundly shaped who I am as a minister and an organizer. My understanding of God as the animating force for liberation efforts over time, place and history had a found a new anchor on the streets of Ferguson. My understanding of Love deepened as I witnessed community members taking care of each other in the streets as pepper spray, rubber bullets, sound cannons, tanks and military formation drills threatened their lives. Ferguson deepened my commitment to hold our nation accountable to our legacies of racism and violence so that the horrors of the past and the terrors of the present are no longer threats to a more peaceful future. These principles are core to my ministry and I am committed to developing these ideas and practices within the UCC so that we may more fully live into the justice making vocation that is a call for all of us to hear.

*PRESENTE!*

I returned to Tucson more committed than ever to social movement building. I found an amazing community of organizers and activists in my new home town and the Black Lives Matter movement gave me new tools in how to interpret what I was witnessing in the Borderlands. Seeing the militarization of the police in St. Louis helped me understand the role of the Border Patrol in intimidating and brutalizing communities of color on both sides of the border. The narrative of how Michael Brown was a criminal and had deserved what he got was similarly applied to the reality of Border Patrol involved shootings as well as the untold thousands of deaths that have occurred in the surrounding Sonoran Desert over the last 25 years.

One of the experiences I’ve been grateful to share with many student and church groups over the last three years is a memorial walk in Green Valley, Arizona. We visit three sites where unidentified human remains were found and where humanitarian aid volunteers have placed crosses to honor those that lost their life in the desert and the families that mourn them. Crosses are a significant image here in the borderlands. They have become a symbol that transcends any one faith and are a tool that offers people access to a holy experience of grief, lament, conversion and commitment. The primary causes of immigrant deaths in the desert are dehydration and exposure to extreme temperatures, the exact same causes of death as crucifixion. If we as Christians claim to follow a savior who suffered a similar death to the thousands of migrants who have died trying to cross the US/Mexico border, we have a responsibility to show up and say “God knows this death too. God knows how it feels to suffer in these ways and God laments these deaths as God laments the death of Jesus. Jesu Cristo—Presente!” It is our responsibility as people of faith to be present in places of pain and suffering wherever suffering is occurring, to be the presence of comfort and healing because we know that God goes with us, indeed that God is already there, waiting for us to join in the work of transformation, the work of healing ourselves and our world.

***Where Do We Go From Here?***

As I conclude this survey of my life I must offer a living witness to the irritantly persistent presence of the Holy that has been leading me to this moment of ordination. While there is a consistent line I’ve walked weaving in and out of churches and faith based networks, there is also a whole lot of Jonah in here about trying to do anything to get away from what is being asked of me. Yet it’s been over the last three years that I’ve been able to do the ministry I want to do at my current placement as Assistant Minister at the Good Shepherd. I see that there is space for me to balance social movement building within the demands of congregational life and I believe that within the structure and culture of the UCC there is a place for me.

What I hear being asked of both Baptist and UCC communities today is to be effective agents of change in the communities they are located, sensitive to the intersecting concerns of marginalized groups as we try and get to a more just, more free, society. The church has a role in modeling how communities can challenge our patterns of segregation that we internalize and perpetuate. Some of this work can be done internationally, as the Baptist Peace Fellowship and Global Missions projects make evident, but there is also a call to be accountable to the places we live.

As an authorized minister in the UCC, I want to dedicate my life to accompanying people on their life journey as they grow in spirit and resistance. I want to be with folks as they celebrate confirmations and baptisms and baby dedications and coming out parties and weddings. I want to grieve with folks through deaths and divorces and personal traumas and devastating diagnosis’. I want to be with folks as they attend their first protest or speak in public about a justice issue they care about or as they are being released from jail for civil disobedience. I want to lament with folks political losses and setbacks while always charting for the future. I want to work together with other ministers to better our denominations so that we live into the best of our heritages and transform our problematic practices into transformative futures.

May it be so. Amen.