

Reflection on the Call and How the UCC via Plymouth is a Part

My call comes from a long time of wondering, a period of serious doubt of organized religion, returning to Church (via the UCC) and finally hearing again and now contemplating the Call.

The calling to ministry has been part of me since my youth (I just ignored or put that answer on hold). I believe there is a reason for everything and God has made that clear to me including the time away from church as much as the return to church. I have felt a spiritual connection early in my youth and now rekindled that connection in these years with Plymouth and the UCC.

I participated in the sacraments of baptism, confession, communion and confirmation into the Catholic Church via a family that was devout Catholic and a dad that grew up devout Missouri Synod Lutheran. Going to Mass on Sunday was not optional in my family. Further, as a youth, I was heavily involved with Mass and the Church via serving as a altar boy while a young boy and eventually as a cantor and lecturer at Mass during my high school years. I can recount how I felt in awe of priests and the Church with how people respected them and what they brought to people. Yet as I grew into adolescence, there were serious contradictions within myself with what people were saying I ought to feel. I grew disconnected from the Church as I could no longer ignore my own feelings. Since then, I have struggled with organized religion for several reasons —bullying, sexual orientation and how the Church leaders are willing to characterize Truths, but God was still there somewhere.

I grew in education, martial arts, study of Asian religions/philosophy, and work with equality issues along with my career as a software engineer. I found Jesus's messages throughout many of the texts I was reading for Tao or Buddha even though they were not from Jesus or the Gospels. This leads me to believe that what Jesus was preaching is a universal truth that spans cultures, history and generations. I find a connection to Jesus preaching in my work in social justice for equality and find some of the arguments against social justice have not really changed since Jesus time. Yet the Truth of Jesus is waiting for us to realize, has always been there, and always will be.

Thus, I still feel that it is fitting that I took the name of Matthew (from the Apostle) for my confirmation name because I had to realize the worth of the cause and be willing to invite Jesus into my being. My invitation was fulfilled when I realized the mission of Jesus was to grow in the love of God and of neighbor as the primary commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40). Matthew became an evangelist as he realized the grace of Jesus's teaching included all of society including the outcasts and society's fringes. I doubt that I can even attempt to put myself in the same breath as Matthew, Saul/Paul, or any Evangelist before, but they provide examples to me of how conversion happens to some.

Again for me, I came from turmoil and rejection of religion given how it played a major part in serious bouts with depression episodes in my life. That rejection from my members of my family, friends, and loss of child caused serious doubt of self worth, as well as a serious contradiction of what I heard (or taught) about Jesus teachings versus people "of God" were willing to do. When I was willing to let go of those hooks, I found some confidence, but I was always wondering about God and looking to reconnect in some way.

Perhaps the Calling yields to helping others find their spiritual connection to God and to the universe through discipleship because I had to walk through a wilderness or two in my life.

(Gula, 1996). My community at Plymouth helped me to think that it was ok to have doubt and to have conflict. I feel that I can relate to people who have trouble finding God in their lives, and I can help others because I understand the disconnect (similar to Evans (2015) experiences) as much I understand the connection that is there. I understand how God always will be there in various forms and ways, and I can show the diverse ways one can come to experience and know God.

I found the UCC by Plymouth through several other groups that were already meeting here. When I heard the words “no matter who you are or where you are life's journeys...”, I first met that with serious skepticism yet it certainly didn't sound like anything that I had heard at a church. I heard more sermons and decided to join with my spouse and that meant I was drawn to also be active again in church just like I was as youth. I became a Deacon, got involved with Chancel choir, and stepped up to be a Stephen minister. The combination of these I also was hearing again the call and decided that this time should answer.

While I still have a place in my heart for Catholic traditions, I have grown to love and admire the work the UCC is doing with the message of Jesus as being a real truth and a real place of refuge for some. Plymouth has become a home to me where I can express myself, learn from others and just be. To me, the UCC finally seemed to put into practice the words of Jesus that I was reading and hearing rather than confusing with personal bigotries and traditions.

The UCC has made it clear there is more than one way to worship God with its focus upon decentralized autonomous congregations. Also, the UCC General Synod speaks not only to member Churches but also to the world at large about issues where religion has often played significant roles in hurting people. This vocal recognition by the UCC helps me to realize that perfection is nice but not available to us as people. That reflection also helps me and others to realize we are not the only ones that have strayed from the good path, and that there is a path to forgiveness if we are first willing to recognize our part in life's choices.

God has called me here for some reason for this time, and I have yet to learn where this will take me. Further the training from Stephen ministry will aid in my future pastoral work as it has already taught the value of listening and being truly present. Being a Deacon has helped me understand the worth of some traditions and to respect the differences in how people worship. Being a minister, I will pray that my words and the meditations of hearts will be worthy in God's sight always.

References

Evans, R. (2015). *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Gula, R. M. (1996). *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.