

[OVT-011] On Appointing a Committee to Review the Preparation for Ministry Process

Source: Presbytery
Committee: Unassigned

Event: 226th General Assembly (2024)
Sponsor: Highlands Presbytery
Type: General Assembly Full Consideration

Recommendation

On Appointing a Committee to Review the Preparation for Ministry Process

The Presbytery of the Highlands overtures the 226th General Assembly (2024) to appoint a committee to review the overall Preparation for Ministry process, and to make recommendations for relevant and appropriate changes to the 227th General Assembly (2026).

The Committee will be responsible for the following:

- An overall review of the Preparation for Ministry process including an assessment, evaluation, and recommendations for changes to the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCCEC):
 - revision of the handbook, including the process
 - development of ordination exams
 - selection/nomination of the team responsible for overseeing exam writers.
- Make recommendations for next steps to bring the process in line with today's church and its needs, or to develop a new process.
- The committee shall consult with presbytery leaders and committee on preparation for ministry (CPM) moderators concerning the process including a discussion on their understanding and suggestions concerning G-2.0607d: "examination materials, together with evaluations that declare those materials satisfactory in the areas covered by any standard ordination examination approved by the General Assembly. Such examinations shall be prepared and administered by a body created by the presbyteries."
- The committee shall consult with the Unification Commission on issues and concerns about the Preparation for Ministry process.
- The committee shall consider the following questions in their report to the 226th General Assembly:
 - Are ordination exams still necessary in the church today? Are the process and exams as they are now meeting the moment of the church and culture? Do they perpetuate white privilege culture and values?

- Is the process helpful to form people who will be operating within this white privilege culture church or is the process missing the point at which the church is trying to move beyond?
 - What are ordination exams looking for and are they the best way to find it? What is being examined that isn't already discovered through the CPM process and the requirement of a seminary education?
 - If the exams are still necessary, how might they examine what needs to be understood in the multicultural, racial, and power-imbalanced twenty-first century? Are these exams still serving their greater intended purpose?
 - How can readers come to the process without their cultural bias and perhaps "old school" view of the church, and provide an objective and impartial standard to test taker responses that may not reflect the reader's cultural understanding? How does having evaluators who don't know the test takers or anything about them improve the preparation for the ministry process?
 - How do we improve the integrity and relevance of preparing people for ministry to benefit the church and culture in the post-pandemic world?
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- The General Assembly moderator(s) appoint a team of twelve which will include at least four mid council leaders and two CPM moderators. The moderators should also consider for the committee recently ordained clergy, ruling elders, men and women, and a diversity of ages, cultures, racial and gender identity. The team should be staffed and receive support from the Office for Ordered Ministry and Certification, The Office of Racial Equity and Women's Intercultural Ministries, The Office of Theological Education.

Rationale

Rationale

In early 2023 the Exegesis examination, developed by the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCCEC) focused on Judges 19, which includes the rape and dismemberment of a concubine. Many test takers, mid council leaders, CPM moderators and others have pushed back that this was an inappropriate passage to use for students to demonstrate their ability to exegete a passage. Many test takers and exam readers found this text hard to read, let alone useful for formulating a curriculum for college students; some acknowledged that it triggered trauma responses. The response of the PCCEC to the concerns expressed by mid council and CPM leaders was slow.

In the weeks and months following, The PCCEC slowly shared information on how they determined that this was an appropriate passage to use. What we learned from those exchanges and conversations is that the process for developing the examinations works on a three-year cycle. Within that cycle anyone on the PCCEC can flag exam passages, questions, or scriptures as inappropriate or in need of revision or editing. This particular passage did raise flags but remained in the process. We also learned that the PCCEC process does not include any input from other OGA/PMA staff, other diverse voices, or feedback from outside the committee (even those bodies created expressly for that purpose), thus forming a closed loop of conversation and information. The PCCEC's funding model, unusual for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), was cited as a hindrance to a more open system.

The process for ongoing conversation about examining seminarians failed both the students and the presbyteries the PCCEC is meant to serve. A story about the rape, abuse, and dismemberment of a woman was not appropriate for exegesis by candidates for ministry. Even well-seasoned pastors would approach this conversation with caution, if at all.

The test takers were told they could not consult or speak to anyone about the test while they were taking it. Many students became upset with the material but felt that they couldn't speak with anyone for fear it would cause them to fail the exam. The ordination exam is already stressful, and being faced with questions that cause trauma and not being able to discuss this with anyone is unconscionable. The exam instructions were silent on how to seek help if this passage triggered a trauma response or traumatized the exam taker. A recent pilot project initiated by the PCCEC seeks to remedy concerns about seeking support and counseling during the exam, but this was no doubt instigated by the volume of comments that came from outside the closed loop.

When the mid councils and CPM leaders sought explanations about the exam the response from the OGA and the PCCEC was inadequate, very slow, frustrating, and confusing.

What was learned from this experience is that the PCCEC and the ordination exam process no longer functions as a confidential process but as a secretive process. The ability to appropriately and nimbly respond to concerns is inadequate and confusing. Concerns raised even within the committee went unheeded. The whole process, including the structure and funding of the PCCEC, hasn't been thoroughly examined in a very long time. The Book of Order reference (G-2.0607d) that the process is developed by the presbyteries no longer applies.

The conversation concerning ordination exams this last year also prompted other conversations and questions concerning exams and the process of ordination:

- Are the exams still necessary and if so, how can they examine what needs to be examined in a multiracial, multicultural, power-imbalanced twenty-first century?
- Are the exams and the process in the present form meeting the moment of the church and culture? Or are they perpetuating a white privilege culture and values beyond their reasonable life in the church?
- Is the process as a whole helpful to form people who will be operating within this white privilege culture church or are they missing the point at which the church is trying to move beyond?
- Is the present process and ordination examinations out of touch with the reality of church life, culture, and ministry?

These events and conversations have led to the overture asking for a full review of the process in light of the church today.