

## Ten Basic Questions, or, (Almost) Everything You Always Wanted to Know About the UCC's Ministry Issues Pronouncement ...

**1. Why did we need a "Ministry Issues Pronouncement," anyway?** In the late 1980s, leaders in the UCC (and all other mainline denominations) realized that for a variety of reasons—including changing demographics and growing numbers of small, financially marginal churches—traditional methods for identifying and credentialing persons for ministry were inadequate. For example, they noted

- small urban and rural churches couldn't afford to hire full-time ministers with seven years of college and seminary training
- faithful and successful—but non-traditionally trained—leaders of immigrant churches often were unable to be fully credentialed in the UCC
- licensed bi-vocational ministers, men and women who had served and "grown" their churches successfully for years, often were unable to be fully credentialed in the UCC

For these and other reasons, the 22d General Synod (1999) called for study of ministry matters, including the possibility of multiple paths toward ordination. Six years later (1995) Synod 24 passed the "Ministry Issues Pronouncement."

**2. What did this pronouncement actually say?** In particular, the pronouncement called upon all settings of the UCC to do three things:

- develop, support, and engage *in multiple paths of preparation* for authorized ministers
- expect and encourage all authorized ministers to be *lifelong learners, accountable to one another and the church*
- participate actively in the *discernment of call of particular persons* to become authorized ministers of the church

Since 1995, therefore, local Church and Ministry Committees (CMCs) in partnership with national staff have begun the process of implementing these recommendations.

**3. Okay, I want to know what each of these three things means. But the first one is a real problem. I'm strongly in favor of a minister's having both college and seminary training. What's this about "multiple paths to ordination"?** The Ministry Pronouncement made it clear that "the traditional, seven-year college/ seminary path will continue to be the path for many persons." Moreover—as has always been true in the United Church of Christ—local CMCs continue to have the authority to adapt and alter guidelines in such ways as they prayerfully discern are necessary for their own settings, and for the best preparation of individuals. Nevertheless, because of the changing circumstances noted in #1 above, it is critically important for the continued health and vitality of our congregations that CMCs begin to explore paths of preparation that enable *all* called and gifted persons to be fully prepared and authorized. The hope is that, if there is *real reason* for an individual to seek a path other than the traditional one, CMCs will be open to that possibility.

Development of new paths will not happen quickly, and it will not happen well if it happens in isolation. Cooperation, conversation across regional boundaries, partnerships with educational entities, technological innovation: all these will be important as new initiatives are developed.

**4. What about “lifelong learners accountable to one another and the church”? What does that have to do with CMCs?** In the past, ministers authorized in the UCC often assumed that once they went to seminary, passed their ecclesiastical council and got ordained, they were responsible mainly to God and their local congregations. That understanding is changing. This part of the Ministry Pronouncement acknowledges two things. First, with information and knowledge changing at breakneck pace, authorized persons must intentionally update their pastoral skills and theological understandings if their ministries are to remain vital. Second, because those ministries are undertaken *in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ*, it is appropriate for the authorizing bodies—our CMCs—to engage in activities of oversight.

What might these activities of oversight be? They will, of course, vary from region to region. But it is possible they will, over time, involve the development of continuing education requirements for maintenance of standing.

**5. What’s *discernment of call* all about?** The importance of this recommendation is twofold: first, it emphasizes that “call” is a process that is not only personal, but communal. Second, it makes clear that the outcome of this process is not a given; it involves discernment.

- **Call as a personal and communal process.** In our individualistic society, people often understand “call” as something that happens privately, in a flash of God-inspired awareness. In the UCC, however, we typically understand that a true call to ministry is at once *personal* (an individual believes he or she hears God’s special call) and *communal* (the individual’s perceived call is tested and affirmed—or not—by the Church.) H. Richard Niebuhr helpfully describes the path to ordination as a sequential process with four parts: the *Christian call* summons an individual to basic faith; the *secret call* beckons toward more specific service; the *providential call* tests both one’s gifts and graces and one’s ability to acquire appropriate training; and the *ecclesial call* represents the Church’s affirmation of an individual’s preparation and giftedness.
- **The need for discernment.** In the past, students and others seeking ordination in the UCC came “in care” of their Associations. This language—and the activities it implicitly encouraged or discouraged—was problematic: it suggested that the role of CMCs is primarily to “care” for one who has already “received” a call. (Not surprisingly, individuals “in care” whose fitness or readiness for ministry was questioned often felt wounded, angry, and *un-cared for*.) The new recommendation—as well as the new name for the process—“Members in Discernment”—emphasizes mutuality of exploration. Now, both an individual and the church will seek *together* to understand whether authorization is the right path. Moreover, this language suggests that to begin a process of discernment is not to presuppose what the outcome will be.

**6. This discernment process seems very confusing. What's the difference between the old "in care process" and the new "marks of ministry" process?** In the old system, people in care accomplished *certain required tasks*, such as completion of a seminary degree, Clinical Pastoral Education, and preparation of an ordination paper. In no way does the new process reject those and other tasks as potentially important in people's preparation. But rather than focusing on tasks to be completed, the new process emphasizes *personal attributes and abilities*, called "Marks." This emphasis recognizes implicitly—but importantly!—that

- people who may not have completed certain tasks (such as attending four years of college and three of seminary) may have knowledge, gifts and graces appropriate for authorized ministry. And conversely,
- people who *have* completed certain tasks (such as attending four years of college and three of seminary) may *not yet—or ever—*have the knowledge, gifts and graces appropriate for authorized ministry.

The new process thus focuses much more intentionally on *individuals* and their developmental needs as they discern a call to ministry. Additionally, the new process assumes that people seeking licensed ministry and commissioned ministry will be "Members in Discernment." Here, too, a particular outcome is not presupposed.

(For a more thorough and detailed series of guidelines and exercises, visit [www.ucc.org/ministers/ministry-issues-project](http://www.ucc.org/ministers/ministry-issues-project). See especially the section entitled "Using the Marks for Assessing Members in Discernment and Developing Their Learning Plans." This site also contains links to the 178-page manual for use with the Marks, and the full text of the original Pronouncement.)

**7. But there are so MANY "marks." How can committee members know whether a Member in Discernment IS all those things?** They can't. Moreover, no one—including veterans of many years of ministry—will exhibit all the Marks. Without doubt, committee members will continue—appropriately and importantly—to use their intuition about those seeking authorization. But familiarity with the Marks is useful in several ways, for example:

- The Marks help concretize otherwise subjective responses. *Why do you like a particular candidate? Is it because she has certain spiritual gifts, evidences biblical knowledge, practices pastoral caring....? Or, on the other hand, is it because he looks a lot like your grandson?*
- The Marks enable members of CMCs to identify appropriate areas of inquiry, conversation, and discernment.
- The Marks enable Members in Discernment, together with CMC members, to work together on appropriate learning plans.

(For a complete list of the "Marks," see pages 17-21 of Draft 3.1, *The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ*, available on the UCC website cited above.)

**8. Even if we don't have to "check off" all those Marks, there still seems to be far more to do than most CMCs can accomplish, especially those that are working**

**with multiple Members in Discernment.** Again, it's important to remember that you will not be examining every Mark on the list. Nevertheless, it IS true that the new process will involve more work with individuals than the old one did. To be responsive, therefore, CMCs and Members in discernment will need to be innovative. Are there conversation partners—seminaries, hospitals, field education sites, local church members, and others—who can offer assessments of the candidate's attributes and skills? Are there alternative structures within conferences/ associations that might help facilitate information gathering?

**9.I hear there are changes being proposed to the UCC's *Constitution and Bylaws* regarding these ministry issues. How will these affect me and my Committee?**

The proposed changes, which can be seen on the UCC website, reflect language about the matters discussed above—for example, substituting language about “Members in Discernment” for “Students in Care”—and include material regarding persons seeking ordination, commissioning, and licensure. Provisions in the *Constitution and Bylaws* are (and have always been) binding on the national setting and General Synod; they are, however, *recommendations* to the other settings of the church. The expectation and hope is that all settings will consider the new language and provisions seriously and prayerfully, because of the covenantal ties that bind the settings of the United Church of Christ together.

**10.Okay, here's my biggest fear. Isn't all this going to lead to the “dumbing down” of ministry in the UCC?** The intention of the Ministry Pronouncement was never, and is not now, to make the path to ordained ministry easier and quicker. Rather, its intent was 1) to enable *all* called and gifted persons to engage in discernment and preparation with regard to ordained ministry; and 2) to enable *all* churches, small and large, to have fully credentialed, qualified ministers. Nevertheless, everyone knows about the “law of unintended consequences”: plans that have noble aims but problematic outcomes.

CMCs have a critical role—perhaps *the* critical role—in making sure those unintended consequences don't happen. To this end, they must hold two important imperatives in tension. First, they must be open to the “new occasions and new duties” our changing society, churches and church members are revealing with respect to ministry. And second, they must explore both old and new ways to maintain the rigorous intellectual, personal, and spiritual preparation that has characterized ministers in the United Church of Christ and its predecessor bodies.

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