

SECTION D

ORDINATION CANDIDATE INFORMATION

Philip Balla

Emily Howard

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*“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?
And I said, Here am I; send me!” Isaiah 6:8*

When I was a child I was completely fascinated by the stars and the night sky. Like Walt Whitman, I was less interested in the precise astral phenomena and more drawn to a deep sense of connection to something beyond me. Overtime, I have come to see these early moments and yearnings as my first prayers, my first attempts to reach back to God who was always reaching out to me. As I grew that relationship deepened and broadened. I came to connect that feeling of relationship to God with the language, prayers, and hymns of the body of Christ. The relationship grew until I remember feeling overwhelmed by the hymn, “Here I am Lord” and I remember singing the words in an intentional way that took seriously the hymn’s commitment to go and set God’s people free. It was a dramatic moment that gave way to a flame within me that is my call to ministry.

Thirteen years have passed since that call and the flame has not run cold. Rather than jump right into the crowds to preach and teach, I felt called to the preparation of mind, soul, and body just as Jesus took time for preparation and just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. So, I have turned to study, service, and general exploration of the human condition. I have earned degrees from Defiance College (B.A., B.S.), from Harvard University (M.Div.) and I am submitting myself to intensive doctoral study at Fordham University (Ph.D. candidate), where I explore the broad and deep roots our ancient Christian tradition. My work has involved deep exploration of theological expressions of late ancient Christians in the deserts of Egypt, the general development of expertise in the history of Christianity, and the theoretical exploration of the self in relation to God. It has also involved noticing that patterns of questions, debates, and rhetorics of ancient days continue to thrive in our modern world. Along the way I have learned to read several languages (Greek, Coptic, Syriac, Latin, German, French), have deeply engaged with diverse theological expressions, and have experienced the personal losses and joys that deepen human experience. Whether I was sitting with a Buddhist nun on a scorching day in Cambodia, praying with a dying woman during my CPE program, or scrutinizing Coptic papyri with international scholars at a conference, I have seen it as preparation for a future ministry, the deepening of potential bonds of that body which I will one day serve.

Now, the time of this extended preparation through formal education is nearing its end (only 2-3 years left in the Ph.D.). My gaze is shifting to a future of service. Having been blessed with such a full and rich education, I am focused on how I can make use of all that I am to best serve the body of Christ. My call has always felt rooted at the intersection of that congregational call with the skills and training of scholarship with which I have been blessed. Having been approved for ordination, I now have the joy of knowing that the time of service draws near and that this body of Christ will be with me wherever I go. I ask for prayers as I discern where my service will take me, which is to say, where my gifts will best serve the body of Christ. I affirm to you and to God, “Here am I; send me!” Amen.

Emily Howard

I recently heard that I asked to read the Scripture publicly in worship when I was 5 years old. I first imagined becoming a pastor while attending the College of Wooster, where I graduated in 2010 and remained in ministry on staff and met the United Church of Christ through our shared mission activities in Wooster. I then became a part of a UCC church plant in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. From there, I went on to the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, where I earned my M.Div in 2018. I served as student ministry intern for First UCC in Marion, and United Church Homes senior living communities. I am deeply blessed to be SENT into preaching the gospel by Marion's First United Church of Christ. I will be CALLED to the ministry in Wooster, Ohio's Trinity United Church of Christ as Assistant Pastor.

"My life flows on, in endless song... how can I keep from singing?" The kin-dom of God makes sweet music. When I first moved to Cleveland Heights in search of a worshipping community, I needed God's guidance to clue me in to the journey ahead. In my apartment living room, as I wondered, "should I keep going to Pilgrim UCC?", I heard a song in my heart (yes, the doo-wop hit by Maurice Williams & The Zodiacs...): "Won't you staaaaaaay, just a little bit longer?" On that Sunday, at Pilgrim UCC, I met a key link in God's kin-dom. They introduced me to the pastor of a new church start in my neighborhood, Cleveland Heights - a true kin-ship connection. Mysterious, real, and inviting - is the Holy Spirit. Not every time does the mystery come to such blessed fruition - but in my heart, I still hear its music, and it never ceases to amaze.

That still-singing voice, though, never once told me "you are called." Instead, I believe God invited me to choose to take up the mantle of ordained and public leadership in ministry. God kept showing me, "you might like this job." "You might be good at it." Until, finally, I do choose. I freely accept the invitation to public ministry. Thanks be to God for lovingly making me into someone capable of this YES.

I feel deeply grateful to the people of the Northwest Ohio Association, Marion First UCC, United Church Homes, Emanuel UCC, my Excellence in Ministry group, and the Committee on Ministry for sharing their beautiful faith in ministry. I feel as though ordination is a goodbye, and in some ways, it is: goodbye to the association that sends me. Until we meet again, may you always listen to the gentle music of the Holy Spirit.

Emily Howard, February 2021