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How PATHWAYS Has Prepared Me for Authorized Ministry

The PATHWAYS program has been one of the most formative experiences of my preparation for authorized ministry. While I entered the program with years of leadership experience in nonprofit management, deep involvement in the United Church of Christ, and a clear sense of God's call, PATHWAYS transformed that call into a more mature understanding of pastoral identity. It strengthened my theological foundation, sharpened my practical ministry skills, challenged assumptions I did not know I held, and equipped me to lead faithfully within the covenantal life of the United Church of Christ.

As I prepare for ordination, I see PATHWAYS not simply as a collection of courses but as an integrated journey of formation. Each course built upon another, helping me grow intellectually, spiritually, and pastorally. Several courses have been especially influential in shaping the minister I am becoming.

Understanding the Covenantal Nature of Ministry

The course that perhaps most reshaped my understanding of ministry within the UCC was **UCC History and Polity**. Prior to the course, I appreciated the United Church of Christ because of its progressive theology, commitment to justice, and extravagant welcome. What I gained was a much deeper appreciation for the covenantal structure that makes the UCC unique.

Unlike hierarchical traditions, authority within the UCC is exercised through covenantal relationships rather than top-down control. Congregations retain autonomy while choosing to remain accountable to one another through Associations, Conferences, and the national setting of the church. Ministry, therefore, is never an individual endeavor. Authorized ministers serve not only local congregations but also the wider church.

This understanding came alive during my service as chair of a resolution committee at the 2025 UCC General Synod. Leading delegates from across the denomination through prayerful discernment, respectful dialogue, and consensus building demonstrated the practical reality of covenant. We were not simply debating resolutions; we were discerning together how God was calling the church to live faithfully in the world.

That experience reinforced what I learned in PATHWAYS—that authorized ministry extends beyond the walls of any single congregation. Whether serving on conference committees, participating in Association work, mentoring Members in Discernment, or contributing to the broader witness of the denomination, ministers are called to strengthen the covenant that binds us together. This understanding will continue to shape how I lead congregations, encouraging them to see themselves as participants in God's wider mission rather than isolated communities of faith.

Preaching as Prophetic Witness

One of the most timely and challenging courses I completed was **Preaching Against Christian Nationalism**. The course explored the theological dangers of confusing national identity with Christian identity and challenged us to preach in ways that reclaim the Gospel from political idolatry.

Rather than encouraging partisan preaching, the course emphasized returning consistently to the teachings of Jesus: love of neighbor, care for the vulnerable, justice, humility, and radical hospitality. It reminded me that faithful preaching must always ask whether our words draw people closer to Christ or merely reinforce cultural assumptions.

As someone who serves both a local congregation and a nonprofit dedicated to serving marginalized communities, this course affirmed my conviction that the church must be willing to speak truth with courage and compassion. Authorized ministry requires helping congregations navigate difficult conversations without creating unnecessary division, while also refusing to remain silent when the Gospel calls us to justice.

The course strengthened my confidence to preach prophetically—not by offering political opinions, but by continually inviting people to examine their lives through the lens of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Forming Disciples Across Generations

The **Faith Formation** course expanded my understanding of Christian education beyond traditional Sunday School models. Rather than viewing faith formation as something reserved for children or confirmation students, the course presented discipleship as a lifelong process that flourishes through relationships across generations.

One of the most significant insights I gained was the importance of creating spaces where children, youth, adults, and older adults learn with and from one another. Faith is often transmitted less through formal curriculum than through storytelling, shared worship, service, mentoring, and authentic relationships.

This perspective has influenced how I think about congregational life. As I serve churches in the future, I hope to design ministries that intentionally bring generations together rather than separating them. Whether through intergenerational Bible studies, mission projects, worship leadership, or storytelling, I believe the church is strongest when every generation recognizes that it both teaches and learns.

Faith formation is not simply education; it is the lifelong shaping of disciples who continue growing in their relationship with God and one another.

Proclaiming Hope in Every Season of Life

The course **Preaching for Special Occasions** demonstrated that some of the most significant sermons ministers preach occur outside ordinary Sunday worship.

Funerals, weddings, memorial services, community celebrations, civic observances, and moments of public tragedy each require unique pastoral sensitivity. These occasions often bring together people with widely differing relationships to faith, making them opportunities for compassionate proclamation rather than theological argument.

The course emphasized that effective preaching in these settings begins not with the preacher but with the people gathered—their grief, joy, uncertainty, celebration, or fear. The Gospel must always meet people where they are while gently pointing toward hope.

This learning has already influenced my ministry through preaching funerals, participating in community worship services, and offering pastoral presence during times of crisis. I have learned that some of the most meaningful sermons are those that hold space for lament while quietly proclaiming resurrection hope.

Authorized ministry calls ministers to accompany people through every stage of life. This course helped me understand that preaching is often less about providing answers than about bearing witness to God's faithful presence in life's most sacred moments.

Reading Scripture with New Eyes

The **Old Testament Hermeneutics** course fundamentally changed how I read Scripture.

Rather than approaching biblical texts solely through historical or literary analysis, the course introduced womanist and feminist biblical interpretation, Midrash, and sacred imagination. These approaches expanded my appreciation for voices that have often been overlooked and encouraged me to ask new questions of familiar texts.

Womanist and feminist perspectives invited me to consider how power, gender, race, and social location shape both biblical narratives and our interpretations of them. Midrash encouraged creative engagement with Scripture, exploring possibilities beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. Sacred imagination invited me to enter biblical stories with empathy, curiosity, and wonder.

These tools have profoundly enriched my preaching. Rather than presenting Scripture as a collection of settled answers, I have learned to invite congregations into deeper conversation with the text. Biblical interpretation becomes less about mastering Scripture and more about allowing Scripture to transform us.

This approach also reflects my understanding that God's Spirit continues to speak through ancient texts in fresh and surprising ways. PATHWAYS taught me that faithful interpretation requires both intellectual rigor and spiritual imagination.

Crafting Worship that Forms Communities

The **Art of Worship** course deepened my appreciation for worship as intentional theological formation.

Before taking the course, I understood worship primarily as a collection of liturgical elements. The course helped me recognize that every aspect of worship—the call to worship, prayers, confession, assurance, Scripture, sermon, music, offering, communion, and benediction—works together to tell the story of God's relationship with humanity.

Thoughtful worship design shapes how congregations understand God, themselves, and their calling in the world. Every prayer, every hymn, and every movement within the liturgy carries theological significance.

This understanding has transformed how I prepare worship services. Rather than viewing each element independently, I now seek coherence throughout the entire service so that every piece supports the central theological message. My goal is for worship not simply to inform people about God but to create encounters with God's presence that inspire faithful living throughout the week.

Caring for the Whole Person

My work in **Supervised Ministry V**, combined with **Introduction to Spiritual Health (Pastoral Care)**, strengthened my understanding that effective ministry requires caring for the whole person.

Through these courses, I gained a greater awareness of common psychological and mental health conditions, trauma-informed pastoral care, crisis response, grief, addiction, anxiety, depression, personality disorders, and appropriate pastoral boundaries. I also learned the importance of recognizing when referral to mental health professionals is both necessary and faithful.

This learning complements my Clinical Pastoral Education and my ministry at APNH, where many individuals experience trauma, substance use disorders, housing instability, chronic illness, and mental health challenges.

Rather than seeing spiritual care and mental health as separate concerns, I now understand them as deeply interconnected. Authorized ministry requires ministers who can offer compassionate presence, listen without judgment, recognize suffering, and help individuals access appropriate support while continually reminding them of God's abiding love.

Beyond the Classroom

Two experiences outside traditional coursework also shaped my preparation for ministry: **Project Proclaim** and **Preaching Camp**.

Project Proclaim affirmed the importance of cultivating healthy clergy leadership while helping me build relationships with colleagues across the denomination. Those connections have become an invaluable source of encouragement, accountability, and mutual support.

Preaching Camp provided opportunities to preach, receive thoughtful feedback, and refine my voice. More importantly, it reminded me that preaching is not a performance but an act of faithful communication grounded in authenticity, humility, and deep love for God's people.

Together, these experiences reinforced that ministry is always learned in community.

Conclusion

Looking back, PATHWAYS has prepared me not simply to perform the functions of ministry but to embody the identity of an authorized minister within the United Church of Christ. It has strengthened my theological grounding, expanded my biblical imagination, refined my preaching, enriched my pastoral care, deepened my understanding of worship, and rooted my ministry within the covenantal life of the church.

As I continue serving in congregational ministry while leading a community-based nonprofit, I carry with me the conviction that ministry is ultimately about helping people encounter God's grace. PATHWAYS has given me the theological knowledge, practical skills, and spiritual confidence to accompany individuals and communities as they seek to live more faithfully into God's call.

I leave the program grateful—not because my formation is complete, but because PATHWAYS has equipped me with the tools, relationships, and practices that will sustain a lifetime of learning, service, and faithful ministry.