

**UNDERSTANDING THE COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY:
SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

(as shared at the Eastern Association Meeting, September 28, 2008)

1. Who serves on the Committee on Ministry?

The Committee on Ministry is comprised of six lay people and six clergy who are members of Eastern Association Churches. Practically anyone here today would be eligible to be elected and serve on the Committee on Ministry. I'd like to introduce the current members of the committee to you and ask them to stand as I call out their names. The six lay members are: Joyce Schutt, from Bethany UCC, Berger, Rhonda Stockglausner, St. Peter's, Washington, Karen Watson, Friedens-Peace New Melle, Jim Blaue, St. Paul's, Gerald, Roger Miyasaka, Grace, O'Fallon, and Karl Rethemeyer, St. John's, Weldon Spring. The six clergy are Libby Brueseke, St. Peter's, Owensville, Doris Judy, Faith, Wentzville, Bruce Moeller, Femme Osage, David Poe, St. Peter's, New Haven, John Silea, Weldon Spring, and myself, Bill Schwab, St. Peter's, Washington. This is quite a diverse group of people who bring multiple skills and experiences to this task.

2. What does the Committee on Ministry do?

The primary task of the Committee on Ministry is to determine the fitness of persons for authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ. From the time a person initially seeks to become an authorized minister to the time a person ceases being an authorized minister, the Committee on Ministry is charged with overseeing how that minister functions in the Eastern Association.

3. Can you be more specific?

Well first of all, the committee oversees Members in Discernment, that is, we nurture those who are investigating and preparing for authorized ministry. The committee also oversees those who have completed their education and have prepared documentation to become ordained, licensed or commissioned ministers in the United Church of Christ. We also manage the process of clergy entering and leaving the association. And when there is a charge of improper behavior the Committee on Ministry administers a review to determine whether or not a minister continues to be fit for ministry.

4. Well, that's all about clergy, what is your responsibility to congregations?

The committee is responsible for authorizing congregations for ministry in the United Church of Christ within the boundaries of the Eastern Association. When a conflict arises in a congregation we are also available to be invited by the congregation to conduct a Situational Support Consultation.

5. It seems the Committee on Ministry has a wide range of tasks.

Yes, the Committee on Ministry oversees a broad range of issues. It provides both a supportive and a disciplinary role for authorized ministers and churches. For one committee to hold support and discipline in compassionate tension is not an easy thing to do. Needless to say, our decisions are not always popular! In our form of church government, where the primary unit is the local church, the Committee on Ministry depends on the cooperation of clergy and churches a great deal in order for its work to be effective.

6. If a member of my church is thinking about authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ, where should he or she start?

If someone in your congregation is thinking about authorized ministry, the first place he or she should go is to you, the pastor of the local congregation. Together you can explore what is involved in authorized ministry. The primary resource for authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ is the Manual on the Ministry. It is more than 200 pages long and describes in detail the process for becoming an authorized UCC minister. This Manual can be purchased but it is also available at no cost on the United Church of Christ website.

7. After those initial conversations with a pastor, what comes next?

The next step for the person interested in becoming an authorized minister is to seek a meeting with the Church Council. The governing board of the church is to interview the person and determine whether or not the congregation wants to commend this individual to the association as a Member in Discernment. After receiving approval from the Church Council, the Committee on Ministry should be contacted by the person seeking authorization for further direction. The committee will then provide guidance about what documents need to be completed. Finally an interview is arranged with the Committee on Ministry who then votes on receiving this person as a Member in Discernment on behalf of the Association. At any time in this process a conference staff person is available for guidance to the pastor and to the person seeking authorization as a UCC minister.

8. I understand you require our pastors to get “boundary training.” What is it? And why is it necessary?

First of all the requirement for boundary training comes from the Association Council not the Committee on Ministry. In 1998 the Association Council, which is the governing body of the association similar to a Church Council, made mandatory, boundary and ethics training for all ordained, licensed and commissioned ministers. Every three years all authorized ministers must spend about eight hours reflecting on their professional behavior.

9. What does Boundary Training entail?

Boundary training raises questions around such issues as taking gifts from church members. For example, if a church member offers a minister the free use of a vacation condo for a week, how does that gift change the minister’s relationship with that church member? Or, what is an appropriate relationship for a former pastor to have with a congregation he or she has previously served? Or, if a young person asks to meet with the pastor alone after a youth meeting and there is the possibility no one else may be in the church, how should the pastor respond?

10. I’ve never thought much about those issues, that’s interesting. But why do pastors have to do it every three years?

Pastoral ethics and boundaries are never static, but always changing. They are an essential part of ministry and continually need to be discussed and reviewed with colleagues. Poor pastoral ethics and crossing boundaries can lead to irreparable harm to persons and to congregations—that’s why regular training has been deemed necessary by the Association Council. As leaders of the church, authorized ministers are expected to have their walk and talk together as much as possible.

11. What if our church and pastor have trouble seeing eye to eye? Where can we turn for help?

Fortunately, most issues can be resolved by an open exchange of viewpoints within the local church. Many churches have Pastor-Parish Relation Committees which often can resolve differences. But if help outside a local congregation might be beneficial, the Committee on Ministry, with the help of the conference staff, can provide a Situational Support Consultation.

12. A what? What did you call it?

A Situational Support Consultation. A team from the Committee on Ministry listens to the pastor and a representative body of the congregation. Notes are taken and then the members of the Committee on Ministry develop recommendations for the pastor and congregation. These are presented to them with the clear understanding that the church and pastor can take them or leave them. The success of a Situational Support Consultation depends on the cooperation of both the pastor and the congregation. When followed the process is often quite helpful in leading the pastor and congregation to reconciliation or to the determination that the pastor-congregation relationship is no longer effective and it is time to move on.

13. If our pastor resigns, then what do we do to find a new pastor?

The first thing to do is to have a congregational meeting to accept the pastor's resignation in order to declare the position of pastor vacant. At about the same time the president of the congregation should notify the conference office of the vacancy. The conference staff person will then set up a time to meet with the Church Council to discuss the process for seeking interim leadership and then for seeking a new pastor. The United Church of Christ has very good resources for these times of transitions.

14. What are some of those resources?

Each United Church of Christ pastor has a profile on file at the UCC Church House in Cleveland. Each church seeking a pastor completes a Congregational Profile. With the help of publications and the conference staff, pastors are introduced to congregations seeking new pastors and churches are introduced to pastors who are seeking new positions. It is common for this process to take 18 months. Once a pastor is called, he or she contacts the Committee on Ministry in order to seek authorization for ministry in Eastern Association. If all documentation is in order, the Committee on Ministry interviews the new pastor and authorizes that individual to perform ministry in the Eastern Association.

15. Well, I probably could come up with a few more questions. But that's plenty for me to think about right now.

Thanks for asking and feel free to contact anyone on the committee with additional questions. I can't promise you they will be able to give you an immediate answer, but they will find the answer and get back to you. Thanks for all your interest. By the way, have you ever considered serving on the Committee on Ministry? You sound like a good candidate!