

Faith Journey and Statement of Faith

By Ruth Ragovin

Born in the United States to Presbyterian parents, my faith was first nurtured at Memorial Church on the Harvard University campus where my father (a Presbyterian minister) was a professor in the Divinity School. While it was an inter-denominational church, the atmosphere in which I was raised was very Presbyterian (my ancestors were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, French Huguenots, and German Reformed). Indeed, my older brother is named John Calvin. People experience God in many ways. From my earliest childhood, God's presence has been mediated to me most closely within the loving embrace of caring people in a number of communities of faith. Through them I caught the Christian faith as something of the mind of Christ was passed on to me. I was only six years old when I first felt called to ministry, drawing a picture of myself in a black ministerial robe, holding an open Bible, preaching. When I was ten my father was appointed in the aftermath of Vatican II as the first Protestant theologian anywhere to serve on an all-Catholic theological faculty at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. Our family immigrated to Toronto, Canada, and most of my family still is there. I began attending the United Church of Canada (a merger of Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists). When I was twelve, I began spending one semester a year in Tübingen, Germany, where I attended the Evangelische Gemeinde, an English-speaking congregation affiliated with the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement (Disciples of Christ, Independent Christians, and Church of Christ all worshipped together). A number of the people there became important mentors as they encouraged me along as a difficult adolescent who was full of questions. This is a story that is too long to tell here (although you can read a little about it in an article written about me¹), but it was shortly before my 16th birthday in conjunction with a near-death experience at a hospital in Kathmandu, Nepal, that I had a sudden, dramatic spiritual awakening following which I publicly confessed my faith in Jesus Christ. That experience, the most important moment in my life, significantly informs my faith as a follower of Jesus and calling. A few years later, back in Canada, I resided at Conrad Grebel College, a Mennonite USA college on the campus of the University of Waterloo, where I double majored in public health and religious studies. Upon graduation I wasn't sure whether I wanted to go and work in global health or congregational ministry. To discern this, I first spent time on the mission field (maternal and child nutrition specialist) in rural Jamaica through Mennonite Central Committee. Next, I spent a gap year primarily in West Germany. It was while I was auditing a course at the University of Munich on

¹ <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/news/ruth>

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the 19th-century Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher that it became clear that I really wanted to continue on in the study of religion, with an eventual path toward ordination. I received a full tuition scholarship to do both a Masters and Ph.D. at Drew University, where I focused my studies upon Schleiermacher. While I still felt called to ordained ministry, I was unsure what denomination I wanted to affiliate with. After all there was no United Church of Canada in the United States, which was the denomination I felt most closely connected to. I honestly would have felt comfortable in any of the mainline denominations. The most obvious was to seek ordination with the United Methodists since I was at a Methodist affiliated university, and I already was serving as a youth director at a Methodist church in a nearby town. However, in the late 1970s I was witnessing the few Methodist women in my classes go on after ordination to be placed by their district superintendents in the absolute worst clergy-killer ministry settings. I did not want to put my fate in the hands of denominational judicatories. At the advice and encouragement of the theologian Dr. Thomas Oden, for whom I worked as a graduate assistant for a number of years, I began exploring the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a denomination I was somewhat familiar with because of my time with the Stone Campbell church in Tübingen, Germany. The Reformed theology of this denomination, which had stemmed from the Presbyterians in Kentucky and Pennsylvania in the early 1800s, felt very familiar to me. The decision to seek ordination with them was solidified because the wonderful man I met at Drew and later married, Russ Ragovin, who had converted from Judaism, felt very comfortable himself becoming ordained with the Disciples of Christ. Starting in the early 1980s, Russ and I began serving in various capacities in ministry, with each of us later being ordained. My ministries have included educational ministry (teaching world religions at Lethbridge University in Alberta; teaching New Testament at Pan American University in TX; program director overseeing an ecumenical educational program at Disciples Center in San Diego; director of the Schleiermacher: Studies and Translation Series); regional ministry (Associate Regional Minister for Women's Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in TN); spiritual retreat leading; interfaith spiritual direction; and, above all, congregational ministry (3 years in California in urban ministry; 7 years in Tennessee in rural ministry; 13 years in western KY, in a university town, all with churches affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)). I have always felt that my secondary denomination is the Presbyterian Church (USA) as I share their progressive theological beliefs. I have felt a strong kinship with the Presbyterian ministers and congregations in the places I have served and participated in cooperative ministry with them. I retired three years before planned when, in the summer of 2022, my late husband Russ was diagnosed with a rare neuromuscular disorder. We moved to Gainesville, FL, in October of 2022, to be close to our daughter and grandchildren. Russ died on July 12, 2023, nine months to the hour of our arrival here. Now that I have taken the year following his death to learn to walk on my new widow's legs, I very much want to return to congregational ministry, although this time in a part-time capacity. I do feel a strong sense of calling to serve at Faith Presbyterian Church in Melrose, FL, a wonderful congregation, where I have been in a rotation of

ministers bringing the message one Sunday a month. I feel a sense of excitement about the opportunity to become re-rooted in and acquainted with the denomination of my origin (knowing I have so much to learn especially about Presbyterian polity), while maintaining my ordination standing with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). These are not mutually exclusive as I bring with me the following (greatly abbreviated).

Statement of Faith:

I believe in one sovereign God, who is revealed to us as God the Father/Mother (Creator), God the Son (Revealer), and God the Holy Spirit (Sustainer).

God is revealed to us through the special revelation of scripture that includes both the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament as it recounts God's self-disclosure in the lives of people over time and place. Our faith also is informed by the many confessions of the global church that have come down to us through history and which still will be written.

God also is revealed to us through general revelation as manifest in many ways including creation, our conscience, dreams, synchronicities, music, scientific discoveries, prayer and other spiritual practices, and when we gather together as community.

God the Father/Mother (Creator), created the universe, which God declared *Tov*, or full of goodness.

Human beings were given the task of tending to this universe but early on we lost our way.

What we call original sin might be described as the generational mistakes made by our ancestors that are passed down to us through the family systems and world we live in, which make it impossible for us to freely choose the good that God intends for us.

The Hebrew scriptures tell the stories of God's ongoing covenant with God's people as God waited patiently for them time and time again and as they waited with hope for someone to save them.

God became incarnated in a particular human being named Jesus, who embodied perfect God consciousness all through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

During Jesus' life, he challenged, encouraged, strengthened, healed, and taught about the Kingdom of God that is both within and without. Jesus, as a kind of wisdom teacher, taught in parables that jolted people out of their usual ways of understanding things. He gathered around himself a core group of disciples, both male and female, whom he commissioned to carry out his work. The disciples' mission (and ours) might best be summarized by the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20) and the Great Commandment (Mt 22:36-40). The Lord's Prayer shows us how to pray and relate to God. The heart of Jesus' teachings are found in the Beatitudes, which depict how the mind of Christ manifests itself as people mature as Christians.

Jesus' unjust death, following which he visited hell to save those who already had died, led to his resurrection, ascension, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (which proceeds both from the Father and the Son), enabling us to stay in relation to our Trinitarian God as we are empowered to build God's Kingdom starting in the particular neighborhood in which we live.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can confidently proclaim that love is stronger than death, after this life there is more life, and that *"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39) We are justified by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9) and called to grow in Christian maturity (sanctification) as we increasingly display the mind of Christ.

As Christians we are part of a universal family composed of the communion of the saints, which includes not only those who are alive today but Christians of all times and places, including those not yet born.

The church as God's new community is given to us as a gift to carry out Christ's work in the world as we each are part of the body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers. Here we are embraced even before we are born and reminded of God's unconditional love and forgiveness as we live into our identities as God's beloved children, proclaiming the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. In God's new community we continue to grow in our faith and are strengthened for the journey through the sacraments of baptism and communion as we look with hope to the day of Christ's return at the dawning of God's new creation.