

**Northern California Nevada Conference
United Church of Christ**

GUIDELINES

for churches supporting Members In Discernment regarding authorized ministry

It must be understood by a candidate, Local Church, Conference and advisors that to be accepted as a Member In Discernment (MID) with the Conference does not commit either the individual or the Conference to ordination / commissioning. Discernment is a time of reflection, study, and prayer, when the possibilities of ministry, lay or ordained, can be explored.

I. Definition

To be a Member In Discernment (MID) is a covenantal relationship which exists between a person considering and/or preparing for ordained or commissioned ministry, his/her Local (sponsoring) Church and the United Church of Christ, represented by the Northern California Nevada Conference.

II. Purpose

Discernment is a time for a person to:

→ **REFLECT** about the meaning and significance of his/her decision to explore authorized ministry while being in relationship with both a Local Church and the Conference.

→ **PARTICIPATE** in the life of the United Church of Christ, locally, and at the Association, Conference, and national levels.

→ **GROW AND MATURE** in faith by discovering areas of personal strength and weakness, with the aid of advisors.

→ **UNDERSTAND** the history and polity of the United Church of Christ and learn about its governing bodies, committees, covenanted and affiliated ministries.

→ **LEARN** about specific procedures, guidelines and requirements leading to recommendation by this Conference and approval by an Association.

→ **BUILD** a network of caring and supportive relationships with persons in the Local Church, Association, and Conference who will guide his/her pilgrimage toward authorization.

III. Role of the Committee on Ministry, Section A

The Committee on Ministry, Section A (COM-A) represents the Conference and works in cooperation with the Local Church and seminary or theological training program to help prepare the Member in Discernment for authorization.

COM-A's overall tasks are

1. To offer fellowship, support, and guidance while the individual completes the necessary requirements leading to authorization.
2. To assess a person's fitness for ministry and periodically reassess his/her readiness for authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ.
3. To appoint two supporters to work closely with the person: (a) an advisor who is an authorized minister, other than the person's pastor, and (b) a member of COM-A to act as a liaison.
4. To look for "readiness for authorized ministry." While discerning readiness is not an exact science, there are general signs which must be observed in the person:

a) Knowledge

If seeking ordained ministry, a person will be expected to have completed course work in the following areas of study in fulfillment of the M.Div. degree from an accredited seminary:

- i) The Bible and Biblical Interpretation
- ii) Systematic Theology and Ethics
- iii) Church History
- iv) Pastoral Theology (including Homiletics, Christian Education, Pastoral Care, Psychology, Ethics, and Administration)
- v) United Church of Christ history/theology and faith/polity/practice

If seeking commissioning, a person will be expected to have completed course or experiential work specifically preparing him/her in the area of gifts or skills to be shared as a ministry. In addition, preparation in one or more of the above areas may be recommended or required by the Committee on Ministry to provide appropriate theological, Biblical or other foundation for the commissioned work.

A Member in Discernment towards ordination should be able to articulate, in his/her ordination paper and in ensuing discussions with COM-A members, a theological position on the important doctrines and concepts of Christian faith, such as: God, Creation, fall, sin, grace, covenant, Jesus Christ, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, Holy Spirit, Church, ministry, missions, world, and the reign of God (See guidelines for the ordination paper in *Manual on Ministry*.)

A Member in Discernment toward Commissioning should be able to articulate, in his/her commissioning paper and in ensuing discussions with COM-A members, a theology which expresses the holy aspect of the work or gift to be shared, and understanding of the important concepts of Christian faith (specifically God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the role of the church in the world (see guidelines for the commissioning paper in *Manual on Ministry*.)

In addition, s/he should be able to articulate his/her evolving understandings or theological struggles in these areas.

b) Experience

The Member in Discernment toward ordained ministry will complete a variety of field experiences in preparation. In each instance, a supervisor's evaluation is required.

These experiences will include:

- i) 1-2 years of supervised field work as part of his/her seminary training
- ii) Opportunities to preach, teach, and assume leadership roles at the person's sponsoring church, in the Association, and Conference
- iii) One quarter of Clinical Pastoral Education (recommended)

The Member in Discernment toward commissioned ministry likely comes to the process with training and experience in the area of giftedness. However, during the time of discernment, s/he is encouraged to seek out further training and experiences to press the edges of knowledge, and to seek opportunities to begin serving or teaching within the wider church.

c) Personal Growth

The Member in Discernment should demonstrate signs of growth and maturity in the following areas:

CALLING/VOCATION	A mature understanding of his/her calling to Christian ministry and the reasons for seeking ordination / commissioning in the UCC
FAITH/COMMITMENT	A strong commitment to the challenges and responsibilities of Christian ministry.
LEADERSHIP	An ability to exert leadership working with, and in partnership with, others.
COMMUNICATIONS	An ability to communicate the "good news" of the gospel, and to help people to understand the relationships between scripture (or tradition) and contemporary issues
MISSION OUTREACH	A deep sensitivity of the needs and plight of the poor and oppressed, and an awareness of the Church's mission throughout the world.
COVENANT RESPONSIBILITY	Eagerness to strengthen the covenant relationships which unite local churches together in Associations, in Conferences, and in a denomination that seeks to bind all Christians in the one Body of Christ.
PROFESSIONALISM	Understanding of ministerial ethics – moral and ecclesiastical - and agreement to live by them.
SELF AND OTHERS	An understanding of one's self and how one relates to others, particularly in times of stress, crisis, and conflict.

IV. Role of the Local Church

- a) Make the formal, written request to COM-A, acting for the Conference, to recognize as a Member in Discernment a member of that Local Church considering ordained or commissioned ministry
- b) Nurture through personal contact and support
- c) Offer opportunities to participate in worship, work with committees, teach children and adults, preach, plan, or exercise his/her skills in the service of Christian community
- d) Challenge the person intellectually, morally, and spiritually – asking the “tough questions” about faith and application to life
- e) Keep the person on the church’s mailing list and in all ways connected to the life of the community even if s/he is living at a distance
- f) Contribute financial support
 - Supplement the cost of his/her registration, meals, etc. for meetings of the Association and the Annual Meeting of the Conference
 - Provide grants, scholarships, or no-interest loans as an investment in tomorrow’s church!
 - Contribute 1/3 or more of the cost for the person to participate in the required Candidate Assessment Program through a center for career and ministry development approved by the Conference. (suggested that 1/3 of the cost be borne by the Association, and 1/3 by the person)
- g) Demonstrate knowledge about the guidelines and requirements for ordination or commissioning (referring to the materials posted on the Conference website, and the guidelines in the *Manual on Ministry*)

V. Role of Advisors

- a) Meet regularly with the Member in Discernment to aid in the understanding and fulfillment of the goals and steps of the discernment process
- b) Where applicable, observe the person in the sponsoring church, field work, or other setting
- c) Encourage and, if possible, provide experiences whereby the person can grow in areas that need strengthening
- d) Facilitate a caring relationship of trust and support and be a ministerial role model to encourage the candidate’s growth.

VI. The Process

The Local Church

Individuals should begin the process of being formally recognized by a local church as a Member In Discernment as soon as the decision is made to explore seriously the possibility for ordained or commissioned ministry.

The pastor and the church body have the responsibility to discern whether the candidate is sincere and gifted for ministry. If they so believe, the body, on behalf of the church, votes the following motion, that is then included in a letter to the Committee on Ministry, Section A:

“VOTED: That the pastor communicate to the Committee on Ministry, Section A of the Northern California Nevada Conference, United Church of Christ the desire of ____ (local church name) ____ that one of its members ____ (name of candidate) ____ be examined and if found acceptable, be received and recognized as a Member in Discernment of authorized ministry in the Conference.”

The Church and the Candidate

The candidate contacts the scheduler for COM-A for an appointment to be interviewed for recognition of Member In Discernment. The candidate insures that the documents on the Request for Recognition as a Member in Discernment checklist are received in the Conference office. The checklist is available from the Conference office, or online.

The Committee on Ministry, Section A

- a) Establishes a date for the interview and notifies the candidate.
- b) Opens a file for the candidate in the Conference office

At the Meeting with COM-A

The candidate is encouraged to bring his/her pastor and./or other individuals supportive of the journey to authorized ministry, and who can offer observations on the candidate's gifts or participation in the life of the church.

The meeting begins with prayer and introductions. The candidate is invited to share a synopsis of his/her faith journey or any new insights to the written material presented.

The committee engages the candidate in conversation around issues of faith, pilgrimage, and vision for ministry.

There is conversation about the meaning of “being a Member in Discernment,” the role of the local church, expectations of the candidate, and responsibilities of the Conference and any potential ministerial advisors.

The candidate and his/her guests are excused from the room while the committee discusses and determines whether to receive and recognize the individual as a Member in Discernment. The committee votes and the candidate is invited back to receive the committee's decision and any supportive commentary. (The candidate receives a confirming letter within two weeks, along with a copy of the notes of “next steps” taken in the meeting.

The committee deliberates as soon as possible to choose an appropriate ministerial advisor for the candidate. This advisor must have ministerial standing in the Northern California Nevada Conference. The goal is to provide confirmation of an In Discernment advisor within 1 month.

Member In Discernment Requirements

A Member In Discernment is expected to meet with his/her advisor at least 4 times/year to establish relationship, review goals, deal with problems, and evaluate progress, *It is the candidate's responsibility to initiate these contacts.*

The MID status is granted for one year at a time, and must be renewed through a MID renewal meeting each year.

The MID must complete one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, and a Psychological Assessment prior to their Ordination interview.

A candidate must remain in Discernment status for at least one year before being eligible to be interviewed for recommendation to an Association for ordination or commissioning. COM-A may recommend a longer period as deemed appropriate.

Candidate Psychological Assessment

A candidate assessment program is required as early as possible in the Discernment process. It will be recommended when the candidate is first recognized as a Member In Discernment, and at each renewal thereafter until completed. A candidate cannot be considered for ordination or commissioning until the assessment has been completed and the report received by the committee.

At this time, the approved sites for candidate assessment in the Northern California Nevada Conference are the Center for Ministry, in Oakland, CA, and the Interfaith Counseling Center in Berkeley, CA. If a candidate is attending seminary outside of the geographical area of the Conference, and it is impossible to return to one of these sites, contact should be made as soon as possible with the Associate Conference Minister for Ministerial Authorization, to discuss appropriate alternatives.

The cost of the assessment should be divided among the Member in Discernment, the home church, and the Association.

There are two main values to this assessment.

(a) It will help the MID and the Committee determine which areas of ability and aptitude will give shape and direction to the candidate's ministry, as well as those characteristics of personality where growth would be desirable.

(b) It may be used by the Committee, along with other considerations, to help assess the suitability and readiness for authorized ministry of a Member in Discernment.

A signed release must be given to the assessment center so that reports can be sent to the Committee on Ministry. Candidates are assured that the information provided to the Committee will be treated with strict professional confidentiality.

Important Note

The granting of Discernment status does not assure ordination or commissioning, but does assure guidance, counsel, and assistance throughout the time of exploration.

Discernment status is not transferable from one Association or Conference to another, but COM-A will write letters of recommendation and share its files with other Committees on the Ministry upon request.