

MOVING TOWARD ONE FORM OF AUTHORIZATION IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST: A DISCUSSION GUIDE

COMMITTEES ON MINISTRY BRIDGING THE TRANSITION

The Habakkuk Group's development of a re-visioned Manual on Ministry impacts every aspect of processes of ministerial authorization and oversight in the United Church of Christ. The vision for these processes and the clarity of their theological foundations hold creative possibilities for the authorization of ministers in the United Church of Christ in the 21st century. This discussion guide provides questions and information to support both the ongoing conversation about ministerial authorization and the development of an updated procedural guide for Committees on Ministry.

The re-visioned Manual on Ministry serves as a bridge in two ongoing transitions within the work of ministerial authorization:

- **MOM as a Conversation:** Since the United Church of Christ was formed by mergers, we have continuously discussed and revised our ideas about ministerial authorization. MOM reflects and contributes to those conversations, especially in seasons of significant cultural and missional change in the Church.
- **MOM as a Procedural Guide:** As the Church changes, the work of Committees on Ministry adapts to meet new visions for ministerial authorization. The Manual on Ministry, as a procedural guide for Committees on Ministry, curates and encourages best practices.

With ongoing changes of ideas about ministerial authorization in the UCC, there is no one bridge – no one consistent idea, cultural influence, social justice norm, or theology that ties all of our ideas

DISCUSS: *What ministry roles are needed – in the church, in the world, in the 21st century – and can you imagine those roles having different titles/types of ministers?*

Can you imagine ministers having many roles but the same title?

DISCUSS: *What requirements for authorization do committees on ministry hold for all candidates regardless of formational path?*

Do you know gifted persons who have been excluded from ordination due to an association's requirement that all candidates follow the same formational path into ministry?

DISCUSS: *What distinctions remain between the forms of authorization?*

Do those distinctions serve the Church faithfully in the 21st century?

about ministry together. Instead, there are a jumble of roads, bridges, pathways, and detours, all operating at the same time and all impacting the overall bridge conversation uniquely.

For example, the early conversation about women in ministry in the United Church of Christ was reflected in the 1968 version of the Manual on Ministry, in which a full page explicitly affirmed women in lay and ordained ministries. The conversation about oversight of authorized ministers reached a critical peak in the 1980s, which resulted in a whole section on oversight written into the 1986 version of MOM. Across the history of the UCC, as congregations and Associations have identified varied needs for authorized ministry, the Manual on Ministry has obligingly described many different ministry roles: licentiate, lay minister, commissioned worker, licensed minister, commissioned minister.

Into this broad and ongoing conversation about ministerial authorization in the UCC, the Habakkuk Group stood “at the watchpost” (Habakkuk 2:1) from 2014 – 2016 to pay attention to trends, challenges, needs and new imaginings for ministry and the Church. This was -- and continues to be -- a complicated conversation, and not everyone is even on the same ramp; each Association and Conference sees its own unique needs; each cultural context has its own values; each Committee on Ministry (with every turnover of committee members) has a new set of priorities. The role of the Manual on Ministry role in this conversation is to take a “big picture” look and a “deep discerning” listen to the entire United Church of Christ and to support the wide diversity of our conversations in a single manual.

The role of the Manual on Ministry in the ongoing changes that occur over time in Committee on Ministry work is to curate and support best practices in ministerial authorization. Now MOM

takes on the metaphor of a continual bridge project: refining tools and equipping the builders (Committees on Ministry) so that the best, most faithful and effective, learned and imaginative authorized ministers are formed and sent out on behalf of the United Church of Christ. At times, MOM leads the way in outlining best practices for the sake of consistency across the denomination. At other times, MOM has to “catch up” to the changed practices already in use by Committees on Ministry.

In recent years, one of the most significant changes in the work of authorization was led, not by the Manual on Ministry, but by General Synod. **The Ministry Issues Pronouncement** by Synod in 2005 affirmed multiple paths of ministerial formation and theological education, asserting that an individual’s path of preparation as not sufficient to distinguish a Licensed Minister from an Ordained Minister. Out of this Pronouncement and related work, the **Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers** were developed to help Committees on Ministry assess the preparation and formation of individuals for ministry regardless of educational path.

The Habakkuk Group’s work and discernment stand on the shoulders of the Ministry Issues Pronouncement and subsequent papers. Habakkuk’s aim with the 2018 version of the Manual on Ministry is to support best and consistent practices by Committees on Ministry in their work to meet the needs of the 21st century Church, including the ongoing response to Ministry Issues.

MANUAL ON MINISTRY AS CONVERSATION

The Habakkuk Group represented a particular point in time along the United Church of Christ’s ongoing conversation about

***The Ministry Issues Pronouncement** challenged the assumption that one path of theological education & ministerial training was appropriate for every ministry candidate.*

Preparation for ministry may include:

- (1) regional theological education programs,*
- (2) seminaries or*
- (3) mentorships.*

DISCUSS: *How does your Committee on Ministry demonstrate commitments to diversity in its own practices of ministerial authorization, support and oversight?*

DISCUSS: *To what extent do you believe that congregations' budgets should shape the UCC's forms of authorization?*

authorization. Other points along the “bridge” are worth noting for your conversation:

Ministry Issues Pronouncement

The Ministry Issues Pronouncement (2005) was committed to building a “multiracial, multicultural, open and affirming, accessible to all, just peace church” through processes of ministerial authorization.

Referring to the theological grounding for ministry in Section 1 of the 2018 MOM: if in fact the UCC’s theologies for ordination and licensure are indistinct, and if the pastoral roles served by Ordained and Licensed Ministers are the same, and if – in the spirit of Ministry Issues – we do not authorize persons differently on the basis of their diverse paths of ministerial formation, then what distinctions (if any) remain between the two forms of authorization? Do those distinctions serve the Church faithfully in the 21st century?

Pastoral Pay

One phrase that is used to argue for local churches’ need for Licensed Ministers asserts that small congregations “cannot afford” to have Ordained Ministers as their pastors. This raises the rationale that frugal church budgets can dictate ministerial authorization, and it ties the cost of seminary training and the resultant debt as a qualifying measure of fitness for ministry and the ability to serve faithfully and effectively. The “Scope of Work” material in the Call Agreement Workbook can be used to help congregations right-size their pastoral job descriptions according to their financial ability.

While many Associations ordain or authorize to a part-time ministry setting, others determine ordainable or authorizable calls

on the ability for the setting to pay a living wage and offer licensure as a way for congregations to afford an authorized minister. In many cases, the difference between licensed ministry and ordained minister is based solely on salary, not on the scope of work or skills needed to be a faithful and effective minister.

Needs of the Church

The 2018 Manual on Ministry, Section 2:5 names three categories for Committees on Ministry to discern whether a call is ordainable or authorizable: the call must be *covenantal* with the various settings of the church, *respond to the needs of the church*, and *involve mutuality in ministry* between the minister and the community. The challenges and changes in mission happening across the Church Universal perceive authorized ministers preaching and teaching on behalf of the denomination in a variety of settings where representation by the church is needed. Throughout Christian history, the Church has recognized a specific need for representative servant leaders “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephes 4:12).

The UCC is part of a larger trend in examining its forms of authorization; other denominations engaged in similar conversations include The United Church of Canada and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which are reducing --or recommending a reduction in-- their forms of ministerial authorization. Our ecumenical agreements on the Mutual Recognition of ministers apply only to ordained clergy.

Forms of Authorization

Licensed Ministers and Commissioned Ministers are lay persons in their ministerial roles. Licensed Ministers have been authorized to perform the sacraments and other ministerial duties in one setting

Key Point:

Authorization is based on both an individual’s call and competencies, and on the need of the United Church of Christ for a representative servant leader.

Discuss: *What are the needs of the UCC for faithful and effective ministers in the 21st century?*

What are the needs for faithful and effective bivocational ministers who work part-time and partial-income ministries alongside additional professions?

Does your Association recruit and raise up such persons to be considered for ministerial authorization?

Discuss: *Do you believe that the UCC should always authorize a lay person who is asked to celebrate the Sacraments?*

Do you believe the UCC has a need to authorize individuals whose ministries do not include the Sacraments?

only. In the United Church of Christ, the form of ministerial authorization known as Commissioned Minister is only thirty years old; it has recognized lay leaders' gifts for the church and authorized them for ministry in one setting without granting authority to perform the sacraments and ministry outside the scope of their call. Taking seriously the priesthood of all believers (see Section 1 of the 2018 MOM), we look at the ministry of lay persons who serve the Church with various gifts and talents and are led to wonder when or if they need to be authorized by the United Church of Christ. Further, we wonder when and if a Committee on Ministry needs to have oversight for lay ministers.

Associations have used these two forms of authorization in many varied and inconsistent ways. The 2018 Manual on Ministry, by emphasizing the Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers as an assessment tool in the ministerial formation of lay candidates for ministry, encourages consistency across the settings of the denomination.

MANUAL ON MINISTRY AS PROCEDURAL GUIDE

The United Church of Christ empowers its Committees on Ministry to continue their work through seasons of change, including seasons of transition between MOM versions. In order to adapt to changes resulting from the 2005 Ministry Issues Pronouncement, along with other shifts of the 21st century, Committees on Ministry have abandoned parts of the 1986/2002 MOM.

The 1986/2002 version of MOM used the language of "Students in Care." The shift away from that language toward "Members in Discernment" is a transition away from a literal use of the 1986/2002 MOM and a move into the language proposed by the

2005 Ministry Issues Pronouncement. The Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers was developed after that pronouncement as a tool for discerning the appropriate preparation and formation for those who have gone through a non-seminary path in seeking authorization. These Marks can also be used as a review tool in processes of ministerial oversight.

Inconsistencies in our Procedures

Committees on Ministry have used different processes for authorizing Members in Discernment and those who have become Commissioned or Licensed Ministers. As well, Associations or Conferences vary in seeking out Licensed Ministers for pastoral positions through the UCC Ministry Opportunities website, recruiting individuals to pastor local congregations as Licensed Ministers, and circulating unofficial profiles for its Licensed Ministers; Associations and Conferences vary on whether those profiles include a background check. Further, some Associations have Licensed Ministers that pastor local churches whom the Committee on Ministry would strongly oppose advancing to ordained authorization due to incompetency; this leads to a question of why the Committee on Ministry entrusts a church – of any membership size, of any annual budget, of any theological persuasion – to a less-than-competent pastor.

Given the existing inconsistencies of authorization practices across the UCC, the 2018 MOM recommends moving toward common standards for all authorized ministers in all ministry settings and that Committees on Ministry adopt uniform protocols for assessments of faithfulness and excellence for all authorized ministers and settings of the church.

Discuss: *Does your COM affirm the use of clerical collars and stoles by Commissioned and/or Licensed Ministers?*

How have commissioning and licensure been used by your COM and by your region?

What assumptions undergird your practices of authorizing Licensed and Commissioned Ministers?

How do you assess individuals' readiness for licensure or commissioning (and how do you assess their ministry settings) differently from or similarly to readiness for ordination?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS FROM THE HABAKKUK GROUP

Licensure

Members of the Habakkuk Group were asked, “What was broken with licensure that you’re trying to fix with one form of authorization?” The short answer is that the Habakkuk Group sees some inconsistencies and injustices in the practices of licensure across the United Church of Christ, such as:

- alternating application of licensure as an end in itself (“career” Licensed Ministers) or as a step in the process of ministerial formation toward ordination;
- varied transportability of licensure, including some local use of a ministerial profile for Licensed Ministers; although licensure was intended only for one location and for a finite time, it is common for Licensed Ministers to “carry” their license to serve in another setting;
- inconsistent understandings of Licensed Ministers as sacramental representatives of the United Church of Christ beyond their ministry settings;
- different expectations of excellence for Licensed Ministers (for example, a Committee on Ministry that says “no” to ordination but “yes” to licensure for an individual), which may implicitly suggest that an Association holds different expectations of vitality for its congregations;
- unequal standards of pay for pastors who are licensed in comparison to those who are ordained.

Discuss: *The three forms of ministry were their own response to change when they were introduced in the 1986 version of MOM, and they have become “fixes” for shifts in the life of the Church.*

What aspects of Local Church life does your Association/Conference understand to be “fixed” by the current use of licensure?

The longer answer to the question is that current practices of licensure are being used to “fix” changes in the life of Local Churches that licensure was never intended to address: small congregations with part-time pastorates, rural congregations that

have trouble attracting pastors to their regions, the burden of debt for those authorized ministers whose formational path includes seminary, the increased number of persons whose ministries are part of multi-vocational portfolios, and more.

The landscape of the Church – even more broadly, the landscape of institutional and professional life across many fields of our society – is changing significantly. The Habakkuk Group’s proposal for one form of authorized ministry is not intended to fix those shifts, just as the existing three forms of authorization do not fix the shifts in the Church’s landscape. The Habakkuk Group invites the United Church of Christ to consider thoughtfully its varied responses to these changes, including its response through ministerial authorization and its imagination for excellence & faithful authorized ministry serving across the changing landscape and in diverse settings where the Spirit calls us to send representative ministers with the Good News of Christ.

Member-In-Discernment with Lay Ministerial Standing

Members in Discernment are occasionally asked to serve congregations during their process of ministerial formation; in many instances, Committees on Ministry license persons for that formational experience. When the location of a MID’s ministry training falls in a different Association than the Association where the MID is a member, current practices are that a license is granted by the Association where the ministry training is located. In these situations, the Member in Discernment is subject to relationships and requirements of two different Associations. In the past, Committees on Ministry were not able to conduct Fitness Reviews on Members in Discernment who were serving in ministry, since MIDs do not hold standing. Additionally, there have been occasions when Licensed Ministers (including MIDs with

Discuss: *Has your COM had the experience of licensing a MID whose membership and MID process are in a different Association ?*

What experiences has your COM had regarding oversight of Licensed Ministers and Members in Discernment?

Retired has financial and employment connotations and is not an ecclesial standing in the UCC.

Exempt Standing is a type of Ordained Ministerial Standing signifying that an Ordained Minister has come to the close of their public ministry and wishes to remain on the Association's roster but covenants to no longer perform public ministry.

licensure) chose to leave their ministry setting and end their licensure in order to avoid Fitness Reviews. The 2018 Manual on Ministry Section 2:4 describes a transparent covenant that defines the roles of each Committee on Ministry for MIDs with Lay Ministerial Standing in separate Associations. Oversight is with the Association where the MID process is conducted. The MID with Lay Ministerial Standing may be an alternative to the current practice of licensure.

Exempt Standing

In our society the concept of retirement has shifted dramatically. Words such as 'retired,' 'active,' 'inactive,' and 'emeriti' are all used and understood differently within social and ecclesiastical structures. The UCC does not have a form of ecclesiastical standing for 'retired' clergy (the UCC Yearbook has a specialty code of RT, which serves as an informational detail but not a form of ministerial standing). In the United Church of Christ we experience significant numbers of ministers who self-identify as 'retired' but continue to serve congregations in part-time, interim, and supply capacities. In addition, there are no current guidelines on what constitutes the use of the word 'retired,' nor any ecclesiastical process to support a retiring minister's discernment and outline the relationship with their Committee on Ministry. The Habakkuk Group strove to find a title for a new type of standing that would honor the end of a minister's service and provide clarity on the conclusion of their public ministry.

The 2018 Manual on Ministry recommends a new form of ministerial standing called Exempt Standing. This is a type of Ordained Ministerial Standing that signifies that an Ordained Minister has come to the close of their public ministry and wishes to remain on the Association's roster but covenants to no longer perform public ministry. Their Committee on Ministry then covenants to release the minister from ongoing requirements to maintain standing, such as continuing education and boundary awareness training. Exempt Standing would be the only type of ministerial standing in which the minister may hold membership in a Local Church outside of the Association where standing is held. All authorized ministers engaged in any form of public ministry (e.g. pulpit supply, interims, service on an Association or Conference committee, consultants) maintain Ordained Ministerial Standing, adhering to the requirements of standing as set by their Associations.

Discuss: *How has your COM negotiated waivers for clergy who are no longer active in ministry?*

Are there 'retired' clergy practicing ministry in your area who do not hold standing in your Association?

How does your COM connect with 'retired' clergy who have relocated but hold standing in your Association?

DISCERNMENT THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

The Habakkuk Group's proposed movement to one form of authorized ministry (ordination) and to a fuller understanding of the ministry of Word and Sacrament prompts a question: What about Commissioned and Licensed Ministers? The Group's prayerful consideration of the theology and history of ministerial authorization finds a simple and direct answer: ***consider ordination***. Many of the gifts of currently Commissioned and Licensed Ministers are needed more expansively across the United Church of Christ; those who feel called to ordained ministry should be invited to explore this call, and those who do not feel called to ordination should be celebrated for their faithfulness as laypersons. The following pages outline basic steps and guiding questions for those Committees on Ministry that would like to use one form of

ministerial authorization during this season of transition toward the guidelines described in the 2018 MOM.

Develop a Plan for Discernment

Meet to reflect on the 2018 Manual on Ministry and to develop a plan for discerning future authorization with Commissioned and Licensed Ministers.

Consider the existing workload of the Committee on Ministry (COM); if needed, invite volunteers with prior Committee experience to join a few COM members in forming a Bridge Team for this work.

Schedule Initial Meetings

Contact all Commissioned and Licensed Ministers and their ministry settings *in writing* to explain the upcoming work of discernment; suggestions for writing these letters are provided at the end of this outline.

The initial meetings with Licensed and Commissioned Ministers can be individual sessions or large regional gatherings of all Licensed and Commissioned Ministers to introduce one form of authorization and to outline the Committee's plan for discernment with ministers regarding possible ordination. If large group gatherings are held, include time for one-on-one conversations between individuals and the Committee.

In these initial meetings Plan to seek God's guidance together, to make room for silence, to acknowledge feelings, to answer questions and to seek out answers that you don't know. Use the tools of the **Discernment Travelogue**.

Discuss: *How many Licensed and Commissioned Ministers are currently within your oversight?*

How are you feeling about your current workload?

How do you best continue your ongoing work of authorization and oversight while taking time for your own engagement with the Manual on Ministry materials?

How do you respond to questions without knowing all of the answers?

How do you best practice discernment as a Committee without assuming certain conclusions?

During this transitional season, Committees on Ministry can choose not to issue new licenses or commissions. Any individuals who are already in discernment with a Committee on Ministry in the hopes of becoming licensed or commissioned might refocus their discernment on call and competencies for the possibility of ordination.

Initial Meetings

The initial meetings with authorized ministers provide an opportunity to seek God's guidance, clarify information about the drafted MOM, acknowledge diverse feelings about the transition, make room for uncertainty, and express appreciation for diverse ministries. The invitation to explore a call to ordination is not a promise of ordination but an opportunity for mutual discernment. The invitation is also not a denial or abrupt ending of their current authorizations.

Before concluding the initial meeting, the Committee (Bridge Team) outlines expectations for the discernment process as outlined in the drafted MOM. Commissioned and Licensed Ministers should be equipped with the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers and related tools such as Journaling the Journey for the purpose of individual discernment until the second meeting.

If an individual at this initial stage feels open to further discernment of a call to ordained ministry, a second meeting is scheduled to review the individual's call and competencies using the Marks. If an individual is not inclined to pursue the possibility of ordination, the current parameters of authorization are reviewed (licensure requires regular renewal by the Committee on Ministry; commissioning is held for the duration of call and the specific field

Ask All Authorized

Ministers: *How do you understand ordination?*

How do you understand the priesthood of all believers?

Do you feel called by God into lifelong service or into service for a season of a particular ministry?

How does your current ministry role relate to Sacraments?

In what ways, if any, does your ministry represent the UCC to the world?

How do you represent Christ in your ministries?

How do you represent the UCC to your ministry setting and to the world?

DISCUSS: *What is the need of the Church in this particular setting?*

How does an individual minister's experience provide evidence of competencies for ordained ministry?

If the Licensed or Commissioned Minister becomes ordained, how might their ministry setting need to adapt the current call agreement?

Where and how are your understandings of ordination being challenged?

Where are you having trouble saying "no"?

How are you distinguishing between God's call to all people and God's call (echoed by the UCC's call) to ordained ministry?

of ministry). A second meeting is scheduled for an opportunity to reflect on the individual's ministry.

Second Meetings

In second meetings, a Committee on Ministry (Bridge Team) listens for the individual's ongoing discernment as well as its own discernment. If there is a shared sense of call to ordination, the Committee considers the individual's previous formation, current experience, and possible needs for further preparation, as well as the appropriateness of ordination for the individual's current call.

As a result of the second meeting:

- ▼ If the individual and Committee (Bridge Team) agree that the discernment of possible ordination should continue, then a Plan of Preparation and Formation is developed, taking into account previous experience, formation, multiple paths, and the Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers (2018 MOM, Section 1).
- ▼ If the individual or Committee (Bridge Team) do not discern a potential for ordination, the end date of current authorization is clarified. Once authorization ends, individuals must take care not to present themselves as authorized ministers of the UCC. Liturgical recognition for the end of authorization as well as the celebration of lay ministries may be appropriate.
- ▼ Those ministers whose current authorization and call will conclude with professional retirement may be considered for Exempt Standing at the Committee's discretion.

Third Meetings: Decision Point

After the second meeting, individuals and Committees or Bridge Teams prepare for discernment to move to decision: concrete steps are outlined for individuals pursuing ordination or authorization is discontinued. Committees should neither unduly burden nor inattentively expedite the process toward ordination, but should rely on the Marks for assessment of competencies. Those who do not pursue ordination continue in the Church as laypersons who, like all Christians, are called to use their gifts in service of God's mission although no longer with the authorization and oversight of the United Church of Christ.

Plan to celebrate the faithful work of those whose ministries will no longer include authorization and to support those ministry settings whose Licensed or Commissioned Ministers have had a change in their authorization.

At the conclusion of these proceedings, confirm that the Committee or Bridge Team is communicating with the Association or Conference registrar to keep authorization records and the UCC Data Hub up-to-date.

LETTER OUTLINES

To Those Ministers Currently Licensed or Commissioned

Begin this letter to Commissioned and Licensed Ministers with a summary of the 2018 Manual on Ministry materials. Borrow or adapt text from this guide to underscore the UCC's ever-evolving understandings of ministerial authorization.

Highlight the proposed one form of ministerial authorization as an opportunity for vocational discernment and an invitation to explore ordination (especially where the path to ordination previously might not have seemed available).

Key Point:

Use the Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers with all authorized ministers to explore their call and competencies.

We pray: O Holy One, as we become an expression of your presence in our midst, we ask for your Spirit to be present in our discernment of your call in our lives. As your Church gathers, guide and strengthen us in the ways we serve your name with our gifts and passions. Throughout history, you have emboldened leaders in your effort to energize people to serve creation. May we sense your Spirit moving within our efforts to raise up and support leaders for your Church's ongoing work in the world. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Request the opportunity to be in discernment together. Explain that current authorizations are all limited: licensure by intervals of renewal, commissioning by duration of call and the specific field of ministry.

Provide the date(s) and time(s) of a large group meeting or appoint a Committee person to schedule individual meetings. Include contact information for a specific Committee or Bridge Team member who is willing to field initial questions.

To Ministry Settings with Licensed or Commissioned Ministers

Begin this letter to the ministry settings of Commissioned and Licensed Ministers with a summary of the 2018 Manual on Ministry materials. As needed, borrow or adapt text from this guide to underscore the UCC's ever-evolving understandings of ministerial authorization.

Highlight the proposed one form of ministerial authorization as an opportunity for encouraging faithfulness and excellence for 21st century leadership by all of our UCC ministers, regardless of full- or part-time employment, specialized or bivocational careers, rural or urban context.

Invite ministry settings to understand that ministerial authorization represents the relationship of the UCC with individuals who serve in and on behalf of the denomination. While ministry settings' individual needs are taken into account in authorization decisions, the overall well-being of the UCC through its ministerial leadership is of foremost concern in authorization. Assure ministry settings that current forms of ministerial authorization will not be changed immediately or without conversation.

Include contact information for a specific Committee or Bridge Team member who is willing to field initial questions.