Take the time necessary

The first items identified by the *Book of Order* as “evidence of readiness to begin ordered ministry as a minister of the Word and Sacrament” are a candidate’s personal qualities of “wisdom and maturity of faith, leadership skills, compassionate spirit, honest repute, and sound judgment” (G-2.0607). If you are going to assess those kinds of qualities, then the center of the preparation for ministry process is going to have to be the building of a relationship. Now, when we identify relationship building as the core of the work between an individual, a congregation, and a presbytery in discerning one’s call to ministry, we are not talking about just getting to know one another. We are talking about building the kind of relationship where both affirming and challenging truths can be spoken and heard. It takes time to build those kinds of relationships, and it takes work to gather the information about the person and the current needs of the church and the world to make decisions about “suitability” and “readiness” for ministry.

The two years required by the *Book of Order* for inquiry and candidacy (G-2.0602), then, show just how seriously the church takes this responsibility to devote the time necessary to build relationships where all the partners truly know each other. There will certainly be practical considerations and other factors that will pressure both those under care and those responsible for their care to rush to a conclusion. But the stakes are high for the individuals, their families, and the broader church. Time taken at the beginning to clearly discern the person’s call and to develop their gifts can both stave off problems and increase effectiveness for years to come.

**Time Requirements**

To be enrolled as an inquirer, the applicant shall be a member of the sponsoring congregation, shall have been active in the work and worship of that congregation for at least six months, and shall have received the endorsement of the session of the sponsoring congregation. The inquiry and candidacy phases shall continue for a period of no less than two years, including at least one year as a candidate.

For those familiar with past practice relative to the congregational membership time requirement in order to be enrolled as an inquirer and formally enter the preparation process with the presbytery, attention needs to be given to the specific language in the current constitutional standards of G-2.0602. The Form of Government continues to require that every person “enrolled as an inquirer ... shall be a member of the sponsoring congregation.” However, no specific time requirement is attached to that membership; rather, the time requirement has been shifted to the period in which the person has been “active in the worship and work of the congregation.” Before the session can issue its “endorsement,” the individual must “have been active in the worship and work of that congregation for at least six months.”

What does this language mean as a practical matter? Well, for one thing it means that it is not enough for the person to simply be on the congregation’s roll as an “active member” (G-
The person must have been regularly engaged in the worship life and ministry of the congregation. The members of the session, at least collectively if perhaps not individually, should know the person well enough within the context of congregational life to form an at least preliminary opinion that they can envision this person as a minister of the Word and Sacrament. It also means that a person who has been actively engaged in the congregation’s “worship and work” for six months or more but only officially joins the congregation for the purpose of entering the preparation process may receive the session’s endorsement without additional time passing following reception into membership. To put it simply, while being a member is important (to assure proper oversight, G-2.0605), what is even more important is the person’s relationship with the congregation and session and how well the session knows through direct experience the person’s gifts and callings for ministry.

The *Book of Order* requires both that at least two years be spent in the preparation for ministry process overall, and that “at least one year [of the total time be] as a candidate” (G-2.0602). Notice, then, that there is no specific time set for the inquiry phase. It can be less than a year, but in such cases candidacy for that individual would need to be longer than one year to fulfill the minimum two-years total. Inquiry could also last more than a year, and in those cases the total time will be more than two years since there must still be “at least one year as a candidate.” In either case, there should be no reason to advance individuals to candidacy simply because they have been inquirers for a year. Advancement to candidacy should only be considered once both the session and the presbytery are convinced of the person’s “suitability for ordered ministry” (G-2.0603) in general, and likely “fitness” for ministry as a minister of the Word and Sacrament (G-2.0604).

Like other requirements, this distribution of the time between inquiry and candidacy as well as the requirement of an overall period of two years under care may be waived by a three-quarters vote of the presbytery (G-2.0610). But again, no one’s interests are truly served by rushing people through the process before there is a clear understanding of their suitability, fitness and readiness for a call to ministry requiring ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament.

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**Just how caring is it really for either the individual or the broader church to rush through those who may not have had time to develop their gifts for ministry to a point of readiness?**

**Beyond inclusion on the roll, what specific evidence might a session look for in deciding whether an applicant has been “active in the work and worship of that congregation”?**

**What questions might a presbytery ask a session in this regard in order to understand how the session reached a decision about endorsing an applicant?**