Deciding about “suitability for ordered ministry”

Over the years, many presbytery committees and inquirers have found it helpful when making a determination about whether or not there is the potential to be a candidate for ministry of Word and Sacrament to review six specific areas. These particular areas have been referred to in the past as “outcomes of inquiry.”

1. The inquirer should be able to articulate an understanding of Christian vocation in the Reformed tradition and how it relates to his or her personal sense of call.
2. She or he should be able to express their personal faith in a manner that demonstrates an understanding of the Reformed tradition.
3. He or she should be able to expound upon at least one concept from that personal faith statement at greater depth explaining what it suggests about God, humanity, and their interrelationships.
4. The inquirer should be able to explain what it means for them to be Presbyterian, indicating how that awareness grows out of participation in the life of a particular church.
5. She or he should be able to discuss their personal and cultural background as it relates to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, including a concern for maintaining personal spiritual, physical, and mental health. Inquirers should also be able to relate their own personal cultural location to changes in American society and its increasingly multicultural character.
6. He or she should be able to express their understanding of the tasks ministers of the Word and Sacrament perform, including expression both of his or her specific gifts for this particular ministry and of areas in which further growth is needed.

“Denominational identity” among church members is generally viewed as declining rapidly. How important is it in that general cultural context for inquirers to be proficient in and committed to Presbyterian distinctives?

Beyond these traditional “outcomes of inquiry,” what other areas are important given the cultural changes in both society and church?

What tasks might be assigned to assess inquirers’ sense of their own approaches to leadership and how they relate to needs for leaders in the church of today and tomorrow?

Consultations throughout the inquiry phase provide opportunities for the inquirer to demonstrate these abilities and others that a presbytery believes are indications of suitability for ordered ministry. These consultations may also suggest other specific tasks that might be relevant in the determining a particular inquirer’s suitability for ministry. It can be helpful to have inquirers prepare written responses to at least some of these tasks.
The very act of writing tends to focus their thinking, and written statements have the added advantage that they can be read by members of the session and the presbytery's committee in advance of a conversation about them where they can be explored more deeply.

Whether or not written statements are required, the conversation about these areas of self-understanding is far more important than simply the ability to produce responses. It is what is learned about the inquirer that matters, not that these exercises in self-exploration were completed. Does the inquirer’s self-understanding of her or his gifts for ministry fit with the personal experience of the inquirer’s ministry by the pastor, elders on session, and the ministers and elders on the presbytery’s committee or reports they have received from seminary field education and others? Does the understanding and experience of the ministry of the Word and Sacrament by these pastors and elders suggest to them that the inquirer has the potential to be a strong colleague in this ministry?

But these questions about self-understanding in the context of ministry need to be paired with frank and honest conversations about the current realities of pastoral ministry within the Presbyterian Church. For example, a sizable majority of most Presbyterians—and so, not surprisingly, most inquirers—belong to congregations with more than 250 members. However, a majority of our churches have fewer than 100 members, and many are in rural areas or inner-city neighborhoods. Such congregations often do not have budgets that can support salary and compensation packages in keeping with presbytery-set minimums for full-time pastoral positions. Additionally, one current trend within the church is the formation of smaller faith communities that may be intentionally smaller than 100 members as a means for maintaining mutual accountability in their discipleship. Is the inquirer willing and able to consider ministry with churches quite different from the congregations where they may belong? Is the inquirer willing and able to accept a call that may require both relocation to another area and pairing pastoral ministry with other forms of work to make the arrangement economically viable?

Ultimately, all these questions come down to this: Does the overall experience of the inquiry phase point toward a future in the ministry of Word and Sacrament for the inquirer, or do his or her gifts and passions suggest a better fit with other ministries of the church? Our Reformed theology stresses we are all called to ministry in our baptism. The purpose of inquiry is for a communal discernment of whether the inquirer is gifted and called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament or to another form of service—perhaps even another form of ordered ministry as a ruling elder or deacon. A successful outcome of inquiry is finding that area of ministry whether or not it means continuing further in preparation as a candidate for service as a minister of the Word and Sacrament.

Both inquirers and those who work with them need to recognize that the presbytery’s decision to enter the candidacy phase with an individual involves hard questions that go to the very core of a person’s self-understanding. It will not always be the case that inquirers, their sessions, and presbytery’s committees will simultaneously reach the same conclusions. But it does not benefit the inquirer to continue into candidacy if a presbytery has made a determination that his or her gifts are better suited to other areas of service. Everyone in the process must recognize that when a presbytery enters into the candidacy
phase with an individual, the expectation is established that once preparation is completed that person will find a call to this ministry. If the presbytery is still uncertain about whether an inquirer’s gifts are suitable for the ministry of Word and Sacrament, the individual needs to continue in the inquiry phase rather than establish false expectations by prematurely transitioning to candidacy.

How might a discussion of how an inquirer’s vision of themselves in future ministry fits with the types of pastoral leaders the church needs inform a decision about the inquirer’s “suitability for ministry”?

What are some practical ways a presbytery can help an inquirer to hear “no” or “not yet” to serve as a minister of the Word and Sacrament as “yes” to other ministries for which they are gifted and to which God is calling them through the community?