

## Statement of Call - Sara Tillema

When I reflect on the call that God has placed on my life to ordained ministry, I cannot pinpoint one particular “call moment.” And yet, the Holy Spirit has faithfully been alive and at work in my life in mysterious and unexpected ways, leading my path to this moment as I pursue ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA).

I began attending church when I was 13 years old after spending a week at a camp where I first heard the story of an all-loving God who would give all on the cross in the ultimate act of love. Since my family did not attend church, my only option for being involved in a congregation was to attend a local evangelical church with my best friend’s family. I quickly rose as a leader in the youth programs, but I engaged with skepticism because I found that what I learned conflicted not only with the progressive values that I was taught at home by my parents, but also with the God I found in Scripture. Because of this, I took it upon myself to be the student who always asked the hard questions when I found that what I was being taught was incongruent with the loving God I found in the Bible. Despite the frustration and loneliness I experienced as a member of a church where I seemed to be the only person asking these questions, I continued to feel that God was with me, urging me to continue on in my journey of faith. During my college years, I quickly discovered that I was not the only one, and that there were others who found that their belief in Jesus was what provided the foundation for inclusion and social justice work in the Church.

Retrospectively, I can say with confidence that these early years in my Christian journey are where the seeds of my call were planted. Having experienced a spiritual environment where God was only for the few, the Scriptures were literal, and questions were not **encouraged fostered** in me a sense of “holy curiosity” that I still carry with me today. As I discern a call to ordained ministry, I believe that I am called to help foster a sense of wonder in the lives of the faithful, to be unafraid to encounter God with our holy curiosity. Just as “iron sharpens iron,” I believe that our questions and critical reflection only strengthen our faith, allowing us to encounter the divine with authenticity.

As an undergraduate, I became very interested in learning about the Bible and Christian tradition in an academic setting, which led me to enroll at Princeton Theological Seminary with the intention to pursue coursework in Church History in hopes to later enter a PhD program. When I started seminary, I had no interest in pursuing pastoral ministry; however, God had other plans. In my first semester I found myself sitting in a course titled “Theological Foundations of Youth Ministry.” While I only enrolled in this course to fulfill M.Div. requirements, from the first day I felt the tickling of the Holy Spirit that there was a Word for me in that classroom. That course served as the jumping-off point which connected my passion for academic theology with pastoral ministry, particularly that of Campus Ministry.

If my years in evangelical spaces fostered in me a “holy curiosity,” then I can say that my time in higher education has fostered in me a “holy imagination” that I bring to my work in ministry. As I dove headfirst into the world of Campus Ministry throughout my time at Princeton, I was encouraged by peers and mentors to reimagine the way that we do Church for these times. As I conceptualize my gifts for ordained ministry, I think that this “holy imagination” is one of the greatest gifts I bring to the table – the ability to creatively engage with where God is at work in the world, and to approach my work with an openness to explore the myriad ways in which the Spirit may be calling us to engage in the world.

As I look forward to where God may be calling me in the years to come, I can confidently, yet humbly say that I feel called by God to serve as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA). I do not know exactly where this call will lead me, and it is likely it will take many forms throughout my ministry, both in the church and academic settings. What is clear is that I am called to employ my “holy curiosity” and “holy imagination” to the work of ministry. Where there are gaps in my knowledge, I ask only that God continue to walk alongside me to open doors, and I promise to be faithful to paths put before me.