

Marks of an Ordainable Call
A Policy Paper of the Ordination and Ministerial Standing Committee,
Metropolitan New York Association, New York Conference, United Church of Christ

We affirm with the wider United Church of Christ that God calls the whole church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ. Further, we recognize that God calls individuals to all kinds of special service to the church and to God's world on behalf of the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ordained ministry, however, is ministry that is called and set apart by and on behalf of the church, for which ecclesiastical authorization is required. For a ministry to be ordained in the United Church of Christ, there must exist 1) a clearly articulated sense of God's call by the individual candidate, 2) confirmation by a duly authorized body of the United Church of Christ that it senses and affirms the individual's calling, gifts, and demonstrated competencies for ministry, and 3) recognition by the United Church of Christ that the ministry to which the individual is called is, indeed, something that should be set apart for covenantal authorization.

First, two definitions. By "church" we mean the universal gathering of Christians into bodies for worship, service, teaching and fellowship. There are many Churches (UCC, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, etc.) but only one church. That church is still in the process of becoming both visible and unified. Second, the body of followers of Christ that meets in one location is called a "local congregation." Local congregations are usually members of a particular Church (denomination). In the United Church of Christ, the local congregations are the primary place of worship and ministry, though they do not comprise the entire church.

The Metropolitan Association fully subscribes to the guidelines established by the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry of the United Church of Christ, as outlined in the Manual on Ministry, Section 3, "Ordained Ministry," pp. 11 - 15, which detail the typically acknowledged settings for valid ministries recognized throughout the whole United Church of Christ, the usual criteria for determining whether a ministry will require ordination, and the provision for a four-way covenant of call which allows for some ministries in non-typically recognized settings to be set apart and authorized as an ordained ministry of the United Church of Christ.

The Manual on Ministry (Section 3, p. 13) notes that other ministries could be added to the list of typically recognized ministries, if in the judgment of the Association they meet the spirit of the requirement for ordained ministry. Following is a set of criteria the Metropolitan Association will use to help it determine if a candidate's proposed call and setting for ministry meets the spirit of the requirement for ordained ministry in the Metropolitan Association, New York Conference, United Church of Christ. It is assumed that all applicants for ordination in non-traditional settings are seminary graduates.

All ordained ministries in the Metropolitan Association that are authorized and set apart for ordination will show evidence of the following "marks."

1. Authorization.

The proposed ordained ministry position will give clear sign that God is the caller of both the individual performing the ministry, and ultimately of the ministry itself. Further, the proposed ordained position will show that it is validated by the church, authorized by the church, and done on behalf of the church, through clear, written, covenants of accountability and mutual responsibility, which describe a clear process of reporting and supervision.

2. Distinctiveness

The proposed ordained ministry position will have discernable characteristics that set it apart as a visible ministry of and on behalf of the church. These characteristics are demonstrated by:

A) regular and on-going performance of the essential activities that typically constitute ordained ministry – preaching and teaching the gospel, administering the sacraments and rites of the church, and exercising pastoral care and leadership;

Or, in the case of someone working in a non-traditional setting for ordained ministry, a willingness and readiness to perform these essential activities, as requested, through their attendance, participation, and leadership in their local church and the life of the association; and

B) In the case of a non-traditional setting for ordained ministry, a quality of witness to the ministry of Christ through this particular calling, such that people may clearly see that it is an intentional decision on the part of the local congregation involved in the four-way covenant to have an ordained minister lead its outreach to the world in an essentially secular activity, for the purpose of witnessing to the gospel; or

C) If the ordained ministry activities are engaged in on only a part-time basis, commitment of the whole person to ordained ministry, even a passion for such, so that it is discernable that ordained ministry is the primary and essential focus and calling of the individual, and there is integration of the individual's passion for ordained ministry into all areas of his or her life, rather than something the person does on the side to find personal satisfaction and/or to supplement their income.

Discernment of these characteristics will necessarily be done on a case-by-case basis with each candidate for ministry, in consultation with the local church.

If a "four-way-covenant" is required for ordination, a pre-ordination conference will be required, to include participation by the candidate, sponsoring congregation, representatives from the Ordination and Ministerial Standing Committee, and possibly the calling body, for the purpose of clarifying the call, followed by a Committee vote to affirm that there is an "ordainable call." This will occur before the Ordination Interview is scheduled with the candidate.

The Metropolitan Association will ask of any candidate coming before it seeking a four-way covenant for ordination the question: “Why is licensing or commissioning not sufficient authorization for this call?” Any candidate coming before the Metropolitan Association must explain and demonstrate why licensing or commissioning is not sufficient for the position. Candidates seeking a four-way covenant for ordination should also expect to be questioned about “what happens next” after their four-way covenant ends... in other words, where do they see themselves working beyond the current setting?

For the purpose of showing how these characteristics might play out in a typical situation, we offer three “examples” for clarification.

1) Candidate A works almost full-time as a mover, working for a company that moves people from borough to borough and offers special care of their belongings. Candidate A takes pride in providing moving services custom tailored to meet the needs of each individual or family serviced. Candidate A goes by the nickname “The Rev” and includes gospel witness as a frequent part of his or her interaction with clients. In addition, Candidate A preaches occasionally at his or her local congregation and leads a Bible Study class.

Analysis: Candidate A probably does not have an ordainable call. Even though he or she attempts to represent the Church publicly in his or her work, it is not clear that moving people is an activity of such a clear link to the gospel that the church would want to authorize and set it apart as ordained ministry. The work in the candidate’s local congregation, while important, is essentially incidental to the candidate’s primary vocation.

2) Candidate B works full time in a social service agency providing counseling and drug rehabilitation services. He or she openly tells co-workers, and clients when appropriate, that this work is an extension of his or her call to serve the gospel of Christ. Candidate B is called to a 10 hour per week position as assistant pastor in a local congregation, where he or she preaches, teaches, provides pastoral care, and administers the sacraments.

Analysis: Candidate B probably does have an ordainable call. The part-time ministry demonstrates regular and on-going activities essential to typical ordained ministry. The local congregation has made a covenantal commitment to the candidate to help them be accountable for their ministry. In addition, there is a corollary sense of recognizable ministry evidenced in the candidate’s secular work of healing/counseling.

3) Candidate C works almost full time as a legal secretary, but makes no connection between his or her primary work and his or her sense of calling. Candidate C also is contracted on a year by year basis to be the leader of a Christian youth group at a local congregation. In such capacity he or she will preach once a year at the local congregation, and provide some counseling and pastoral care services to the members of the youth group. Candidate C is considering entering doctoral studies in church history,

and is interested in continuing the youth ministry position, and working more part-time as a legal secretary, as a means of supporting him or herself through the early stages of the doctoral program.

Analysis: Candidate C probably does not have an ordainable call. While he or she performs some typical activities essential to ordained ministry with the youth group, it is not clear that this is an on-going and regular commitment on the part of either the candidate or the local congregation. The primary work they engage in is purely secular, with no connection made to the ordained ministry of the local congregation. In addition, the candidate's commitment and passion of his or her whole person to the youth ministry is not clearly established. It may well be that their real vocation is to teach church history. But if fulfilled, that will become a separate place of employment and place for ministry, and will need to be evaluated for the marks of ordained ministry on its own terms.