

2 Ministerial Authorization

ARTICLE 1: MEMBERS IN DISCERNMENT

LOCAL CHURCH AS LOCUS OF MINISTRY

At the heart of the understanding of Christian ministry in the United Church of Christ is the theological conviction that God calls all disciples to serve Christ in their work and to witness in daily life. The Local Church of the United Church of Christ—in polity and in mission—is called to equip and empower the ministry of disciples. No matter the size or circumstance of a congregation, several habits reflect a culture of call:

- The congregation actively affirms a belief in the priesthood of all believers¹¹ and in the call of all Christians to be ministers (using their gifts and presence to serve the world with God’s grace and love).
- The congregation has an identifiable mission providing many and varied opportunities for persons to have meaningful involvement in that mission.
- The congregation as a whole is connected to the life of the wider Church, including a familiarity with the processes by which congregants may explore vocational ministry in the United Church of Christ.

For some members, the call of discipleship may include specific preparation and formation in order to respond faithfully and effectively with their work and lives. For some members, the call of discipleship may include the exploration of ordination, to serve as a representative servant of Christ on behalf of the United Church

“Preparation” refers to the specific activities that contribute to a person’s development spiritually, personally, professionally, and ethically. “Formation” is an open-ended and lifelong effort; it is the ongoing array of habits and intentional practices that contribute to a person’s maturity, effectiveness, and faithfulness for ministry.

¹¹ Priesthood of all believers: The understanding that all persons have access to God without an intermediary and that all persons have the potential to show God to others (to minister for God).

of Christ. The Local Church’s culture of call takes a particular focus when a member feels called to ordained ministry, providing discernment support as well as connection to the Association for engagement with its formal discernment processes. A member of a Local Church who is approved by an Association’s Committee on Ministry to enter a discernment relationship is called a Member in Discernment (MID). Member in Discernment is an ecclesial status within the United Church of Christ.

DISCERNMENT PARTNERS

The Member in Discernment process involves interdependent and covenantal relationships, in support of the member as well as the Committee on Ministry making decisions on behalf of the United Church of Christ. These relationships help to form and examine the person’s capacity for ordained ministry, and they provide accountability so that discernment is not practiced in isolation.



- **Local Church.** To become a Member in Discernment, a person must first be an active member of a Local Church of the United Church of Christ for at least one year, in order to establish and demonstrate commitment to a particular faith community's ministry and to the United Church of Christ. The relationships developed through membership and the experiences of Local Church life allow the person, the pastor, and the congregation to pay attention together to the person's call. The pastor and a Local Church Discernment Committee¹² are the person's first and ongoing discernment partners. If these discernment partners agree that there is a potential call to ordained ministry to be explored formally, the Local Church's governing body recommends the person to the Committee on Ministry.
- **Committee on Ministry.** The Committee on Ministry of an Association, acting on behalf of the United Church of Christ, provides support, assessment, and accountability for the person's continuing journey of discernment, and the Committee engages in its own discernment to determine whether the person's call requires ordination. The Committee's discernment in relationship with the Member in Discernment should not take longer than seven years.
- **MID Advisor.** The Member in Discernment Advisor, assigned by the Committee on Ministry, is a UCC member (lay or ordained) whose familiarity with the polity of and commitment to the ministry of the United Church of Christ position them to serve as an effective process guide for the Member in Discernment. The MID Advisor meets with the Member in Discernment between the person's annual reviews with the Committee as a checkpoint on the Member in Discernment's adherence to formation and preparation plans, and as a resource to clarify the discernment process as needed.

The guideline of seven years is intended to allow ample time for long-term experiences of formation (such as mentoring and part-time academic studies), while limiting the endless "limbo" of discernment without decision. Committees on Ministry may modify this timeframe in discernment with a MID, depending on particular circumstances, however a clear and gracious boundary of time serves both the MID and the integrity of the process.

¹² Local Church Discernment Committee: A small group of Local Church members who gather with the person exploring their call, in order to listen, encourage, and provide feedback before and during the MID process. The Local Church Discernment Committee may be a standing committee (elders, deacons, council, etc.) or an ad hoc group formed for this purpose.

Ministry training experiences may include such opportunities as field education, clinical pastoral education (CPE), internships, and more.

- **Theological Education.**¹³ Seminaries, field education sites, regional theological education programs, mentoring programs—and those who serve in such settings—offer knowledge and insight to the Member in Discernment and to Committees on Ministry. Professors and teachers are those persons directly involved in theological and educational development. Supervisors are those who oversee ministry training experiences.
- **Ministry Development Centers.** Development Centers are organizations that are called upon for psychological assessments, personality and gifts inventories, etc. A Committee on Ministry may require feedback from these professionals regarding the preparation and readiness of a person for ordained ministry.
- **Mentors.** Mentors are persons whose ministry experience and personal relationship with a Member in Discernment afford them opportunities to provide candid feedback and professional wisdom. Mentors are not assigned to Members in Discernment by Committees on Ministry and therefore are not required to submit feedback. Committees can encourage Members in Discernment to seek out mentors as informal but critical sources of support.
- **Peer Networks.** The connection—formally and informally—of Members in Discernment to one another is encouraged for support and networking. Denominational gatherings of Members in Discernment can be hosted by Associations, Conferences, and the National Setting.
- **National Setting.** The National Setting of the United Church of Christ provides guidance to Committees on Ministry, Associations, and Conferences in order to support Member in Discernment processes and to ensure the development of faithful and effective ministers.

¹³ See Section 3 for sample educational plans that follow multiple paths of theological formation and professional development.

SUMMARY OF THE MEMBER IN DISCERNMENT PROCESS

The Member in Discernment process is intended to engage all discernment partners in reflection, conversation and assessment, so that the need of the Church for excellent and faithful ministers may be met through wise decisions of Committees on Ministry, informed by all partners in the discernment process. The process unfolds in the following sequence:

1. exploration of call with Local Church;
2. initial meeting with Committee on Ministry;
3. psychological assessment, signed self-disclosure statement, and criminal background check;
4. preparation and formation plan developed between the Member in Discernment and the Committee on Ministry, based on the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers as well as assessment reports;
5. ongoing preparation and formation with development of the Marks Portfolio; meetings with the MID Advisor;
6. annual reviews with the Committee on Ministry, making adjustments to the preparation and formation plan as necessary;
7. successful completion of all COM requirements and the Committee on Ministry ordination interview;
8. Ecclesiastical Council.

Based on discernment between the partners involved at each step of the process, decisions by Committees on Ministry must ultimately have a *Yes* or a *No* but may include intermediate decisions of *Yes, but* and *No, but*. A *Yes* decision indicates unhesitant affirmation and continuation of next steps. A *Yes, but* decision indicates continuation of the process with recommendations that must be prioritized and met by the Member in Discernment. A *No, but* decision terminates the process but expresses potential for a new start to the discernment process at a future date and offers

Committees on Ministry that are structured with subcommittees or organized Conference-wide should understand "Committee on Ministry" to indicate whichever committee is assigned to the process of discernment.

recommendations for the person's growth. A *No* decision indicates a termination of the process, recognizing that the person, like all Christians, is called by God into ministry but not to ordination.

Administrators serving Committees on Ministry, Associations and/or Conferences are expected to keep current records of the initiation and termination of Member in Discernment statuses in the UCC Data Hub, based on timely reports from Committees on Ministry.

STEP-BY-STEP MEMBER IN DISCERNMENT PROCESS

1. Exploration of Call with Local Church

For those exploring a sense of call to ordained ministry, the first place to engage that call and listen for feedback is the Local Church. A person must be an active member of a Local Church for at least one year before applying to a Committee on Ministry to enter the Member in Discernment process.

Meetings between a person considering ordained ministry and their Local Church pastor should explore the person's sense of vocation and consider what it means to be called to ordained ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. The pastor can also provide information on the UCC process of discernment and support the development of a Local Church Discernment Committee if one does not already exist.

The Local Church Discernment Committee helps the person listen to and test their sense of call.¹⁴ The goal of discernment for the Local Church Discernment Committee in reflection with the person is to determine if the person has the inherent gifts, character, and potential to serve faithfully and effectively as an Ordained Minister in and on behalf of the denomination. Following a time of discernment between the person and the Local Church Discernment Committee, and in conversation with the pastor and the Discernment Committee, a congregation's governing body makes a *Yes* or *No* decision to recommend the person to the Committee on Ministry for consideration to become a Member in Discernment.

¹⁴ See Section 3 for best practices of Local Church Discernment Committees.

If, after prayerful discernment with the person, the Local Church Discernment Committee or the governing body does not believe that a call to ordained ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ is present, the process of discernment towards ordained ministry ends here. The *No* decision is made known to the person with appropriate pastoral support. The Local Church continues to support the person's vocational exploration and the appropriate exercise of the person's gifts as a lay person, consistent with its encouragement of all members' gifts in service to God's mission.

If the decision is *Yes*, the Local Church governing body writes a letter of recommendation to the Committee on Ministry and requests that the person be received as a Member in Discernment. This recommendation does not presume a specified outcome but is an affirmation of continued discernment and ongoing support for the person's process. Accompanying the governing body's recommendation, the person submits a completed Member in Discernment application form to the Committee on Ministry.¹⁵

Additional documentation that may be required by the Committee on Ministry at the time of initial application may include:

- statement of the person's spiritual journey;
- statement of the person's understanding of their call in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ;
- resume or portfolio, written with reference to the Marks;
- documentation of educational and professional training (such as transcripts);
- three written references of support for the person to enter the Member in Discernment process;
- criminal background check (may be required by the Committee on Ministry as part of the application or following the initial meeting);

¹⁵ See Section 3 for the Member in Discernment application form, including self-disclosure statement.

- psychological assessment (may be required by the Committee on Ministry as part of the initial application or following the initial meeting);
- other requirements as established by a Committee on Ministry for all of its applicants to the Member in Discernment process.

2. Initial Meeting with Committee on Ministry

Upon receipt of the letter from the Local Church requesting that a person be received as a Member in Discernment (accompanied by the application materials from the person), a Committee on Ministry schedules an initial meeting with the person. Representatives from the Local Church Discernment Committee and the applicant's pastor are encouraged to accompany the person and to contribute to the meeting. As appropriate, a cultural consultant¹⁶ may be invited to this and future meetings with the person. Prior to the meeting, the Committee on Ministry thoroughly reviews the submitted materials, which form the beginning of a file in the Committee on Ministry's records of the person.

The purpose of this initial meeting is to offer hospitality to the person and the Local Church, to listen prayerfully to the movement of the Spirit, to engage in conversation about the person's spiritual journey and call, to outline expectations of the process, and to clarify any questions. Following the meeting, the Committee determines whether to accept the person as a Member in Discernment and communicates this decision in a timely manner to the person and the Local Church.

If the Committee's decision is *No*, the discernment process toward ordained ministry ends here.

¹⁶ Cultural consultant: A person who helps to observe differences in cultural norms, when those attributes are not already present within the Committee on Ministry. In a meeting between a person and a Committee on Ministry, the cultural consultant might take a teaching role to help the Committee understand the person's context so that the person is freed from that role.

If the Committee's decision is *Yes*, the person is received as a Member in Discernment and entered in the UCC Data Hub. A Discernment Covenant¹⁷ is written among the person, the Local Church of membership, and the Committee on Ministry, outlining expectations for the discernment process. The Committee assigns the MID Advisor.¹⁸ If not already submitted in the application process, instructions are given for the person to complete a criminal background check, to schedule a psychological assessment, and to sign the self-disclosure statement. The costs of the criminal background check and psychological assessment are recommended to be shared by the person, the Local Church, and the Association.

3. Psychological Assessment, Signed Self-Disclosure Statement, and Criminal Background Check

The Committee on Ministry directs the Member in Discernment to sign the self-disclosure statement and to complete the required criminal background checks, the results of which are sent to the Committee. Likewise the Member in Discernment is guided to an appropriate ministry development center for psychological assessment.¹⁹ The report of the results from the psychological assessments is sent to the Committee on Ministry with recommendations from the assessor. These recommendations may include questions for further exploration with the Member in Discernment and suggestions for psychological growth suitable for one who would seek to serve as an Ordained Minister. If serious pathologies are identified that would preclude one from having the potential to serve as an Ordained Minister in a healthy manner, the Committee on Ministry takes these under consideration when determining whether (and how) to continue the discernment process.

Member in Discernment is an ecclesial status. Ecclesial statuses exist in the United Church of Christ for those persons who are engaged in discernment processes to seek Ordained Ministerial Standing. Persons holding ecclesial statuses are in relationships of mutual discernment with Committees on Ministry but do not have the authority to represent the United Church of Christ. Statuses are non-transferable across Associations and may be terminated at any time by a Committee on Ministry.

¹⁷ See Section 3 for sample Discernment Covenant.

¹⁸ See Section 3 for guidance on selecting and training MID Advisors.

¹⁹ See Section 3 for best practices with regard to psychological assessments.

After prayerful review of the results of the psychological assessment, self-disclosure statement, and criminal background check, the Committee on Ministry makes a decision whether the person will continue as a Member in Discernment. The decision is communicated in writing, and a copy of the decision is kept in the person's file. If the Committee's decision is *No*, the process of discernment towards ordained ministry ends here. If the decision is *Yes*, the discernment process continues and a preparation and formation plan is developed.

A preparation and formation plan should include opportunities for Members in Discernment to acquire the competencies represented in the Marks: the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for faithful and effective ordained ministry. Theological education (through an accredited seminary, a recognized regional theological education program, a mentoring program, or some combination of these), with outcomes oriented toward the Marks, should be identified as part of a Member in Discernment's preparation and formation plan.

4. Development of Preparation and Formation Plan

A preparation and formation plan is developed by the Committee on Ministry, based on the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers in relation to the Committee's assessment of the Member in Discernment's application materials and psychological assessments. Preparation and formation plans are individualized and may take multiple paths based on the nature of the call, the available options for a Member in Discernment to develop their competencies, and the needs of the Church. Committees should standardize and clearly communicate any requirements of the discernment process that are expected of all Members in Discernment. These may include some or all of the following:

- theological and practical education for ministry, with learning outcomes oriented toward the Marks;
- the development of a Marks portfolio²⁰ to document competencies around the Marks;
- successful completion of an approved UCC History, Polity and Theology course;
- ministry training experience under supervision (Clinical Pastoral Education, field placement, internship, etc.);

²⁰ Marks portfolio: A collection of materials that demonstrate competencies and experiences related to the Marks; this collection may take many forms. If the MID process moves toward an Ecclesiastical Council, the Marks Portfolio becomes the basis of an ordination paper or portfolio presentation. See Section 3 for sample outlines of Marks Portfolios.

- successful completion of boundary awareness training;
- successful completion of anti-racism training;
- participation in regional or national MID gatherings;
- engagement with the wider Church, such as participation in Association annual meetings, Conference committees, General Synod, etc.;
- progress reports on the preparation and formation plan at annual meetings with the Committee on Ministry;
- ongoing self-assessment based on the Marks;
- periodic meetings with the MID Advisor;
- prior to the Ecclesiastical Council, a drafted UCC Ministerial Profile.

5. Ongoing Preparation and Formation with Development of the Marks Portfolio; Meetings with the MID Advisor

With the establishment of a preparation and formation plan, the ongoing adherence to that plan falls largely to the Member in Discernment. Building a Marks portfolio serves as a method to demonstrate and integrate one's growth (personal, professional, and spiritual).

The MID Advisor provides clarity about the process as needed to the Member in Discernment and encourages the Member in Discernment's attentiveness to their progress through (and options for) the preparation and formation plan.

Members in Discernment are also expected to remain actively involved in their Local Church of membership, turning to the Local Church Discernment Committee for ongoing conversation about vocation and readiness for ministry.

The geographic residence of a Member in Discernment may change temporarily or permanently during the discernment process as a result of employment, education, or life circumstance. When geographic distance prohibits a Member in Discernment from meeting in person with their MID Advisor, Local Church

Discernment Committee, and/or Committee on Ministry, creativity and the use of technology are encouraged.

- As needed, it may be appropriate for a Committee on Ministry to seek out and assign a MID Advisor who is located in proximity to the Member in Discernment; the Committee makes this assignment by collaborating with the Association where the Member in Discernment resides, with the understanding that the MID Advisor reports to the Committee on Ministry overseeing the discernment process.
- When distance keeps a Member in Discernment from participating regularly in their Local Church of membership, mutual intentionality is encouraged to continue the relationship; it may be appropriate for the MID to participate in a nearby UCC congregation for additional community.
- Though the annual meeting between a Committee on Ministry and Member in Discernment is best held in person, the use of online video conference and other technologies may be deemed appropriate when geography represents a barrier to that meeting.

As geographic challenges and opportunities are navigated, the status of a Member in Discernment must be held in the same Association as the Local Church where the Member in Discernment has membership. If Local Church membership moves into another Association, the Member in Discernment process cannot transfer. If the Member in Discernment applies to enter the discernment process in a different Association for any reason, the file developed by the Committee on Ministry that first granted MID status to the person is shared with the Committee on Ministry where the person has made a new application to be a Member in Discernment. Committees on Ministry review a person's previous discernment process in another Association before agreeing to begin a new Member in Discernment process.

6. Annual Review with Committee on Ministry

Members in Discernment meet annually with their Committees on Ministry to continue to listen together to God’s call, to review their progress with the preparation and formation plan, to make adjustments or changes to the plan that may be needed, and to determine next steps in the discernment process. The annual meeting is an opportunity for both discernment and assessment. Partners in the discernment process—such as professors, supervisors, representatives of the Local Church Discernment Committee, MID Advisors, and others—may be encouraged to contribute to this review.

Following the annual review, the Committee on Ministry prayerfully makes one of the following decisions:

- *Yes.* The Committee affirms the person’s continued status as a Member in Discernment and ongoing progress in formation and preparation.
- *Yes, but.* The Committee continues the person’s MID status and adds particular learning or behavioral goals within a given time frame as a requirement for the discernment process, with a date set for reassessment.
- *No, but.* The Committee terminates the MID status due to the Member in Discernment’s lack of progress and/or substantial need for growth, with constructive feedback offered that could help the person begin the discernment process again at a future undetermined date.
- *No.* The Committee determines that the person is not called to or suited for ordained ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

All decisions that result from the annual review should be communicated in writing and added to the Member in Discernment’s file. If Member in Discernment status is terminated, either with or without bias, the results are to be recorded in the UCC Data Hub.²¹

²¹ See Section 3 for best practices of Committees on Ministry, including how to say “no” well, how to review Committee processes for signs of bias, and more in the Committee on Ministry Orientation Booklet.

The Committee on Ministry has the ability to terminate MID status at any time. Should questions arise regarding a Member in Discernment’s violation of or capacity to adhere to the UCC Ministerial Code, the Committee on Ministry considers the concerns and determines the ecclesial status accordingly. A Fitness Review cannot be initiated for a person with an ecclesial status (such as Member in Discernment).

When Member in Discernment status is terminated, the phrase “without bias” may be entered in the UCC Data Hub to indicate that the Committee has no concerns about the person applying to re-enter the discernment process at a later date. The phrase “with bias” may be entered in the UCC Data Hub to indicate that the Committee has concerns about the person’s fitness or capacity for another discernment process.

7. Committee on Ministry Ordination Interview

Once the Committee on Ministry assesses that a Member in Discernment has completed their preparation and formation plan and has developed their competencies related to the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers satisfactorily, the Member in Discernment prepares an ordination paper or portfolio presentation²² for an ordination interview. The MID Advisor may be asked to guide the Member in Discernment in shaping the Marks portfolio into the final form of an ordination paper or portfolio presentation. At the same time, the Committee solicits final assessments from all partners in the discernment process.

The use of Ecclesiastical Councils varies by Association. Although discernment processes are delegated by an Association to a Committee on Ministry, the purpose of an Ecclesiastical Council is for an Association to exercise its authority to approve (or not) one of its members for ordination in the United Church of Christ.

Upon review of the Member in Discernment's portfolio presentation or ordination paper, the Committee on Ministry schedules an ordination interview with the Member in Discernment. In an atmosphere of prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit, the Committee on Ministry holds the ordination interview and discusses with the Member in Discernment their sense of call and journey of preparation, reflecting together on the ordination paper or portfolio presentation alongside the Marks. Following the interview, the Committee decides if it is time to move from the discernment process to a final authorization decision. Options for this decision are:

- *Yes.* The Committee commends the Member in Discernment to the Association for an Ecclesiastical Council.
- *Yes, but.* The Committee continues the process of discernment and defines certain learning outcomes or skillsets that must be demonstrated and reassessed by a specified time.
- *No.* The Committee on Ministry does not recommend the Member in Discernment for ordination in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ and concludes that its process

²² The ordination paper and portfolio presentation represent diverse methods for a Member in Discernment to demonstrate their competencies related to the Marks. The use of the Marks provides the means for consistency of subject matter across different styles. See Section 3 for examples.

of discernment is complete with this decision. Member in Discernment status is terminated.

All decisions are to be communicated to the Member in Discernment in writing and added to their file. If Member in Discernment status is terminated, either with or without bias, the results are recorded in the UCC Data Hub.

8. Ecclesiastical Council²³

In the United Church of Christ, the authority to ordain ministers and to grant ministerial standing is given to Associations. The Ecclesiastical Council is a gathering of delegates on behalf of an Association to decide, on behalf of the United Church of Christ, for or against the ordination of a Member in Discernment (pending the receipt of an ordainable call²⁴) following the affirmative recommendation of a Committee on Ministry. Members in Discernment who receive negative recommendations (a *No* decision) from Committees on Ministry are not considered by Ecclesiastical Councils.

At the Committee on Ministry's recommendation, the Association schedules an Ecclesiastical Council and shares the Member in Discernment's ordination paper or portfolio presentation with the Association for its consideration. Delegates from Local Churches in the Association gather as an Ecclesiastical Council to examine the Member in Discernment and to vote for or against their ordination.

If the outcome of the Ecclesiastical Council is *No*, Member in Discernment status is terminated, with or without bias, and updated in the UCC Data Hub. If the vote is *Yes*, the UCC Data Hub is updated to indicate that the Member in Discernment is "approved for ordination pending call." At that time, the Member in Discernment may begin to circulate a UCC Ministerial Profile.

A Member in Discernment who is "approved for ordination pending call" continues to meet annually with the Committee on

The criminal background check on the UCC Ministerial Profile has a lifespan of eighteen months. Providing up to four years for a Member in Discernment to remain "approved for ordination pending call" allows for two full lifespans of the UCC Ministerial Profile (three years) and an additional year for the Committee and the Member in Discernment to review prayerfully the appropriateness of a continuing search. Depending on a Member in Discernment's particular circumstances, the Committee on Ministry may modify this period of time to ensure sufficient opportunity for the Member in Discernment to find their first call.

²³ See Section 3 for best practices for Ecclesiastical Councils.

²⁴ See Section 2 Article 5 for additional reflection on ordainable calls.



Section 2:1 Members in Discernment

Ministry. These meetings must include a vote by the Committee on Ministry, acting on behalf of the Association, to renew the status of “approved for ordination pending call.” Annual renewal of “approved for ordination pending call” permits a Member in Discernment’s UCC Ministerial Profile to continue its circulation and to be updated as needed. If a decision is made to decline renewal of “approved for ordination pending call,” then Member in Discernment status is terminated, the UCC Data Hub is updated accordingly, and the UCC Ministerial Profile is withdrawn from circulation. A Committee may terminate “approved for ordination pending call” at any time based on lack of an ordainable call and/or unsatisfactory demonstration of the Marks or Ministerial Code.

A Member in Discernment may be categorized as “approved for ordination pending call” for a recommended maximum of four years.