

PREPARATION FOR COMMISSIONING OF RULING ELDERS (1)

Introduction

Preparation to be a commissioned ruling elder involves two phases: exploration and discipleship. These two phases are designed to explore the call, evaluate the gifts, and support the preparation of men and women who are personally examining their sense of call to ministry as a commissioned ruling elder or have been encouraged by the faith community to consider the possibility that God is calling them to that particular ministry. (*AHPM*, p. 30) In general – but not in all the details – these phases correspond to the inquirer and candidate phases in the preparation for ministry of teaching elders.

The Committee on Relational Ministry shall appoint a CRE Oversight Sub-committee (hereafter: the Oversight Committee). The purpose of this committee is to provide for the best possible leadership for the church by assuring that persons who are called to be commissioned ruling elders are firm in their faith in Christ, assured of their call to serve God and the church as commissioned ruling elders, effective in ministry, and continually growing in their understanding of the Christian faith and the work of the church.

These responsibilities continue after the CRE is commissioned. The Oversight Committee oversees both the training and the ministry of CREs, but this proposal deals only with their training.

The Oversight Committee shall consist of six persons and shall include at least two teaching elders and at least two ruling elders. It shall include at least one member of the Committee on Relational Ministry, who shall serve as chair of the committee.

The *Book of Order* states that a person who seeks to be commissioned for particular pastoral service as defined in G-2.1001 “shall receive such preparation as determined by the presbytery to be appropriate to the particular commission. The ruling elder shall be examined by the presbytery as to personal faith, motives for seeking the commission, and the areas of instruction determined by presbytery.” (G-2.1002).

- 1) This proposal is a revision of parts of Shenandoah Presbytery’s policy for AREs and CREs. In it I have borrowed heavily from two documents: the PCUSA General Assembly’s *Advisory Handbook on Preparation for Ministry (AHPM)* and Shenandoah Presbytery’s *Process of Preparation for the Ordered Ministry of Teaching Elder (PPTE)*. I have given credit to these sources in some cases where I have used their words or altered their words only slightly. In order to produce a more readable document, however, I have not followed the usual grammatical rules regarding quotation marks and giving credit for all the content that I have borrowed.

This Committee on Oversight shall foster and assess the individual's development in five key areas:

1. *Education for Ministry*, including evaluation of the person's academic potential and progress, and reflection on their educational experiences in relation to their preparation for ordered ministry as commissioned ruling elder.
2. *Spiritual Development*, providing a framework in which persons can reflect on their personal faith journey and their spiritual practices including those practices that enable them to discern the will of God in their lives.
3. *Interpersonal relations*, providing opportunities to reflect on how one relates to others and one's leadership style, and what they mean in terms of the functions and responsibilities of church leadership.
4. *Personal Growth*, through which persons reflect on who they are, what areas they need to develop, how to understand their call, and how to develop personal stewardship.
5. *Professional Development*, to help persons develop specific skills that will enhance their effectiveness as commissioned ruling elders, especially in the areas of understanding their ministry context, maintaining the tension between being in unity with a congregation and being set apart from them as a proclaimer of the word of God, and the ability to deal with conflict that may emerge in ministry settings. (*AHPM*, p. 31)

The building of relationships is central to the fostering and assessing of these qualities. The exploration and discipleship phases should strengthen the relationships between the individual, the congregation, and the presbytery. These relationships are centered in the relationship between the explorer/disciple and the Oversight Committee and between the explorer/disciple and the mentor.

The Oversight Committee will meet with all explorers and disciples at least twice a year to support and assess their development in the five areas listed above. In preparation for these meetings the explorers and disciples will submit a written report on their progress toward becoming a CRE. In addition the Oversight Committee will meet once a year with all CREs, explorers and disciples.

Ruling elders are ordinarily not eligible to serve as Commissioned Ruling Elders in their own churches. The Presbytery, however, may determine that its mission strategy permits a ruling elder to become a commissioned ruling elder in their own church. In such cases the presbytery may commission a ruling elder to become a commissioned ruling elder in their own church by a three-fourths vote of the members of presbytery present and voting.

Persons who wish to enhance their abilities to serve as ruling elders in their own churches are advised to take the courses for CREs at Union Presbyterian Seminary, to continue to serve in roles prescribed for ruling elders in the Book of Order, and not to seek to become CREs.

The mentor

When a person is approved as an explorer, the Oversight Committee shall assign one of its members to be a mentor for that person. The mentor shall build a relationship of trust and understanding with the explorer and shall consult with the explorer in relation to the five qualities that are listed above. Normally the relationship between the mentor and the trainee will continue through both the exploration and discipleship phases. When CREs are commissioned, the Oversight Committee will determine whether they continue to have the same mentor or are assigned a different one.

The guidelines for the mentor and the explorer/disciple/CRE are as follows

1. The mentor shall be a good role model: a person who has demonstrated competence in the service of the church, strength and soundness of faith, and a desire for learning and personal growth. In the mentoring relationship the mentor shall demonstrate the openness and caring that a CRE should develop.
2. The mentor shall not be the pastor of the explorer/disciple.
3. The mentor shall be accessible for meetings and phone conversations.
4. The mentor shall be approachable and non-judgmental, shall listen before giving advice, and shall present constructive criticism in a positive way.
5. Upon appointment the mentor shall make the initial contact with the explorer, provide contact information (phone numbers, email address, etc.) and set up a first meeting with the explorer.
6. At least once every two months mentors shall initiate a conversation with the explorers or disciples for whom they have responsibility. In preparation for these conversations explorers/disciples shall prepare a written report on their preparation for ministry as a CRE. The goal of these reports is to enable the mentor to support the explorer/disciple. They may discuss any or all of the five key areas that are listed above.
7. The Oversight Committee should be contacted when any of the following occur:
 - failure to respond to the mentor's request for the bi-monthly contacts or to prepare the written reports;
 - problems in the relationship between the mentor and the explorer/disciple;
 - major issues that greatly affect the explorer/disciple's preparation for ministry as a CRE.
8. No mentor shall have responsibility for more than three explorers/disciples.

Education

Education of those who wish to be CREs in Shenandoah Presbytery will be provided by Union Presbyterian Seminary in a two year program (with a third post-commissioning year). Persons may become explorers before they begin their studies at UPS or at any point during those studies; but two years are required for the explorer and disciple

phases -- at least one year as an explorer and at least six months as a disciple -- before the candidate may be commissioned as a CRE.

Explorer

The purpose of the exploration phase is to provide an opportunity for the church and those who believe they may be called to serve as CREs to explore that call together so that both the presbytery and the explorer can make an informed decision about the explorer's suitability for ministry as a CRE (Compare BO G-2.0603). Enrollment of the applicant as an explorer does not guarantee that the explorer will be recommended for enrollment as a disciple.

To be enrolled as an explorer the applicants must:

- be a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and have been active in the work and worship of a congregation of Shenandoah Presbytery for at least six months;
- Submit an application form;
- Receive the endorsement of the session of their congregation. Sessions shall meet in person with ruling elders interested in becoming CREs before endorsing them. Sessions shall also meet with explorers and disciples at least once every six months to review their progress toward becoming CREs;
- Submit two letters of recommendation;
- Engage in an interview with the Oversight Committee;
- Have a high school diploma or GED.

During the explorer phase, trainees must complete the following tasks and report on them to their mentors:

- undergo a psychological and vocational assessment within the first two months after becoming an explorer;
- complete the Foundations (Year 1) courses at UPS;
- preach once in a church assigned by the Oversight Committee;
- observe a regular session meeting in a church assigned by the Oversight Committee;
- observe a periodic visit in a church assigned by the Oversight Committee.

Explorers must maintain regular contact with their mentors and attend the meetings of the Oversight Committee with explorers and disciples.

Disciple

The purpose of the discipleship phase is to provide for the full preparation of persons to serve the as CREs. This shall be accomplished through the presbytery's support, guidance, and evaluation of a candidate's fitness and readiness for a call to ministry as a CRE (Compare *BO G-2.0604*) Enrollment of an inquirer as a disciple does not guarantee

that the disciple will be recommended for commissioning as a CRE even if the candidate completes the program of education for CREs at UPS.

To be enrolled as a disciple the applicants must

- have completed at least one year as an explorer, and submitted a report on their progress toward becoming a CRE during that time;
- have completed the activities required in the explorer phase;
- receive the concurrence of their mentor that this move to the discipleship phase is advisable;
- submit an application form;
- engage in an interview with the Oversight Committee.

During the disciple phase the trainee must complete the following tasks and report on them to their mentors:

- complete the required coursework for CREs at UPS.
- preach and lead worship twice (two different sermons in two different churches) in churches assigned by the Oversight Committee
- teach twice with arrangements approved by the mentor.
- interview one CRE and one teaching elder (in churches of less than 70 members) assigned by the Oversight Committee, using questions supplied in part by the Oversight Committee.
- observe two regular session meetings in churches assigned by the Oversight Committee.

Disciples shall maintain regular contact with their mentors and attend the meetings of the Oversight Committee with explorers and disciples.

Disciples may serve as supply preachers and leaders of worship with the guidance and approval of the Oversight Committee but may not assume the responsibilities of a CRE until they have been commissioned.

Final assessment

In order to be approved as an ARE or CRE disciples must:

- complete at least 6 months as a disciple;
- complete the activities required in the disciple phase;
- complete the CRE program at UPS;
- receive the concurrence of their mentor that they seem to be called to be CREs;
- complete a form that is similar to the Personal Information Form for teaching elders;
- submit a written faith statement;
- submit an autobiographical account of their faith journey and the development of their vocational calling;

- submit a written sermon, with a description of the contemporary need to which the sermon is addressed and an exegetical interpretation of the Biblical material for the sermon;
- give evidence of an understanding of the questions required for ordination;
- be examined by Presbytery as to personal faith, motives for seeking the commission, theology, Bible, and polity. Parts, but not all, of this examination, may be conducted on behalf of Presbytery by the Oversight Committee.

A background check shall be conducted before a person is commissioned to serve as a CRE in a church.

After-commissioning requirements

During the first year after being commissioned, CREs shall complete the third year of CRE classes at UPS. After that year they shall complete the equivalent of at least five days of continuing education (Possibilities include conferences, continuing education classes at seminaries and colleges, and on-line courses) each year as suggested or approved by the Oversight Committee and report the completion of this education to the Oversight Committee.

CREs shall maintain regular contact with their mentors, who shall be teaching elders.

(Last revision: October, 2017)