

## Licensure and Commissioning

### Background and Context

In 2018, the Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) ministry team published an updated Manual on Ministry. Among the changes proposed were a formalized expansion of formation pathways for candidates towards ordination (a living out of the Ministry Issues Pronouncement of 2005 and further ratified in 2009) and an expanded understanding of what constituted an “ordainable call” in the United Church of Christ.

The shift to multiple paths towards ordination affirmed the United Church of Christ’s commitment to a learned clergy and a recognition that learnedness happens in a variety of ways, not all of which include credentialed educational degree programs. This includes seminaries, regional theological educational programs, mentorships, and individualized education plans developed by Committees on Ministry for Members in Discernment. Moving to a competency-based model of formation, Committees on Ministry use the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers as the standard by which they assess and discern a Member in Discernment’s readiness for authorized ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

The shifts that expanded the understanding of an ordainable call affirms the United Church of Christ’s commitment to the Local Church as the locus for ministry while recognizing that there is a need for representative servant leadership in settings other than the Local Church. The Manual on Ministry identifies three criteria for an ordainable call: the call is covenantal (with a connection to a Local Church including through a four-way covenant), the call responds to the needs of the Church for priestly and pastoral servant leadership (including sacramental leadership), and the call involves mutuality in ministry between the minister and the calling body with structures of both support and accountability.

The changes that expand both the pathways through which someone may be ordained to ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ and the understanding of what “ordained ministry” looks like in the twenty-first century have led to deeper and more faithful responses on the part of Committees on Ministry and candidates seeking ordination in the UCC.

And – the Church still has the need for temporary, faithful, accountable, pastoral leadership in a particular context when an ordained minister is not available to serve. Whereas the 1986 Manual on Ministry focused on three forms of authorization based on role, education, and timeframe for ministry, the 2018 Manual on Ministry took a different route. Recognizing that all authorized ministry is ministry, and that the Church is primarily concerned with ensuring that the sacraments and rites of the Church are faithfully administered by gifted, supported, and accountable pastoral leadership, the current iteration of the UCC Manual on Ministry distinguishes between ministry that lasts for a season and ministry that lasts for a lifetime.

For ministry that lasts for a **lifetime**, ordination is appropriate. This aligns with the practices of the Church from its earliest years and through many different expressions throughout time. Ordination in the life of the Church Universal is understood as a lifelong vocational call to a ministry of Word and Sacrament, servant leadership “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12, as quoted in MOM p. 8). This is true

whether the ordained minister is serving in full-time ministry, part-time ministry, part-time ministry with a secular job “on the side,” or whether the individual is professionally retired from the practice of ministry.

For ministry that lasts for **a season** in a person’s life, Lay Ministerial Standing is appropriate. Lay Ministerial Standing recognizes that a Local Church has a specific need for pastoral leadership and that an ordained minister is not available to meet that need, but there exists within the community an individual with gifts and graces to meet this need for a temporary time in that Local Church. That “temporary time” is referred to in the 2018 Manual on Ministry as a “season” and the Manual suggests that this “season” lasts approximately seven years. Those who continue to feel called beyond that time frame are urged to consider whether they have a lifelong call to ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ, which is expressed through ordination (even if that individual continues to serve in the same context post-ordination).

These forms of authorization embody the Church’s need for priestly, prophetic, representative and servant pastoral leadership. Section 1 of the 2018 Manual on Ministry theologically roots the role and purpose of authorized ministry and it is this theological grounding that serves to aid in the mutual discernment towards a lifetime call to ministry and a temporary call to pastoral leadership in a particular location.

### **Lay Ministerial Standing, Licensure, and Commissioning**

Although Licensure and Lay Ministerial Standing and Licensure are nearly identical in concept and practice (see the attached chart on the last page of this document), some Conferences have not yet shifted to the use of Lay Ministerial Standing in place of Licensure. For those conferences who have not yet shifted to the use of Lay Ministerial Standing in place of Licensure, the following guidelines are suggested. These guidelines are in keeping with the 1986 UCC Manual on Ministry, which received some updates in 2001. Commissioning Resources are also shared, as are some background and context to the 2018 changes proposed.

All authorized ministers are expected to abide by the UCC Ministerial Code, to receive the support, guidance, and oversight of Committees on Ministry, and are subject to all four oversight processes of authorized ministers (Periodic Vocational Support, Situational Support Consultations, Information Reviews, and Fitness Reviews).

### **Continuation of Licensure**

Licensure is intended as a temporary authorization for ministry of Word and Sacrament in contexts where an ordained minister is not available and in those contexts where Lay Ministerial Standing is not yet in use. Licensure is specific to the location of service (typically one Local Church or a yoked parish arrangement), and time-bound, with annual renewals expected. Licensure grants full sacramental authority within that local setting, and the minister is considered an authorized minister for participation in Association, Conference, and national meetings of the United Church of Christ. However, licensure does not grant the individual authorization to represent the United Church of Christ beyond the local setting for ministry for which they have been authorized, or with individuals who do not have a connection with that local setting for ministry. Sacramental authority, including that of officiating at marriages, is approved only in connection with that specific location.

Because licensure is intended to be temporary, licenses must be renewed annually by the Committee on Ministry. MESA has drafted a Sample Application for Licensure and a Sample Licensure Renewal, the latter of which also functions as an Information Review for licensed ministers. Additionally, licensure is not transferable across Associations or extended to new positions. If a Licensed Minister seeks a new call, they must seek a new license. Finally, a licensed minister is not eligible to circulate a UCC Ministerial Profile.

For those ministers engaged in long-term licensed ministry or licensed ministry in multiple sequential calls, it is strongly recommended that the minister and the Committee on Ministry discern whether ordination is appropriate. Licensure, like Lay Ministerial Standing, is not intended for those with a lifelong call to ministry. [The Transition Discussion Guide](#) regarding one form of authorization is a suggested conversation document for these individuals and the Committees on Ministry who provide for their oversight.

### Continuation of Commissions

In the 1986 Manual on Ministry, Commissioned Ministry was defined as a “church-related ministry that does not require ordination or licensure,” which was interpreted as having pastoral and teaching authority but not authority to preside at sacraments or at weddings. These individuals were engaged in career-long vocational work that extended the ministry of the Church, such as church administration, parish nursing, music ministry, and child and youth ministry. They had specific knowledge and skills that furthered the mission of Christ’s Church but do not involve sacramental leadership.

Commissioned Ministry is vocation-long, transferable across Associations so long as one is still engaged in that church-related ministry, and with eligibility to circulate a profile. Commissioned Ministers resign their commission when they are no longer engaged in that church-related ministry; Committees on Ministry may grant “Retired Commissioned Minister Standing” upon retirement on a case-by-case basis. Oversight of these ministries mirrors that of those with Ordained Ministerial Standing.

Because of the faithful discernment of previous Committees on Ministry and of those engaged in Commissioned and Licensed Ministry, a framework for transitioning was proposed at the time of the release of the 2018 Manual on Ministry (see: [The Transition Discussion Guide](#)). All who served in these forms of ministry and the COMs who support and hold them accountable were encouraged to discern whether moving to ordination was appropriate. Those with active commissions were encouraged to discern whether their church-related ministry might in this new time and framework be rightly understood as an ordainable ministry. Some Commissioned Ministers sought ordination, some are still discerning, and some have discerned that commissioning is still the appropriate form of standing for their ministry, most often because they do not preside over the sacraments of baptism and communion. These commissions shall continue so long as the minister is engaged in that church-related ministry, but **no new commissions are anticipated.**

Chart outlining Licensure, Lay Ministerial Standing, and Commissioned Ministry

<i>Lay Ministerial Standing</i>	<i>Licensure</i>	<i>Commissioning</i>
<i>Temporary authorization for ministry within a single local context</i>	<i>Temporary authorization for ministry within a single local context</i>	<i>Authorization for “church-related ministry not requiring ordination or licensure”</i>
<i>Requires Local Church membership</i>	<i>Requires Local Church Membership</i>	<i>Requires Local Church membership</i>
<i>Valid for up to a suggested maximum of seven years</i>	<i>Requires annual renewal with Committee on Ministry (no cap but not intended to be permanent)</i>	<i>Vocation-long (but may be granted “Retired Commissioned Minister” upon professional retirement)</i>
<i>Sacramental leadership within the ministry setting</i>	<i>Sacramental leadership within the ministry setting</i>	<i>Non-sacramental ministry leadership</i>
<i>Not transferrable</i>	<i>Not transferrable</i>	<i>Transferrable across Associations and Conferences so long as one is engaged in this specific church-related ministry</i>
<i>Supervision by an ordained minister</i>	<i>Supervision by an ordained minister</i>	<i>Supervision not specified</i>
<i>Suitable when an ordained minister is unavailable for service</i>	<i>Used when an ordained minister is unavailable for service</i>	<i>Suitable for non-sacramental ministry that furthers the Church’s mission and requires oversight by a Committee on Ministry</i>
<i>No “inherent” privileges of voice and vote</i>	<i>“Voting membership may be granted”</i>	<i>Has voice and vote in wider church expressions</i>
<i>May seek ordination</i>	<i>May seek ordination</i>	<i>May seek ordination</i>
<i>May hold MID status concurrently</i>	<i>May hold MID status concurrently</i>	<i>May hold MID status concurrently</i>
<i>May not circulate a profile (unless a MID approved for ordination pending call)</i>	<i>May not circulate a profile (unless a MID approved for ordination pending call)</i>	<i>May circulate a profile</i>
<i>Number: 77 (began in 2018)</i>	<i>Number: 437 (down from about 700 in 2018)</i>	<i>Number: 101 (down from about 135 in 2018)</i>