

A NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF THE NEW “IN CARE”: A COVENANT OF DISCERNMENT AND FORMATION

History and Background:

For some time, “student in care of an Association” has referred to both the designation and the process through which a candidate for ministry has been in covenant with the authorizing body of an Association during his or her period of preparation. As the most recent edition of the Manual on Ministry indicates, the purpose of this relationship is “to provide support, counsel, and assistance to the student during the time of the student’s academic preparation for the ordained ministry.” [Section 2, page 1] The Ministry Issue Pronouncement adopted by the 25th General Synod in 2005, recognizing the changing needs of the wider church and the variety of circumstances in which those considering authorized ministry may find themselves, demands reevaluation of the traditional in care model.

A New Model for Discernment and Formation

A new model for responsible nurture of those considering authorized ministry—a “**Covenant of Discernment and Formation**”-- addresses three particular areas of concern in the current model.

First, though the present Manual clearly defines the in care relationship as one existing between the person in care, the local church in which he or she is a member, and the Association, in practice **the current model does not meaningfully engage the local church in shared nurture or accountability, beyond initial recommendation to the Committee on Ministry, usually at the initiative of the person in care.** A new model must create true partnership with the local congregation in the nurture of potential candidates for ministry.

Secondly, the present in care model assumes the person in care, prior to coming to a Committee on Ministry to be brought in care, “has been called by God and... is preparing for the ordained Christian ministry.” [Section 2, page 1] The call to ministry in the in care process is assumed, as is the person’s trajectory toward ordained Christian ministry, in many cases to the local church setting. **The new model maintains that discernment of call is itself the primary task throughout this covenantal relationship, not just during the initial phase. The task of ongoing discernment expands the responsibility, training and focus of mentors, advisors, and Association committees; necessarily involves the local congregation in an ongoing intentional relationship in which recognition and differentiation of call can be explored; and requires potential candidates to remain open to the movement of the Spirit in evolving self-understanding of call without predetermination of a particular form of ministry and, consequently, authorization.**

A key characteristic of the “new in care” is, therefore, **continuing openness to a variety of outcomes, even ones that are unexpected.** Clear understanding of what discernment is, and provision of the necessary tools to do it among covenant partners, is fundamental to the intent of the new model. Within this process of discernment and formation all covenant partners provide a community of mutual accountability—which may include alternative agencies or entities in which the individual may be working during this period.

Lastly, the present in care model assumes a guiding relationship “during the time of the student’s academic preparation.” [Section 2, page 1] Because the Ministry Issues Pronouncement of 2005 clearly recognizes both a variety of valid pathways to ministry and a diversity of settings and needs of the churches to be served, **the traditional academic assumptions of the period of in care, though still applicable to many, are no longer exclusive.** The new model must be relevant and meaningful for all circumstances and settings for those discerning, responding to and potentially seeking authorization of a call to ministry.

The Ministry of Nurture and Support of Members in Discernment

The new model for nurture of those considering ministry in the United Church of Christ necessitates changes in the traditional model of in care in four distinct areas: new terminology, new focus, new process, and new understandings of the need for authorization. Foundational to these changes is the fundamental conviction that the work of nurture and support of those discerning a call to ministry is a ministry in and of itself; not merely guidance in meeting practical requirements, but personal engagement, sharing of faith, and challenge and growth for all partners in the covenant.

Changes in our new model:

From	To
Applicant/Student In Care	Member in Discernment
Preparation for Authorization	Discernment of Call and Formation
Meeting Educational Requirements	Developing & assessing Readiness
Preparation Ending in Authorization	Ongoing Formation & Lifelong Learning

The Manual’s current terminology of “applicant” and “student in care of an Association” embodies and assumes a person has a well-defined call, an academic orientation, a trajectory toward ordained Christian ministry, as well as nurture in the form of meeting uniform requirements on an agreed upon schedule. The new model begins from the assumption that individuals come to their local congregations and then to Committees on Ministry with only a clear sense of call and a desire to engage that belief with others of faith and experience in the tradition. The new model, therefore, requires the individual have openness to discernment with covenant partners around the nature and direction of that call — even if the vocational trajectory seems clear initially. “Member in Discernment” more aptly describes the individual not only in the initial phase of their relationship with a Committee on Ministry and their home congregation, but throughout the process toward authorization—and beyond.

An opening period of discernment lasts for as long as is necessary for all three covenant partners to become satisfied—through a process of mutual engagement—that the MID has a call, and that call has been affirmed by all. At that point the Committee on Ministry has responsibility to answer the question, “Is the Member called to ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ?” The Committee may discern at this point that the MID’s call as a baptized Christian is not to an authorized ministry. Therefore, since authorization is not required, no further relationship with a Committee on Ministry is necessary — though the Committee may act as a resource to the local church to help the individual find a means of acting on her or his particular call.

The Committee may also discern that the MID does have a call to authorized ministry in and on behalf of the UCC, and the work of discernment may turn to potential setting and type of ministry. Is it word and sacrament in a local church or other setting? Chaplaincy, missionary or conference work? A ministry requiring commissioning, licensure, or ordination? Again, outcome is not assumed and a period of intentional discernment is needed. This ongoing focus on discernment allows for a distinctly non-linear process when appropriate, in which the Member in Discernment may be led to amend initial trajectories, and, in turn, move the covenant partners to revise the process best suited for preparation and possible authorization.

For example, if the MID, Committee on Ministry, and local congregation come to clarity on setting or type of ministry, discernment may become focused on formation. A MID, guided by the Committee with input and affirmation from the local congregation, might be led to establish a program of mentoring, study, and nurture as is appropriate to prepare responsibly for the particular form of authorized ministry. For many this preparation will be a continuation of academic studies, but for others there will be more emphasis on practical experience, guidance from those experienced in the specific field of ministry, and other forms of formation as are deemed appropriate. Conversely, an agreed-upon path of formation might lead to experiences that do not confirm assumptions of setting or type of ministry, and return the Member to continued covenantal discernment of how best to respond to a call. **Unlike the previous in-care model, the Covenant of Discernment and Formation assumes no static trajectory toward a particular outcome.**

The new model insists that this part of the process for all MIDs include UCC identity formation, including courses in UCC history, theology, polity and practice; experience in the denomination at all levels; knowledge of and engagement with UCC issues; and integrity and accountability to the covenants embodied in authorization to ministry within the denomination. A MID must discern if the United Church of Christ is truly the denomination of his or her heart, and if the MID has the capacity to help others embrace the same appreciation and enthusiasm. When a MID completes the program of formation worked out in covenant with the Committee on Ministry and the local congregation, that MID may request authorization, be it ordination, commissioning or licensure.

The elements within a Covenant of Discernment and Formation are decidedly nonlinear, allowing the partners in the covenant to adapt to the unique gifts and needs of the MID and the communities from which they have come, and to which they may be called. **Bearing in mind that discernment is by definition not a sequential, predictable process, certain moments of discernment can nonetheless be identified. A formal beginning, an entry point for the Covenant of Discernment and Formation; a covenant of formation, in which an appropriate learning plan is defined; assessment of readiness, using the collection of “Marks” provided specifically for this purpose; formal authorization appropriate to the particular ministry; and an ongoing covenant of mutual accountability, which the authorized minister is then bound to for the duration of authorization. It is critical to understanding this new model that between beginning and the ongoing covenant, the middle moments of discernment can and will occur in many permutations, depending on the MID’s circumstance, the needs of the community, and the collective wisdom of the Committee on Ministry.** Since this process is a sacred journey guided by the Holy Spirit, Committees on the Ministry may wish to celebrate simple rituals that mark the Member’s movement through the process, such as an affirmation of Baptism, a commitment to covenant, even a ritual of separation should the COM discern that the Member is not called to an authorized ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. At that moment, it will be important to reaffirm the call that each Christian receives in Baptism and encourage the Member to heed and follow that call, with the support of their local congregation.

Points of Discernment in the Covenant of Discernment and Formation

While discernment is a fluid and ongoing process, there are some specific points that identify transitions on the path of discerning a call to authorized ministry and readiness for authorization. These include:

A New Model: Covenant of Discernment and Formation Mutual Covenant of Discernment

This is the entry point to the process that is agreed upon by the Member in Discernment (MID), the MID's home church community and the Association Committee on Ministry. NOTE: Prior to this step, the church community will engage with the MID in a process of discernment both about recommending the MID to the Association and their own willingness to be active partners in the Covenant of Discernment and Formation.

Covenant of Formation

Prior to entering this phase, a decision is made about whether the MID's call is to a form of UCC authorized ministry and what that form might be: licensed, ordained, commissioned. At this point a learning plan is defined including educational expectations as well as mentoring/experience and an outline of other areas of ministerial readiness needing further formation. A specific plan will be agreed upon by all covenantal parties.

Assessment of Readiness for Authorization

Using the collection of "Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers," the COM, in covenant with the MID and her/his local church, discerns the MID's readiness for authorization. By this point in the process, the Committee on the Ministry will have used multiple tools for discernment: psychological assessment, reports from such experiences as field education or supervised ministry, reviews from seminaries or other educational programs, reports from CPE supervisors and MID mentors, feedback from the MID's church community as well as their own relationship with the MID and intentional times of prayer and reflection.

Authorization

Pending a call from a specific body, the COM determines the MID is ready for authorization. At this point, the MID becomes a Candidate for Authorized Ministry. Authorization is celebrated in a rite of commissioning, licensure, or ordination.

Ongoing Covenant of Accountability

ALL persons holding UCC ministerial authorization enter into this covenant that includes accountability to their Association and the Wider Church, agreement to engage regularly in continuing education and a commitment to ongoing nurture and formation.

These phases are not necessarily linear. However, all the phases of discernment, whenever they occur and for whatever duration, are significant.

Expectations of Committees on Ministry

The new model of nurturing individuals for possible authorized ministry within the UCC—the Covenant of Discernment and Formation—demands much of Committees on Ministry, including:

1. **Commitment** to and capacity for enabling formal processes of discernment, not only as a Committee in its own work, but as a body tasked with enabling local congregations and individuals to do the same;
2. **Clarity** about the need for and types of authorization to various ministries within the denomination, and the most appropriate means of providing formation for each;
3. **Conviction** about the fundamental importance of formation about UCC identity and loyalty;
4. **Courage** to put the needs of the church above the desire of the individual, particularly in relation to the need for patience in discernment and the possibility of discernment leading to unexpected outcomes.