

Suggested Guidelines for Committees on Preparation for Ministry for Candidates with Disabilities in Accommodating Ordination Exams

**Prepared by Nancy Olthoff, Ph.D.
For Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC)**

Endorsed by the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates

Introduction/Background:

Ordination examinations are required of each candidate prior to entering professional ministry. These exams establish professional standards for ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and integrate academics with practical ministry for entry level competence. Multiple stories of candidates for ministry with disabilities who have had difficulty with passing their ordination exams have reached the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns network. Recently, some local Committees on Preparation for Ministry (CPM) have requested consultation on this matter to suggest ways in which they might proceed that would be fair, consistent and equitable to candidates and faithful to the mandates in the Book of Order in G-14.0310b(4) and G-14.0313b¹ regarding Examination Requirements and alternatives. The CPMs need to submit their process to their Synods to demonstrate that they have determined a means by which a candidate who has failed twice or has a disability would be examined. Thus, this booklet has been prepared to facilitate the process of administering ordination exams to persons with disabilities.

Considerations:

Committees need to understand that ordination exams comprise part of the entire process that leads to becoming a Minister of Word and Sacrament. They are intended to be tools for discernment in the preparation process. These exams are similar to those that are used for admission into other professions in law, accounting, or nursing. Persons planning to enter the profession of ministry must demonstrate that they have competencies in several areas through a testing process. The specific five areas tested are Bible Content, Biblical Exegesis, Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, and Polity.

Generally, candidates with documented disabilities are provided accommodations in the testing process based upon their provision of documentation of disability and their previous educational accommodations. Accommodations are used to level the playing field for persons with disabilities, in other words to mitigate the impact of the disability on the testing process. These accommodations may vary widely since they are selected on a case-by-case basis. Accommodations should be provided for all students with documented disabilities without waiting for testing failure prior to their implementation.

Accessing Accommodations:

1. The candidate should submit documentation of disability to the CPM.
 - a. The documentation should be from a licensed professional (not a family member) that s/he has a disability.
 - b. The documentation should provide clear and specific evidence of the disability.

- c. The documentation should interpret the evidence of the disability as it pertains to test taking.
 - d. Recent documentation (within the past five years) is preferred. However, the committee may exercise discretion for specific cases.
 - e. The testing instrument utilized must be recognized as having good reliability and validity for the purpose of diagnosis. Examples of such instruments are the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale and the Woodcock Johnson III.
 - f. The documentation may provide suggestions for possible accommodations. This would link the results of the assessment to specific ways to decrease the impact of the disability. These may help the committee determine how to support the candidate as she/he prepares to be retested.
2. The CPM should have the documentation reviewed by someone with expertise in this area to make sure that it is adequate. If the documentation is inadequate, the candidate should be informed what s/he needs to provide to the committee.
 3. The CPM needs to hold a discussion with the candidate about prior use of accommodations during his/her academic career. What was effective in mitigating the impact of the disability and what was not? If no accommodations were previously used in the academic setting, seek to understand what has changed for the candidate in this setting.
 4. Once the CPM has accepted the candidate as a person with a disability, the candidate can be offered accommodations in order to achieve appropriate completion of the professional standard. Reasonable accommodations are made to support the person with a disability in the testing setting. They are decided on a case-by-case basis.

Recommendations about accommodations

1. Maintain the integrity of the examination so that the examination taken by the candidate with a disability is the same as taken by his/her peers. This eliminates potential charges that the exam was easier or more difficult than that taken by others.
2. Alter the manner in which the exam is administered to allow the candidate to provide demonstration of competency rather than evidence of disability.
3. Have an agreement with the candidate about which accommodations are to be used and be able to state the basis for each accommodation. (Do not provide a checklist to the candidate and allow the candidate to select accommodations.)
4. Always proctor exams to provide security for the candidate as well as the CPM.

5. Provide the equipment for accommodation, if possible. If the candidate is providing technology make sure that the screen is visible so there is no digression to other screens without permission.
6. Present the testing results in the same format, usually a written product, as will be graded for all other candidates. Thus, if a candidate dictates the exam as an accommodation, transcribe the words into written form. Do not ask graders to accept an audiotape that could allow for variation of tone and emphasis. This could provide an unfair advantage to the candidate with a disability.
7. Do not inform readers about the nature of the person's specific disability. The readers may be asked to disregard spelling errors as an accommodation. Nevertheless, the candidate should still demonstrate logical organization, wording that reflects grasp of the material, appropriate punctuation and appropriate sentence structure and grammar.
8. Maintain expectations rather than lower the standards for a candidate with a disability
 - This dishonors their accomplishments
 - This may contribute to other candidates being disgruntled
 - This could negatively impact the professional standard of pastors
9. Do not waive requirements. Candidates with and without disabilities need the satisfaction of meeting the standards for entering a career in professional ministry. As individuals move among presbyteries, they need the confidence that they have entered the profession in a respected manner.
10. Ensure that accommodations are provided but do not promise a passing grade. In other words, do not guarantee a successful outcome.
11. Do not assume for a candidate who is unsuccessful that the result is related to the disability especially if the appropriate accommodations have been provided. Other explanations such as lack of preparation, failure to take the appropriate class related to the exam content, or lack of adequate rest prior to taking the exam may well explain the failure. We encourage the exercise of pastoral care for those who are not successful in their candidacy process. Their gifts need to be recognized and affirmed even as they shift their focus from pastoral ministry into other fields of service.

Specific reasonable accommodations:

There are many accommodations for individuals with disabilities. The following list provides the most common accommodations and some perspective on the scope of accommodations.

1. The most common accommodation is extended time, usually up to a maximum of double time. This generally does not apply to take home exams.
2. Providing a distraction-reduced setting is the second most common accommodation. A setting without distractions is often requested, but cannot be guaranteed. Such a setting would exist if one could control any distracting influence from noise, smell, visual stimulation, heating, air conditioning or lighting. Thus, to reduce the expectation of the candidate that all possible distractions will be controlled, the committee will work to

provide the best possible setting with the fewest distractions within the context of their environment.

3. Disregarding spelling errors is a frequent accommodation for persons with learning disabilities.
4. Make sure that the testing site is accessible for persons using wheelchairs and provide tables at a height that is comfortable in relationship to the chair.
5. Some people may need a separate desk and chair arrangement rather than a standard student style desk.
6. Access to technology is often needed. A word processing program is the most common need. Candidates may use computers at most testing sites.
7. For some candidates encouragement to stay at the task, or reassurance that they are adequately prepared to face the task, may be needed to lessen anxiety and stress during the course of the testing. The proctor should be aware of what would be helpful to the individual, but may not discuss the contents to the exam itself.
8. Having a person read aloud the test questions may be helpful in order that the candidate may both hear and see the specific question being asked. Persons with learning disabilities often misread questions and thus misunderstand what is being asked. The person reading the test questions should not interpret the questions or define any of the words, but they may need to read the questions aloud several times to support the candidate.
9. Persons with attention deficit disorder, a specific learning disability, and some mental illnesses may need to have the final version of the exam read back to them in order to make corrections. Some may need to have the exam reread to them more than a single time. Some candidates who have difficulty with expressing their thoughts clearly may benefit from having the exam read by beginning with the final sentence and working back through the exam a sentence at a time. This takes the material out of context and allows individuals to determine whether a complete thought was stated clearly. Ask the candidate what is most helpful to him/her.
10. Some candidates with medical needs may need food available during the examination process or may need to take breaks. If breaks are taken, maintain all materials in the testing environment.
11. A sign language interpreter may be helpful for a person who is deaf. They may need to receive the instructions during the testing process in their preferred mode of communication.
12. Dictation of responses is an accommodation that is rarely needed, but may be allowed. If dictation occurs, have a skilled keyboard person present to transcribe the oral presentation into written form. Allow the candidate to review the printed out version to make corrections. Dictation to a tape with subsequent transcription does not allow the candidate the opportunity to revise his/her work and the practice is discouraged.

We hope that these suggestions will assist you in working with your candidates for ministry who may have disabilities. If you need to discuss this further, please contact Lesley Davies, Associate for Examination Services: 1-888-728-7228, extension 5746 (ldavies@ctr.pcusa.org) or the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) network at the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA): 1-888-728-7228, extension 5800 (sstack@ctr.pcusa). God's calling to each person is unique and God equips each person for the work of ministry.

¹ G-14.0310b(4): Examination requirements (4) presentation of satisfactory grades together with the examination papers in the five areas covered by the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates.

The examination requirements of G-14.0310b(4) shall not be waived until an inquirer or candidate has failed on two attempts to receive a satisfactory grade, unless the inquirer or candidate has a disability, documented by a person or person of the presbytery's choice, which disability affects the individual's test-taking ability. If the presbytery believes that the person should be certified as ready for examination for ordination, pending a call, it shall authorize an except only by a three-fourths vote of the members of the presbytery present, and must determine an alternate means whereby it will satisfy itself of competence in the areas of difficulty. When the individual successfully completes the alternate pattern, the presbytery may certify readiness in the usual manner. The minutes of the presbytery shall contain a full record of the reasons for the exception and the alternate pattern for determining competence. Presbyteries shall submit to the synod the process by which a candidate, who has failed one or more ordination exams twice, or who has such a documented disability, would be examined. Once that process has been approved, presbyteries may proceed with particular candidates, and note such exemptions in their minutes each occasion. Such processes will be reviewed every three years.

April 2006