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Commission Minister
Ministry of Spiritual Connection

A Practical Approach for Developing a Spiritual Connection and Relationship With a
Power Greater than Oneself — God.

I. My Spiritual Journey

God has always been and always will be with me. God was with me when I was too young to know it. At 10 days, I had a life-threatening medical issue that required major surgery. Of course I was too young to remember the surgery, but I grew up believing (and still do) God wanted me around.

I thank my parents for giving a solid religious foundation. We went to church regularly, and I eagerly participated. I was baptized as an infant, and I reaffirmed my baptism during confirmation class. My fondest memories growing up are in church. Ms. Ethel Hamilton, the kindergarten teacher and music director at church, taught me to connect to God through music. To this day, when I sing “Jesus Loves Me” and “This Little Light of Mine,” I am taken back to that safe, loving church classroom.

The Lutheran church instilled in me a spiritual outlook that is with me to this day, even if I mostly have left behind their theology. We read the entire Bible. Ms. Elle French, my third grade Sunday school teacher, made the Bible vivid and relatable. Confirmation class built my spiritual foundation. We discussed the importance of Church and God. The Youth Group gave me a sense of belonging. I loved all of it, and I began to feel the first tug of my call to ministry. Moreover, it was a safe haven from a dysfunctional household and was a refuge.

Teenage years can be confusing. I had experienced sexual abuse as child, which I kept bottled up inside me. I also became aware that I am gay, causing much religious conflict in me. Church and my grandmother were safe havens while I struggled internally. My grandmother, Gran acted as a parent to and rescued me from my home life. I felt safe at church and at Gran’s, but few other places. God was watching over me.

I struggled academically and socially in school. I later learned I have a learning disability, but at the time I thought I was stupid, which only added fuel to my low self worth. A specialist told my parents “high school must have been a living hell for Gordon.” In some ways it was.

I was a skinny, awkward young man. I was not good at sports. School was an athletic-centered place, and my family was prominent in its history. In my mind, I clearly did not measure up. I contributed by being the wrestling team manager and being in drama club plays. Other students contributed by bullying me. But God was watching over me. A librarian, Janet Graham, took me under her wings. I now know Janet was a lesbian and spotted me a mile away. We are friends to this day.

After high school, I joined Gran's church, First United Methodist, and became a fifth generation member. I planned on attending Lutheran ministry college, but I set that dream aside in the midst of depression. I struggled with depression and sought counseling. Equally predictably, I self-medicated with alcohol.

My siblings all attended prestigious colleges. I went to the local state school, joined a fraternity while closeted, drank a lot, and dropped out. I felt so far away from God. But God was watching over me. I participated in campus ministry in college. My church also had an annual collegiate day at which I gave personal witness in front of 1800 people at two services.

At the same time, I reluctantly came out to my parents, which did not go well. My father pronounced my sexual orientation "a grave spiritual error," and hired an investigator to follow my boyfriend. The pastor at my former Lutheran church told my parents I was going to hell.

My drinking got worse. I spent too much time at the gay bar and my grades suffered. One evening several fraternity brothers came to my apartment and confronted me on my drinking, my grades, and hanging out at the local gay bar. I didn't know what to do, so I did what I knew how to do. I went to my church and prayed in the sanctuary. I sought counseling from my own Methodist pastor. He was not hostile, but he was not supportive either. I needed spiritual direction. I got Switzerland.

I never felt so far from God. I dropped out of church and school, and focused on retail and alcohol therapies.

After one night of heavy drinking and crying on the phone to my boyfriend at the time, I knew I was sick and tired of my life. My boyfriend helped me find a treatment facility. I then went to my father for help. On the way, I prayed for the first time in a long time — the Lord's prayer that I remembered from Sunday School. My father was gentle and kind, and made all necessary arrangements. God was watching over me.

Seeking treatment was the beginning of my adult spiritual journey.

After 28 days of treatment, I took the advice to enroll in a halfway house in Phoenix. Recovery offered me a wide-open spiritual road that was not separate from who I really am. I could be me and be with God. My childhood spiritual foundation made recovery more accessible to me than for most because I believed in God,

wanted to rely on God, and had a sense that God was with me. I got a sponsor, worked the steps, and went to more meetings that I can count. Recovery became my spirituality.

I learned my main objective was rebuilding a relationship with a Power greater than my self. Acknowledging my powerlessness and unmanageability, coming to believe in a Power greater than myself, and turning my will (my thinking) and my life (my actions) over to God, as I understood God, opened me to a much bigger and lifelong spiritual journey. There were many great spiritual quotes that meant a lot to me, and two have stood out.

“Forget about church and the Bible, work on your relationship with God.” The idea behind this is that for most people, including me, it’s easy to make God an an idea or a thought rather than a life experience. By temporarily setting aside doctrine and focusing on a personal, spiritual experience, I came to sense God in a new light.

“God is the answer, now what is the problem.” This seemingly simple quote is deeper than first glance might suggest. It further sums up Reinhold Neibuhr’s Serenity Prayer. Answer to all questions ultimately reside in God. I just need to remind myself of that. Some answer involve me, some do not, but all all answers involve God.

Early recovery reminded me of Sunday school at the Lutheran church. It gave me a good framework, but I had much growing to do too, experiences to experience, and things to learn.

For example, I longed for a mate, but I had to heal first. Only when I finally truly believed I deserved a healthy and loving relationship did I find my husband, Brendan. Our relationship is based on a shared spiritual journey, and on that basis alone has lasted 23 years (so far).

The ultimate goal of recovery, as reflected in Step 12, is a spiritual awakening. That certainly has been my own experience in early recovery and today. Along the way, I found my way back to church despite the many misgivings of my past experiences. Church did not replace recovery, but became an essential spiritual tool within recovery. Brendan and I first found an LGBT church (Community Church Hope), but in time wanted to reconnect with a wider church community. Each step of my church journey has led to the next.

I attended a UCC event (a Southwest Conference Annual Meeting) knowing nothing about the UCC. I finished the event with a sense of marvel. How had I not known about the UCC? The people I met were open-minded, educated, thoughtful, and spiritual. They wanted to know me. My other attributes (gay, recovery, male, and so one) didn’t define me to them. It was transformative. My memory of that weekend is vivid, and I often share to memory. I know now God was watching over me.

After a brief search of UCC churches near me, I found my current church, First Church UCC Phoenix, which I have attended for 18 years. Joining UCC brought me to my spiritual home. The parallel between the spiritual journey in recovery and in church are a perfect fit. (It is no coincidence that AA's founders were both Congregationalists). I was finally able to connect the spirituality of my childhood with the spirituality of recovery and move forward to develop a maturing spirituality of my own. I am a regular participant in church service, programs and administration. Church is a cornerstone of my life today.

I still vividly recall attending a routine Sunday evening service when my youthful call to ministry reawakened. A question was posed to the crowd: "What is your calling?" I heard this voice inside of me and stood up, almost involuntarily, and said I was tired of standing still, that I was called to ministry. The room was hushed silent, and in that thin space, I deeply communicated with the Holy Spirit. It was the first time I connected an inner voice with the Holy Spirit, and knew with absolute certainty that it was God. Almost immediately (and for years since) my personal history of my life has been reshuffled as a result of this new understanding. I see events in my past in a very different light. That evening had unmistakably unique qualities: it was slow motion, vivid, everyone spoke only to me, and I had a sense of total revelation. It motivates and reassures me to this day that God has called me to ministry.

That God called me to ministry is clear, but I was less clear about what that meant. Thus started my seven-year discernment journey. It was as if God told Jonah "I want you to go somewhere" and left Nineveh out. I have since learned the purpose of discernment.

Over the last many years, I have taken all the necessary administrative steps, and accepted the advice to seek spiritual direction. I have worked with my spiritual director, Amanda Peterson, for six years. Recovery is not just about overcoming, it also is about reclaiming — reclaiming the call I felt as a youth and mistakenly thought I had lost because I am gay. During this discernment period, I reclaimed my voice and found my purpose. The length of discernment was necessary. I had to unpeel yet more layers so that the past would not control my future.

As I will discuss further in part III (My Theology) of this paper, I know deep inside myself the Holy Spirit's calling for me — not just that I have been called, but what I have been called to do. My experience rebuilding a mature relationship with God and leading others on that journey is where I have been led. Many people know only a childhood version of God, or none at all, and wonder why their faith eventually fails them. Developing the tools to connect spiritually with God every day, learning to embrace the mystery of faith and uncertainty, and exploring with an open mind all are essential tools I have been called to share with others. It is no surprise to me now that my life is my ministry.

II. Polity

Our Congregational ancestors had a distinct insight that set them apart from other European Christians: Every person has a unique relationship with God that may be informed by others, but not dictated. In England, that insight was treason.

The Congregationalists challenged (however incomplete and imperfect) the notion of church hierarchy, rejecting not only popes but also bishops and other offices. After a sojourn to Holland and back to England, a group of Congregationalists set out for America to put their ideas into action. It was far from perfect and rife with dissent, but the basic polity of later Congregationalists and today's UCC began to emerge.

People participated in a congregation by choice, congregations called their pastors rather than having them assigned, and decisions were made more or less democratically. It is too easy to look backwards at the imperfections of the early Congregationalists — women and men without property were excluded, and doctrinal warfare was all too common. And yet, the Congregationalists' understanding of covenant created a framework for an impressive lists of firsts. The first publication of an African American author, the first African American pastor, the abolitionist movement, ordination of women, higher education, not to mention the American revolution.

The ever-widening understanding of inclusiveness was the impulse for the ecumenical merger that created the UCC in 1957 after 15 years of struggling with the issue. The merger was not easy. Four different denominations grappled with merging different governance, finances and theology. Ultimately a creaky and cumbersome UCC took hold. Over time, our governance has streamlined, and Congregational polity has come to permeate our denomination. No further mergers have taken place, but the UCC's ecumenical relations are among the strongest.

The UCC expression of covenant relationships has become the foundation of our denomination. Church members join a congregation by covenant, pastors and other clergy stand in covenant relationship with the congregation (and other settings of the church). Congregations covenant to form associations and conferences, which in turn covenant with the national setting. Because each person has a unique understanding of God, the UCC is founded entirely on covenant relationship rather than hierarchical authority.

Our covenant relationships do not create pure independence in the person, the local church or other settings of the church. We are autonomous in mutual covenant, but not independent. We covenant to listen seriously and respectfully to each other and to other settings of the church, at all levels discerning to understand how God is manifested among us.

As a result, the UCC is not a doctrinal denomination. We co-exist with a multitude of spiritual understandings through covenant and mutual respect. The covenantal basis of the UCC is at the heart of the ministry to which I am called. Each

person has a unique relationship with God, and my calling is to help others explore what that means to them.

III. My Theology

A. The Basics

Wars have been fought and countless lives lost fighting over fine theological points. Arcane (and even common) theological questions are interesting and useful intellectually, but for me spirituality ought to be simple and basic. I cannot allow myself to be distracted from God while cogitating the nature of Jesus' divinity and/or humanity. Keep it simple. I do not intend to teach theology nor do I have the training. My calling is to help people explore their own theology.

A few basics have proven more than sufficient to sustain my spiritual life. God is love. I exist to return that love. "You shall love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets." (Matt. 22:37-40) This is the basic statement of what it means to be a Christian (although other religious traditions do this too). The law I follow is Love — for God and for one another. What ultimately matters most is not my detailed, pious observance of religious rules, but my heart, because I am not capable of loving perfectly.

My shortcomings — failure to love perfectly — are "sin." Sin is not the loaded term of most Christian theology. The Hebrew word for "sin" is *hhatah*, which literally means "miss the mark." (Strong's #2403). God does not condemn our sin because God created all of us perfectly in imperfection. Grace is the space God gives us to experience our human imperfection, from which we learn to rely on God and to serve God and other fellow humans. There is no eternal condemnation for "original sin." God loves us just as we are. Our actions may create consequences here and now, but that has no impact on God's love.

Because there is no eternal condemnation for sin, the notion of Hell as a consequence of sin is untenable. Hell — separation from God — is of our own making, here and now. We create our own personal hells (and always have a Get Out of Hell for Free Card, any time we want it).

The same is true for heaven. Heaven is not a reward for accepting as true the notion that Jesus died for our sins because God insisted someone had to pay. Jesus said "heaven is within you." (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus came to teach us how to create heaven within us by following his example. Both heaven and hell are of our own making.

Following Jesus is a paradox. My life is all about me, but life looks outward to God and all of creation and calls me into service. Each day is a conversation with

Jesus because to emulate Jesus is to be his mouth, hands and feet. We are called to follow Jesus, not to worship Jesus. By following Jesus's path and serving others, we find ourselves.

However, we are called to worship God. In moments of fear, I often turn to prayer and grasp for courage. Courage is not absence of fear; it is the strength to face and walk through fear. Thus God's grace is revealed to us in our weaknesses. The challenge for me (and most others) is to remember to worship God when things are going well. I do that by reminding myself to regularly give thanks.

This is the framework of my theology. It is basic, simple, and it has worked for me and kept me clean and sober for 30 years.

B. What about God

God is everything and yet unknowable. God is an experience, not a concept. The Creator of the universe is simply beyond human comprehension. That does not mean humans are completely without knowledge. Indeed, we seem to have a built-in sense that God exists and is pure love, a sense that transcends culture, religions, and epochs.

“God is not a study, an essay, or an argument. Either you are inundated with God or you are not. God is as real as someone touching your hand. That's how much you can feel the Spirit inside of you. God is as real as the beating of your heart. You feel it flowing through your being.” – Michael Singer, *The Untethered Soul*.

If God is an experience (which is true), then the Bible does not so much describe God as it describes the efforts of others to experience God. The Bible is not the literal Word of God, but it is instructive in helping me understand my own experiences that defy description.

Ultimately, understanding God is the great mystery. I gain so much wisdom, compassion, love and understanding by working to understand something I never will understand. Call me a mystic. God is beyond description, is neither male nor female, is of no race or religion. God is God. In Exodus, Moses asks God who God is. The answer is usually translated as “I am that I am.” This cryptic answer is poorly translated. In Hebrew, the answer is the infinitive form of the word “to be” said twice. God's answer, in English, is more like “to be, to be” or “Am Being.” God defines God as the entirety of all of existence itself.

C. What about Jesus

Christianity took a wrong turn when the spiritual guidance of Jesus became a religion about Jesus. I do not worship Jesus; I follow his teachings and example. Jesus teaches me about how to relate to God and to others. In this role, Jesus is the head of the church.

Jesus taught us how to connect to God free from dogma. He challenged religious dogma of his time. Unfortunately, most Christians took that freedom as an opportunity to write a new set of rules and tie themselves up again. That is very wide of the mark. Jesus teaches us to be unashamed of our humanity, to love fully, and to not fear God. Following Jesus keeps me from creating my own personal Hell of self-centeredness and selfishness, and leads me to the loving presence of God. In this respect Jesus is divine.

I look to Jesus' life on earth as an example. Jesus welcomed everyone. Jesus paid particular attention to women, to immigrants, to orphans, and anyone else society left out. Jesus teaches us to look beyond our own needs and experience and to focus on others. In recovery, that's often called "getting out of yourself." Creating Jesus' heaven inside of me requires that I get out of myself and pay attention to others. This is love, empathy and compassion in action.

Christians often refer to Jesus as the Son of God, and we all are Children of God. When Jesus died, he became one with God after life, as we all do. The Trinity is a paradigm for each of our relationships with God. Jesus made God relatable in life and in death

D. What about the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit might seem to be the step-child of the Trinity, but that is far from accurate. The Holy Spirit is the voice in our heads, a conduit from God. The Holy Spirit is inspiration and conscience. The Holy Spirit is manifested through people and situations.

I relate to God and Jesus through my consciousness, but the Holy Spirit is ever present. The Holy Spirit is the Voice of God.

Discernment is the process of learning to listen for the Holy Spirit. It is another mystery. We somehow sense a deep truth and learn to identify that as the Holy Spirit and not ourselves. A significant portion of my calling to guide others in awakening spiritually is encouraging people to learn to listen to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. It is subtle, rarely pushy, quiet, gentle, and utterly convincing.

IV. Ministry Plan — How to Reimagine God and Awaken Spiritually

A. Overview

Most people, regardless of background, find themselves in the midst of adulthood with a child's understanding of God in tow. As Rev. Dr. Laurence C. Keene so aptly put in in the movie For the Bible Tells Me So, "There's nothing wrong with a fifth-grade understanding of God — as long as you're in the fifth grade." A child-like attitude toward God is what Jesus taught us, but not a childish attitude. The difference is crucial.

I first encountered this conundrum when I started my own recovery journey. Alcoholics Anonymous encourages participants to connect spiritually with a God of one's own understanding (Step 3), culminating in a spiritual awakening (Step 12). My own background, steeped in Missouri synod theology, proclaimed me a sinner bound for hell because of my sexual orientation, and I found temporary but ultimately counterproductive refuge in drinking. Embarking on recovery, I had to sift through my fifth-grade understanding of God, discard parts, and seek to know God with an open heart and open mind.

My experience is not unique to me or unique to recovery. It probably is the norm. Yet my own church, as well as most churches, are full of congregants who never get past their fifth-grade understanding. Sadly, most people reach a point where they believe God has failed them and find their faith shaken.

At the same time, particularly in the UCC and my own church, new members arrive from a wide variety of religious backgrounds or no background at all. Our task is to help them embark on the journey of exploring an unknowable God and to experience the richness of a mature, ever-growing faith. If God is still speaking, what are we doing to help people learn to listen?

B. The Ministry

Most churches, including my own, offer a wide variety of programs for spiritual growth. Sunday sermons, bible classes, meditation and prayer groups, etc. What I see missing, certainly in my own church, is a coherent effort to help people open their minds to develop their own unique understanding of God. Our covenant-based polity rests on the uniqueness of one's own understanding, and we honor it in word and deed. Yet, we fall short in actually helping people identify their own understanding.

In this regard, the church (my own congregation as well as the wider UCC) can benefit greatly from the experience of recovery groups. As Frederick Buechner observed in his forward to the Recovery Devotional Bible, "I . . . believe that what goes on in [recovery groups] is far closer to what Christ meant his church to be, and what it originally was, than much of what goes on in most churches I know." There is a great deal of truth to this.

As a person new in recovery, I was told "forget about the Bible and focus on God." In other words, discard dogma and seek a genuine understanding. That could have come from the mouth of any UCC clergy. I started on my own ever-lengthening spiritual journey. As an AA sponsor to others, I have held out my hand and welcomed others to join me on the journey. We may travel the same path together for a time, we may part ways, but the people I have accompanied, and those who accompanied me, are headed to the same destination. All paths lead to God.

I know to the core of my being that God has called me to share with others how to embark on the journey, to point the way, and to accompany for a time. It is both deeply spiritual and eminently practical.

C. The Concept

Beginning an adult spiritual journey usually falls into three stages: 1) breaking down barriers and dogma; 2) equipping with basic tools; 3) taking first steps on the lifelong journey.

1. Breaking Down Barriers.

Everyone carries with them unchallenged assumptions about God, assumptions that at best are benign and at worst are serious obstacles to a genuine relationship with a God of One's Own Understanding: God is a man; humans are by nature sinful because of Adam and Eve's disobedience; Jesus died for our sins; the list goes on ad infinitum. The first stage of spiritual exploration encourages participants to challenge assumptions. Why do I believe this? Is it really true?

A practical approach dispels some commonly-held misunderstandings to encourage further questioning — e.g., the widely-held view that God is a man. Participants should focus on key scriptures and outside sources. For example, participants should be challenged to identify anywhere in the Bible where God's physical appearance is actually described. There are none. Quite the contrary, the Bible quite clearly proclaims that no one ever has seen God (1 John 4:12) and that God is spirit (John 4:24). It is true the Bible states God made humans as a reflection of God's image (Genesis 1:26), but that does not mean a literal physical reflection, only that we are patterned after God.

There are countless resources that dispel myths about God and Jesus, too numerous to name here, but Spong, Borg and others provide good food for thought. The apt word here is "deconstruct." The point is to help clear the clutter to make room for something new.

These exercises usually are best one-on-one with some additional group participation. It is human nature to be defensive and no one should feel ganged up upon or embarrassed because of baseless assumptions.

2. The Basic Tools

"If I am wrong about this, what else am I wrong about?" If a person can reach this point, a great deal has been accomplished. The willingness and desire to stop tending weeds and start focusing on growing shoots actually can produce a bumper crop.

The experiences of other people struggling to understand God is immensely valuable at this point. After all, the Bible at its core is just that. Other faith traditions

(within and outside Christianity) offer different but also useful perspectives. Now is the time for exploration, reading, discussion and sharing, not just UCC materials, or even Christian materials.

The basic tools usually focus on one or just a few stumbling blocks. It is a sin to be gay? Are women supposed to be subservient? Does God really love me? It is an opportunity to take the first steps to a mature understanding of God. Appropriate resources depend on the topic, but they are many.

The goal is to acclimate a person to the custom of critical, spiritual inquiry. This can be done one-on-one, but often group participation is most helpful for a person to hear other views or personal experiences.

3. Beyond the Basics – Developing a Lifetime Habit.

With all due respect to Matthew (“For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.” (Matt. 7:13)), in fact the spiritual path to God is broad and roomy. God’s house has lots of rooms, (John 14:12), certainly more than a human can comprehend. Developing mature spirituality means willingness to travel down dead ends, cul-de-sacs, wrong turns, wrong doors, empty rooms and experience them all. Ask, contemplate, pray, meditate, experience, in other words, go explore God. This is, in effect, the maintenance portion of the ministry plan.

The mystery of the unknowableness of God becomes coherent through exploration, even if this statement itself is fundamentally irrational. Everyone will have a unique totality of experience with God even if some parts are shared. Instilling a desire for spiritual exploration as a lifetime habit is the only sure road to a spiritually mature understanding of God (or at least recognition of the inherent inability to understand).

Regular group meetings, shared reading and experience, common participation as well as private prayer and meditation are key practices. Participants in the meeting become fellow travelers, helping and encouraging each other.

D. Action Plan

In addition to one-on-one meetings (usually church referral), I propose to establish a regular weekly or bi-weekly group meeting for shared study, prayer and experience (initially at my own church, but later throughout the conference). The topics that will be covered are:

- Deconstruct and rebuild an authentic relationship with God
- Why go to Church
- Religious or Spiritual- What’s the difference
- God speaking to us - Is the Bible the only answer
- Logical verses a Spiritual approach
- A Spiritual relationship-it’s personal

- Reclaiming Words
- Is there really a need for God?
- I can do it All by myself
- Gratitude -a Lifetime of Practice
- Fear and Doubt, a constant companion
- What is prayer and meditation

I have a wealth of materials and pastoral support for these meetings, but what will resonate most with the largest number of people can only be gleaned from experience. A significant goal of my ministry, in addition to directly working with people, is to develop a core curriculum that has proven most useful. The curriculum can help equip clergy and lay people in other settings, in other other churches, and even other denominations.

After developing the program and common curriculum, I believe other congregations in the conference will benefit from shorter workshops that I can present in one or two days, and perhaps even at the Conference Annual meeting. I also will be available to speak during or after services at congregations throughout the Conference, or to work with referrals one-on-one. The action part of my calling is twofold: 1) to directly help other people on their spiritual journeys, and 2) to help clergy and congregants to include in their ethos practical ways to reimagine God.

“God is the answer, now what is the question?”