

**Discerning Your Call:  
Preparing for Ministry in the Presbyterian Church (USA)**

*A Resource of the Presbytery of Chicago*



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## Table of Contents

<b><i>Discerning Your Discipleship</i></b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b><i>Preparation for the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament</i></b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Pre-Inquirer</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Inquirer:</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Candidate</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Certified Ready to Receive a Call</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b><i>Preparation for the Ministry of a Commissioned Pastor</i></b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b><i>Frequently Asked Questions and Helpful Hints</i></b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Who do I talk to?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Forms? What forms?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Is financial aid available?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>About those Presbytery Meetings</b> ... ..	<b>7</b>
<b>Are there guidelines for the four candidacy statements?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Are there exceptions to the PCUSA testing process, especially the Senior Ordination Exams and the Bible Content Exam?</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>What if I don't pass the Bible Content Exam or a Senior Ordination Exam?</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>What if I take more than five years to complete the process?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>What if I change my mind?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>So what is the checklist?</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Inquiry:</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Candidacy</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Final Steps to become Certified to be Ready to Receive a Call</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>After Being Certified to be Ready to Receive a Call</b> .....	<b>12</b>

## Discerning Your Discipleship

All baptized Christians are called to discipleship. For some, discipleship takes the form of serving as a minister of the Word and Sacrament (teaching elder) or as a Commissioned Pastor (a ruling elder who serves in a particular pastoral role as commissioned by their presbytery.) In Chicago Presbytery, to prepare for either role, you will work with our Commission on Preparation for Ministry (CPM). The CPM is a team of commissioned lay pastors, ruling and teaching elders chosen by the presbytery to shepherd individuals through their call to ministry.

Our process is about more fully discerning God's call to you -- it is not about checking off a list of requirements (though we do include a checklist [here](#) for your convenience). The process will challenge and exhilarate you. The CPM will be with you, struggling and celebrating with you every step of the way. So will your pastor(s) and the session of your congregation, not to mention your family and your friends. This is an exciting journey, and we are privileged to be your companions along the way!

Welcome aboard.

## Preparation for the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament

Preparation for the ministry of the Word and Sacrament is a multi-stage process that ordinarily takes 3 to 5 years to complete. You will meet at least annually with CPM (either virtually or in person), participate in annual boundary training, attend at least two presbytery meetings a year, maintain an up-to-date background check, and keep in touch with your CPM and session liaisons.

The four stages are:

**Pre-Inquirer:** During this first, and very brief stage, you will meet with your pastor and session and secure their endorsement. (You must be a member of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA) congregation for at least six months before beginning the CPM process.) You may also meet with the CPM moderator and your assigned CPM liaison. You are also required to meet with LeaderWise, a career counseling and psychological assessment service and to participate in a background check. If endorsed by your session and approved by CPM, you will become an...

**Inquirer:** The purpose of the inquiry phase, which lasts a minimum of one year, is to explore your call and ask questions – the more questions, the better.

*The purpose of the inquiry phase is to provide an opportunity for the church and those who believe themselves called to ordered ministry as ministers of the Word and Sacrament to explore that call together so that the presbytery can make an informed decision about the inquirer's suitability for ordered ministry. G-2.0603, Book of Order. (Should "ordered ministry" be defined somewhere?)*

You will start seminary. At some point as an inquirer you will either serve a CPM-approved field education internship in a Presbyterian congregation different from your own and/or take Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at an accredited site, also approved by CPM. Most inquirers also take the PCUSA Bible Content Exam (offered in English, Spanish and Korean) during this period.

If, after a minimum of one year, you continue to feel God's call in this direction and you and your CPM liaison believe you are ready, you will draft your candidacy statements:

1. Statement of Understanding of Christian Vocation
2. Statement of Personal Faith
3. Statement of Being Presbyterian
4. Statement of Self-Understanding

Review your drafts with your CPM and Session liaisons and other supportive friends and family. Meet with your pastor and session for a formal recommendation to candidacy. Present your statements to CPM. If approved, you will be welcomed by the Presbytery and received as a...

Candidate: The candidacy phase lasts a minimum of one year.

*The purpose of the candidacy phase is to provide for the full preparation of persons to serve the church as ministers of the Word and Sacrament. This shall be accomplished through the presbytery's support, guidance, and evaluation of a candidate's fitness and readiness for a call to ministry requiring ordination. G-2.0604, (Book of Order)*

As a candidate, you will graduate from seminary with an M.Div. and will complete either the CPE training or Field Education you did not do as an Inquirer.

With CPM's permission, you will take, and pass, the four PCUSA Senior Ordination Exams (and the Bible Content Exam if not taken as an inquirer). The focus of these exams is to assess entry-level readiness for ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The exams present pastoral challenges whereby candidates can demonstrate how they integrate faith and theological education in practical ministry. They are given in four areas: Polity, Theology, Worship and Sacraments, and Biblical Exegesis. These exams are a culmination of all the work you have completed in seminary and your internships. So we encourage you to begin "with the end in mind." If writing is a challenge for you, seek support early in your seminary career. Let CPM know if you have any documented learning impairments or if English is your second language. Assistance may be available.

If you have completed all of the above, and believe you are ready to receive a call, finalize your Statement of Faith. Also, prepare an exegesis and sermon and provide a video of your sermon delivery in a worship setting. Share these with CPM for final assessment.

During the final assessment process CPM will evaluate your readiness in the following areas:

- Full education for ministry with sufficient fluency in the Christian and Reformed traditions, along with awareness of the scope and tasks of the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.
- Interpersonal relations with a depth of sensitivity, compassion, and empathy, an ability to maintain appropriate relationships, and to acknowledge limits and set boundaries.
- Personal growth shown by maturity and integrity demonstrated by trustworthiness, openness, flexibility, and a healthy level of self-esteem.
- Professional development shown by a commitment to the church, its people, mission, theology and polity, its governance through participation in the presbytery, and to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.
- Spiritual development shown by a Statement of Faith compatible with the Reformed Tradition, especially as seen in the confessional documents of the church, and a commitment to the practice of your faith in the world.

CPM will discuss with you and review the Statement of Faith, your exegesis and sermon and the video of your sermon delivery. If you are approved, you will be...

**Certified Ready to Receive a Call:** As long as you are searching for an ordainable position, you remain under the care of the CPM. We require you to participate in annual boundary training, attend at least two meetings of your local presbytery, continue your annual reviews, and remain in touch with your CPM liaison, as well as your pastor and session.

While seeking a call, you will work through the Church Leadership Connection (CLC) of the PCUSA and with the appropriate Commission on Ministry (or equivalent) of the presbytery where the call is located. Keep CPM and your home church informed, so we may pray for you and celebrate with you when you are ordained!

## Preparation for the Ministry of a Commissioned Pastor

Not all pastors are ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

*When the presbytery ... determines that its strategy for mission requires it, the presbytery may authorize a ruling elder to be commissioned to limited pastoral service as assigned by the presbytery ... Presbytery, in its commission, may authorize the ruling elder to moderate the session of the congregation to which he or she is commissioned, to administer the Sacraments, and to officiate at marriages where permitted by state law. G-2.1001 (Book of Order)*

While commissioned pastors do not have to complete all the requirements expected for ministers of the Word and Sacrament, there are standards. Because the position is designed to be flexible, standards can vary, but generally include:

- Completion of coursework in theology, worship, church history, and polity. Commissioned pastor training may be offered by a presbytery or seminary.
- A Statement of Faith compatible with the Reformed Tradition.
- An exegesis and sermon.
- Annual meetings with CPM, and
- Boundary training and background checks.

A commissioning to particular service is only valid for that particular service. Outside of the particular commissioned service, you will remain a member of your home congregation and be accountable to your session.

## Frequently Asked Questions and Helpful Hints

### Who do I talk to?

You will be assigned a CPM liaison at the start of your process. Feel free to ask that person anything! Their job is to help you through what can sometimes be a confusing process.

You will also need to periodically send materials such as forms, seminary transcripts, completion of field education requirements, etc., to the presbytery office. At least two weeks prior to your meeting with CPM, please send all documents to the Ministry Coordinator at the Chicago Presbytery office: [ministry@chicagopresbytery.org](mailto:ministry@chicagopresbytery.org), with a copy to your CPM liaison.

Finally, when you send in the forms confirming your completion of CPE and Field Education, please include exact start and end dates, even if those dates aren't obvious. Our database needs the precision.

### Forms? What forms?

To help you (and the CPM) stay on track the PCUSA requires a number of forms. They are:

Application Forms: ([link](#))

- Form 1A: *Application to be Enrolled by Presbytery as an Inquirer*
- Form 1B: *Questions for Reflection*
- Form 1C: *Financial Planning for Theological Education*
- Form 1D: *Session Evaluation and Recommendation Regarding Enrollment as an Inquirer*

Forms for Enrolling an Inquirer: ([link](#))

- Form 2A: *Report of Consultation Regarding Application to Become an Inquirer*
- Form 2B: *Covenant Agreement and Inquirer Release*

Forms for Annual Consultation: ([link](#))

- Form 3: *Pre-Consultation Report on Developmental Areas*
- Form 4: *Report on Consultation*

Forms for Advancing to Candidacy: ([link](#))

- Form 5A: *Application to be Enrolled by Presbytery as a Candidate*
- Form 5B: *Session Evaluation and Recommendation Regarding Enrollment as a Candidate*

Forms Reporting Actions to Others: ([link](#))

- Form 6: *Summary Report of Final Assessment of Candidate's Readiness to be Examined for Ordination*

## Are there exceptions to the timing and educational requirements of the ordination process?

Yes. With the approval of three-fourths of the presbytery, exceptions can be granted. Such requirements are granted only very rarely. If this is an issue for you, talk to CPM.

## Is financial aid available?

The Presbytery of Chicago has limited aid available, as may your seminary. Your congregation may be able to help. Certain requirements, such as the initial vocational assessment by LeaderWise, are subsidized by the Presbytery.

Education for ministry is expensive. The Board of Pensions regularly holds financial planning seminars at PCUSA seminary campuses, and we strongly encourage you to participate in one.

## About those Presbytery Meetings ...

CPM requires all people under care to participate in at least two presbytery meetings a year. If you don't live in the Chicago area, you may attend meetings of the presbytery where you live. Just send confirmation to Chicago Presbytery's Ministry Coordinator. Ministers of the Word and Sacrament are members of their presbytery, not of a local congregation. Your relationship with your presbytery will strongly impact your experience of ministry, so getting familiar with presbytery life early will help you with your discernment.

## Are there guidelines for the four candidacy statements?

Yes. To start with, all statements must be no more than 1 page long, with one inch margins and marked line numbers, and reasonable size type, such as Arial 11, Times New Roman 12, and so forth.

- **Statement of Understanding of Christian Vocation:** Please share how your personal call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament reflects the Reformed Tradition.
- **Statement of Personal Faith:** Initially, this is an early draft of the Statement of Faith to the Presbytery for ordination and place in your Personal Information Form (PIF) when you seek a call. We encourage you to include a discussion of:
  - the nature of God;
  - the experience of God, sin, and evil;
  - the life and work of Jesus;
  - Jesus' humanity and divinity;
  - Christology and atonement;
  - the Holy Spirit;
  - the congregation and its ministry in its context;

- the Sacraments;
- the Bible;
- the ministry and mission of the Church in the world; and
- eschatology.

We recommend that you keep your statement short, as you also add it to your PIF, and space in the PIF is extremely limited. Keep it clear, concise, and authentic. Work with your Session and CPM liaisons early in the process – they have read many Statements of Faith and can help you anticipate the questions your statement will raise.

- **Statement of Being Presbyterian:** Reflect on what it means to be Presbyterian, indicating how your awareness stems from participation in the life of your particular congregation.
- **Statement of Self-Understanding:** Reflect on the ways you have been shaped by your personal and cultural background and include a description of how you maintain your spiritual, physical, and mental health.

Are there exceptions to the PCUSA testing process, especially the Senior Ordination Exams and the Bible Content Exam?

If you have a documented learning impairment or English is your second language, accommodations can be made with the approval of the presbytery. Talk to CPM.

What if I don't pass the Bible Content Exam or a Senior Ordination Exam?

The Bible Content Exam can be taken at any time, without advance permission from CPM. There is no limit to how many times it is taken.

The Senior Ordination Exams, usually taken late in the educational process, require advance approval from CPM. Ordinarily, if you fail any of these four exams three times, you will be removed from the preparation process. CPM can allow a fourth attempt if:

- CPM has determined that you show a very high potential for ministry,
- If you have passed three of the four exams, and
- You can show that you've taken advantage of all appropriate study resources.

Again, help may be available for persons with learning and testing disabilities. Talk with your CPM liaison and with CPM. There may be resources available through your seminary, as well.

## What if I take more than five years to complete the process?

Some forms of ministry, such as those requiring a Ph.D., require far more than five years to complete. Sometimes life, including financial, family and health concerns, interferes with the best-laid plans. CPM can help you adapt your process to your needs. However, you must continue to meet with CPM annually; do boundary training annually, attend at least two presbytery meetings a year, and maintain an up-to-date background check.

If you are attending seminary part-time, and/or you know that personal circumstances will lengthen your process, consider delaying the start of your CPM process until you are ready to enter the five-year timeframe.

After five years, you will be required to repeat your vocational assessment with LeaderWise, and may be required to retake an ordination exam, especially if the Book of Order has changed significantly since you previously took the exam.

## What if I change my mind?

The process of preparing for ministry is one of discernment. How is God calling you as a baptized disciple? If you decide, at any point in the process, that you are not called to ordained ministry as a minister of the Word and Sacrament, but that you are instead called to a different vocational path, congratulations! You have discerned God's call to you.

***Be aware, though, that if you leave the process, and then at some time in the future choose to return, you will start at the beginning.***

Also, your session and CPM may find themselves doubting your call, and either body can recommend that you be removed from the process. They will not do so lightly, and without warning, but they may initiate these discussions with you. While this can be painful, again, it occurs only rarely, and is part of discerning God's call.

## So what is the checklist?

Pre-Inquiry:

Date	Item
	Met with home pastor to discuss your sense of call and pursue seminary studies.
	Enrolled in a seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.
	Talked with the Moderator of the CPM
	Completed forms 1A, 1B, and 1C and send to the Ministry Coordinator at the Presbytery Office
	Met with home session, asked them for their endorsement, and had the Clerk sign form 1D. Sent form to Ministry Coordinator
	Scheduled and completed LeaderWise assessment, received report.
	Signed authorization form for background check, and returned form to Ministry Coordinator.

*Inquiry:*

Date	Item
	Scheduled first CPM meeting. Was welcomed as an inquirer. Signed forms 2A and 2B.
	Took Boundary Training and had a confirmation sent to Ministry Coordinator.
	Participated in Inquirers/Candidates Retreat (if offered).
	Got approval from CPM for CPE and/or Field Education site
	Took CPE or Field Education and sent supervisor's evaluation to Ministry Coordinator
	Took and passed Bible Content Exam
	Completed Form 3 and sent to Ministry Coordinator and CPM liaison two weeks before meeting with CPM for Annual consultation.
	Talked with CPM liaison about applying for candidacy.
	Met with Session to ask for their support to apply for candidacy.
	Completed Form 5 and sent to Ministry Coordinator
	Wrote and reviewed the four candidacy statements with Session at home church and with CPM liaison.
	Four papers examined by CPM and CPM approved move to candidacy.

*Candidacy*

Date	Item
	Got approval from CPM for CPE or Field Education site (whichever you have not completed yet)
	Took CPE or Field Education and sent supervisor's evaluation to Ministry Coordinator
	Requested permission to take Senior Ordination Exams: <input type="checkbox"/> Theology <input type="checkbox"/> Worship and Sacraments <input type="checkbox"/> Polity <input type="checkbox"/> Biblical Exegesis
	Registered for Senior Ordination Exams: <input type="checkbox"/> Theology <input type="checkbox"/> Worship and Sacraments <input type="checkbox"/> Polity <input type="checkbox"/> Biblical Exegesis
	Took and passed Senior Ordination Exams: <input type="checkbox"/> Theology <input type="checkbox"/> Worship and Sacraments <input type="checkbox"/> Polity <input type="checkbox"/> Biblical Exegesis
	Sent current seminary transcript to Ministry Coordinator
	Completed Form 3 and sent to Ministry Coordinator and CPM liaison two weeks before meeting with CPM for Annual consultation.
	Took financial planning seminar.
	Completed the following seminary courses: <input type="checkbox"/> Greek & Exegesis <input type="checkbox"/> Hebrew & Exegesis <input type="checkbox"/> Preaching <input type="checkbox"/> Pastoral Care <input type="checkbox"/> Church History <input type="checkbox"/> Ethics <input type="checkbox"/> Christian Education <input type="checkbox"/> PC(USA) Polity <input type="checkbox"/> Reformed Worship and Sacraments <input type="checkbox"/> Reformed Theology (including Book of Confessions & Calvin)
	Took Boundary Training & had confirmation sent to Ministry Coordinator

*Final Steps to become Certified to be Ready to Receive a Call*

Date	Item
	Sent statement of faith, exegesis, recorded sermon, and sermon manuscript to CPM and liaison.
	Met with CPM to present and discuss statement of faith, exegesis, recorded sermon, and sermon manuscript.
	Sent final transcript showing MDiv degree to Ministry Coordinator.
	Received Certification from CPM!!!
	Provided CPM with feedback on my process.

*After Being Certified to be Ready to Receive a Call*

Date	Item
	Kept CPM informed of progress towards securing a call
	Continued annual requirements such as annual meeting, presbytery participation, and boundary training
	Received a call
	Became ordained