

Examining Ministers for Membership and Approving Pastoral Relationships
COM will only schedule interviews with persons for membership and approval of terms of call once all required documents have been received by the COM co-chairs (i.e., PIF, Statement of Faith, Proposed terms of Call or Contract, and in the case of CLPastors, written verification of completion of all requirements)

Guidelines for Examination:

- 1. Examining group is to refrain from pushing their own agenda**
- 2. How long and with whom is the examination (should be communicated in advance)**

The Book of Order in G-11.0402 states:

The presbytery, through its appropriate committee, shall examine each minister or candidate who seeks membership in it on his or her **Christian faith and views in theology, the Sacraments, and the government of this Church**, except as provided in G-14.0481 [The Presbytery placing the call to a candidate for ministry shall ordinarily examine and, contingent upon the candidate's successful completion of that examination and all requirements in G-14.0450, the presbytery responsible for the candidate's preparation for ministry shall ordinarily ordain the candidate.]. Every minister seeking membership in a presbytery shall have a call to a pastoral relation within the presbytery, or from a governing body or agency as defined in G-11.0410, or be entering a work defined in G-11.0411, for which the receiving presbytery shall give its permission, or shall be honorably retired as defined in G-11.0412.

G-11.502d: It (COM) shall counsel with churches regarding calls for permanent pastoral relations, visiting and counseling with every committee elected to nominate a pastor or associate pastor. It shall advise with the committee regarding the merits, availability, and **suitability** of any candidate or minister whose name is contemplated for nomination to the congregation, and shall have the privilege of suggesting names to the committee.

G-11.502g: It shall counsel with sessions regarding stated supplies, interim pastors, interim co-pastors, interim associate pastors, and temporary supplies when a church is without a pastor, and it shall provide lists of pastors, commissioned lay pastors, and qualified laypersons who have been trained and commissioned by the presbytery to supply vacant pulpits.

In addition the following statement is found in G-11.0502h: It (COM) may be given authority by the presbytery to find in order calls issued by churches, to approve and present calls for services of ministers, to approve the examination of ministers transferring from other presbyteries required by G-11.0402....

What different types of interviews are possible for membership?

- The most common type of interview COMs face is **ministers from other presbyteries** who have or expect to have a call or temporary pastoral relationship to a church within the bounds of the presbytery. These persons are examined for membership and for compatibility with the particular position.

- A second common type of examination is that of a **candidate under care** (of this presbytery or another) who has or expects to have a call from a church within the bounds of the presbytery. These persons are examined for membership and for compatibility with the particular position. Their candidate files are additionally examined by the CPM and they must meet with the CPM and be presented for examination for ordination by the Presbytery by the CPM.
- **Ministers from other denominations** will occasionally need to be examined, either for temporary membership while working with a PCUSA congregation, or perhaps because they are making a permanent transfer of their denominational membership. These persons are examined for membership and for compatibility with the particular position.
- **Honorably retired** pastors may seek membership in another presbytery. Presbyteries differ on principles for handling the examinations of honorably retired ministers. Some reason that a more "relaxed" examination should be in order for the honorably retired. Others believe the examination should be consistent with examinations of other ministers since the honorably retired may later seek to serve as an interim, parish associate or other position within a church of the presbytery. These persons are examined for membership.
- **At-large and inactive members of presbytery** may apply for membership in another presbytery if circumstances (position or residence) require it. Both sending and receiving presbyteries must approve the change. (G-11.0413) It is wise to examine these ministers as you would any other member of presbytery. In addition, for the care and well being of these ministers, the Committee on Ministry should ask about the circumstances leading to their at- large or inactive status and help them to set goals for working toward active status. The COM should give special attention to their emotional and spiritual needs and is wise to assign a "mentor" to work with them and to monitor their progress toward their goals. These persons are examined for membership.
- **Persons who have previously laid aside ordination** are required to re-enter through the same presbytery that granted release. (G-6.0600c) It is wise for the COM or other appropriate committee to hold a preliminary interview with the person and diligently search the record to objectively ascertain the circumstances leading up to the minister's release from office. If the COM has satisfied itself that everything is in order, it may give that person permission and assistance in filling out a Personal Information Form and permission to circulate that form in search of a call.

Other occasions for examination:

- Persons seeking to be commissioned as a **commissioned lay pastor**. Such an elder is selected and receives training approved by the Presbytery. The elder shall be instructed in Bible, Reformed Theology and Sacraments, Presbyterian Polity, preaching, leading worship, pastoral care, and teaching. The elder shall be examined by the appropriate committee of presbytery as to personal faith, motives for seeking the commission, and the areas of instruction mentioned previously. (G-14.0560) These persons are examined for

membership and for compatibility with the particular position.

- **Minister members of the Presbytery** seeking to serve another congregation within the Presbytery are examined for compatibility with the particular position. According to policy #13, these ministers are examined by the whole COM as follows:
Meet with the minister member/candidate, as a committee of the whole, and discuss:
 - a. Appropriate match between the congregation of call, as well as reasons for leaving the congregation of departure;
 - b. Decision to seek a call within the presbytery and how it may impact both congregations involved; and
 - c. Ways to ensure that appropriate boundaries are set between the minister and the congregation he/she is leaving.

When does the examination occur?

After reference checks are completed by the Executive Presbyter and the Stated Clerk and at the time of in person interview by the church.

How shall we determine what questions to ask?

The general categories mentioned in G-11.0402 are **Christian faith and views in theology, the Sacraments** and the **government of this church**. When the person is also being examined in relation to a particular church position, the COM also asks questions regarding **compatibility** with the particular position. **The Presbytery of Susquehanna Valley also includes the following questions and completes Form 5:**

1. *“Has anything changed since your PIF (dossier) was written?”*
2. *“In good conscience, is there any principle or tenet of the Reformed faith and/or polity for which you need to declare a “scruple” to which you dissent and cannot conform?”*

To consider more specific issues the COM may wish to design a process for reaching agreement about what specific questions will be asked and how to proceed.

Think together about the interview process

Who will sit where? Who will ask what? What additional written materials will be required of the applicant beforehand? Consider a core group of questions that may be asked of every minister. Consider some optional questions that may be asked in certain circumstances but not in all circumstances (such as of specialized ministers). Consider the advisability of allowing redirect questions and questions created by the specific situation.

In no case should members of the COM or other examining committee allow their own personal beliefs or egos to get in the way. Debate with an applicant is not called for. If there will be an interview on the floor of presbytery, counsel the applicant if you believe there are omissions in their statement of faith or phrases used that may trigger high intensity reactions from members of presbytery. The applicant may choose to do nothing about your warning, but at least you have shown them that you are concerned and helpful.

What additional papers are required?

- Personal Information Form
- A Statement of Faith - one page with the following categories: God (with a statement on each person of the Trinity), the Bible, the Church, the Sacraments, Christian Vocation
- An autobiographical Statement incorporating one's Faith Journey - usually one page.
- Verification of all credentials for CLPastors from the Committee on Lay Preaching (completion of all courses and current status as commissioned lay preacher, evidence of completion of courses in polity and conducting wedding services if request to moderate session/congregational meetings and conducting weddings is made)

QUESTION AREAS

All five areas must be covered, however these are sample questions only. COM members may choose to ask these sample questions or other questions.

Area One: Christian Faith and Spiritual Practice

1. Spirituality

- What do you understand "spirituality" to mean?
- What regular spiritual practices do you follow? Why?
- How would you go about nurturing spiritual discipline in the life of others? Of a congregation?

2. Faith and Life

- "How does your faith impact the ethical decisions you make in your everyday life?"

3. Faith Commitments

- Who is Jesus Christ for you?
- What does it mean to you, practically speaking, to "trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" (*Book of Order W-4.4003 a.*)
- As you think about your life of faith, can you identify places or moments in which you were then or are now aware of the movement of God's Spirit or the working of God's grace?

Area Two: Reformed Theology

1. "Essential Tenets" of Reformed Theology

- Our constitutional questions ask us to "sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do" (*Book of Order W-4.4003 c.*). What distinctive elements of the Reformed faith would you describe as "essential," and how do they impact your life and ministry?
- What do you think is/are the unique contribution/s of the Reformed tradition to Christian faith and life?
- What use do you make of the *Book of Confessions* in the life of the church?

2. Scripture

- Our constitutional questions for ordination describe the Scriptures as "by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God's Word" to us

(*Book of Order* W-4.4003 b.). What does this mean to you as you think about the place of Scripture in the life of faith? In the life of the Church?

3. *Christology*

- Who is Jesus, as you understand him?
- Of the many titles the New Testament uses for Jesus, which of the following (or others) do you find most illuminating and helpful in expressing your understanding of Jesus: Christ, Messiah, Lord, Son of God, Son of Man, High Priest, Lamb of God, Good Shepherd, Way/Truth/Life?

4. *Atonement*

- What do you understand to be the meaning of the death of Jesus?
- Throughout the history of the Christian faith, there have been many ways of modeling or describing the atoning work of Jesus Christ. What ways of describing the atonement are most illuminative and meaningful for you, and why?

5. *Sin and Salvation*

- What do you understand sin to be?
- We sometimes speak of sin as an individual phenomenon, and at other times as communal or corporate. How do you understand these terms, and what impact do they have on the way we think about the saving work of Jesus Christ?

6. *Theological Anthropology*

- What do you understand the biblical account to mean in the description of human beings as “created in the image of God” (Gen 1:27)?
- What does it mean to you that human beings are created “male and female” (Gen 1:27)? What is the place of sexuality in your understanding of God’s good creation?

7. *Proclamation of the Word*

- What is preaching, as you understand it?
- How do you prepare to preach, including your work with the text, your thinking about the congregation, etc?
- Are there favorite themes to which you return most often in your preaching? What are they, and why are they significant to you?

Area Three: Sacramental Theology and Practice

1. *General matters*

- What is the place of the sacraments in worship (in terms of both your theology of worship and the placement in the order of service)?
- What is your practice regarding the participation of elders (and deacons, if appropriate) in the administration of the sacraments? Why?

2. *Baptism*

- As you understand the sacrament, what happens in baptism?
- What scriptural models of baptism (circumcision, ritual cleansing, dying and rising, etc) are most illuminative and meaningful for you?
- In your ministerial practice, how do you handle requests from relatives to baptize a child whose parents are not members of the church you serve as pastor?
- How do you handle requests for private baptisms? How do you counsel individuals who come with such requests?

Adapted from the COM Advisory Handbook on examination of ministers and St. Augustine
Presbytery Topics for Examination June 1, 2010

3. *The Lord's Supper*

- How do you understand the liturgical language of the “body” and “blood” of Christ, in light of your sacramental theology?

Area Four: Church Polity

1. *Relationship to presbytery*

- What expectations do you have regarding the presbytery in the following areas:
 - i. accountability to presbytery?
 - ii. support from presbytery?
 - iii. participation in presbytery?
 - iv. resources from presbytery?

2. *Historic Principles of Order (Book of Order G-1.0300)*

- The *Book of Order* lists eight “historic principles of church order” in G-1.0300. How important are these principles in your understanding of our church’s polity?
- How do you see them at work in the life of the church?

3. *Government and Discipline*

- Do you affirm that you will be “governed by our church’s polity” and “abide by its discipline” (*Book of Order* W-4.4003 e.)?
- If you can so affirm, what does that affirmation mean to you, especially in those cases in which your conscience leads you to disagree with our church’s polity and discipline?

Area Five: Compatibility with position

- What is your sense of the goals, visions, and needs of the church or work to which you are being called?
- How do you see your skills, gifts, interests, and abilities in light of those goals and needs?
- What areas of professional development and/or continuing education do think are most important for you in your first few years in this call?

Added required questions by Presbytery of Susquehanna Valley

1. “Has anything changed since your PIF (dossier) was written?”

2. “In good conscience, is there any principle or tenet of the Reformed faith and/or polity for which you need to declare a “scruple” to which you dissent and cannot conform?”