

A Guide to the Ecclesiastical Council

This Guide was approved by
the Southwest Association Church and Ministry Committee on October 4, 2018
and last amended on August 1, 2019.

As a voting delegate to the Ecclesiastical Council, this is your opportunity to hear and interview candidates for ordination in the United Church of Christ. Voting delegates to the Ecclesiastical Council are defined by our Association Bylaws and include duly appointed delegates of our member churches as well as clergy who hold standing within the Association. In collaboration with these other laity and clergy, you will determine if an individual has been called by God and will therefore be sent to proclaim and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership. You will make the determination after reading the candidate's ordination paper and after the candidate has responded to questions from those gathered for the Ecclesiastical Council.

Two types of candidates may appear before an Ecclesiastical Council. First, prior to appearing before you, the candidate may have been a Member-In-Discernment of the Southwest Association for at least two years and completed a program of formation in covenant with the Church & Ministry Committee of the Southwest Association. During this time the candidate has undergone a professional career assessment, completed academic and ministerial experiences, and completed the ordination paper while working with the Church & Ministry Committee and an appointed advisor. The applicant has been interviewed and recommended to this Council by their home church and by the Church & Ministry Committee.

Alternatively, the candidate may have "Seeking Privilege of Call" status. This means that they have been previously ordained by an ecclesiastical body other than the United Church of Christ and are now seeking to have their ordination recognized within our denomination. The applicant has undergone a process of discernment with and has been interviewed and recommended to this Council by the Church & Ministry Committee.

Now, you are asked to decide if the candidate should be authorized for ordination. To say that this is an important responsibility is to understate the matter. The decision to ordain is a decision made for the entire United Church of Christ and will be binding on and honored by the other Associations and Conferences of the UCC.

You will have the opportunity to question the candidate at length. What you are looking for, finally, is a quality, a sense, that the person appearing before you is responding to the divine call and is answering that call honestly and faithfully. So you need to be alert to both the tangible and the intangible evidence of a candidate's fitness. In developing your questions, you may find it helpful to consider the United Church of Christ's expectations of its candidates for ordination as defined in the The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers, which can be found at http://www.ucc.org/ministers_marks.

When the examination is complete, you will be asked to cast a vote by ballot, selecting from the options:

- Yes! I believe this candidate will be a faithful pastor and teacher of the United Church of Christ. I authorize ordination pending an approved call.
- No. This candidate is not ready for ordination.

You are an important part of the ministry of Jesus Christ through your participation in the Ecclesiastical Council. We hope that this guide provides you with some insight into the ordination process and some guidelines for answering the question: “Whom shall we send?”

Prior to the Ecclesiastical Council

So that churches may have time to appoint delegates and the delegates, along with the authorized ministers of the Association, may have time to prepare, an official notice will be sent via email at least 21 days prior to the Ecclesiastical Council to all Association Churches and authorized clergy, as specified by the Association bylaws. In addition to the notice of meeting, this guide and an electronic copy of the candidate’s ordination paper will also be distributed. Churches are responsible for forwarding this documentation to their chosen delegates in a timely manner.

Meeting Format and Agenda

The general format and agenda of the Ecclesiastical Council is as follows. Clergy and voting delegates will be asked to register as they arrive so that we may confirm a quorum according to the Association bylaws. Please arrive a few minutes early so this process does not delay the meeting. The candidate is responsible for providing one (1) printed copy of their ordination paper, which will be available before and during the meeting for review.

Welcome

Greetings are given and the meeting is called to order. A quorum is confirmed. If a quorum is not present, refer to the Association bylaws for further procedures.

Opening Prayer

A prayer is offered asking for wisdom and the guidance of the Spirit as we deliberate and make our decisions.

Introduction of the Process

The meeting agenda is reviewed. Points of clarification regarding process can be made at this time.

Introduction of the Candidate (5-10 minutes)

The candidate is introduced and recommended to the gathered body for ordination to authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ. A summary of the candidate’s formational process with the Church & Ministry Committee is provided and may include some or all of the following:

- The committee’s experience with the person
- The process used by the committee to reach its recommendation
- Notation of major recommendations from references

- Something about the candidate's theological and polity understandings
- An evaluation of the candidate by the Member-In-Discernment advisor (if applicable)

Candidate's Presentation (15-20 minutes)

The candidate makes a presentation related to their qualifications for ordained ministry. This is typically based on their ordination paper and demonstrates the candidate's theological, polity, and functional understandings of ordained ministry, relating these to their commitment and preparation for ministry based on their sense of call.

Examination by the council (about 30 minutes)

This is the gathered body's opportunity to question the candidate. A facilitator will be appointed to moderate the discussion and keep time. The rules of the examination are explained:

- No one person may ask a second question until everyone who desires has been able to ask their first question.

Deliberation

The candidate and those who are not authorized ministers of the Association or other voting delegates (i.e. family, friends, etc), are gracefully invited to leave during deliberations. A motion is made to authorize ordination of the candidate pending acceptance of a call approved by the Association. Discussion of the candidate is held.

Vote

After the period of discussion, the authorized ministers of the Association and other voting delegates will be asked to vote. Voting will be by ballot. Options are either yes or no. By the Association bylaws, 2/3 majority vote is required to approve the candidate for ordination pending an approved call.

After the vote is confirmed, the candidate and other guests will be invited back into the room and the results of the vote will be shared.

If the candidate is approved, a moment of celebration should be offered.

If the candidate is not approved, attention should be given to appropriate pastoral care. In addition, the candidate is referred back to the Church & Ministry Committee to determine whether the candidate can be re-considered again after additional formational work or whether the candidate's process should be terminated.

Closing Prayer

The ecclesiastical council will be concluded with prayer.