

Commissioned lay pastors (CLPs)

G.14.0140 - Commissioned Ministry

In the life of the Christian community God calls people to particular acts of discipleship to use their personal gifts for service in the Church and in the world. These specific acts may be strengthened and confirmed by formal recognition and commissioning in worship. (W-4.3000)

Commissioning may be used to recognize many gifts and ministries such as church school teaching, mission service, and community outreach ministries. Since all Presbyterians are called to service, it is not necessary to commission or ordain persons in order to validate their sense of call (G-5.0102).

I. What is a Commissioned Lay Pastor?

The particular role of Commissioned Lay Pastor is an extension of the office of Elder which is an ordained office of the church. The CLP role was created in the mid 1980s in response to the mission needs of presbyteries which did not have enough ministers of Word and Sacrament to adequately serve their churches. At first it was “Commissioned Lay Preacher”. A decade later, the role was expanded to give presbyteries the option for authorizing a CLP to administer the sacraments and other pastoral functions and the name was changed to “Commissioned Lay Pastor”.

See G-14.0560 for the constitutional provisions regarding Commissioned Lay Pastors

II. Planning Your Presbytery CLP Program

As you consider the mission needs of your presbytery, you may find that CLPs are needed to serve churches that cannot meet the minimum compensation for a minister, or churches that are in isolated rural communities, or churches that need a leader who is fluent in the language and culture of a new immigrant group. If you have ministers, educators, and others available to meet your mission needs, it is not required that a presbytery institute a CLP program. At this writing, at least one presbytery commissions only new immigrants as CLPs.

Many Presbyterians are excited about the educational program offered to CLPs and want to find new avenues of service. The PCUSA will be enriched if such individuals are encouraged to enroll in lifelong learning opportunities offered by seminaries, presbyteries, church-related colleges, and other organizations.

It is essential that presbyteries communicate their requirements for becoming a CLP so that individuals are not disappointed when they complete course work and find their presbytery does not need CLPs or that they do not meet the requirements.

Each presbytery that develops a CLP program has to determine where the parts of the program fit in its structure. Some presbyteries asks the Committee on Preparation for Ministry to oversee the application, screening, and education of CLPs, while the examination, commissioning, deployment, supervision, and support are tasks of COM. Other presbyteries create a special committee to work with CLPs. However it is structured, COM must work closely with the CLP process. Ordinarily, the COM works with congregations in deciding when and where a CLP can best provide the pastoral services that the mission requires and the COM supervises the work of the CLP through a minister of Word and Sacrament who serves as a mentor/supervisor.

III. Application and Screening of Potential CLPs

To be eligible to become a CLP, a person must be a PCUSA elder in good standing with gifts and graces for pastoral ministry. Since CLPs will be serving congregations in the pastoral role, it is as important to screen CLPs as it is pastors, youth workers, or others who have access to persons in vulnerable life situations. Information should be sought from a pastor and others who know the CLP applicant well and background checks are recommended. It is important to examine the motives of the applicant. If the person is seeking personal status from the new role or full-time employment, that is not the intent of the program.

IV. CLP Education

CLP education shall include Bible, Reformed Theology and Sacraments, Presbyterian Polity, preaching, leading worship, pastoral care, and teaching (G-14.0560). There are many models for CLP education. Some presbyteries have ministers, educators, or seminary or college faculty who teach the CLP courses. Other presbyteries partner with seminaries to offer a joint program in which graduates receive certificates from the seminary. Most of our PCUSA seminaries offer programs that meet the requirements for CLP education. Creative provisions are made to reach CLP candidates through evening and weekend courses and online education.

Go to pcusa.org/seminaries to see what is offered by PCUSA seminaries for CLP education. Some Presbyterian Colleges also offer CLP courses. Many of the Christian Educator certification courses meet CLP requirements. See pcusa.org/christianeducators for a listing of these course offerings.

V. Examination and Commissioning

After the educational program is completed, a committee of the presbytery examines the CLP candidate. Some sample examination materials are available in the Book of Occasional Services and online at pcusa.org/clp

The presbytery commissions a CLP for a limited period for service in a particular church. Based on the needs of that church, the presbytery may authorize the CLP to administer one or both of the sacraments, moderate the session under supervision, perform weddings (if the state allows), and vote at presbytery. These authorizations are not automatic and may be granted to some CLPs in a presbytery and not to others based on the ministry context.

It is advisable to have a written covenant of expectations between the CLP, the congregation served, and the presbytery. A sample covenant is below.

For information about compensation and tax concerns see the web sites cited.

A presbytery service of commissioning is held. A sample service of worship is available on the website. Many presbyteries also have a service of celebration in the congregation to be served. This is a joyous occasion that gives visibility to the presbytery and starts the ministry off well.

VI. Supervision and Support of CLPs

The CLP is accountable to the presbytery through the minister moderator of the session. It is important that a moderator be chosen who will work closely with the CLP in a supportive way. The presbytery also must assign a minister of the Word and Sacrament as a mentor and supervisor (G-14.05064). Since CLPs are often expected to carry out pastoral functions without the benefit of a full theological education, they benefit from ministers who have had the added education and experience. CLPs often are knowledgeable about the culture of the region and are able to share wisdom with the ministers with whom they work. Some of the most exciting ministries include CLPs and ministers working together as a team, sharing their gifts.

Just as minister pastors are strongly encouraged to be involved in lifelong learning, so it is important for CLPs to continue their education. Many chose to enroll in degree program through a PCUSA seminary.

It is common for CLPs to throw themselves into their ministry with great enthusiasm. Many of them have other employment as well. The potential for burnout is great. The presbytery should provide support and be alert to help the CLP monitor life balance.

VII. What if a CLP Moves?

It should be carefully noted that the commissioning of a lay pastor is “local,” that is, for service in one congregation, and is valid for up to three years. If the lay pastor ceases to serve a particular congregation, the commission is no longer valid. Because the use, training, supervision, and nurture of CLPs is determined individually by each presbytery, lay pastors are not eligible to use the PCUSA call system - Church Leadership Connection. The commission they have been granted is by one presbytery and is not transferable to another presbytery. If a CLP relocates outside the presbytery and joins a PCUSA congregation in their new area, they must contact the presbytery to see if there is a need for CLP services. If so, reference checks would be done and the new presbytery would determine whether the previous training meets their requirements.