

Congregational Discernment for Ordination

Suggestions for the Congregational Chairperson

Ordination is a long-term ministry credential that is granted by a regional church/area conference of the Mennonite Church. It grants a minister the privileges and responsibilities of the office of ministry. Ordination usually follows the period of time known as the licensing. Licensing is a two-to four-year period of time in which the candidate's call and readiness for ministry is tested within a ministry role. An affirmation of that call and readiness for ministry by the minister, the congregation, and the regional church/area conference initiates the ordination process.

While the regional church/area conference is responsible for the ordination credentialing decision, the ministerial leadership committee of the regional church/area conference needs and values counsel from others who have experienced the ministry of the candidate to make a good decision about whether to ordain. The congregation is one of several groups or individuals from which the ministerial leadership committee receives counsel regarding the confirmation of a call and readiness for ministry on the part of the ordination candidate. During its discernment process, the regional church/area conference ministerial leadership committee will consider a candidate's personal faith and theology, character, relational skills, ethics, ministerial functioning, commitment to the Mennonite Church, and understandings of the office of ministry and of ordination.

Congregations with a pastor or member being considered for ordination will need to engage in a congregational discernment process which enables the leadership of the congregation to determine whether to affirm the candidate's call and readiness for ministry. With a decision to affirm that call and readiness for ministry, the congregation will then make their recommendation to ordain or to re-license to the regional church/area conference ministerial leadership committee. The following steps will usually be taken by the congregational chair (or chair of the elder board).

Letter of Request. The ordination process in the congregation begins with a letter from the congregational chair to the regional church/area conference minister requesting that the regional church/area conference begin the ordination process for their pastor (or member.) The regional church/area conference minister will respond to that letter to help the congregation begin a discernment process. This letter of request will usually be received by the regional church/area conference after a full year of licensed ministry or at least six months before the current license is to expire.

Congregational Discernment. With the help of the regional church/area conference minister, the congregational chair shall guide the ordination discernment process in the congregation. It is important to keep the ordination candidate fully informed of the actions and steps that are planned. This congregational discernment process may occur in any of a variety of ways:

1. The elder board might process it and act on behalf of the congregation in making a recommendation for ordination (a) through personal reflection within the elder group; (b) by making selective inquiries of members; and (c) by writing a recommendation for ordination of the candidate and then asking for affirmation or feedback from the congregation.

2. With guidance from the elder board, small groups within the congregation might process the ministry call and readiness of the ordination ministerial candidate to seek a congregational consensus to recommend this ordination.
3. With the regional church/area conference minister, the entire membership of the congregation might process the call and readiness for ministry of this pastor (or member) to seek a congregational consensus to recommend this ordination.
4. Other ways determined by the local deacon/elder board and the minister.

Key Questions the Congregation Should be Asking in this Discernment Process. Keeping in mind the differing roles and responsibilities of the congregation and the regional church/area conference in the discernment process, the congregation should focus on the following questions.

1. Is there an acceptable level of competence to carry out the essential tasks of ministerial leadership, not only in this congregation but throughout a lifetime of ministry?
2. What qualities of character (listening to others, teachability, mutuality, integrity, authenticity, love, etc.) does this person demonstrate to provide effective leadership and to maintain meaningful relationships?
3. Does the church recognize in this person one who leads the church and one who represents the church in the community and the world?
4. How has the church experienced the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ through the ministry of this person?

Letter/Report of Recommendation. Following the congregational discernment process, the congregational chairperson shall report the recommendation (or failure to recommend) to both the candidate and the regional church/area conference minister or overseer.

Ordination Interview. Upon receipt of a letter of recommendation to ordain, the regional church/area conference minister, or the chair of the ministerial leadership committee shall consult with the congregational chair and the candidate about a time and location for an ordination interview with the candidate. The congregation will be invited to send a representative to that interview with the candidate, and it is the responsibility of the congregational chair to ensure that a representative is appointed.

Ordination Date and Planning. Following the successful outcome of the ordination interview with a decision by the regional church/area conference ministerial leadership committee to ordain, the regional church/area conference minister shall consult with the candidate and the congregational chair (or elder chair) regarding an ordination date. With a date determined, the regional church/area conference minister shall also help the congregation and the candidate begin planning for the ordination service, which shall be hosted by the congregation.

Responsibilities the Congregation Will Likely Assume:

1. Arranging the date with the candidate and regional church/area conference minister.
2. Posting the date on the church calendar and making related announcements.
3. Inviting other clergy persons in the community to the ordination.
4. Inviting other Mennonite ministers in the cluster or regional church/area conference to attend.
5. Forming a worship committee to work with the candidate and the regional church/area conference minister in planning the worship service.
6. Planning the celebration meal or fellowship time following the ordination service.
7. Submitting an announcement of the ordination service to the local newspaper.