Removal from Covenant Relationship

Inquiry and candidacy continue until a presbytery acts in one of three ways to end the covenant relationship and remove the person’s name from its roll of inquirers and candidates.

1. Once a candidate who has been “certified ready for examination for ordination” receives a call approved by a presbytery and has been examined, ordained and installed, the presbytery of call notifies both the session and presbytery of care to remove the person from the membership roll of the congregation and the roll of inquirers and candidates of the presbytery of care (G-2.0704; see the section on “Ordination,” in the Advisory Handbook).

2. Persons under care as either an inquirer or a candidate may withdraw from the process by notifying their session and the presbytery’s committee. Such decisions may be arrived at mutually through the consultations and covenant reviews that are the core of the preparation for ministry process.

3. The presbytery or its commission (acting on “delegated authority” on behalf of the presbytery, G-3.0307) may act on its own to end the covenant relationship because it has determined that an inquirer is not “suitable” for ordered ministry as a minister of the Word and Sacrament (G-2.0603) or that a candidate’s continuing preparation would not result in a determination of “fitness” and “readiness” (G-2.0604). If a person is removed from the process by a presbytery’s commission, it must report its action to both the session and the presbytery at their next respective meetings.

For inquirers and candidates currently enrolled in theological studies, notification of this action should be sent to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Theological Institution Contact person at that seminary or theological school as well.

When a presbytery’s committee decides to recommend removing a person from covenant relationship, some basic principles of Christian charity and due process are warranted.

- As the committee reviews the presbytery’s policies and procedures for this action with the person, it should make every effort to be supportive and caring during what is sure to be a difficult time.
• Explain as clearly as possible why the decision has been made, emphasizing the person’s strengths as well as indicating the weaknesses that led to the decision.
• Offer suggestions through a group discernment process for alternative occupations or forms of ministry and service that the person may wish to consider, including persons to contact, resources, and so forth.
• Contact the pastor of the person’s home church and the session liaison as soon as possible to explain the action to be recommended to the presbytery, since it may be unexpected if the congregation has become disconnected from the covenant process. Tell them the reasons for the committee’s action, give them the alternatives that were suggested, and offer any other suggestions the presbytery may have about how the congregation can be most supportive of the person as he or she seeks a new direction.
• Provide opportunity for the person and any of her or his advocates to be heard by the presbyteries’ committee before any final action is taken.

Presbyteries may wish to establish a set process for handling situations where an inquirer or candidate may wish to contest a recommendation to remove him or her from the process. It will be important to remember that these really are not like “judicial proceedings” that would seek to safeguard a presumption that the person has a right to be ordained or should always eventually be “certified ready” for ordination barring extreme mitigating circumstances. The goal should be to create a fair and open to hearing from those persons who may disagree with the recommendation and want to argue for a different course of action, but presbyteries will also want to avoid establishing an adversarial process.

As decisions are made regarding who should hear the request not to terminate the covenant relationship, keep an eye toward what will be the circumstances should the recommendation to end the relationship be overturned. If this individual is not removed from the process, she or he will continue to be under the care, direction, and supervision of the presbytery’s committee. The goal, then, should be a process that has the possibility to persuade that body to come to a different conclusion about whether the individual should continue in the process. If the committee is told it must keep the person under care but has not been persuaded as to the wisdom of that course of action, it is unlikely the relationship between the committee and the individual going forward will be conducive to healthy discernment. Given this concern, it is probably beneficial (rather than a detriment or conflict of interest) to have the committee be the body that hears any request for reconsideration.

Finally, in those presbyteries that have not specifically delegated that responsibility for the roll of inquirers and candidates to a commission overseeing preparation for ministry, the formal action to remove someone from the roll will require a plenary vote of the presbytery. There can be legitimate concerns about whether such “personnel issues” belong on the floor of a presbytery meeting, but if these decisions are placed before that body it will need the relevant information. Concerns for confidentiality relate to sharing information only with those who have a “need to know,” and someone who presses a
request for reconsideration to the full presbytery has by that action created the “need to know” among all the commissioners. That being said, provisions can be included in the process requiring such matters to only be addressed in “executive session.” Also, in cases where the presbytery committee’s decision to remove the person is not being challenged or appealed it is probably sufficient to report in the motion for removal that “based on the committee’s discernment with [the individual], the committee recommends [the individual] be removed from the roll of inquirers and candidates.” If the presbytery commissioners accept that the committee’s judgment would be well-founded or it would not have brought such a request, then that is probably all that needs be disclosed in the plenary meeting of the presbytery.

What “mechanisms and processes” will a presbytery need to have in place to address the need to remove persons from the process?

Should a presbytery provide a formal appeal process for such decisions, and if so, what procedures would it need to include? For example, who would hear and rule on the appeal?