

20. The Commission on Ministry, moves that the role of Staff Attorney, Post-Conviction Relief Unit in the First Judicial District, Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia County, a position currently filled by the Rev. TJ Denley, Esq. be validated as a ministry of the Presbytery of Baltimore. We offer the following rationale:

Rev. Denley, who previously served as a hospital chaplain in Baltimore, offers a unique set of gifts as both an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament and a practicing attorney serving in the chambers of the Honorable Scott DiClaudio. COM's Credentials Team discussed the fact that this is a non-traditional type of request, but we believe that her responses to the questions on our Validated Ministry Application reveal that as Rev. Denley serves the court, its employees, criminal defendants and their families, she is performing faithful ministry to God's people and to society:

For example, in response to the question "How is this ministry in conformity to the "mission of God's people?" G-2.0503a (1)], Rev. Denley states "The way I approach this job is that I am called to love all of God's children, and that my call is to show God's unconditional love for all, is to make sure justice is done and that all voices are amplified so they can be heard. A great summary of this is a quote attributed to St. Francis, "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary. This job is in conformity with the mission of God's people because it allows for all for justice to be done and for those silenced and ignored to be seen and heard." She cites an example of a defendant convicted of murder applying for "compassionate release" due to his incurable cancer, so he could enter hospice. This involved arranging for a hearing in which his concerns could be stated, but also in which the impact on members of the victim's family could also be fairly heard.

Rev. Denley also states that "while this job is in the criminal legal system, it does not contradict the mission of God's people." She writes, "I have found a way to do the legal aspect of my job while respecting my moral beliefs." An example is a long-delayed petition by a defendant convicted of murder and sentenced to death which has given her an opportunity to highlight both legal and moral issues in her brief for the Judge and in their subsequent conversations. She has been able to act in the interests of justice in assuring that both the petitioner's and victim's family's interests are heard.

Responding to the question How does this ministry meet the standard of "Service to Others?" [G-2.0503a (2)], Rev. Denley cites her opportunities to respond to those who have suffered due to Philadelphia's long history of police and prosecutorial misconduct: "My job is reviewing post-conviction relief petitions and discussing with the judge whether these petitions should be granted or not. I am serving others by advocating for justice."

Our application also asks: How does this ministry meet the standard of "Fidelity to God's Word?" [G2.0503a(3)]. Rev. Denley states, The only training that is necessary for my job is a law degree and passage of the bar, which I have. But my training as a chaplain and minister gives me an added aspect to the job. One of my favorite verses is Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" I do that every day when I attend court and be a representative of God's love to all, the defendants, the victims, the families of both, the attorneys as well as the court staff." She also explained to us in our interview that it is well-known among those with whom she works that she is an ordained minister, and so she often finds herself responding pastorally to others in the office who seek her guidance and support.

Although Rev. Denley now resides in the Philadelphia area where she attended law school and where she now works, she has continued to attend Baltimore Presbytery meetings via Zoom and would very much like to be active in Presbytery committees and task forces. We discussed with her the possibility of transfer to Philadelphia Presbytery, but they apparently have a policy of not receiving clergy into membership who aren't serving in congregations. This often happens in judicatories where there are major PCUSA agencies, like, for instance, the Board of Pensions, and they have difficulty recruiting enough Ruling Elders for parity in Presbytery meetings. In our view, Rev. Denley's gifts and eagerness to participate in the life of this presbytery will continue to be a blessing to our work and fellowship.

Perhaps more importantly, in view of her written responses and our engagement with Rev. Denley in our interview, we believe that her position in the court system gives the church a unique opportunity to have a presence in a place where justice is being meted out and human beings are in need. Thus we find that she meets the Requirement III.4 in our Validation Policy: "The ministry is such that, though an M.Div. degree and/or ordination is not a requirement for the position, the training and experience attendant to the study and training for ordination and the experience gained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament materially enhances the ability of the minister to perform the ministry." Accordingly, we recommend the Presbytery approve her position as a Validated Ministry.