

Ministerial Credentialing: A Guide to the Process

Credentialing Packet

“These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elder. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.” (1 Timothy 4:11-15)

1. Introduction and General Guidelines for Ministerial Credentialing

- (a) *For whom is this packet intended?* This packet of materials related to ministerial credentialing has been written to provide guidance to regional church/area conference ministers and regional church/area conference ministerial committees as they work with the process of credentialing persons for ministerial leadership in the church. It is intended as a guide and resource within which each regional church/area conference will find ways to augment and adapt to meet their own needs and expectations. This material is based on *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*.
- (b) *Purpose of credentialing.* The process of ministerial credentialing has been developed by the church to identify those called to special roles of ministerial leadership in and for the church. Its purpose is not to elevate persons to a special status but to affirm who they are by God’s grace, to grant to them the church’s office of ministry, and to invite them to continuing forms of accountability for the unique and special roles which they serve among us. Credentialing and credibility belong to each other. In this sense, credentialing is not for the good or glory of the candidate; it is for the good of and protection of the church and those to whom the church ministers.
- (c) *Important documents in the credentialing process.* The first of two important documents to be familiar with is the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* which represents the theological perspective of the Mennonite Church at this point in its history.

The second important document is *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership* which gives an overview of the Mennonite Church understanding of ministry, the meaning of ordination, and the polity provisions of the church. The candidate would have read both of these documents during the filling out of their Ministerial Leadership Information form (MLI).

This packet of materials is intended as an additional guide to the process of giving and receiving credentials. It is a manual designed to supplement the polity document above.

- (d) *When the process begins.* In *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*, we understand that the granting of ministerial credentials is closely related to and contingent upon a call to a specific place of ministry. Thus, the process begins after one has received a call either for a pastoral position in a congregation or a placement in a ministry-related position.

However, the process truly begins with one's sense of vocation and call from God and the church. It moves forward with the years of preparation through formal study and continuing discernment.

- (e) *While we do not prescribe a single educational standard* which must be achieved, we do expect some level of formal ministerial preparation through educational programs provided by the church. We affirm the goal of a M.Div. seminary degree as an ideal expectation.
- (f) *Weight given to licensing and ordination.* One of the continuing questions has to do with the relative weight to be given to the process of licensing toward ordination as compared to the process of ordination itself. We consider both to be of great significance. However, because at licensing a candidate is first entering ministry, we are calling for the heightening of the intensity of the interview in the licensing experience, particularly around issues of compatibility (similar in faith and life) and theology. At the same time, the ceremony of licensing should be more minimal. In contrast, the ceremony of the ordination event should be the high moment of ministerial credentialing.

2. Licensing Toward Ordination (see pages 36-37 of *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*)

"The license is usually issued for a minimum of a two-year period for the purpose of testing the inner and outer call to ministry. Further discerning of ministerial gifts, abilities, and aptitude may or may not lead to ordination. The license may be extended for another period of time if more discernment time is needed." *

- (a) *Preparation for the licensing interview.* The licensing interview focuses on three things: (1) the candidate's call to ministry, (2) their theological understanding of the Christian faith, and (3) their commitment to serving within a Mennonite/Anabaptist faith community.

In preparation for the licensing interview with the regional church/area conference ministerial leadership committee, the following items will be gathered:

- (i) a letter of request from the candidate's congregation for the person to be licensed.
- (ii) a copy of the Ministerial Leadership Information form, which normally will have been completed for the search process. (If more than three years since completion, a new MLI should be prepared/updated.)
- (iii) a theological statement or response as requested by the regional church/area conference committee. (See the Questionnaire Guide in this packet.)
- (b) *Who should participate?* In addition to the candidate and the committee, a congregational representative may be present for this interview.
- (c) *The licensing interview.* It is recommended that the committee designate one of its members to assume special responsibility for the preparation and leadership of the interview with each candidate; this is a task which can be shared among committee members. Written materials should have been available to the committee in sufficient time for their preparation for the interview.

- (d) *A designated date and time* for the interview should be scheduled well in advance. The recommended time for this interview should be in the range of 1½ to 2 hours in length. Sufficient time must be given in order to take seriously the work and preparation which the candidate has put into the process.
- (e) *The appropriate spirit* of this interview is neither a friendly chat nor an adversarial interrogation. Rather we look for a sense of mutual discovery, self disclosure, and spiritual adventure.
- (f) *If there are controversial issues* on which committee members do not agree among themselves, it is essential that they discuss their approach privately before the interview rather than in front of the candidate. This is not to say that there should never be disclosure of differences, but that the interview time is not the place to resolve these since full attention should be given to the candidate.
- (g) *Issues that give the committee cause for concern* regarding the ministerial person during this interview should be identified to the credential candidate at that time. This provides an opportunity to return to these issues, either during the licensing period or at the ordination interview to follow.
- (h) *Mentor relationship.* At the time of the licensing interview, if not before, the candidate and the committee should agree upon naming a pastoral mentor for the ministerial person. This relationship of support, counsel, and guidance will continue throughout the licensing period and through the experience of ordination. (See the Guide for Orientation and Growth for additional details about this relationship.)
- (i) *Expectations to be met.* As an outcome of the licensing interview, the committee may choose to request of the candidate one or more expectations to be met prior to ordination. This might include the reading and reporting on certain assigned books, meeting minimum educational requirements, taking special courses related to Anabaptist history and theology, taking a unit of clinical pastoral education, etc. These expectations will be noted in the person's Ministerial Registration database.
- (j) *Communicating the credentialing decision.* The committee leadership and regional church/area conference minister will be intentional about the way in which the committee's decision is communicated to the candidate and the congregation. While this may initially be communicated personally and informally, it is highly recommended that it also be communicated in a formal written response to all the parties involved. Included should be an explanation (either positive or negative) for the decision made. Any additional information such as continuing expectations should be included in the written response.
- (k) *With the approval for Licensing Toward Ordination* there will be a determination of a date for the public recognition of this credential and its meaning. Such a time and occasion will be scheduled when mutually agreeable to the ministering person, the regional church/area conference, and the congregation. The most optimal time to do the Licensing Toward Ordination is when the pastor is installed within the congregation. (See Ceremony document for additional information.)

3. Ordination for Ministry (See pages 18-22, 38-39 of *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*)

“Ordination is an act of the church (congregation, regional church/area conference, and denomination) which call and appoint a member to ongoing leadership ministry in the life and mission of the church. The ordination act includes the covenant between the church and the minister being ordained, the laying on of hands, and the prayer of blessing for ordination. *

- (a) *Preparation for the Ordination interview.* In contrast to the licensing interview, which focuses on the call to ministry, theology, and compatibility within the Mennonite/Anabaptist context, the ordination interview focuses more on reflection based upon ministerial experience. While it will undoubtedly touch all of the above for review and update, more attention will now be given to emerging issues of ministerial identity as they have grown during the licensing time. It is also a significant time to reflect upon the meaning of ordination and the person's long-term commitment to this role within the church.

In preparation for the ordination interview, the following items will be submitted to the regional church/area conference ministerial committee:

- i) a letter of request from the candidate's congregation for the person to be ordained, including a brief report of their discernment process;
- ii) a statement by the candidate concerning the meaning of ordination, its privileges and responsibilities, and the mutually understanding accountability relationships;
- iii) a written report and statement of support from the pastoral mentor;
- iv) a theological statement or response as requested by ministerial committee;
- v) a new or updated Ministerial Leadership Information form (MLI). Another option is for the MLI to be considered a baseline and item ii above used to show the growth of the pastor.

Additional references which may be included at the discretion of the committee might include the following:

- i) statements from ministerial colleagues and/or peer group;
- ii) report from the overseer, bishop, or regional church/area conference minister; and/or
- iii) a report from a qualified therapist, psychologist, or vocational counselor.

- (b) *General guidelines* outlined above for the licensing interview will be followed in the ordination interview as well. (Specifically this refers to items 2. b, c, d, and e.)
- (c) *Special attention* should be given to any items noted in the licensing interview and/or specific expectations to be met prior to ordination.
- (d) *Communicating the credentialing decision.* The committee leadership and regional church/ area conference minister will be intentional about the way in which the committee's decision is communicated to the candidate and the congregation. While this may initially be communicated personally and informally, it is highly recommended that it also be communicated in a formal written response to all the parties involved. Included should be an explanation (either positive or negative) for the decision made. Any additional information such as continuing expectations should be included in the written response.
- (e) *Scheduling the ordination event.* With the approval for Ordination there will be a determination of a date for the public recognition of this credential. Such a time and occasion will be scheduled when mutually agreeable to the ministering person, the regional church/area conference, the congregation, and others from the supporting pastors and friends of the candidate and congregation. (See Ceremony document in this packet for additional information.)

4. Licensing for Specific Ministry (See pages 39-41 of *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*)

"This credential is time-specific, location-specific, or ministry-role specific. It is usually not intended to move toward ordination. The credential continues as long as the person is engaged in a leadership ministry

assignment within the congregation or another specialized leadership ministry (church planters, chaplains, area church and national church staff).” *

- (a) *Preparation for the Licensing/Commissioning for Specific Ministry Interview.* Because this is a single credential unrelated to another to precede or follow, it is important for the participating persons to keep in mind that a broad range of concerns will need to be covered. These will include the sense of call, theology, Anabaptist/Mennonite relatedness, and ministerial identity.

In preparation for the licensing/commissioning interview, the following items will be submitted to the regional church/area conference ministerial committee:

- i. a letter of request from the candidate's congregation for the person to be licensed/commissioned,
- ii. a statement of the candidate concerning the meaning and purpose of this license/commission, and
- iii. a theological statement or response as requested by the regional church/area conference committee.

In addition, the committee may request reports from other sources such as those suggested above in the ordination section. (See 3. a. v, vi, and vii.)

- (b) *General guidelines* outlined above for the licensing interview will be followed in the licensing/commissioning interview as well. (Specifically this refers to items 2. b, c, d, and e.)
- (c) *Who should participate?* Again, a representative from the congregation might participate with the candidate in the interview with the regional church/area conference committee. Consideration might be given to having a representative from a hiring institution if that fits the situation.
- (d) *Communicating the credentialing decision.* The committee leadership and regional church/ area conference minister will be intentional about the way in which the committee's decision is communicated to the candidate and the congregation. While this may initially be communicated personally and informally, it is highly recommended that it also be communicated in a formal written response to all the parties involved. Included should be an explanation (either positive or negative) for the decision. Any additional information such as continuing expectations should be included in the written response.
- (e) *Scheduling the public recognition event.* With the approval for Licensing/ Commissioning, there will be a determination of a date for the public recognition of this credential. Such a time and occasion will be scheduled when mutually agreeable to the ministering person, regional church/ area conference, the congregation, and others from the supporting friends of the candidate and congregation. (See Ceremony document in this packet for additional information.)

5. Special Cases and Situations: Credentialing Chaplains, Mission Workers, and Others

- (a) *Why credential persons for ministry in specialized settings?* While much of the credentialing process has to do with pastors serving our congregations, the church also wishes to support persons in ministry in specialized settings. The church has not always adequately understood or supported those who served in ministry roles outside of the congregation. However, it is our perspective that in fact we can and should have a thoughtful process by which to credential these persons who represent the church in world mission. Whereas the primary service of pastors is within and to the congregation, those who carry out ministry roles in specialized settings do so as representatives of our congregations beyond our own people. They truly represent the church as its missionary arm.

There second reason why the church needs to work with the credentials of persons in specialized ministry settings has to do with accountability. While there may be exceptions, most of such ministry persons highly desire to see their ministry as growing out of their church relationships. They wish for the accountability that ministry credentials offer. Additionally, it is often expected of those who represent particular faith traditions within specialized professional groups, such as the Association of Professional Chaplains, to have the denominational endorsement for their ministry.

(b) Guidelines for Credentialing Those in Specialized Ministry Settings

- (i) In general, the normal procedures should be followed as much as possible. If ordination is anticipated, it should be preceded by licensing, etc.
- (ii) There may be a greater consideration given to the possible use of the credential “License for Specific Ministry” than may otherwise be the case for pastors. But we do not intend this as the credential of choice for those in ministry in specialized settings. They should have every right of access to the more traditional credential route of licensing and ordination.
- (iii) The way in which their local congregation is involved in the process will inevitably be different than when credentialing involves the congregation’s pastor. It may be somewhat lower key, but this does not mean it should be ignored. The local congregation and particularly the pastor should be strong in supporting this credentialing process. The ministry person is expected to maintain an active affiliation with a Mennonite congregation for the duration of the special ministry assignment and the active ministry credential.
- (iv) As with pastors, the person to be credentialed will have a specific position of ministry to which they have been appointed or in which they are currently employed. This normally means that the employing agency, whether a mission board, local health care center, or some other group, will also be involved in some appropriate manner in the credentialing process.
- (v) All persons serving in ministry roles in specialized settings are expected to maintain forms of accountability with the regional church/area conference.
- (vi) Denominational Endorsement for Chaplains. For persons in specialized ministry, there is often a need for endorsement by the denomination beyond the normal ordination procedures. This denomination endorsement may be required either for the position itself or for membership and certification in the professional organizations related to the special ministry. It is our intent to respond to this need and furthermore to claim such persons in special ministries as an important extension of our total witness and ministry.

* Quotations taken from *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*