Accommodations to Particular Circumstances

The Book of Order permits a presbytery, by a three-fourths vote of those present, to waive any of the constitutional requirements for ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament except for any standard ordination examinations approved by the General Assembly.

When considering such waivers, presbyteries are required to specifically state “good and sufficient reasons for accommodations to the particular circumstances of the individual seeking ordination” (G-2.0610). Guidance for assessing whether the stated “reasons” are “good and sufficient” has been provided by an authoritative interpretation by the 206th General Assembly (1994) that affirmed that waivers should be granted when “the candidate is exceptionally well qualified, but through a different route than is usually followed.” In a sense, then, what is being waived is the process for achieving or demonstrating the mandated standards. Such waivers are “not to be acted upon lightly, as evidenced by the requirements of a three-quarters affirmative vote of presbyters present” (Minutes, 1994, Part 1, page 201).

This paragraph of the Book of Order was the focus of particular attention of a special committee created by the 220th General Assembly to study the overall preparation for ministry process, whose report was approved by the 221st General Assembly (2014). Among its recommendations was a call for

presbyteries, through whatever structure they have in place to guide the preparation of persons for ordered ministry as a teaching elder, [to] make full use of the flexibility provided by the Form of Government in G-2.06, particularly 2.0610, to respond to the unique needs of individual inquirers and candidates, especially those from immigrant and underserved communities.

Within the special committee’s rationale for the recommendation was a concern that presbyteries had not yet adjusted to and so taken advantage of flexibility in the Book of Order “to shape the preparation process in ways that would accommodate their unique contexts and circumstances” since the Form of Government revisions adopted in 2011.

Thus presbyteries are encouraged to be flexible in terms of processes for developing and demonstrating “suitability” (G-2.0603), “fitness and readiness for ... ministry requiring ordination” as a minister of the Word and Sacrament (G-2.0604) while at the same time holding firm to the standards of the “qualifications of character and scholarship required of candidates of this church” (in the language of G-2.0505). The limits of a presbytery’s flexibility in granting waivers is the requirement that any waivers must obtain approval “by a three-fourths vote” of the presbytery, and outright waivers may not be granted for the standard ordination exams (“except for those [requirements] of G-2.0607d”; see G-2.0610). In its deliberation of whether to approve a requested waiver, the presbytery should be
reminded that an authoritative interpretation by the General Assembly set the standard for assessing the constitutionally required “good and sufficient reasons” as that “the candidate is exceptionally well qualified, but through a different route than is usually followed.” Again, what is being waived is the process, not the standards of “character and scholarship.”

While the *Book of Order* does not allow a presbytery to “waive” the standard ordination exam requirements of G-2.0607d, that restriction does not mean every candidate must receive “satisfactory” evaluations on all those examinations. By the same process required for other accommodations, a presbytery may approve an “alternate means by which to ascertain the readiness of the candidate for ministry in the areas covered by the standard ordination exams” (G-2.0610). This provision recognizes written examinations are not appropriate means by which to assess some individuals’ ministry competence. But that the exam requirements may not be “waived” also recognizes the important role the exams play in the assessment of a candidate’s readiness to begin ministry precisely because they are not judgments (whether positive or negative) shaped by previous experience during the preparation for ministry process and they provide input from the broader church through readers from other presbyteries.

There are many issues to consider surrounding “alternate means” assessments of competency in the areas of the standard examinations (ranging from what accommodations can be granted within the structure of the standard exams themselves to possible models for alternative assessment). The Assistant Stated Clerk for Preparation for Ministry has worked with the examinations committee, disabilities advocates, and other advocacy groups within the denomination to develop a separate training resource to advise presbyteries and candidates about these possibilities. It is available on the Preparation for Ministry section of the Office of the General Assembly website as an online presentation entitled, “Alternative Assessment of Competency.” A written version of this guidance is included in the “Resources” section at the end of the Advisory Handbook (where you will also find the Internet address for the online presentation).

When a presbytery does approve any accommodations to the usual requirements, “[a] full account of the reasons for any waiver or alternate means to ascertain readiness shall be included in the minutes of the presbytery and communicated to the presbytery to which the inquirer or candidate may be transferred” (G-2.0610) either within the preparation process or in
relation to receiving a call to ministry requiring ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament.

**What specific circumstances do you believe might warrant exceptions to the constitutional requirements for the preparation for ministry process?**

**Should a presbytery apply this same process to requests for exceptions to its own requirements for all those under its care?**