Final assessment and negotiation for service

The *Book of Order* is clear that candidates “may not enter into negotiation for ... service as a minister of the Word and Sacrament without approval of the presbytery of care” (G-2.0607). An “authoritative interpretation” issued by the 219th General Assembly (2010), and reaffirmed by action of the 220th General Assembly (2012), clarified that under specific conditions a presbytery could approve a candidate to “negotiate for service” even before it had “certified [that] candidate ready for examination for ordination, pending a call.” The full text of that authoritative interpretation, edited to reference the current paragraphs in the *Book of Order*, is as follows:

Section [G-2.0607] allows a candidate to enter into negotiation for his or her ministerial service, even if the candidate has not had his or her final assessment from the presbytery's committee on preparation for ministry, provided the candidate

- has completed two full years of theological education (or the equivalent thereof),
- has had an annual consultation within the last year,
- has satisfactorily completed all the standard ordination exams or received certification of readiness under [G-2.0610],
- has received the approval of the candidate’s committee on preparation for ministry.

If the committee on preparation for ministry has approved a particular candidate who meets all the aforementioned requirements to enter into negotiation for his or her ministerial service, that candidate may circulate a Personal Information Form or other biographical information. (Minutes, 2010, Part 1, page 60)

Because the Assembly in 2012 reaffirmed the full text of its authoritative interpretation in applying it to the current language of G-2.0607, each of the provisions set forth in the bulleted list remains binding upon presbyteries in making decisions as to whether or not to approve a particular candidate to enter into “negotiation for his or her service as a minister of the Word and Sacrament” prior to “certification [of that candidate’s] readiness for examination for ordination, pending a call.”

Presbyteries may well want to consider including in their “mechanisms and processes” (G-3.0307) any other specific requirements they will consider when approving a candidate to “negotiate for service” prior to “certification of readiness for examination.” The key principles would include that such approvals should not be a usual practice of presbyteries and should be reserved for those who are clearly nearing the time for their “final assessment” and are fully expected to be “certified ready for examination” when the assessment is conducted. Neither candidates nor the congregations or agencies that may
what would be reasonable expectations for a presbytery to set in order to consider a candidate’s request to negotiate for service prior to final assessment?

“Final assessment” is a formal review by the presbytery’s committee to make a determination as to whether a candidate is “ready for examination for ordination, pending a call” and so is to be approved to “negotiate for service” so that a call might be pending. It is usually scheduled when a candidate has satisfied the requirements listed in G-2.0607b-d that are easily verifiable. Although these particular requirements are quite straightforward, a few comments about each of them may be helpful to both candidates and presbytery representatives who work with them.

Certainly the most important part of a candidate’s final assessment will be exploring the evidence for the personal qualities identified in G-2.0607a: “wisdom and maturity of faith, leadership skills, compassionate spirit, honest repute, and sound judgment.” In a very real sense, everything that has transpired in the relationship between the candidate, the session, and the presbytery during the preparation process is evidence for, or against, the person possessing these essential qualities of ministers of the Word and Sacrament. As the saying goes, “It’s all information.” “Final assessment,” then, is an opportunity to step back and look at the forest which is the person being considered as a potential minister of the Word and Sacrament rather than focusing on all the individual trees represented by the specific goals in the covenant agreements developed over the years. The role of the presbytery is to weigh this evidence in evaluating the person’s “fitness and readiness” for this particular ministry, not to count up how many goals have been met and how many remain unmet.

where are some specific places in a person’s record of inquiry and candidacy that you would look for evidence of the qualities listed in G-2.0607a?

how can a presbytery offer a critical assessment of these qualities without being judgmental of the person?
Association of Theological Schools (ATS) guidelines permit seminaries and theological institutions to provisionally admit some students to their graduate level programs even without a regionally accredited undergraduate degree. In such cases and when the candidate’s academic performance in seminary meets expectations, the presbytery’s committee may seek a waiver to this requirement under the provisions of G-2.0610 (see the “Accommodations to particular circumstances,” section in the Advisory Handbook). Such requests may also be warranted when a candidate’s undergraduate education was completed outside the United States and so the degree was not awarded by an institution accredited by one of the regional associations recognized by the United States Department of Education.

Not all ATS accredited schools have Greek and Hebrew as standard requirements for the Master of Divinity degree, and as a consequence they may have limited course offerings in “exegesis of the Old and New Testaments using Hebrew and Greek” (G-2.0607c), or even none at all. For this reason, presbytery committees should carefully review class descriptions in seminary catalogs and/or course syllabi to determine whether a particular entry on a transcript is evidence of having fulfilled this requirement. Candidates may need to be directed to request either independent study opportunities with faculty members or additional tutoring in these areas in conjunction with standard course offerings.

The graduate theological transcript presented at “final assessment” must show either graduation or “proximity to graduation” (G-2.0607c). “Proximity” is obviously not a precise term and will require some judgment from the presbytery’s committee—especially at a time when many candidates are pursuing their theological education on a part-time basis. Generally this requirement has been understood as relating to the last or next to the last semester of studies (whether full-time or part-time). As previously stated, no one is served by having both a candidate and a congregation become excited about the prospects of ministry together only to have the possibility of ordination delayed because graduation lies many months or even a year off in the future.

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b. a transcript showing graduation, with satisfactory grades, at a regionally accredited college or university;

c. a transcript from a theological institution accredited by the Association of Theological Schools acceptable to the presbytery, showing a course of study including Hebrew and Greek, exegesis of the Old and New Testaments using Hebrew and Greek, satisfactory grades in all areas of study, and graduation or proximity to graduation; and …
The Presbyteries’ Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCC) is “the body created by the presbyteries” to administer the “standard ordination examination[s] approved by the General Assembly” (G-2.0607d). It encourages inquirers or candidates to take the Bible Content Examination during or immediately after the equivalent of the first full-time year of seminary so that the results of the test may be used to guide course selection during theological education. The PCC further recommends that the other exams (on Biblical Exegesis, Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, and Church Polity) be taken only after completion of the equivalent of two full-time years of theological education. These four examinations can only be taken with the approval of the inquirer or candidate’s presbytery. The *Book of Order* requires not only documentation that these exam requirements have been satisfied, but also the presentation of the examination materials and their evaluations themselves. These exams can only truly fulfill their purpose of advising the presbytery’s committee about a candidate’s “fitness and readiness” if the presbyteries’ committee reviews the exam responses and the evaluative comments are reviewed in full.

The PCC in conjunction with Mid Council Ministries of the Office of the General Assembly produces a separate handbook covering all aspects of the standard ordination examination program. Both committee members and inquirers and candidates are encouraged to be sure they have the most recent addition to assure they have access to current policies and procedures.