“We find ourselves in the midst of monumental change in this country and throughout the world. Breathtaking technological advances are influencing how we interact with others, obtain information, and structure our lives. Shifting demographics are reshaping homogeneous neighborhoods into multicultural communities. Tumbling economies are erasing job security and impacting individuals and families in critical, perhaps permanent, ways in areas such as housing and healthcare. Environmental concerns and catastrophes are compelling us to reconsider our patterns of consumption. The world order itself is feeling seismic shifts as popular uprisings challenge and even topple longstanding governments.

“Being in the world, the church – especially in North America – finds itself in the midst of these changes.”

—Report of the Six Agency Leadership Initiative Consultation
Surveying the Current Landscape

The world is changing rapidly. Some have estimated that, on average, the sum of human knowledge doubles every five years. Though clearly the rate of increase is not the same across all areas of life, some researchers have estimated that the “half-life” of a professional education ranges between five and ten years. That means that roughly half of what one learned will be obsolete ten years after graduation, and three-quarters of it will be obsolete in another ten years. And it is not just professional or technical knowledge that is becoming obsolete. Societal influences and lifestyles are changing just as rapidly.

Nevertheless, we are still influenced by past practices and assumptions in ways that are often as imperceptible as they are out of step with current realities. We still refer to music “records” or “albums” even though most music is sold as downloaded digital files (not even digital files on compact discs). We still speak about “dialing” a phone number even though most of us cannot remember the last time we saw a phone with a physical dial. In fact, most of the youngest generation find the notion of “landline” phones physically wired to the network almost quaint, because for them being “wired” usually means being connected to a cellular phone network or to the Internet by a wireless connection.

By the time most of us reach a stage in life where we are likely to be sufficiently experienced as church leaders that we will be asked by our presbyteries to supervise others in the preparation for ministry as teaching elders, many of the assumptions we have as a result of our own preparation or that of our generational peers a decade or more before will be far out of step with current realities. Rather than assuming our experience provides a norm consistent with the experience of those under care, we need to begin by considering some emerging patterns that we find among those who discern a call to ministry as teaching elders and the nature of the church to which they feel called to serve.

What changes are you seeing between inquirers and candidates currently under care and those entering ministry a generation ago?

What things remain consistent about ministry despite broader cultural and technological changes?

How can the process adapt to deal with both the continuity and the change?

An old and familiar road

If we were to take what is generally thought of as the “usual” process of preparation for ministry of Word and Sacrament experienced by a “typical” teaching elder currently serving in the PC(USA) and reduce it to a story, for many that story might go something like this:

• During their adolescence they had formative experiences within the Presbyterian Church. They were actively involved in their home congregation, and while they may have drifted a
bit from congregational life during college they still connected with some campus ministry, Presbyterian or otherwise. As they began to think about their vocational plans for the future they expressed an interest in seminary. Either their home pastor or their college chaplain encouraged them to contact their presbytery to begin the formal process of “inquiry.” They discussed seminary options with their pastor and presbytery and moved from university life to full-time seminary study as seamlessly as many of their peers moved out of the dorms and onto graduate and professional schools in the fields of business, law, and medicine.

- The next three years moved smoothly along two parallel tracks. One rail was their academic training at the seminary that, like other professional programs, included a strong component of “field education.” “Theory” was the focus of some courses, but it was continually related to the “practice” of congregational ministry through practical theology courses and formal internships supervised by experienced pastors trained as ministry supervisors. The other rail was the ecclesial process with their presbytery of care. There were consultations at least once a year with representatives from the presbytery. They worked out a course of study and supervised practice of ministry that would meet both graduation requirements and the PC(USA)’s expectations for educational preparation. By their third year of study, they were almost certainly academic seniors in the seminary process and had been advanced to candidacy by their presbytery with some or all of the standard ordination examinations completed.

- As they entered their final semester of studies they had been “certified ready for examination for ordination, pending a call,” and were actively involved in seeking that first call. Through the seminary placement office, denominational placement assistance like “Face to Face” events, and more informal referral networks, they might be in touch with nominating committees from several congregations. As commencement arrived, the call to serve as a small church pastor or associate pastor of a larger congregation was in place. Examination by the presbytery of call and ordination soon followed, and the newly ordained pastor began a new phase of life in a new town or city ministering to and serving with a new faith community.

You could reduce that story to its barest essentials and represent it graphically as:
All the various stages of the process flowed smoothly from one into another, and in a majority of cases the work of preparation confirmed the discernment of call that had been shared by the individual and the community from the very beginning of the process.

**Changes in the scenery**

There are several trends among those currently under care that would, however, suggest some different story lines. For example, the distribution of inquirers and candidates by age range shows that only for a minority is pastoral ministry a first career choice. Nor is consideration of a call to ordered ministry as a teaching elder necessarily a “mid-career” option for thirty- and forty-somethings; upwards of one out of every 10 inquirers and candidates active in the preparation for ministry process in January 2015 would be receiving their first calls at a stage in life that not too long ago would have been associated with retirement age.

Another significant change has been seen in the relationship between seminary education and the ecclesial process of preparation for ministry. It is increasingly the case that individuals have already begun seminary studies before they engage the presbytery in the discernment and preparation process. In some cases this pattern is a result of a decision to enroll in graduate theological study for reasons other than preparation for pastoral ministry. Sometimes it is seminary classes undertaken as a result of other personal interests that open the door to considering a call to professional service in the church or other ministry forms.

It can also be the case, however, that individuals who have not grown up in the Presbyterian Church or may not have mentoring pastors simply are unaware of the ecclesial process that leads to readiness to be ordained as a teaching elder. This issue can also emerge if the seminary was chosen because it was in the community or “close to home,” but is unrelated to the Reformed tradition and has few (if any) Presbyterian students. These individuals will not necessarily have mentors within the seminary community who can point out to them that there is an ecclesial process within the church as well as the academic process in the seminary.

For these and other reasons, only about one quarter of all inquirers and candidates under care in January 2015 were currently still enrolled in seminary, and almost half those under care had been out of seminary for two years or more. Moreover, the largest single group was inquirers who had been out of
Advisory Handbook on Preparation for Ministry

Many only became PC(USA) members as adults. A spiritual experience may have led them to enroll in a nearby seminary even before a call to vocational ministry emerged. Entry into the inquiry/candidacy process may not have occurred until the Middler year of seminary or even after graduation. The standard ordination examinations and final assessments could only be completed in the final semester of their studies at the earliest. The true assessment of their call and commitment to pastoral service only comes through negotiating for service—a negotiation not only with congregations but with members of their family as well as they find that the nature of the calls that are available to them do not necessarily match their expectations.

Changing face of ministry

There is one other trend among inquirers and candidates that warrants particular attention because it also relates to changes within the broader context of congregational ministry: the size
of the congregations from which those under care come does not align with the distribution of congregational size across the denomination. To appreciate the impact of this development, we can consider one approach to comparing congregational sizes that seeks to take into consideration the differing role of pastors and how the size of the congregation affects the nature of the pastoral relationship.

Briefly stated, this research divides congregations into four groups.

- **“Family-Size”** churches have up to 75 members and typically average less than 50 in weekly attendance. The pastor’s role in such congregations is often likened to that of a chaplain, because the direction and leadership of the congregation is largely controlled by one or two prominent families with long history in it.

- **“Pastor-Size”** churches can have from 75 to 250 members and average up to 150-175 in worship. In these congregations, the pastor’s role is shaped by personal relationship with the members and the upper limit is set by the number of people with whom it is possible for one individual to truly engage in personal relationship.

- **“Program-Size”** churches with 250 to 750 members and average attendance of around 500 would be the next grouping. Congregations in this range generally begin to have one or two other staff persons ministering to the congregation, though they may serve in non-ordained positions such as Director of Christian Education or Youth Director. The pastor’s role and duties begin to define most members relationship with the pastor more than a personal relationship leading to requests to assume certain roles.

- **“Corporate-Size”** congregations make up the final group. These churches have the broadest range in membership, from say 800-900 members to “megachurches” with several thousand members. They will have large staffs of ordained and non-ordained persons, each with rather specialized areas of ministry and focus. While members will likely form relationships with staff persons with whom they have regular contact, the ultimate basis for that relationship will form around shared concern related to the area of the particular pastor’s or associate pastor’s responsibilities within the congregation.

Now, in terms of issues related to those who are discerning a possible call to pastoral ministry, what is perhaps more important than the different sizes of these congregations is the difference in the role of the pastor and the basis for the pastoral relationship. If an inquirer or candidate has experience only in congregations of a particular size, then they will likely identify “the role of a pastor”—what it in effect means to be a pastor—with the ways pastors function in congregations in that group.

So, how does the congregational experience of our inquirers and candidates relate to the distribution of congregations within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? Well, as the charts on the following page indicate, they are almost exactly opposite. While four-out-of-five of our congregations are in the “Family” and “Pastor” size categories, two-out-of-three of our candidates come from “Program” and “Corporate” size churches. This distribution of inquirers
and candidates really should not be that surprising. Although the “Members by Congregation Size” chart below shows the available statistics with slightly different limits for congregational sizes, it still matches quite closely with the distribution of inquirers and candidates by congregational size. So, our inquirers and candidates are quite representative of overall membership of the PC(USA) in this regard.

But while they may be representative, they do not often bring with them into the process of preparation for ministry experience in congregations like those that make up the vast majority of our churches. To fully understand their gifts and callings for ministry, it will be helpful for all inquirers and candidates to have experiences in congregations unlike their home church. Some may be opened to broader ministry possibilities. Some may be confirmed in what they know. All will gain a wider understanding of what the Spirit is doing in the very different kinds of churches and fellowships today.

Of course, there are also contexts of ministry of Word and Sacrament that are not congregation-based—at least in the ways congregations have been understood up until recently. Often when we think about these other ministry contexts, the ones that come readily to mind are where ministers engaged in service to others on behalf of some institution. Perhaps they were chaplains working in hospitals, correctional institutions, or schools and colleges. Maybe they were...
directors of community ministry organizations, or partners in a professional pastoral counseling center. They might be spiritual directors or other program support staff at Christian conference and retreat centers. Look at almost any listing of “specialized ministers” on a presbytery’s records from a decade or so ago in you can easily expand these possibilities. Certainly these institutional-based ministries will continue for some time, but these institutions are facing many of the same stresses as congregations.

There are indications that the growing edge of non-congregational-based ministry may be in “emergent” or “missional” fellowships developing in forms that some researchers refer to as “micro-communities.” Some characteristics of these new communities include that they are self-selecting groups where it is engagement in an activity simultaneously with others, often through digital media forms, that determines “who belongs” much more than any membership list. They are not so much led by teachers or experts as created through interactive experiences contributed to and shared by all the participants. The group’s identity cannot be associated with a particular location, because the usual place for connecting with others may be in cyberspace rather than physical space. When gatherings do occur at physical locations, the choice of location is likely to be determined by the experience (fellowship at a local eatery, service projects along a hiking trail, advocating for a cause at a rally), not by a property owned and maintained by the community.

The challenge both for those discerning a call to minister to such micro-communities and for those who engage in that discernment with them while guiding their overall preparation for ministry is to think seriously about how the specific functions of ministry of the Word and Sacrament fit in. Since our Reformed theology stresses that all the baptized are gifted and called to ministry, then the highly interactive sharing of experiences and calls to mutual accountability within such groups is not a problem. Indeed, it may be a model for longstanding Christian communities to emulate. But how does one distinguish the functions of ordered ministry by those gifted as deacons, ruling elders, or teaching elders? Do we need expanded theological understandings of ministry beyond these forms of ordered ministry?

What benefits might there be to having inquirers and candidates work in ministry contexts very different from their home congregations?

Are there benefits to having them serve in both congregational and non-congregational ministry contexts?

What new and emerging forms of ministry might they be encouraged to explore?

How do both those exploring ministry and those in discernment with them think about the functions of ministry of Word and Sacrament that define the role of a teaching elder in “emergent” contexts?
Changing cultural landscape

The challenging questions surrounding the changes specifically in ministry contexts lead us to consider how changes in the broader society will shape ministry. For our purposes, we will look at just three areas: the “graying” of America, the trend toward an absence of any racial-ethnic majority, and the gender shift in higher education.

Many people have commented on the rise in the average age among members of PC (USA) congregations. Certainly not maintaining church participation among those baptized as children and confirmed as adolescents is a significant factor in this trend. Often overlooked, however, is the impact of the rising median age across American society generally, which is projected to increase from 37.8 in 2015, to 39.3 in 2025.¹ Consider the information in this chart on the projected change in percentage of the population by age group for the decade between 2015 and 2025. The most rapid growth, certainly as no surprise at this point, will be caused by the “baby boomers” moving into traditional retirement age (65 and older). But notice as well that there will be a slight increase among those in what have become the “childrearing years” of 25-44, many of whom are children of “boomers.” Yet because they will typically follow the pattern of delaying having children begun by their parents, the percentage of the population that is under 25 will decrease.² What is most notable, however, is the decrease among those 45 to 64, the only cohort projected to decline both as percentage of the overall population and in real numbers (by 1.75 million). Over recent decades that age range of the population has provided the bulk of leadership in all ordered ministries of the church, and certainly among teaching elders serving in pastoral leadership.

There are three likely implications from these trends. In terms of those who will seek to prepare for ministry, there will probably be a decrease in the number of “mid-career” inquirers and candidates (as their numbers in society drop) paired with increases in both younger inquirers (whose overall numbers in society will rise) and older inquirers (who may explore ministry options for longer life expectancies beyond what have been customary retirement ages).

Enrollment trends in seminaries are already beginning to move in these directions. Secondly, in terms of those who will be ministered to, we should expect increasing needs to minister to those at either end of the age spectrum. We will need church leaders skilled at ministering to both the oldest and the youngest among us as they become the largest groups within the society. Finally,

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² The total number will be essentially the same, increasing by slightly less than 1 million, but because the overall population will increase they will comprise a smaller proportion of the total.
the current trend of more call-seekers than available pastoral calls is likely to reverse at some point in this period. However, other factors such as declines in both congregational size and the number of congregations because of aging and other demographic factors make it difficult to project when a possible “pastor shortage” might occur.

A longer-term demographic trend that will reshape both society and the church is that before the middle of this century America will become a nation with no racial-ethnic majority. Again, that overall trend is not particularly surprising news at this point (since some communities and regions are already there), but the combination of factors that are driving it may be. Immigration that is primarily from regions other than Europe coupled with the already mentioned generally higher birth rates among recent immigrant families are the major forces reshaping the racial distribution in American society. But another force changing the overall distribution that will have perhaps even more impact on the perception of racial-ethnic identity and the relations between racial ethnic groups is a steady increase in inter-racial marriages and the bi- and indeed multi-racial children who will be born into these families. These children and young people are much less willing to “choose between” their racial heritages by identifying with one particular racial-ethnic group. They see themselves not as simply White, Black, Hispanic, or Asian; they are multi-racial. And, just as importantly, since not only their communities but even their families are multi-racial gatherings, they tend to feel out of place in groups that are racially homogenous.

As with age, these trends in racial-ethnic distribution and identification will impact both congregations and inquirers and candidates in the preparation process. Over the next several decades, congregations may be pulled in two competing directions. As immigration continues to increase, new immigrant communities—like so many previous immigrant groups—will at least initially form fellowships and congregations with others who share their identity and experiences. The PC(USA) is seeing some of the fruit of our foreign mission efforts over the decades come home to us as Presbyterians from Africa, Central and South America, Asia, and the Middle East immigrate to the United States. But the multicultural experiences of their children and (eventually) intermarriage rates among second and third generations could mean that such immigrant churches will only sustain their ethnic homogeneity if supported by a continuing influx of new immigrants.

Being pulled in these two different directions will have tremendous influence on the preparation of teaching elders to serve with these communities. First, we will need to identify those within these immigrant communities who have the gifts and calling that creates a willingness to prepare
to serve in ordered ministry as teaching elders—and also ruling elders and deacons—within them. But we will also have to recognize that many persons whose ancestry places them within these racial-ethnic groups are going to desire to serve in the multiracial and multicultural communities in which they live. Their sense of call to create what some would call “post-racial” communities will be just as important to the future of the PC(USA) over the long term as the need to provide leadership for new immigrant fellowships and congregations is in the near term.

The final demographic trend we will consider is the amazingly rapid change in the proportions of higher education degrees awarded to men and women respectively. In 1960, women earned only 38.4% of all bachelor’s degrees in the United States. Just fifty years later, as the accompanying chart illustrates, significantly more undergraduate degrees were being awarded to women than to men (57.4% compared to 42.6%, respectively). Although overall professional degrees are now roughly evenly divided between men and women, that will likely change over time as more women than men will have completed the undergraduate education required to enter professional degree programs. Already in 2009 and for every year since, more women than men have earned doctorates in the United States. These trends are also being felt in both seminaries and presbyteries, where women currently make up growing majorities of both students and those under care in the preparation for ministry process. Each year since 2011, the PC(USA) has ordained more women as teaching elders than men.

What demographic changes are you seeing in your communities, your congregations, and among inquirers and candidates?

What characteristics will be needed in church leaders to be able to minister to homogenous and very diverse communities over the coming years and decades?

How can the process of preparation itself adapt to the changes that will result from these trends?

**Leadership for the church in this changing landscape**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has worked to give specific attention to exploring the changing cultural landscape in which the Spirit is calling the church to minister. A joint commission of the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly, the General Assembly Mission Council, and the Committee on Theological Education prepared a report on “Future
Leadership Needs” for the church that reaffirmed the important roles not only of teaching elders, but also the other ordered ministries of ruling elders and deacons and indeed of “all the baptized.” A similar gathering was sponsored by all six agencies of the church in the “Leadership Initiative Consultation.” The 221st General Assembly (2012) created a special committee to prepare a report and bring recommendations to the Assembly in 2014 on how these changes might impact the preparation for ministry process as a whole and the role of the ordination exams within the process in particular. These full reports are included among the resources in the final section of this Advisory Handbook. Other efforts are ongoing, such as the General Assembly study committee on the “Nature of the Church for the 21st Century.”

No one knows exactly what the final impacts of the continuing cultural and demographic changes will be upon our society in general or the church in particular. There certainly will be need for transformational leaders who can help congregations to minister to transformed communities around them. There will also be need for leaders who can manage congregations and institutions that will continue to minister to the needs of constituencies that may themselves be gradually fading away. And there will be a need for leaders who can handle the delicate balancing act of both managing the current congregation while simultaneously leading it through transformation into what it will become in the future. All of that is just from the institutional side; the same needs for dealing with both management and transformation will apply to the individual leaders themselves. This time will be one in which both congregations and their leaders will have to be able to bring forth from the storehouse of our Reformed tradition treasures both old and new to share with our changing world (Matthew 13:52).

What indications are you seeing in your local context regarding the types of ministry leaders you will need?

How might you use tools such as congregational mission studies in Church Information Forms and presbytery mission plans to explore emerging trends in ministry needs with inquirers and candidates?

What other tools may already be at hand that would be useful in this aspect of your joint discernment?

Current impacts upon those seeking calls

All of these factors influencing both those discerning calls to service as teaching elders and the communities in which they might serve in pastoral ministry—along with many others—come together when inquirers and candidates conclude their preparation and begin seeking calls to ministry requiring ordination. Perhaps because in many professions placement is closely connected with completion of graduate degree programs, there is a tendency to think about placement in terms of proximity to graduation. Since within our church eligibility for ordination is not primarily determined by seminary graduation but rather by having been “certified ready to be examined for ordination, pending a call,” it is the certification date that provides the proper
starting point for considering first call placement times. Nevertheless, there are several issues that complicate answering the question, “How long does it take candidates to find a call?”

First, Mid Council Ministries has only recently begun asking presbyteries to report to the Office of the General Assembly when candidates are “certified ready.” That information only became part of the regular reporting process in January 2014, and so many presbyteries are not yet into the habit of including it in candidate’s profiles. Second, not everyone who is “certified ready” is actively seeking a call, and so delays associated with their particular candidacies can artificially inflate the pattern across all candidates. Finally, while it is a rather straightforward process to determine the time needed for persons for have received calls (assuming both data points were reported), it is more difficult to devise a method that takes into account those who are currently seeking a call. With those cautions in mind, here is what can be learned about those who were seeking calls during a recent period.

In mid-May 2015 presbyteries were reporting that 288 persons were both actively “under care” and “certified ready to be examined for ordination, pending a call.” At that same time Church Leadership Connection (CLC) reported 246 Personal Information Forms (PIF) in the system for candidates/first call seekers actively seeking positions, and an additional 36 PIFs for candidates/first call seekers who were not actively seeking. Adding the two categories of CLC PIFs provided a total very close to what was reported by the presbyteries, so together they probably were a fairly accurate representation of the situation at that time.

Of the 288 persons reported by the presbyteries as “under care” and “certified ready,” 92 had dates of certification less than one year previous (May 15, 2014). There were 81 whose certification was more than three years earlier (May 15, 2012), and for 43 of those it had been more than five years (May 15, 2010). It is probable, however, that some of these people—especially at the higher end—had either stopped looking (withdrawn from the process or, like those 36 in the CLC system in mid-May 2015, simply were not actively searching) or found calls and the presbytery had not yet updated their profiles. For example, while presbyteries reported 292 ordinations in 2014 to the OGA Records Manager, presbyteries had only reported ordination dates in 2014 for 166 candidates on their online rolls. Nevertheless, for every 10 candidates looking for a call in May 2015, three of them had been searching for less than a year, four had been searching for between one and three years, and three for more than three years.

How do those trends among those still seeking compare to their colleagues who had found calls? Since presbyteries began reporting “certification of readiness” dates online in January 2014, there had been 151 persons by mid-May 2015 for whom presbyteries had provided both ordination and certification dates. There were actually 203 persons with ordinations reported to Mid Council Ministries during this period, but presbyteries did not provide the date(s) for some. Nevertheless, that 151 total for whom both ordination and certification dates were available were a sufficiently random and high enough proportion that it likely was close to the overall pattern.

For those 151 persons, the time elapsed between certification to ordination ranged from less than a month to 13 years and 8 months. With a sample that small and a range that wide averages are
essentially meaningless. The mean, which may be somewhat more useful, was 11 months. But probably the best insight is actually gained from considering how many persons were reported as falling within certain time ranges:

- 29% were ordained within 6 months
- 30% were ordained between 7 and 12 months of certification, so about 3 out of 5 (59%) were ordained within 1 year of certification
- 25% were ordained between 1-2 years, so in aggregate more than 4 out of 5 (84%) were ordained within less than 2 years
- 11% were ordained between 2-4 years of certification, bringing the aggregate to 95% within less than 4 years
- 5% were ordained more than 4 years after certification

All these figures underscore the importance of inquirers and candidates keeping their progress in the preparation process with their presbyteries on track with the educational progress in seminary if they are going to be in a position to receive a call at or near the time of graduation.

**Paving the Way**

**Theological background**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is firmly grounded in the Reformed tradition in its relationships with men and women who feel themselves called by God to be teaching elders serving in the ministries of the Word and Sacrament. Both in exploring with these persons their sense of vocation and in all subsequent procedures leading to ordination, the Reformed understanding of the church underlies what the *Book of Order* calls “full preparation” for ministry (G-2.0601).

As Reformed Christians, Presbyterians understand the church as a community called into being by Jesus Christ. It is Christ who gives the church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its offices and ordinances, and Christ is its head in all things (F-1.02).

Presbyterians believe in “the ministry of all the baptized”—that all church members, regardless of their occupational choice, are engaged in ministry. That is their Christian vocation (G-1.0304). Some among them may be called by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to serve as teaching elders fulfilling the functions of the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. That ministry, then, is one among many occupations through which men and women express their God-given interests and abilities in life and daily work. Response to this calling, as to every other, is approached
through a careful process of exploration and testing within the community of faith during which gifts and motivations are evaluated in light of the needs of the church and the world.

The essential role of teaching elders is set forth in both the Bible and in the church’s constitutional documents. Among its key concepts are the following:

- Ordered ministries are a gift of God to the church so that all God’s people may be equipped for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-13).

- Teaching elders in particular equip all the baptized for their ministry by proclaiming the good news in Word and Sacrament, teaching faith/modeling faithfulness, joining with deacons in care for people, and together with ruling elders ensuring that the church’s life is governed in an orderly way (cf. G-2.0501).

- The church actively seeks and ordains persons whose gifts and abilities equip them for the ministry of the Word and Sacrament (G-2.0104); if a person ordained to this ministry is later called by God to other work, the church can release him or her from ordained office (G-2.0507).

- A person experiences God’s call to ministry privately as an inner urgency. The church, however, experiences that call publicly as it affirms that individual’s gifts for ministry and confirms God’s call through the acts of ordination and installation (G-2.0103).

Seen from this theological vantage point, the preparation for ministry process is an intentional engagement between the individual and the church for the purposes of discerning a person’s calling and developing her or his gifts for ministry. Since we believe that God calls and gifts every Christian in their baptism not only to relationship with God but to ministry with and for God’s people, we are never trying to discern “if” a person in the process “has a call to ministry.” That is a given. Their baptism itself is “a call to ministry.” What this process is about is discerning whether a particular person has both the call and the gifts to perform the functions of ministry of Word and Sacrament on behalf of the church as a teaching elder. So let’s look at each of those two concepts—call and gifts—in turn.

**Hearing the call**

What is a “call to ministry”? Some of the most treasured stories in scripture are what we have come to refer to as “call stories.” There is Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush. Isaiah’s vision of God enthroned and surrounded by the seraphs in the temple. Jesus’ challenge to Peter, James, John and others to lay down their nets, “Follow me and … fish for people.” Paul’s dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. All these stories relate times when people in different ways “heard God’s voice” calling them to do certain things.

But there are other stories in scripture where the call seems to originate in the community of God’s people. Mordecai confronts Esther at a moment of crisis with the question, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” The communal needs in the early days of the church in Jerusalem led both the people and the disciples to call forward
persons recognized as “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” to serve specific needs. Yet even though these calls begin with the community, we have long heard the rustling breezes of God’s Spirit moving through these stories.

Reformed theology has considered these and other stories in scripture and concluded that there are always three components to every call to ministry. First, and most importantly, there is God’s call experienced as the leading—and sometimes the active pulling—of the Spirit. On some occasions it is the individual who first feels the Spirit’s leading (think Moses, Isaiah and Paul), and sometimes it is recognized first by others (consider Esther and those first deacons). But ultimately both individual and community are convinced of God’s leading.

In what other stories in Scripture do you find examples of individuals responding to the Spirit’s call?

What other Bible stories provide examples of the community calling forth people to serve?

Other than in stories, where else in Scripture or the Reformed theological tradition do you find the most helpful discussions of the relation between gifts and call?

Is it any wonder, then, that we speak of “discernment” when the ultimate goal is to find agreement between an individual and a community about God’s direction? The lead definition of the word “discern” in one dictionary is “to perceive (something hidden or obscure).” In many faith traditions “discernment” is a spiritual practice rooted fundamentally in prayer. Paul goes so far as to include discernment among a list of spiritual gifts that includes such other gifts as healing and the working of miracles. But that same list of spiritual gifts includes the sharing of wisdom and knowledge—things we most often consider abilities or maybe talents rather than supernatural interventions like miracles.

**Developing the gifts**

Paul’s list of spiritual gifts, then, leads us directly back to the other thing that our process should be helping us to discern. We want to discern not only the call on the person’s life but also the gifts evident in their lives. That too is a basic principle in our Reformed theology: God’s call is to use the gifts God has placed or will develop within us. God overcomes Moses’ objections by strengthening his weaknesses. God purifies Isaiah’s lips to speak God’s message. Esther does use her “royal dignity” to intervene on behalf of God’s people. Over the course of his ministry, Jesus “makes” Peter, James and John into ones “who fish for people.” Stephen, Philip and the other deacons apply their faith, wisdom and spiritual maturity in new ways on behalf the community. Paul is first ministered to in Damascus and then takes time away in study and preparation before he becomes the ‘apostle to the Gentiles.’

Preparing for ministry of Word and Sacrament is a process of discernment. Sometimes individuals seek the confirmation of the community that they have heard God’s call clearly.
Other times the community calls forward those who have the gifts it needs. Either way, discernment involves utilizing both spiritual disciplines and gifts to find consensus regarding whom God is calling to use their gifts in specific ministries centered in the Word and Sacraments on behalf of God’s people. The process succeeds whenever individuals are placed where their gifts meet with the call of the community and most fundamentally with God’s call to serve the needs of others, even if that place of ministry does not entail the functions of ministry of Word and Sacrament as understood within the Presbyterian Church.

What distinction, if any, would you make between spiritual gifts, talents, and abilities?

What are some ways we might “rekindle the gift of God that is within” us (1 Timothy 1:6-7), or encourage others to do the same?

Milestones on the journey

The relationship between the church and those who feel called to be teaching elders engaged in the ministries of Word and Sacrament carries important responsibilities for all involved.

- **For congregations**, it means educating all members in the biblical and Reformed understanding of Christian vocation and helping believers understand that the call of discipleship includes making responsible occupational choices. It also means nurturing and encouraging persons discerning a call to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

- **For inquirers and candidates**, it involves a sense of solemn obligation to God and to the church. In some cases this means that it is the individual’s responsibility to recognize and accept the fact that her or his gifts and calling are to a ministry other than the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

- **For presbyteries**, it means developing effective means of testing and validating the calls of those seeking to become teaching elders, providing them with guidance and oversight, and bringing to active candidacy those with appropriate abilities and motivation. To ensure that this important work is effectively carried out, those chosen to serve on behalf of the presbytery as covenant partners in the discernment and preparation process need particular gifts, skills and commitment.

- **For theological institutions**, it means upholding the Reformed standards of an educated ministry by providing Scriptural, historical, doctrinal and ecclesiastical disciplines, as well as opportunities for students to develop personal and professional skills.

- **For all participants involved in preparation for ministry**, it means relating to one another in continuing openness to God’s grace, with mutual trust and respect based upon the assurance that God has given everyone gifts to use in the church’s ministry. Integrity demands that each partner in the preparation process speak the truth with love to other
partners at all times. It is important for partners to function in a way that reflects mutual accountability and honesty in all dealings with one another.

What gifts, skills, and experiences are most key when deciding who on sessions and from presbyteries should engage inquirers in discerning their gifts and calling for ministry?

Granting that both are important, would you rank knowledge of the process or experience in congregational leadership and other forms of ministry higher in selecting the presbyters who will work with those under care? Why?

Key concepts

The preparation for ministry process is grounded in an understanding of Christian vocation as a response to God’s preeminent grace that calls all Christians to ministry, whatever their occupations. Some among them are called by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to ministry of the Word and Sacrament. The process through which this call of the individual by Spirit through the church is confirmed is built upon four key concepts.

COVENANT

Covenant relationships acknowledge that the Christian community’s primary commitment is to God. In the context of this commitment to and covenant relationship with God, the inquirer or candidate and the representatives of the session and the presbytery negotiate between themselves additional covenant agreements. These agreements affirm their mutual responsibility and provide the means for planning and evaluating the inquirer’s or candidate’s progress in more clearly discerning their call and in preparing and developing their gifts for the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

The resulting ongoing relationships take seriously the unique background, experience and personal attributes that each person brings to the process. They enable the sharing of deep convictions, an enhanced understanding of the demands of ministry, and the self-evaluation that are essential to the process. Professional and spiritual guidance and personal support develop naturally within the context of such relationships.

CONSULTATIONS

Consultations between the inquirer or candidate and the representatives of the session and the presbytery are based on specific goals in five areas of growth and on specific “expected outcomes” for both the inquiry and candidacy phases (see the material under the heading, “Inquiry, candidacy and beyond” in the next section of this Advisory Handbook). The purpose of consultations is to help a presbytery work with the individual at her or his current level of achievement and, through guided conversations and the mutual negotiation of new learning covenants, to stimulate further development in specific areas.
What do you think would be an optimum frequency for consultations? Does the former “annual consultations” work in your context?
What opportunities for the form of consultations are opened by new technologies?

CONNECTIONALISM

Shared mutual accountability characterizes the preparation for ministry process.

The pastor and session are responsible for helping members of the congregation understand what Christian vocation means. They are expected to provide the context within which individuals can discern the call to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament and understand the nature of this ministry. They help inquirers evaluate the suitability of their gifts and provide pastoral care and support during the preparation for ministry process. Acting as advocate for the inquirer or candidate, the session, through its moderator and presbytery commissioner(s), can call the presbytery to accountability in fulfilling its responsibilities.

The inquirer or candidate shares responsibility for her or his movement through the process and for planning for evaluating her or his growth.

The presbytery, through its representatives assigned the responsibility to care for those in the preparation for ministry process, provides pastoral care, guidance, support and evaluation of inquirers and candidates.

Theological institutions provide academic, field education and professional resources in the guidance and educational development and evaluation of inquirers and candidates.

At the conclusion of the preparation process, the responsibilities of examination and ordination are shared by both the inquirer’s or candidate’s presbytery of care and the presbytery of call. Having guided and evaluated the candidate’s progress through the cumulative series of consultations, the presbytery of care meets with the candidate in a “final assessment” of her or his readiness to receive a call (G-2.0607). When a call is extended by a church either within that presbytery or another, the presbytery of call ordinarily has the responsibility of examining the candidate for ordination and then ordaining and installing him or her in that ministry (G-2.0702).

The preparation for ministry process is one of continuing development. By providing a supportive community in which the inquirer or candidate assumes increasing responsibility for decisions made throughout the process, it introduces him or her to skills for self-development, goal setting and self-evaluation. The individual is encouraged to develop these skills into conscious, disciplined planning for personal and professional growth that should continue throughout his or her ministry.
If connectionalism is a key concept in the process, would there be good reasons for consultations to include more than just the inquirer/candidate and the presbytery’s representative?

Ordination to service as a teaching elder is an act on behalf of the full church. How does the connectionalism expressed in that statement inform the work of presbyteries that may be overseeing inquirers and candidates who will receive first calls to serve in other presbyteries?

CUSTOMIZATION

Anyone who compares the listed requirements in the Book of Order today to those in the 2005-2007 Book of Order will be immediately struck by the difference. That earlier edition presented a very detailed process spelled out over ten pages of the Form of Government. It set out instructions down to the level of specific areas of concern and discussion during annual consultations for each year of the traditional three-year Master of Divinity program. By contrast, the current Book of Order treats the full process in two pages. It focuses almost exclusively on purposes and outcomes rather than process.

At one level the streamlining of the constitutional requirements in the preparation for ministry process is simply one example of the overall pattern in the current Book of Order. More significant, however, are the ultimately theological reasons for this approach—most importantly for the preparation for ministry process a recognition of the diversity of God’s people and gifts. That diversity means that while it is possible to state denomination-wide purposes and outcomes, it really is not possible to have a single, denomination-wide process. The need for a variety of processes works itself out at both institutional and individual levels.

Presbyteries differ on a broad variety of measures. They vary in size both in terms of membership (whether gauged by congregations or church members) and geographical size. Some presbyteries have large membership concentrated geographically in a specific urban area. Others have small memberships spread across large areas with predominately rural communities. Still others combine both features, with a concentration of members in a large urban center but extended out a considerable distance to draw in smaller cities and rural communities. These differences in size can also be reflected in the number of persons under care in the preparation for ministry process. Taken together it is easy to see that a process that works well to provide support, guidance, and oversight to more than 75 persons in a presbytery located in single metropolitan area is not likely to work as well in a presbytery with two or three such persons scattered across a vastly larger area. But there are also differences between presbyteries in what they believe are essential skills, educational and professional experiences, and even theological positions among those who would serve in the ministry contexts they know well.

As we have seen inquirers and candidates also differ in many ways. Some have lifelong affiliations with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); others have their first contact with our church
through attending one of our seminaries, which they chose because it was in their local community. Some have a clear and specific sense of call to pastoral ministry; others only begin to think about the possibilities of ministry as a teaching elder after seminary graduation, having made the decision to pursue graduate theological education for personal rather than professional reasons. Some have already been ordained as ruling elders or deacons; others begin the process not even knowing enough about PC(USA) polity to know that Reformed churches ordain to ministries other than pastoral service. Some will be beginning their adult vocational lives; others have extensive vocational experience, with some of them having gained skills that transfer directly to pastoral or specialized ministries and others with experience in fields without apparent connections to ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The preparation for ministry process will never be “one-size-fits-all,” or even as some manufacturers now somewhat diplomatically phrase it, “one-size-fits-most.” The process must not only permit customization, but indeed have it as a core principle. One way to visualize the relationship is presented by the pyramid at the right. The Book of Order requirements provide the foundation of requirements expected of everyone who is to be ordained as a teaching elder in service to the PC(USA). To those, each presbytery may add its own requirements and expectations of every inquirer and candidate under its care. Some of those will be process related (how often and in what ways will consultations be conducted, how are progress reports to be provided, etc.), and others may be specific preparation requirements (is a psychological profile required and what must it include, must field education include a certified clinical pastoral education [CPE] program, etc.). And finally, the covenant agreements between inquirers and candidates and their presbyteries may include requirements that are specific to the individual. Maybe a presbytery will require CPE of a particular candidate because they are discerning a call to chaplaincy even though it does not require CPE of everyone under care in that presbytery.

If one were to visualize this same structure of requirements not in terms of the “foundations” or numbers of persons who must fulfill the requirements, but instead in terms of the requirements a specific individual must meet, then the pyramid might look more like the one at the left. Most of the requirements are likely to be custom tailored to the inquirer or candidate through the covenant agreements. Everyone’s process is going to be different because the issues that will require discernment and the ways in which gifts and talents still need to be developed will be different for each inquirer and candidate.
One understanding of “fairness” is that the same things must be expected of everyone. How would you respond to someone who says, “A customizable process is by definition an unfair process”?

What safeguards might be needed to reduce the chances that individualized requirements might become cover for prejudices or discrimination?

Looking ahead
What follows, then, in this Advisory Handbook is truly meant to be advisory. It presents both wisdom gathered from the past and new ideas that might be tried. It is not an instruction manual for assembling pastors, or a flow-chart decision tree where the final outcome is determined by which boxes are checked and which remain unchecked. Even the use of this handbook will require discernment as presbyteries, sessions, inquirers and candidates consult it and decide what is useful in their particular contexts and relationships, what might need to be tweaked, and where different paths entirely will need to be explored.