During inquiry

The date of the presbytery’s action to enroll the person as an inquirer marks the beginning of the covenant relationship for the purposes of the constitutional time requirements (G-2.0602). The inquiry phase should be of sufficient length for the inquirer, the session, and the presbytery’s committee to formulate a decision regarding the inquirer’s “suitability for ordered ministry.”

In order to make that decision on an informed basis, it is useful for all parties to have specific information beyond just a general sense of how things are going. Presbyteries over the years have found it advisable to have formal, written covenant agreements that lay out specific activities and goals related to the five key developmental areas (see the section on “Inquiry, candidacy, and beyond,” in the Advisory Handbook). These covenant agreements should be carefully and prayerfully developed. They need to be more than just “busy work” or “hurdles to be cleared” if they are going to contribute to the preparation for ministry process. Each goal should be designed to produce outcomes that further an inquirer’s understanding of call and develop her or his gifts for ministry. More important than whether each goal is completed is what has been learned by the inquirer and the presbytery through the effort and attention committed to the agreed upon goals.

In the past the Form of Government required an “annual consultation” between the inquirer (and also candidates at that phase of the process) and the presbytery’s committee to assess her or his progress toward previously established goals in each of the five growth areas and to negotiate together appropriate new goals. While references to “annual consultations” no longer appear in the Book of Order, the need for consultation certainly has not gone away. If anything, there is probably a need for more consultations and on more frequent intervals than just once a year. More frequent contact is especially important to build the relationship and trust that are essential to this discernment process. Some presbyteries are exploring the use of Internet technologies like email and video conferencing (available for free through services like Skype and FaceTime) to encourage more regular check-ins. Others are using these in conjunction with more extensive face-to-face meetings through retreats that bring together those under care and those responsible for overseeing their preparation. Such retreats can provide excellent opportunities for both inquirers (and candidates) to explore broader trends in the church and ministry with the members of the presbytery’s committee.

Are there certain goals that, as a presbytery, you would want all inquirers to meet? If so, what would they be?

What goals would be especially useful in assessing “suitability for ministry” as compared to simply developing ministry skills?

Given the number and location of inquirers and candidates under care in your presbytery, what would be the most effective types of consultation to develop a relationship where mutual discernment can take place?
The inquiry phase is a period of asking questions openly and honestly.

- What are the gifts for ministry that others recognize in the person’s life?
- Where might those gifts fit in response to the needs of the church and God’s people broadly in the world?
- What are the functions that, within the Reformed tradition, distinguish the ministry of Word and Sacrament from other forms of ministry such as the ordained service of deacons and ruling elders? Does the inquirer have the gifts, temperament, and interests that would enable her or him to fulfill those functions of ministry of Word and Sacrament?
- How willing and able is the person to follow the call of God’s Spirit to serve in this ministry wherever that may lead?

Presbyteries are also encouraged to widen the consultations beyond just conversations between the inquirer and committee members. The seminary or institution of theological education possibly being attended by the inquirer will likely have important insights into his or her aptitudes and developing gifts for ministry. Receiving reports from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Theological Institution Contact person at these schools can provide information that goes well beyond what may be found in a transcript. Similarly, reports from those who are supervising an inquirer’s field education assignments or other supervised practice of ministry programs will be invaluable.