Caring For All Creation

Providing hope and healing to a hurting world. How do you sit with someone as they wrestle with God?

 First, primarily, I would listen. Active listening that shows I am really hearing what the person is saying. More and more people just need someone to really listen to what they are saying. What they share may give me insight into the problem with more detail. I can ask questions that may give me more awareness. I may also ask if this is the first time they are wrestling with God or have they been in this place before, and what they did at that time. I would get more information on their relationship with God.

Secondly, I would offer to pray with the person. I would encourage the person to remember that God calls us into a relationship with Him. If they are in agreement, I would offer to keep them in my daily prayers. In addition, if they agree, I could add them to our church prayer list along with my email prayer team. Sometimes it just helps to know there are people out there praying for your needs. We just need to come to Him and lay our burdens at His feet. He will heal us.

 I also might offer some encouraging words from Scripture if the person is open to hearing it. 2Corinthians 4: 16-18 would be one example. “Therefore, do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

There was a time in my life when I wrestled with God. I had an abusive husband and two children only seventeen months apart. I worked night shift at the hospital. It was a very stressful time in my life. I decided I did not have time for church on Sundays. I continued my daily prayers but missed the people I go to church with and communion. I *really* missed communion which brings me into a closer relationship with Jesus. I prayed that God would come to my aid and “fix” things in my life. After some counseling I realized it was up to me to fix my life. God would give me the strength to get through this time in my life. Eventually, after a women’s retreat weekend, I felt closer to God and the strong desire to go back to church. I have never looked back. I believe this experience will help when doing pastoral counseling to others who may need it. I have walked in their shoes as they wrestle with God and can provide emotional support including concern to those who will listen.

 Sometimes it is easy to just quit. Pain, frustrations, work may sometimes want us to throw in the towel and quit. We need to renew our commitment to Christ, gaining strength from the Holy Spirit. We can see our challenges as opportunities for growth. We can give God the opportunity to demonstrate His power in us. As we stay strong and fight against the troubles, we can prove our faith to others. And lastly, we can realize that this life is not all there is. We will live forever with God in a place without sin and suffering. Hopefully these words will help the person live above the pain we face in this life.

Working together For Justice and Mercy - Practicing the radical hospitality of God.

Where do you see the UCC’s commitment to inclusion and justice being modeled well? How do you strive to embody these commitments in your own life and ministry?

When my wife and I joined our local UCC church Desert Garden we were extravagantly welcomed. We were recognized for the gifts we brought to the church on our spiritual journey. It is our local church who models the commitment to inclusion and justice. Our church recently became open and affirming. This included being certified by the Open and Affirming Coalition UCC. We became the 1,857th church to reach this milestone and it took one year to do so. This gives our community the welcoming aspect, that all are welcome here. My wife and I are out and live authentically and are embraced by those at our church. I strive to embody these commitments by being available and approachable to everyone that comes to the church. In my experience, there have been several people who have been hurt or demeaned at their previous churches. I am available to speak with anyone who would like to speak more intently on this issue. I strive to be loving toward everyone. Everyone needs a safe place to come to worship and pray. Anyone who enters our church should be welcomed and embraced for their gifts. Christ loved everyone and I hope to model that behavior as well. There have been several churches who were not receptive to us and we feel like we found a great church home here in our community.

I am also familiar with several other UCC churches that are open and affirming. They model a wonderful Christian concept of all are welcome and embrace the gifts that each person brings to the church. Our UCC foundation has been “first” in many aspects of spiritual inclusion and worship leadership throughout the years.

Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions. Exhibiting knowledge, understanding and continuing study of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. How do you practice prayer with scripture for spiritual growth?

Each day I use the lectionary to get the readings for the day. After I read them, I pause, reflect, and pray that they may feed my soul well. I try to be consistent and do this daily in the mornings. My day seems to go better when I have done the readings and prayers. I also studied the scriptures in my Education for Ministry class as well as seminary. In my Education for Ministry class, together we did theological reflections which I am getting better at now that I have graduated. Theological reflection brings us into an awareness of God’s presence in our lives. Theological reflections deepen and sustain our spirituality in a continually maturing Christian life. During year four of our Education for Ministry class, the focus for the year was theology. We read several books with a theological perspective.

Currently, as a seminary student graduate, I have completed all the required work for graduation. I have learned much regarding Hebrew Bible, History of Christian Thought, Pastoral Theology, and the History, Polity and Theology of the UCC. Some of my favorite classes were my New Testament class, Epistles class, Disability Studies in the New Testament and Early Christianity, and Faith and Film: Religious Education Through Movies. I have worked hard and have done well in my classes. These classes have helped shape me as an aspiring minister and have given me much to think about. They have deepened my understanding of God and the Holy Spirit. I have grown in my relationship with God. I use prayer daily to connect with God. This most definitely feeds my soul. It is my hope that others may see the God-side in me. I hope to bring others a strong way of connecting to God by my example and actions.

Building Transformational Leadership Skills

Witnessing in the public square to God’s redeeming power. How do you engage in print material, online resources, social media, etc. for your ministry and for the fulfillment of the mission of God?

Daily I use the lectionary for the Scripture verses for that day. I read and reflect on these readings. In addition, my Bible is a life application Bible and has commentaries, helping discern what is meant by a complicated verse or verses. It helps me figure out how the verses apply to my own life and helps me to understand what God is saying through His Word.

I am currently reading The Homiletical Question; An Introduction to Liturgical Preaching by William Brosend. It expresses how by answering one simple question each time a sermon is prepped, preachers can respond faithfully and completely to the texts for that particular day, respond to the needs and issues of those gathered to hear, and respond to challenges in today’s world. It is my goal to become an effective preacher and give those who come to hear something to ponder on in the week ahead and maybe sometimes offer even a challenge.

Online I receive the Daily Meditations from Richard Rohr and the Center for Action and Contemplation. These give me another great introspection on a wide variety of topics. I also receive the Daily Devotional from the UCC church. Various authors put together reflective texts and are good reads on multiple topics. It always ends with a good prayer for the day. Sermon Seeds on the UCC site also gives much to ponder on in regard to the Sunday Scripture. It is a good jumping off point when preparing a sermon.

I also use online resources to receive commentary in order to prepare my sermon. In addition, I listen to other preachers’ sermons on the same topic. I always give credit to those preachers if I use something from their sermons. A friend of mine at church gave me the series of books called the Daily Study Bible by William Barclay. These books are invaluable for help in sermon writing and my primary go to when beginning to craft a sermon. I feel my sermons are getting stronger and stronger, giving those who are present something more to think about and strengthen their relationship with their God. I am thinking and yet discerning of going for my Ph.D. in preaching. I would wait after doing several years of ministry before embarking on that goal. This goal would develop my preaching skills even more, making me even stronger in that area.

In regards to social media, I am “friends” with many in spiritual work with a variety of spiritual backgrounds. I often share some of their posts so others can read and digest their statements. I am careful what I personally post and do not engage in political or untoward commentary. My posts reflect my mission to be approachable, strong in my faith, and give others things to think about throughout their week.

In regards to the fulfillment of the mission of God, David Bosch said that “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.” The church is regarded as an instrument for that mission. Bosch also said “to participate in a mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.” I am working on being a good instrument for God’s mission and pray daily for guidance and grace. I am involved in a couple ministries at church which help in God’s mission of love toward people. The first ministry is the Worship committee where we plan services and the help needed at services such as greeters, and ushers. We recently had a festival of praise gathering where the choir from Glendale Adventist church joined our choir for a beautiful communion service. The choir totaled seventy-seven people and our sanctuary was filled with praise.

The other ministry I am involved in is our on-line prayer ministry. When our website informs me, or I receive an email, about someone who is sick, in hospice or needing prayer, I forward the request to those on my team and we join in praying for the person. This is a satisfying ministry because there is definitely power in prayer and I am sure people appreciate the prayers.

Transformational leadership is also needed when the congregation wants to do service projects for those in our community. This requires great listening and guiding during the planning phase. I look forward to providing that to my future, potential congregation as they seek to find ways to bring Christ to our neighbors and fulfill the mission their church believes in.

Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practice. Understanding the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the elements of Christian worship to mature faith. Where do you experience the beauty of God?

I experience God’s beauty in the majesty of creation. In my daily meditations which are usually done on my Arizona patio, I experience the calls of the birds and occasionally have a hummingbird drop by close for a visit. I am reenergized by the greenery in the backyard. I love to take long walks with my dog. One of my favorite places to go is the White Tank Mountain Trails, not too far southwest of where I live. It is here on the trails where I really experience the majesty of our God. Hiking in the mountains brings much joy and I see nature in all its glory, beautifully made for us to enjoy and give thanks for. In the gentle breeze I feel the Holy Spirit is with me, calling me closer. In the sheer height of those mountains, I see God’s splendor as I wind up the various paths. As I walk the trails, I think of Scripture which talks about nature and how we are called to protect all He/She has created. Invigorated from my walk, I can pray to our God and thank Him/Her for all our creation.

I also experience the Holy Spirit at work during our worship at church. I pray that the Holy Spirit works through me to the various congregants present so that the words and music touch their soul. I see that this has happened when the people are leaving the service and give me positive feedback on the sermon or prayers and how these words have touched them. I pray that they have a positive week ahead and am thankful that the Holy Spirit has touched them. This also strengthens me on my own journey.

I also see God and His/Her marvelous creation in my travels all over the world. I have been fortunate enough to be able to travel extensively throughout the world. I have met wonderful people and have experienced historical churches, natural park reserves and gardens, local culture and exquisite culinary feasts. These experiences have broadened my understanding of various cultures and historical landmarks and given me a further appreciation of cultures other than my own.

In addition, another way to care for God’s creation is my participation in the Green Team at our church. I had a team of lay ministers who truly believed the importance of caring for our earth. We worked together to come up with ways we as a church could improve some of our habits and change our ways to show our care for God’s creation. Some of our suggestions were seen as too expensive to pursue by our council and after several months our Green Team disbanded. I continue to see small improvements as time has passed. For example, a recycling bin for our empty water bottles and recycling bins in our Fellowship Hall to take care of clean recyclable materials during our coffee hour. We have also brought in regular coffee mugs to cut down on the use of styrofoam cups. Those small changes are the beginning of ways we as a congregation can help care for God’s creation. They are small steps in the right direction. As a church we also have an electronics recycling program a couple times per year. This is invaluable because it omits these electronics from landfills. We also provide a tech-program where high school students learn how to take apart and put the computer together and hopefully get it working again. This is a great educational tool for these students and they come away happy to have learned something new.