

“Discerning A Call”

A Resource for congregations, lay committees, mentors, committees on ministry, and Members in Discernment to be used in conjunction with the “Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ”

“Discernment is a spiritual discipline, a practice of listening, a practice of developing the ability to perceive the various ways God is at work in individual lives, in communities, and in the world. Discernment may be understood as “the intentional practice by which a community or individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations.” To frame the exploration of a call to ministry within a mutual covenant of discernment means that the Covenantal Partners, including the local church, the Member in Discernment and the Committee on Ministry, will approach major decisions by seeking to understand what God wills in the context of the emerging leadership needs of the church....as the church itself responds to God’s call.

A covenant emphasizing discernment and formation is not necessarily sequential or predictable. The Association does not expect the Member in Discernment to enter the process with a clearly defined call, and the Covenantal Partners begin the process without any assumptions regarding the nature of the outcome. The very language used by the authorizing body—“Member in Discernment”—reflects the reality that the exploration of an individual’s call will include openness to a variety of outcomes, even ones that are unexpected. Discernment of call is itself the primary task of the covenant relationship. Yet certain specific moments or steps can be identified in what is essentially a nonlinear process. There is a beginning, an entry point for the development of the covenant among the Member, the Local Church, and the Association; that beginning assumes that the relationship will extend over a period of at least two years. There is a Local Church Discernment Committee and one or more discernment advisors from the Association. The issue for United Church of Christ authorizing bodies is to listen to and discern with that individual and that individual’s faith community in order to address the question: to what ministry is this person being called at this time? There are then questions that follow: Does this particular ministry require authorization? If so, what form of authorization?

The formation process may take several years. Each covenantal journey will be unique because each candidate will bring unique skills and life experiences into the process. From this mutual discernment process, learning plans will be developed; decisions will be made about appropriate preparation (such as attending a theological seminary, involvement in other learning programs or more focussed participation in the life of the congregation). There will be supervised leadership practice and processes for assessing readiness. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the journey is fluid but formation always includes the Local Church, the Member in Discernment, and the Committee on Ministry. There may be formal authorization appropriate to a particular ministry combined with an ongoing covenant of mutual accountability; however, authorization results from the communal covenantal process and is never a pre-determined outcome.

Covenantal Partners are equipped for the journey with resources such as “The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers”. The *Marks* is a core document Committees on Ministry, Mentors, Local Churches, and Members in Discernment will use throughout the discernment and formation process. The *Marks* are the product of the Ministry Issues Implementation Committee in consultation with the whole church. The Committee’s work grew out of the 2005 General Synod pronouncement titled “Ministry Issues: Forming and Preparing Pastoral Leaders for God’s Church.”

The *Marks* are designed to be used by the covenantal partners as they explore the formation and preparation necessary for each of the forms of authorized ministry (Licensed, Commissioned, Ordained) as well as the expectations for continuing covenantal bonds on the part of those already authorized. Approaching the *Marks* within a Covenant of Discernment and Formation encourages honesty, reciprocity, and a willingness to risk meeting one another with a spirit of openness. An attitude of hospitality invites a genuine, trusting presence that enables partners in a conversation to enter into one another's worlds. Space is then created where individuals allow themselves to be changed by their experiences together.

Because the *Marks* focus on the leadership needs of the church along with the aspirations of an individual candidate, the *Marks* are essential components of the covenant relationship. This resource helps identify qualities that may clarify the actual ministry to which an individual is being called. The *Marks* are not a checklist, not a list of "things to do," nor are they "entry requirements." Rather, they are dynamic descriptions of various aspects of Christian ministry that inform the preparation process for those discerning a call to authorized ministry; within that discernment process, the *Marks* are an essential guide in addressing whether a Member in Discernment demonstrates sufficient readiness to engage in authorized ministry. Of equal importance, the *Marks* also provide a way to assess ongoing faithfulness and effectiveness for the ministry to which authorized ministers are called; and the *Marks* continue to guide those engaged in authorized ministry throughout their entire lives.

Another important component in the discerning process is "covenant". Covenant is a commitment to be with and for one another for the good of Christ's Church rather than for the good of any one individual. To be part of such a relationship requires trust, openness, and spiritual maturity. When the Covenantal Partners embark on this journey, they do so in the expectation that all the partners will be changed. Listening to one another, welcoming and valuing the insights and wisdom of one another, hearing the Spirit speaking to the Church, the participants become open to transformation. Such a commitment involves holding one another accountable to the covenant without knowing where it will lead. With its focus on welcome, openness, trust, and mutual accountability, the covenantal process is a reflection of the faith expressed in one of the UCC formative documents:

"We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us."

*(Adapted from: Ministry in the United Church of Christ: A Background Document-
<http://www.ucc.org/ministers/ministry-issues/Ministry-in-the-United-Church-of-Christ-A-Background-Document.pdf>)*

Discussion Guide

Below are a set of questions, organized in Seven Sessions, to be used by Mentors, Advisors, Lay Committees, Committees on Ministry, and Members in Discernment, in accordance with the *Marks*, as they practice the spiritual discipline of discernment in partnership with one another. This guide can be used by the Member in Discernment, independent of the committee or mentor, or as a tool for discussion between the Member in Discernment, and mentors, advisors and committees. (Possible *Marks* categories are noted parenthetically.)

Session I: Discernment as Listening (*Marks Categories*)

Question 1: In what ways did your family of origin influence your faith pilgrimage? (*ESFOSP, UCC, ESST, SIIPA*)

Question 2: Describe an experience that shifted the way you viewed God, your faith, the church, or your call. What was so significant about this experience, the people involved, the time and place? (*You note which marks you feel were engaged*)

Question 3: Think about a time in your life when you was ready to turn your back on God, or when you/I questioned whether God was truly present in your life? How did this experience shape who you/I are today? (*You note which marks you feel were engaged*)

Question 4: Take a moment to reflect on Psalm 139 (below). How does this passage speak to you? (*ESFOSP, ESST, PTP*)

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. 17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. 19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me— 20 those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? 22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. 24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Session II: Spiritual Foundation for Ministry

Question 1: Though the call to the ministry is not as concrete for some as it is for others, please share your own narrative around “call” as vocation, and describe how it is currently being shaped and nurtured in your context as a member in discernment. (*ESFOSP, you name others important and formative in your call*)

Question 2: In what ways has the word of God, as well as other prophetic literature, been instrumental in the development of your spiritual life as well as in your discerning a call to the ministry? (*ESST, others*)

Question 3: How important is a “lived faith showing love of God, trust in Jesus, and an openness to the Holy Spirit” in responding to the call of vocational ministry? Are there challenges involved in affirming and living by this statement for those called to authorized ministry? (*name marks related to your passions*)

Question 4: How has your community (family, friends, church, mentors) been influential in nurturing your faith development, shaping your call, and affirming your gifts for ministry? (*SIIPA, others*)

Session III: UCC Identity for Ministry

Question 1: How have your experiences and activities within the wider Church expressed a commitment to the “oneness of the body of Christ as expressed through commitment to ecumenism, justice, and the full embrace of all persons in the radical hospitality of God”? How would you describe your own theology of inclusivity as it relates to the life and work of Jesus Christ?

Question 2: What is your understanding of *covenantal relationship* as it exists with the United Church of Christ? As an authorized minister in the UCC would you be comfortable with living within the covenant of mutual accountability as it relates to your life and work in the church? How have covenantal relationships, either negatively or positively, influenced your own perception of accountability and mutuality?

Question 3: The church is part of the ever-shifting cultural landscape that is yielding a less denominationally committed “core” than in times past. Not necessarily negative, though challenging in terms of stability and determining the future trajectory of our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, how do you see yourself contributing to a healthy and thriving future for the UCC?

Question 4: Discuss ways that your ministry (and that of a church under your leadership) embodies the core values of the UCC: changing lives, continuing testimony and extravagant welcome.

Question 5: How do you envision the UCC in its various settings should respond to religious, social, economic, and political trends, changing demographics, and other emerging factors in society?

Question 6: Describe your own understanding of the UCC’s commitment to being a united and uniting, multiracial and multicultural, open and affirming, accessible to all and just peace church.

Session IV: Formation for Ministry

Question 1: How do you practice self-care in your life as it relates to mind, body and spirit, and how important are these practices to your holistic well-being? (CAC, SIIPA)

Question 2: As one who has expressed interest in, and a call to, vocational ministry how do your personal theological beliefs guide you through the process of discerning next steps in your life? How do you think you will balance providing guidance to those whom you are called to serve whose theological beliefs or ideologies will not always line up with yours while also maintaining integrity and commitment to your own convictions? (ESFOSP, ESST, CAC, PTP)

Question 3: Creating boundaries in our lives is an ongoing challenge that we face in both our professional and personal lives. As you think about setting healthy boundaries for yourself, your family, your congregation or ministry setting what do you envision that process will look like? What challenges will you or have you already faced around boundary setting? (CAC, PTP, SIIPA)

Question 4: What role has education played in your life whether formal or informal, and how do you see yourself continuing to learn and grow as you progress in your call and career as a Minister? (UCC, CAC, Code)

Question 5: Look over Marks that outline specific tasks of ministry. Engage in conversation around how you see those lived in the life of a local church.

Session V: Knowledge and Skills for Ministry:

Question 1: What differences do you think physical, psychological, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, class, cultural, religious, racial and ethnic factors make in the ways that human beings experience the world? How has any one or a number of these components influenced your life experience? (SIIPA, WTJM, PTP, CAC)

Question 2: Perspective is everything. Explain a time when your perspective on an issue or personal matter shifted due to hearing someone else's perspective. How do you tend to approach life each day; through what lens do you view the world and the people in it? (Name related Mark)

Question 3: Symbols and images are a language in and of themselves within all cultures of the world. What images or symbols within the greater society have emerged as influential in the last decade, and has their influence been positive, negative or neither? What are some symbols or images that have been monumental to you throughout your life? (ESST, PTP)

Question 4: Technology has truly become integrated into our everyday lives in the United States. How comfortable are you as a professional in utilizing all of the gadgets and gizmos brought to us in this information age? (BTLS, CAC)

Session VI: Knowledge and Skills for Ministry:

Question 1: What level of authority do you ascribe to the bible, what is your personal level of engagement with the biblical texts, and how knowledgeable would you say that you are about its contents? What role do you see the bible playing in today's religious sphere? (UCC, ESST, PTP, SIIPA)

Question 2: Hermeneutics, or biblical interpretation, is an important part of a minister's theological and pastoral identity. Discuss your preferred methods of biblical interpretation, and those methods that you would like to explore further. As an adolescent, young adult, etc. were you exposed to various types of biblical interpretation? How do you think your personal experiences as a "listener" influenced your own pursuit of interpretation? (ESST, ESFOSP, PTP)

Question 3: There are more than 20 major religions being practiced in the world today. Outside of the Christian tradition, how familiar are you with some of these other faith traditions and religious beliefs? What do you find fascinating about religion, and what perplexes you about our religious systems? (UCC, CAC, WTJM, BTLS)

Question 4: Christianity has a rich and dynamic global history that continues to teach and liberate it's followers while also managing to exclude, limit and oppress others. What major evolutions have you seen take place within the Christian Church over time, and in what ways does the modern American church reflect the changes of the historical Christian populations? (UCC, WTJM, SIIPA)

Session VII: Knowledge and Skills for Ministry:

Question 1: What is your theological understanding of authorized ministry, and how does your theology influence your practical role as a Ministry? (UCC, ESST, PTP, SIIPA)

Question 2: In what ways have you seen Power misused within the church? What is the role of power and authority within the church, and as a minister how is that power related to the office you hold? How can the proper understanding and use of power and authority be beneficial to the church? (UCC, WTJM, SIIPA, CAC)

Question 3: As a public figure within the community, how can a Minister engage in community leadership that is collaborative and transformative, while engaging in respectful ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, and still celebrate the unique features of local faith communities while encouraging them to be receptive to the perspectives of the broader church and world? (WTJM, PTP, ESST, BTLS)

Question 4: How important is it to you, as one called to vocational ministry, to adapt to the practices of ministry unique to the social, cultural, environmental and ecclesiastical aspects of particular settings? How important do you think those adaptations are to a particular faith setting? Share an example of how one appreciates, practices and passes on the traditions of faith while interpreting them in light of the context of a diverse and changing world. (SIIPA, BTLS, WTJM, CAC)

Question 5: What experiences have you had in providing pastoral care? Chaplaincy, CPE, visitation, etc.? What is the role of the minister in providing direct care to the members of your faith setting, and in education and equipping others to join you in the care of the Church? (UCC, CAC, SIIPA)

Question 6: Conflict is not usually an inviting subject, but is a necessary agent of change and adaptation within any system. How equipped are you to evaluate the contexts of a community's ministry, history and DNA and creatively lead that community through change or conflict? (BTLS, SIIPA)

Question 7: Wearing the many hats of a minister includes being prepared to understand, participate in, and sometimes even provide financial administration of the church and other religious organizations. How capable do you feel in providing leadership in the area of financial management? In what ways could you broaden your understanding and experience with these matters? (BTLS, SIIPA)

Question 8: Describe an ideal "Call" that would incite passion and excitement in you as a Minister. What gifts do you bring to the table as an authorized minister, and how do you see God using you within the church? (ESFOSP, SIIPA, CAC)