

EXAMINATION POLICY

Seeking Membership in Albany Presbytery

1. This policy applies to all persons seeking membership in Albany Presbytery, including those who have a call to a pastoral relation within the presbytery, those who have a call from a governing body or agency as defined in G-11.0410, those who are entering a validated call as defined in G-11.0411, those who are members-at-large of another presbytery (G-11.0406b), and those who are honorably retired as defined in G-11.0412.
2. The Committee on Ministry (COM) will schedule a clearance interview before the person is presented to the Presbytery and, in the case of persons called to pastoral ministries, before the congregation or session takes action. The purpose of the interview is a preliminary determination of whether the prospective member demonstrates “theologically-informed fidelity to God’s Word” (G-11.0403c), affirms the basic doctrines of Christian faith as interpreted by Reformed tradition, accepts the Presbyterian form of government, and has the gifts and graces required for the position, if any, that the person will occupy. For the purposes of this demonstration, the person seeking membership will present to the clearance committee a one-page statement of faith and a one-page biographical statement.
3. The clearance interview will be conducted by persons authorized by COM, normally two ministers and two elders. The General Presbyter may participate in all clearance interviews. If the person seeking membership is not yet ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, a representative of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry will participate.
4. In questioning the prospective member, the clearance committee will be guided by the statement of faith, the biographical statement, and the constitutional questions that all ordained persons must answer affirmatively. The committee will also explore the prospective member’s preparation, experience and fitness for the particular position he/she might occupy, if any. No particular questions are prescribed or proscribed for the clearance interview. Consistent with decisions of the Permanent Judicial Commission, probing personal questions about a prospective member’s health, finances or life arrangements are appropriate only if: (1) the prospective member invites them by offering written or spoken comments on personal matters; (2) the same questions are asked of all prospective members; or (3) there is “plain, palpable and obvious” evidence available to the Presbytery that a prospective member’s manner of life may be an obstacle to ministry (*Weirll*, Remedial Case 214-5, 2002).
5. Prospective members have the opportunity, under G-6.0108, to identify ordination standards from which they depart, in belief or in practice, on the basis of conscience, guided by Scripture. Prospective members who plan to make such a declaration to Presbytery, which then must determine whether the departure concerns an essential of Reformed faith and practice, are strongly urged to alert the clearance committee to their intention.
6. The clearance committee will report its determination of fitness, based on the examination and on reference and background checks, to COM, which will communicate with the church or other prospective employer, if any. If the determination is positive and there is a call (if applicable), COM will present the prospective member as part of its report to the Presbytery.
7. If a departure from ordination standards has been declared in the clearance interview, COM will inform the Council, which will seek to ensure that the Presbytery is prepared to decide whether the departure involves an essential of Reformed faith and practice (G-6.0108).
8. Prospective members’ statements of faith and biographical statements must be included in the pre-meeting packet of the Presbytery meeting at which they are to be examined, along with a statement of COM’s finding of fitness.¹ If these materials are not distributed a week before the meeting, Presbytery must vote to waive this policy to examine a prospective member. The statement of *Examination Goals* that is appended to this policy will be included in any packet that contains prospective members’ materials.

¹ COM currently uses this statement of fitness: “COM is charged with the responsibility to examine minister candidates for membership in this Presbytery based on the wide range of theological orthodoxy found in our tradition and appropriate ministry fit. The COM has done so by discussing, challenging, and questioning this person’s statement of faith and fitness for service and has found them within an acceptable range, but it is your decision to grant them membership status; and it is now your turn to examine them.”

9. A member of COM will introduce the prospective member in Presbytery and give a brief report on how the person has come to be standing before the Presbytery. The prospective member will then read his or her Statement of Faith and make any additional comments pertinent to membership. The Moderator will direct the Presbytery to be guided in its questioning by the statement of faith, the prospective member's additional comments, the constitutional questions addressed to ordained persons, and the major themes of Reformed theology and practice, if they are not adequately reflected in the statement of faith.

10. If a prospective member chooses to declare a departure from ordination standards for the first time on the floor of Presbytery, the Moderator will ask the body to vote on whether to postpone further consideration of the prospective membership until a subsequent meeting, in order to give the Council time to prepare the Presbytery for the discussion and decision.

11. If a departure from ordination standards has been declared, a period will be set aside to discuss whether the departure involves an essential of Reformed faith and practice. The prospective member will be invited to be present for this discussion.

12. At the end of the examination, the prospective member will be escorted from the floor by a member of the Committee on Ministry. Presbytery will then discuss and decide whether to admit the prospective member.

13 A copy of this *Examination Policy* and the appendix, *Examination Goals*, will be given to prospective members before their clearance interview. Copies will also be given to Pastor Nominating Committees, Sessions and congregational search committees by their COM liaison as they begin their work.

Appendix: Examination Goals

Persons may apply for membership in a presbytery if they have been called to a pastoral relation with a congregation in the presbytery, to a position in a governing body or religious agency, or to a call validated by the presbytery. Members-at-large of other presbyteries and honorably retired ministers who will reside in the presbytery may also apply for membership.

Before anyone can become a member, he or she is examined by the presbytery. The primary purpose of the examination is to determine that the person demonstrates "theologically-informed fidelity to God's Word" in both faith and manner of life. Some presbyteries delegate the examination of certain categories of prospective members (such as those previously ordained by another presbytery) to their Committee on Ministry. Albany Presbytery, however, views examinations as opportunities not only for decisions on membership but also for participants in Presbytery and prospective members to get to know and learn from each other by discussing important matters. Therefore, ordinarily all persons seeking membership in Albany Presbytery are examined on the floor of Presbytery. [If the health of the candidate contraindicates the examination of the candidate before the Presbytery, the Committee on Ministry shall conduct the examination and report the results to Presbytery. The Committee on Ministry, providing sufficient reasons, shall request Presbytery to set aside the provision in the policy that mandates an examination on the floor.] (*Note: This section in brackets was adopted by Presbytery on January 24, 2009.*)

Before a prospective member is presented to Presbytery, he or she will have prepared a statement of faith and biographical statement, which must be included in the pre-meeting packet of the meeting at which the Presbytery examination will take place. **Ministers and elders are strongly urged to read these statements in advance of the meeting and to come to the meeting prepared to question the prospective member about them.**

The prospective member will also have been examined on a preliminary basis by a clearance committee appointed by the Committee on Ministry. (If the prospective member is not yet ordained, a member of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry will have participated in this preliminary examination.) On the basis of this interview and reference and background checks, the Committee on Ministry will make a recommendation to Presbytery that will be printed in the pre-meeting packet. If the prospective member is being called to service in a congregation, there will also be a report of the action of the congregation or session of the church issuing the call.

The following guidelines govern examinations in Albany Presbytery.

1. Examinations are to be conducted respectfully and prayerfully. Examinations are intended to give the prospective member an opportunity to demonstrate the qualities of mind and spirit that qualify him or her for membership and service in the Presbytery.
2. It is the right and duty of the Presbytery to determine whether the prospective member adheres to basic Christian doctrines as interpreted by Reformed traditions in the Confessions and whether he or she has sufficient preparation and ability to carry out the functions of office in a particular setting. At the same time, the Presbytery values theological diversity within Reformed bounds among its members and does not apply theological litmus tests for membership.
3. Questions should focus on the prospective member's faith, as expressed in the statement of faith, and on the ways the prospective member lives out that faith.
4. Because the Church trusts the Holy Spirit to guide, form, inform and renew the body each time it meets, Presbyterians have no single written list of fundamental doctrines or essential tenets to which all ministers must subscribe. Key themes of Reformed theology, however, occur regularly in the Confessions and are noted in the *Book of Order* in G-2.0500:
Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God, who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to the central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:
(1) The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation; (2) Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God; (3) A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation; (4) The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God."

It is appropriate to question the prospective member on these themes if they are not adequately treated in the statement of faith.

5. By decision of Presbyterian church courts, probing personal questions about a prospective member's health, finances or life arrangements are appropriate only if: (1) the prospective member invites them by offering written or spoken comments on personal matters; (2) the same questions are asked of all prospective members; or (3) there is "plain, palpable and obvious" evidence available to the Presbytery that some element of a prospective member's manner of life may be an obstacle to ministry.
6. Both Minister Members and Elder commissioners to Presbytery are strongly urged to participate in the questioning.
7. The 217th General Assembly (2006) affirmed the constitutional right of prospective members of presbytery to identify ways in which their conscience, as formed by Scripture, compels them to depart from one or more ordination standards. It is then the right and duty of the presbytery to decide whether the departure involves an essential of Reformed faith and practice. If a prospective member of Albany Presbytery declares such a departure, the Council will seek to prepare the Presbytery to discern whether an essential of faith or practice is involved. There is no list of essentials, though there are guides, such as the list of themes cited above, that may help the Presbytery to discern them on a case-by-case basis.
8. If a departure is declared for the first time on the floor of Presbytery, without prior notice to the Committee on Ministry and the Council, the Moderator will ask the body whether it wishes to postpone further discussion until Council has had an opportunity to prepare resources for the discussion.
9. The Presbytery has the right to say "Yes," "No," or "Wait" to any prospective member. This includes those whose departure from ordination standards is deemed not to involve Reformed essentials.

Adopted by Presbytery 11/13/07

Revised by Presbytery 1/24/09