



**Committee on Preparation for Ministry**  
Presbytery of Charlotte  
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## **Preparing Inquirers and Candidates for Ordination Examinations: Alternate Examination Procedures<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

The role of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM) is to develop a covenant relationship with individuals who believe that they are called to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA). During this journey, CPM helps individuals

- listen to the Spirit of God;
- listen to the needs of the world;
- identify and develop their personal gifts and skills for ministry; and
- follow God's call to service to the Church and world.

CPM acknowledges the importance of others in the lives of inquirers and candidates, including family members, trusted friends, pastors, members of the session and congregation of the individuals' home churches, and seminary faculty. CPM endeavors to support and nurture these people throughout the preparation process.

Finally, CPM accepts a responsibility to the Church to ensure that individuals are properly prepared and fully qualified to discharge the duties of a Minister of Word and Sacrament. In this role, CPM serves as a bridge between the past and the future, ensuring that the Great Ends of the Church are preserved and promoted and that the historic principles of church order are upheld.

### **Requirements for Ministry**

The complete process for the preparation for ministry is detailed in the *Book of Order*. By the end of the preparation process, candidates are expected to demonstrate readiness to begin ministry by presenting evidence of the following:

- Readiness to participate in the transition plan of the calling presbytery;
- Specific plans for continuing study and growth;
- Theological views compatible with the confessional documents of the church;
- Understanding of the meanings of the questions for ordination;

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the resource paper, *Caring for Candidates Who Are Having Difficulty Passing Ordination Exams*, jointly prepared by the Offices of Preparation for Ministry and Examination Services, Presbyterian Church (USA), March 2004.

- Commitment to ministry with personal maturity, spiritual depth, and a capacity to respond to the needs of others;
- Capacity to write a sermon that addresses a contemporary issue through appropriate exegesis of biblical materials; and
- Competence in the fields of theology, Bible content, Bible exegesis, polity, and worship and sacraments (G-14.0305.j).

Typically, academic competence is demonstrated through five written examinations for ordination. The Bible content examination is usually taken in the first year of full-time theological education (or its equivalent). The remaining four examinations are usually taken in the fall of the third year of full-time theological education (or its equivalent). These examinations provide *one* assessment tool for evaluating candidates' academic preparation and readiness for ministry.

Research from the Office of Examination Services indicates that the general pass rate for ordination examinations is highest for first-time takers. On subsequent attempts, the percentage of persons who pass *decreases* as the number of attempts *increases*. The following material is offered as guidance in working with inquirers and candidates who may have difficulty passing the standard written examinations.

### **Avoiding Failure**

Examination failure is generally presaged by academic failure in undergraduate studies or theological education. CPM and seminary faculty share a responsibility to monitor students' academic progress so that failure can be avoided, if possible. CPM fulfills this responsibility by inspecting students' grades at the end of each semester. To facilitate this process, students are responsible for forwarding their transcripts to CPM prior to their annual consultation each year. Transcripts will be reviewed during annual consultation interview.

When students obtain poor or marginal grades, CPM should confer with them to determine the causes of the academic difficulty. A number of factors should be considered, including the lack of preparation (perhaps due to family or work responsibilities); performance anxiety; cultural issues; stress; lack of computer skills; lack of computer equipment; writing problems; or a learning disability. Most seminaries offer services to help students overcome these obstacles, and students should be strongly encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities. In addition, CPM may arrange counseling, tutoring, and remedial aid in the home community during summers or holidays. Financial aid for equipment or dependent care may also be appropriate.

Students who suspect that they have a learning disability or medical condition that affects learning should have this condition evaluated and documented by a qualified psychologist or educational specialist. The formal report, copied to CPM and the seminary, should include recommendations for accommodations such as alternative testing, assistance with note-taking, or accessible class materials. By monitoring academic progress and providing appropriate assistance as needed, CPM can help students pass ordination examinations. Students with documented learning or medical disabilities should ask for accommodations *before* attempting ordination examinations for the first time.

## The First Failure

When an inquirer or candidate fails an ordination examination for the first time, CPM should assign a knowledgeable person to review the examination and readers' comments *with* the inquirer or candidate. Since some have claimed that the examinations are geared to the dominant, middle-class culture, it is important for the CPM representative to assess the validity of the readers' comments, making sure that the comments are not based on issues of race, gender, culture, church size, or the readers' own theological perspectives.

After validity has been established, the student and CPM representative should assess the reasons for the failure. For example:

- Does the student lack knowledge in the areas being tested?
- Are the student's writing skills adequate for the task?
- Did the student understand the question?
- Did the student respond to all parts of the question?
- Were there any extenuating conditions that might have affected performance? For example, was the student ill? Was there a family emergency? Was the student anxious, tired, or hungry?
- Did language or cultural differences affect the student's responses?
- Have learning difficulties been evaluated and addressed?

Once the reasons for the failure are identified, CPM will take some or all of the following steps:

1. If only one or two examinations were failed, determine whether an academic mentor or tutor is needed or desired and assign a mentor to help the student prepare for the next examination. If three or four examinations are failed, assign an academic mentor.
2. Encourage students to take advantage of additional resources such as personal counseling, tutoring, reading or writing laboratories, remedial courses, and peer study groups.
3. Impel students with potential learning or medical disabilities to obtain a professional evaluation, including recommendations for alternative testing procedures.

## The Second Failure

If a student fails an examination for the second time, CPM will take some or all of the following steps:

1. Determine whether the reason for a second failure is identical or related to the first failure.
2. Assess the person's *entire* experience in preparation for ministry—academic achievements, field education, annual consultation observations and reports, and seminar recommendations.
3. Provide mentoring to address non-academic issues.
4. In conjunction with the seminary, provide intensive tutoring in relevant areas, including a review of previous examinations.
5. Suggest a group discernment experience which provides an opportunity for students to listen for God's call with a small group of people—a trusted friend, spouse, pastor, session liaison, CPM moderator, CPM liaison—and an experienced spiritual guide who can lead the group on behalf of the student. (A copy of the resource, *Presbytery Discernment Team: The Process for Discovering God's Call for Inquirers and Candidates* is available from Preparation for Ministry and Examination Services.) At the end of this process, CPM may recommend an alternative means to test the competence of the student. In some cases, students may be encouraged to use their gifts for ministry in ways that do not require ordination.

### **The Third Failure**

With the preceding safeguards in place, CPM of Charlotte Presbytery does not expect a third failure; however, in the unlikely event that this should occur, the following steps may be implemented:

1. If there is only one examination remaining, determine if the student's performance shows signs of growth and increased understanding in the relevant area. If there is evidence of growth, encourage the student to sit for examination for a fourth time. Since research indicates only a 33% chance of passing, discourage a fourth sitting if there is no evidence of growth or if two or more examinations have been failed.
2. Provide a group discernment experience to help the student identify gifts for ministries that do not require ordination.
3. Consider terminating the preparation process and guiding the student to areas of ministry that do not require ordination.
4. If CPM is satisfied with the candidate's progress in all other areas and if the candidate is otherwise ready to receive a call, consider alternative means to satisfy the presbytery of the student's competence in the failed examination area.

### **Alternative Means of Determining Competence in Bible Content**

Where indicated by professional evaluation, CPM may arrange for the Bible content examination to be given with adjustments for test-taking challenges, not for failure to grasp content. CPM will take the recommendation for an exception to the presbytery of care. Approval is dependent on a three-fourths vote of the members present; and the minutes of the meeting will reflect the reasons for the request and the alternative measure that will be implemented. These minutes will be made part of the inquirer or candidate's permanent file, available in the future to the presbytery of call. With further approval from the Office of Examinations (PCUSA), the alternate examination may be proctored at the seminary site or within the presbytery of care. Appropriate provisions may include—but are not limited to—oral response; unlimited time; or alternative scoring methods.

### **Alternative Means of Meeting Other Constitutional Requirements**

“The examination requirement of G-14.0310(4) shall not be waived until an inquirer or candidate has failed on two attempts to receive a satisfactory grade...” (G-14.0313.b). CPM of the Presbytery of Charlotte has resolved that students must pass Bible Content and three of the four standard ordination examinations either through the traditional written administration or with appropriate accommodations as recommended for students with professionally-diagnosed learning or medical disabilities.

For those who have twice failed one or more examinations, CPM alone cannot decide whether to implement alternative methods of testing; rather, CPM makes recommendations to the presbytery of care, including a comprehensive rationale for the request and a description of the alternative testing methods which will be implemented. Presbytery, by a three-fourths vote of the members present, may approve the exception and the alternative means by which mastery of the area will be demonstrated. “The minutes of presbytery shall contain a full record of the reasons for the exception and the alternative pattern for determining competence (G-14.0313.b). These will be made part of the permanent file of the inquirer or candidate, available in the future to the presbytery of call.

In the Presbytery of Charlotte, CPM will not recommend alternative means to presbytery until the student has passed Bible Content and three of the four examinations. For students who have passed Bible Content and three examinations and twice failed one examination, the following process of alternative examination has been approved by the Synod of Mid-Atlantic, as required by the *Book of Order* (G-14.0313.b), Provision of an alternative means of testing does not mean that the constitutional requirement for competency is eliminated; rather, means that there may be a better way for the individual to demonstrate knowledge and aptitude in the particular areas being tested.

*In the areas of Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, or Polity, the candidate is to be examined orally, questioned in depth with the length and content of the examinations to be determined by the examiners appointed by the presbytery. Upon notification by the examiners of satisfactory completion of the oral examination, CPM will petition the Presbytery of Charlotte for certification of the candidate's readiness to receive a call.*

*In the area of Bible Exegesis, two examiners appointed by the presbytery will review the candidate's latest exegesis paper along with the two readers' comments. The examiners will outline a way for this exegesis to be revised so that it follows the standard exegetical outline. The candidate must present the revised exegesis to the two original examiners and to a third examiner also appointed by the presbytery for grading and review. Upon notification by the examiners of satisfactory completion of the exegesis, CPM will petition the presbytery of Charlotte for Certification of the candidate's readiness to receive a call.*

## **Conclusion**

The Presbytery of Charlotte recognizes that that the standard ordination examinations are only one of the assessment tools used in the process of preparing and evaluating individuals for fitness as Ministers of Word and Sacrament; however, CPM also acknowledges that the standard ordination examinations are an important component designed to ensure capacity, competence, and fitness for ministry. The following policy has been approved by the Synod of Mid-Atlantic:

*When an individual has passed Bible Content and three examinations but has failed one examination two or more times, the Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM) of the Presbytery of Charlotte may recommend an alternative means of testing. Before proposing such a recommendation, CPM must be satisfied with the academic and spiritual preparation of the individual, the individual's gifts for ministry, and the competence of the individual in all other regards. CPM must also be certain that the individual has taken advantage of all remedial work, tutoring, counseling, and mentoring that has been made available. Finally, CPM must determine that the person is ready for the final assessment of readiness for ordination in all other respects (G-14.0310.b). The recommendation of CPM for alternative testing must be approved by a three-fourths vote of the presbytery of care.*

When an inquirer or candidate decides to withdraw from the preparation process, or when CPM decides to terminate the preparation process and remove the individual from presbytery's rolls, CPM will continue to be caring and nurturing, willing to listen to the former inquirer or candidate, and eager to guide the individual in using his or her gifts in areas of ministry that do not require ordination.