

Ordination Examinations: A Misunderstanding Explained

Examinations for ordination have been a distinctive Presbyterian activity since colonial times. The creation of seminaries in the early 1800s did not budge the presbyteries' right to examine those who would serve as ministers. Yet today many seeking ordination to Ministry of the Word and Sacrament do not understand this historic position.

I have discovered that many involved in preparing candidates for ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have little understanding of the ordination examinations required by the *Book of Order*. As executive secretary of Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee and, more recently, as associate for examination services, a major part of my ministry has been interpretation to all who would listen.

Relatively few understand that the five written ordination examinations provide information to presbytery committees making decisions on ordination. The *Book of Order* requires a candidate for ministry to be successful in the ordination examinations and to hold a seminary degree. Whereas theological education is a teaching ministry dedicated to broaden horizons of awareness and to introduce the scope and breadth of reflection on Christian faith, ordination examinations focus on application of material derived from theological education.

Written ordination examinations, instituted 23 years ago by order of the 1967 General Assembly, seek to evaluate readiness for ministry and test five fundamental questions:

Does the candidate have a sufficient knowledge of the Bible?

Can the candidate proceed from biblical text to sermon in a responsible and faithful way?

Can the candidate relate theology and our confessional heritage to pastoral work?

Can the candidate use the "Directory for Worship" in the liturgical issues of worship?

Does the candidate understand the *Book of Order* on issues that arise in ministry?

In 1963 the Committee on Candidates of San Francisco Presbytery petitioned the General Assembly because of their concern at the wide range of examination standards their candidates experienced—from extremely lax to extremely rigorous. The presbytery asked the General Assembly to explore a more uniform approach to the examination of candidates for ordination. The result was denomination-wide written ordination examinations.

The group that determines policy and writes the examinations is called Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates. The plural possessive first word is significant because the examination program belongs to all the presbyteries. Each candidate who writes the examinations must be authorized by a presbytery Committee on Preparation for Ministry. The examinations are evaluated by elders and ministers elected by the presbyteries who gather in regional groups to grade the examinations. The resulting papers and comments are returned to the presbyteries as they consider their decision to ordain a candidate.

Many ministers are concerned about the variation of educational experience of these elders and ministers, yet many elders work diligently and perceptively—at times maybe with more devotion than some ministers.

Another area of concern is the high failure rate. I am often asked why only about half the candidates pass the first time. This rate has been steady for many years, and it is helpful to know that professional examinations in law, medicine, and accounting also have a similar failure rate. The candidates' difficulties lie in the shift from learning the foundations of ministry to demonstrating readiness for the practice of ministry.

As Presbyterians we recognize that shift to be significant.

When an examination is rated "unsatisfactory,"

responsibility is not only with the candidate, but also with the seminary, the presbytery of care, and even the session that endorsed the candidate for ministry. The examinations remind us that all of us need to develop improved means of supporting a candidate who is moving toward ministry.

The strength behind the ordination examinations is the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee—the 24 people who write the examinations and set the policy. Twelve of these are elected by the regional groups that grade the examinations. To ensure competence and ethnic balance, the other 12 members are elected by the General Assembly. There are always five members of the committee who teach the disciplines represented in the examinations. The members' hard work, wisdom, creativity, and willingness to work in new ways and to look for new solutions to old issues demonstrates the value of the rotating member system. My life and ministry has been enriched by those who have dedicated themselves to ensuring that ordination examinations are appropriate for their role in the contemporary church.

The most exciting development is the decision to move in the direction of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization that characterizes ministry at its best. So this spring candidates had a question asking them to build an understanding of mission from the *Book of Order*.

Ordination examinations can be widely misinterpreted and poorly comprehended. Nonetheless, the ordination examination process works well. There are rare cases where an alternate means of testing is appropriate, even necessary. But 99 percent of the time this human mechanism serves the church amazingly well. Those who created this process and those who have carefully and reverently improved it have indeed served the church "with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love."

Ministry is not merely knowing the disciplines of theological education. Ministry is putting into practice insights derived from theological study to enhance and nurture the life of the church.