Receiving a call and ordination

Every presbytery has its own processes for reviewing offers of calls to either congregational or specialized ministries, and very often the entity of the presbytery that oversees this work will not be the same as the one that oversees preparation for ministry. It is important, then, that candidates not assume that practices will be the same in both their presbytery of care and a calling presbytery, or even that those who have overseen their preparation will know all the details for moving into a call within the same presbytery. Take to heart this sage advice: “There is no such thing as a dumb question, and often the only way to avoid doing something dumb is by asking lots of questions.”

What resources can you use to find out about a calling presbytery’s processes for approving first calls?

Who among the covenant partners in your preparation is able to assist you in considering and negotiating a first call?

How would you go about “checking the references” on a church looking to call you, just as they are checking your references in making their decision?

- No call to ministry requiring ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament, whether in a congregation or another agency, is official until approved by the presbytery responsible for Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission in the region to be served by the call.
- Once a “first call” has been approved by the appropriate presbytery, the candidate still must be “examined for ordination.” It is the calling presbytery’s responsibility to “examine, ordain, and install the candidate,” although it may request or authorize another presbytery (usually the presbytery of care) to fulfill one or another of these responsibilities on its behalf (G-2.0702).
- Examination for ordination and membership in a presbytery shall cover the candidate’s “Christian faith and views in theology, the Sacraments, and the government of this church” (G-3.0306).
- Upon ordination, one becomes a minister member of the presbytery where the call is served and ceases to be a member of a congregation. That presbytery assumes the responsibilities of pastoral care and support for the minister of the Word and Sacrament (G-3.0307).

FAQ

If I have already passed the ordination examinations in exegesis, theology, polity, and worship and sacraments, why is the calling presbytery examining me in these areas?

A presbytery’s examination for ordination and membership serves a different purpose than the written examinations required prior to final assessment. The “standard ords” are blind review assessments by other ruling elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament of a candidate’s basic competencies in applying
academic and practical preparation as evidence of readiness to begin ministry. A presbytery's examination for ordination and membership is anything but a "blind review." It will be making a very specific decision about the fit between you and the context in which you would be fulfilling the functions of ministry of Word and Sacrament. It will be examining not only your theological competence, but also the appropriateness of your theological views within the particular presbytery and congregation. A person's gifts for ministry and theological understanding may easily fit within the broad scope of the Reformed tradition (what is assessed by the “standard ords”), but not fit at all within a particular PC(USA) congregation. The examination for ordination is all about the specific, not the general.

Is it possible for me to be ordained in my home congregation?

The Form of Government states that “ordinarily” it is the presbytery placing the call that will conduct the ordination service. That presbytery may, for reasons it deems appropriate, ask another presbytery to fulfill that responsibility. Keep in mind, however, that the primary purpose of the ordination service is not to celebrate what God has done in your life to bring you to this point. Its purpose is to ordain and commission you for service as a minister of the Word and Sacrament within the community that has called you. The service is much more about future ministry that will be shared by you and the congregation or agency than about your past accomplishments. In all cases, presbyteries conduct services of ordination to service as a minister of the Word and Sacrament, not local congregations.

What person or entity of the presbytery responsible for the ordination service will you need to work with to be sure that the service complies with its requirements for participants, time, and other aspects?