

OVERVIEW OF THE CREDENTIALS PROCESS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA PRESBYTERY OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

IMPORTANT FIRST STEP! Purchase and read the PCA *Book of Church Order*. In it you will find everything you need to know about the credentials process as well as other information about PCA polity.

The following is meant to provide an overview of the usual process and to define important terminology.

DEFINITIONS:

Candidate. (sometimes called, “Under Care”) “A candidate for ministry is a member of the church in full communion who, believing himself to be called to preach the Gospel, submits himself to the care and guidance of the presbytery in his course of study and of practical training to prepare himself for this office.” (*BCO* 18-1)

Every applicant for candidacy must have been a member of the congregation whose Session provides an endorsement for at least SIX months before filing his application.

Candidacy is a required step in the process toward ordination.

Licensure. “To preserve the purity of the preaching of the Gospel, no man is permitted to preach in the pulpits of the Presbyterian Church in America on a regular basis without proper licensure from the presbytery having jurisdiction where he will preach.” (*BCO* 19-1)

The Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley has defined “on a regular basis” as preaching more than once a month in the same church. If you preach more than that in the same church you must be licensed by presbytery.

Candidacy is not required for licensure, nor is membership in a PCA congregation. Licensure is not necessarily a requirement for ordination.

Internship. “The Holy Scriptures require that some trial be previously made of those who are to be ordained to the ministry of the Word, both concerning their gifts and concerning their ability to rule as teaching elders.... To provide for such a period of trial, a candidate for ordination must serve an internship. This period of internship shall be at least one year in length, and may be longer at the discretion of the presbytery so as to give sufficient time for the presbytery to judge the candidate’s qualifications and service.” (*BCO* 19-7)

Internship is a formal process. It is NOT just a job in a church which might happen to be called an internship. Presbytery must approve and act upon an internship request. Certain requirements, which differ from presbytery to presbytery, are required to be met.

Ordination. “Ordination is the authoritative admission of one duly called to an office in the Church of God...” (*BCO* 17-2)

There are several requirements which must be met in order to proceed to ordination. Among them, a completed internship, a call to a specific ministry, and a series of educational and examination requirements. (See *BCO* 21)

**THE GOAL
ORDINATION**
(BCO 17, 21)



CALL TO A SPECIFIC WORK
(BCO 21)

INTERNSHIP
(BCO 19)

**VARIOUS OTHER
EDUCATION/EXAMINATION REQUIREMENTS**
(BCO 21-4)

CANDIDACY
(BCO 18)



WHERE YOU ARE TODAY

“THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION” (THE CALLING TO MINISTRY)

Ordination to sacred office in the church is a high and holy calling from God: a vocation. It is the privilege and purpose of God to set aside men for ordination to the Gospel ministry, and yet in so doing, God follows a well-known procedure involving the people of His church.

The *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America describes that process in these words:

16-1. Ordinary vocation to office in the church is the calling of God by the Spirit, through the inward testimony of a good conscience, the manifest approbation of God’s people, and the concurring judgment of a lawful court of the church.

16-2. The government of the church is by officers gifted to represent Christ, and the right of God’s people to recognize by election to office those so gifted is inalienable. Therefore no man can be placed over a church in any office without the election, or at least the consent of that church.

16-3. Upon those whom God calls to bear office in His Church He bestows suitable gifts for the discharge of their various duties. And it is indispensable that, besides possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, every one admitted to an office should be sound in the faith, and his life be according to godliness. Wherefore every candidate for office is to be approved by the court by which he is to be ordained.

The *BCO* clearly sets forth the three stages of vocation or calling that must be verified before a man is ordained to office in the church:




1. The calling of God, by the Holy Spirit, through the inward testimony of a good conscience (the candidate).
2. The manifest approbation (approval) of God’s people (the congregation).
3. The concurring judgment of a lawful court of the church (the presbytery and the Session).

As a man seeking ordination to Gospel ministry in the PCA, you are attesting to the fact that God has given you a “good conscience” in seeking this ordination to holy office. In fact, in your ordination vows, you will attest to the fact that you have “been induced, as far as you know your own heart to seek the office of the holy ministry from love to God and a sincere desire to promote His glory in the Gospel of His Son.” (*BCO* 21-5, vow #5)

To ensure that the Presbyterian Church in America follows God’s plan in calling men into the ministry, our church polity provides for a series of steps to be taken by candidates to prepare them for sacred office. It is the stated intention of this procedure to search out a man’s motives, test his suitability and giftedness for office, and develop his ministerial skills over a process of several years. In summary, the steps in this process of preparation are as follows:

1. Candidacy in a presbytery: attestation to the inward call of God and possible giftedness for ministry.
2. Internship in a local church or special ministry: development of both gifts and understanding of ministry.
3. Licensure to preach in a presbytery: development of expository gifts and skills.
4. Ordination to a specific call to ministry.

Although these steps may be taken simultaneously and, in special instances, compressed in time, the normal, healthy and preferred process would cover the normal span of three to four years of seminary training. Graphically, the procedures would look as follows:

Stage of Seminary		Stage of Preparation
Prior to Seminary: the approval and recommendation of your church Session to come under care of presbytery.		Recognition by your church elders that God may well have set you aside for sacred ministry.
Year 1	Candidacy 	Accepted by the presbytery as a candidate for ministry: The supervision of your training and testing for ordination (BCO 18:1-8).
Year 2	Internship 	A planned program, equivalent to one full-time year of ministry, in a local church or ministry to prepare you for ordination (BCO 19:7-16).
Year 3	Licensure 	Certification to preach regularly in the pulpits of the PCA. Good for four years without renewal (BCO 19:1-6).
Year 4	ORDINATION	Authoritative admission by the presbytery to ministry in a specific call at a local church, mission agency or related ministry. Ordination can only be made to a specific work of ministry (BCO 20:1-13; 21:1-11).

Those of you who have not yet begun the process toward ordination should be aware that this procedure should not be, and ordinarily will not be, hurried or shortened, because the very genius of the process is the validation of calling, gifts and experience over an extended period of time and a series of tests and trials.

The very first step cannot be short-circuited: the inner calling of God with a good conscience toward ministry. To that end, every candidate for ministry will be required to read Edmund Clowney's book *Called to the Ministry*. Upon completion of that reading, he will contact his pastor and begin the process of coming under the care of presbytery as a candidate for the Gospel ministry.

Please be aware that two "certifications" are necessary. The first involves your call to the ministry. No man should take upon himself the privilege of preparing for ordination without serious, extended and detailed discussion with the overseers of his home church. Therefore, a man should not apply to seminary without both membership in a local church and referral of that church to the seminary of their choice.

Secondly, those seeking ordination in the Presbyterian Church in America should remember that *BCO 18-2* requires membership in a PCA church for six months prior to coming under care of

presbytery as a candidate. Therefore, it is ill advised for seminarians to neglect active membership in a PCA church until late in their seminary careers. Sessions may refuse to give endorsements to those whom they do not know well due to inactive membership, poor attendance, or non-involvement in their congregation. Seminarians should not impose upon a local church by “courting” their endorsement merely because they need Sessional certification in order to be ordained. Seminarians and candidates should choose a local PCA church, be active in it, and get to know the pastor and officers well, prior to seeking candidacy, internship or licensure.

This membership in a PCA church can be established in several ways: a full membership in one’s home church, an associate membership in a PCA church close to one’s seminary, or a full-time membership in the local PCA church near to one’s seminary. The *BCO 46-4* defines what “associate membership” is: Associate members are those believers temporarily residing in a location other than their permanent homes. Such believers may become associate members of a particular church without ceasing to be communicant members of their home churches. An associate member shall have all the rights and privileges of the church, with the exception of voting in a congregational or corporation meeting, and holding an office in that church. Thus there are four options or scenarios for membership in the PCA:

Options	Where you are from . . .	Where you attend seminary . . .
Option 1	Full membership in a PCA church	Regular attendance at a PCA church
Option 2	Full membership in a PCA church	Associate membership in a PCA church
Option 3	Not a member of a PCA church (Change membership) !	Full membership in a PCA church
Option 4	Full membership in a PCA church (transfer to another PCA church) !	Full membership in a PCA church

**Keep in mind that a man must be a member of some PCA church for six months, prior to candidacy. Also, candidates should know that local PCA churches will usually give preference to members or associate members for internships at their church.

The rule of thumb is simple: Active membership first, candidacy second. In order to be ordained to pastoral ministry, one should prove a desire, willingness and faithfulness in ministry to a specific local church. Ideally, a man should come under care, become an intern, be licensed and then ordained at the local church where his membership or associate membership is held. The partnership of the seminarian, his local church and his seminary is essential for preparation to the Gospel ministry.

SEMINARIAN'S CHECKLIST

- ❑ I have read Edmund Clowney's *Called to Ministry* and am convinced that I am being set aside by God for sacred office in the Gospel ministry.
- ❑ I have been a faithful and involved member of my local church such that the pastor and elders (officers) know me well and can attest to my calling and my readiness to undertake seminary education.
- ❑ I have applied to a seminary and have sent to them my local church's endorsement and references.
- ❑ I have established a full or associate membership in a local PCA church near to my seminary and am involved in visible, regular ministry in order that my Session may get to know me well.