

Greetings, Catalina UMC! I am incredibly excited to be joining your staff July 1 and I'm looking forward to getting to know you and this wonderful community in the coming months. Before our ministry together begins, I thought it might be a good time to share a bit of my story and the journey that God has led me to all of you.

I come from a military family, as my dad was a U.S. Marine. We were lucky to not move around as often as most other Marine Corps families, but I was born in California, went to elementary school in North Carolina, and attended junior high and high school in Minnesota. I stayed in Minnesota to attend college at the University of St. Catherine, a Catholic women's college in St. Paul, where I studied political science and speech communications. I've always felt called to social justice-type work, so I planned to go to law school, but the good Lord sent me down the faith-based, community organizing path instead.

I was trained up in Saul Alinsky-style community organizing whereby community members participate, lead, and engage in change-making. I worked with churches to advance the common good through issues like driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, building neighborhood support for affordable housing, and expanding hospital charity care programs. In 2003, I moved to Chicago for a faith and labor position with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to work with United Church of Christ (UCC) and Lutheran churches to support hospital workers forming a union. It was in working with those Protestant congregations that I discovered God's call upon my life into pastoral ministry.

I came from a fairly devout Roman Catholic background, so I never saw a clergywoman until I started visiting Protestant churches as part of my work on the southside of Chicago. I became interested in what pastors do and eventually discerned a call to ordained ministry. A friend at the union suggested I check out the United Methodist Church, so I read a book and I fell in love with John Wesley's theology and its balance with social holiness. In 2005, I left my union organizer job to attend Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary at Northwestern University.

Upon graduating seminary in 2008, the Bishop in Northern Illinois appointed me to a campus ministry position and a rural, small-membership church. After my ordination in 2012, I was sent to a working-class, suburban church and then a larger, traditional suburban congregation as an associate pastor in 2013. My last pastoral appointment was to an urban church in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood with a profound history in social movements, a strong ministry with the homeless, and a long-standing commitment in and with the LGBTQIA+ community. It was there I met and married my wife Myah in 2020.

Following the pandemic in 2022, I took a break from pastoral leadership and worked as a healthcare workforce consultant for the past two years. While I loved working back in the political realm, I missed the connection, community, and the journey alongside church folks. My family now lives in Queen Creek, so in receiving this new appointment,

it's felt like God drawing the very best of my life's personal and professional experiences together in a new and exciting way, in this new season of ministry at Catalina UMC.

Myah and I love all things Chicago (go Sox!), drag performances, movies in the park, catching live music at local spots, and hosting barbeque and board game nights. We love super chill vacations near water (ideally at a beach!) and always look for spots we can travel with our road dog—Scooter—the most adorable, sassiest 13-year old mixed terrier on the planet. Myah is a mental health counselor and a highly trained Kung-Fu martial artist. I'm usually found at La Mariposa gym taking group fitness classes like BodyPump, aqua fit, and yoga.

It already feels like an incredible joy and deep honor to be called alongside all of you. We look forward to the wonderful and wild journey ahead, as we walk by faith towards a future that God fills with hope! – Pastor Kelli