

LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRY DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE WITH A MEMBER IN DISCERNMENT

This document is offered for local churches with members whose call they have nurtured and who are interested in being received into a Covenant of Discernment and Formation as the initial step on the path to authorization for ministry. Experience suggests that it is valuable for the well being of the Member in Discernment for the church in which he or she holds membership to form a *Ministry Discernment Committee* as soon as the member makes his/her interest known rather than assigning this discernment to an existing group or committee within the church.

The *Ministry Discernment Committee* should be appointed by the governing body of a local church whenever a member of that church is interested in being received into a covenant of discernment and formation with the Association. This Committee (MDC) assumes responsibility, together with the pastor, for fulfilling the steps analogous to those detailed in the current *Manual on Ministry* regarding the local church's role in the in care process.

The makeup of the MDC will vary depending on the structure of a local church. One model for composing the committee calls for 4 to 6 members; one or two chosen by the person considering the covenant of discernment and formation, one or two chosen by the governing body from the church's membership who exhibit maturity of faith and commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ, one member of the governing body itself, and the pastor. The MDC will be trained in its responsibilities by a representative of the Committee on the Ministry.

The MDC should meet regularly with the candidate for Member in Discernment status. The Committee's purpose is to create a caring and exploratory environment in which the candidate can risk testing his/her vocational aspirations. The committee represents the local congregation in helping this individual discern the particular *gifts* for ministry which God has given the candidate; it also provides a forum for exploring the individual's *call to authorized* ministry. This exploration includes discussing the meaning of ministry in general and looking specifically at differences between the call to authorized ministry and the baptismal call of all Christ's people. The MDC also reviews with the candidate his/her personal history, experience in the local church, and spiritual journey.

There are varieties of discernment practices among UCC congregations. Discernment will look different in the various setting of the United Church of Christ and will reflect the multiracial and multicultural diversity of our church. Approaches to discernment will be shaped by the culture and tradition of the congregation as well as the specifics of the relationship the congregation has with the member (how long the member has been part of the congregation, how s/he has participated, etc.).

Discernment is a way to arrive at understandings, decisions and outcomes that is different from processes that some will have used previously. Discernment starts with the desire to become aware of God's will. Discernment requires deep and careful listening. It involves asking questions not in isolation but within community. It is rooted in prayer and it is comfortable with silence as member and committee take the time needed to ponder questions and to wait for God's will to be made manifest. Member and Committee listen for God by listening to each other and by sharing the silence together where God's still small voice may be heard.

Discernment requires trust in the goodwill of the covenant partners and a willingness to accept the outcomes of the discernment process. Discernment is open to God's surprises. Discernment

calls for flexibility. A rigid format may thwart the movement of the Spirit. Discernment emerges from a relaxed posture that is willing to allow direction to be known according to God's timeline. Discernment rests in the joyous and supportive assurance of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Discernment invites covenant partners into mutual sharing and unfolding awareness. Within the frame of such discernment and in keeping with the traditions and practices appropriate to the local church, the MDC will carry out the necessary functions analogous to those described on pages 3-5 (Section 2) of the Manual on the Ministry and help the member realistically and prayerfully examine the challenges s/he will face as s/he considers preparation for authorized ministry. **Areas of discernment to explore with the member include (the list which follows is suggestive, not exhaustive):**

The member's understanding of Christian faith and practice including beliefs about God, Christ, and church, and commitments to a Christian life including worship, prayer, and service.

The member's sense of call, which includes:

Exploration of the member's gifts for ministry, including ways the gifts have been used in and beyond the church, and how others have understood and affirmed these gifts. The member's understanding of her/his call to authorized ministry as distinctive from the call to ministry of all God's people within the community of the church.

Exploration of licensure, commissioning and ordination, the authorized ministries of the UCC. Final determination regarding authorization will entail ongoing discernment.

How the member envisions functioning as an authorized minister. Understandings of faithful and effective authorized ministry.

Questions about authorized ministry. Particular challenges anticipated as the member imagines fulfilling the office of an authorized minister.

Experience in conflicted situations and the member's approach to conflict.

Experiences in leadership.

Understandings of the physical and emotional stamina and maturity that are needed to function effectively as an authorized minister.

Anticipated preparation for authorized ministry. Seminary? Regional Education Programs? Mentoring? Is relocation possible?

Examination of financial realities. Preparation can be expensive. What is the initial plan to finance the time of preparation and formation?

Issues of employment during the time of preparation and experience and concerns with balancing academic preparation and working. How might balance be achieved?

Household and relationship issues. If the member is part of a household or has a partner, children, or other covenantal relationships, how do the others in the relationships feel about a decision of the member to pursue authorized ministry? What does the member envision regarding balance in household commitments and the maintaining of relationships during the time of preparation?

Reflection on some of the authorized ministers the member admires and respects, and exploration of how the member sees her/himself as similar to/different from them.

It is vital that the member and the Committee enter and continue in discernment as the open ended spiritual practice that it is. No one truly knows the outcome at the beginning. Discernment is a process of conversation, prayer, listening, waiting, gathering and sharing information and insights, and, most especially, being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

At the appropriate time, if/when the MDC believes the member is ready to pursue a covenant of discernment and authorization with the Association, the Committee recommends the member to the governing body of the local church. The governing body will make the formal request to the Association Committee on the Ministry that the member be received as Member in Discernment. If the member enters into the covenant with the Association, the role of the MDC will change. Because the whole discernment process can be exciting, difficult and sometimes confusing for the member, it is vital that the local church and the Association seek to support the member all along the way, not just at the beginning of exploration. The MDC of the local church can stand with the person if/when she/he becomes discouraged, loses their way or feels put upon or disregarded by "the system." MDC will both challenge and support the Member in Discernment and will serve as a communication link between the member and the congregation, maintain contact with the Association Committee on the Ministry, and interpret the process as the member's discernment and formation continues. The MDC will play a particularly important role during times in the process when decisions are called for such as a decision to recommend the member for authorization or a decision that more preparation is needed, or that the covenant of discernment and formation has ended without the member proceeding to authorization.