Certified ready for examination, pending a call

The committee’s decision to certify a candidate “ready for examination for ordination, pending a call” is based on prayerful reflection, review of the covenanted goals negotiated with the candidate, and on their mutual discernment that God has called that person and that he or she has adequately prepared by developing personal gifts for ministry in response to that call.

When conducting final assessment and certifying candidates ready to seek a call, it is important for the presbytery’s committee to give attention to, and prepare the candidates for, some common issues faced in one’s first-call:

- Continuing development of one’s self-understanding in the role of pastor
- Understanding the congregation they will serve in terms of its history, ethos, programs, and status in the community, and in relation to the denomination
- Establishing an appropriate pastoral relationship style for the specific ministry context
- Dealing with conflict that may emerge in the congregation or ministry setting

The candidates should be reminded of resources and programs available to them as newly ordained pastors, including new pastors seminars, seminary debt assistance programs, presbytery mentor programs, and pastor support groups.

The presbytery’s committee needs to take a formal action to grant this “certification of readiness” and to report this action to the presbytery. This certification (or another formal action approving the candidate to negotiate for service) will need to be attested both in order for the candidate to be referred for possible ministry opportunities through the Church Leadership Connection and to any presbyteries reviewing whether to recommend approval of a particular call to ministry requiring ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament.

It should be remembered that “certification of readiness” does not end the covenant relationship between the candidate, the session, and the presbytery. The session remains responsible to provide “concern and discipline” for the candidate, and the presbytery continues to provide “support, guidance, and evaluation” as the candidate seeks a first call (G-2.0605). It is important, then, that “certification” be accompanied by a renewed covenant outlining steps that the candidate will take to find the place of ministry to which the Spirit is leading and to maintain the skills for ministry developed during the preparation process, and the ways the session and presbytery can remain partners in discerning God’s call for the person still under their care.

Finally, both presbyteries and candidates should think of “certification of readiness” less in terms of a diploma received at the end of an academic course of study and more as a form of licensure. Once a person has received an academic degree, they have “all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto” (as many diplomas state) from then on, forever. However, most licenses—and especially professional licenses—are only good for specific periods of time. A person will not have their bachelor’s degree in biology revoked if they do not keep...
abreast of the latest developments in the field, but nurses and doctors can have their licenses suspended if they do not stay engaged in their field and complete continuing education to stay current on developments since their academic training. Some professions may even require a person to go back and update some academic courses if they first seek licensure some years after graduation.

Professional skills and readiness in other fields can atrophy over time if not kept in practice, and the same is true of theological education and the practice of ministry. This fact has been recognized by the Presbyteries’ Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCC), which now advises that presbyteries’ should not consider standard ordination exams as providing useful information regarding a person’s “readiness to begin ministry” for more than five years. Just as a presbytery has the ability to remove a person from its roll of inquirers and candidates “for sufficient reasons” (G-2.0609; see section “Error! Reference source not found.” in the Advisory Handbook), it can also remove a candidate’s “certification of readiness” if it has reasons to believe that the person is in fact no longer ready to assume the responsibilities of ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

What are some specific goals that would be appropriate for a candidate who has been “certified ready for examination for ordination, pending a call”?

Should a candidate spend more than a year or two seeking a call, how can you support and guide them so that they maintain readiness to accept a call?

How might presbyteries evaluate and inquirers and candidates demonstrate continuing readiness for ministry if the search for a call requiring ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament should extend for several years?