Members in Discernment
Local Churches and Members in Discernment
A Resource for Committees on the Ministry

The Ministry Issues Pronouncement affirmed that local churches play a vital role alongside Committees on the Ministry in identifying, nurturing, and discerning with members who may be called to authorized ministry. It recognized, first, the importance of creating a “culture of call” within local congregations. Two affirmations are central: Every local church holds potential future leaders in its midst. Moreover, every local church has the capacity to make identification, nurture, and support part of its ongoing mission and witness.

The Ministry Issues Pronouncement also highlighted the role local churches play in doing discernment with members who have already started to consider authorized ministry. Members in Discernment should have a Ministry Discernment Committee in their local church in addition to the Association’s Committee on Ministry. Churches’ discernment can parallel the COM’s process of discernment. This resource is designed as a study guide to be given to local churches.

I. Creating a “culture of call” in the local church

The effectiveness, faithfulness and vitality of the United Church of Christ begin in the local church with the partnership between committed laity and capable and well-prepared clergy. Almost every authorized minister in the UCC can point to a member of the clergy who inspired and influenced them at some point in their journey, perhaps who even encouraged them to consider a vocation as an authorized minister.

However, as many search committees of local churches can attest, the number of available and qualified candidates for pastoral positions is often limited. (At the same time, candidates in the search and call process often find that the number of positions available to them is limited!) Small membership churches and those lying outside metropolitan areas, in particular, find the limited supply of candidates to be pronounced. In addition, as current clergy retire, there are fewer younger professionals to replace them.

The challenges of a shrinking and/or unevenly distributed supply of pastoral leaders must be met in the context of every local congregation, where faith is first formed and nurtured in young people and people of all ages. Every local church holds potential future leaders in its midst. Every local church has the capacity to make identification, nurture, and support part of their ongoing mission and witness. Congregations that are ably equipped to speak the language of call and to take intentional steps toward nurturing and identifying future leaders will contribute to the health and vitality of their own communities and of the wider denomination. The “culture of
“call” in each local church, then, is the ongoing commitment of that congregation to identify and nurture future leaders of the church, long before they reach the point of connection with a Committee on the Ministry.

Characteristics of calling congregations

No matter the size or circumstance of a congregation, there are some fundamental congregational characteristics that reflect a thriving culture of call. Churches that become “calling congregations” display:

* a robust belief in the priesthood of all believers and the call issued to every disciple. This belief is regularly expressed and enacted through the congregation’s language, worship, and relationships.
* an intergenerational approach to ministry. Youth and young adults are regularly invited and enabled to participate in the work and mission of the congregation. The church has an identifiable mission which provides them opportunity for meaningful congregational involvement.
* a connection to the life of the wider church. The congregation is familiar with the processes by which members may move into intentional forms of vocational ministry.
* an awareness of the needs for future leadership and a commitment to identify and nurture such leaders from within their own membership, on behalf of both the local church and the wider church.

* Discuss: Does your congregation display these characteristics? How might it grow into them?

Practices of calling congregations

Depending on a congregation’s setting and circumstance, it may be able to provide formal mentoring programs, internships (for students during seminary), and residencies (for graduates post-seminary). Churches in college or seminary towns have obvious opportunities to invite and support students in their vocational discernment. However, it is not only congregations in geographic proximity to colleges and seminaries that can develop a culture of call. Indeed, congregations that may be farther away from traditional sources of education and preparation have both a particular opportunity and a particular challenge to identify, raise up, and support those in their congregations who manifest potential for authorized ministry.

A productive culture of call can be expressed through a variety of simple practices, including:

* Helping persons of all ages, but especially the young, recognize they are already ministers;
* Developing eyes to see individuals with potential for ministry;
* Providing appropriate opportunities for persons to engage in leadership;
* Choosing to use the language of “call” in the varied settings of the church’s ministries;
* Developing youth programs that emphasize careers in ministry;
* Avoiding negative stereotypes of careers in ministry (low pay, long hours, etc.)
* Making the most of potentially transformative experiences like mission trips and immersions, recognizing in them not just opportunities for mission but also for vocational discernment;
* Highlighting authorized ministers who have been raised up in a congregation, e.g., by recognizing and celebrating ordination anniversaries;
* providing support for retired ministers in the congregation’s midst and in the wider church;
* Inviting ordained, licensed and commissioned ministers to tell their own stories of call;
* Encouraging and supporting members to become involved in ministry at the Association and Conference level, including service on Committees on Ministry.
* Engaging in one-on-one conversations between clergy and members about the possibility of ministry careers;
* Giving explicit descriptions of ministry and invitations to it from the pulpit;
* Being aware of and supporting theological education.

Discuss: Which of these do you already practice? Which could you start practicing?

II. Local Church Ministry Discernment

Experience suggests that it is valuable for the well-being of a Member in Discernment for the church in which he or she holds membership to have a Ministry Discernment Committee. Furthermore, it is good for the church to form a Ministry Discernment Committee just for the MID—as a separate task force in the church devoted solely to this purpose—rather than assigning this function to an existing group or committee within the church.

The Ministry Discernment Committee (MDC) should be appointed by the appropriate governing body of the church whenever a member is interested in being received into a covenant of discernment and formation with the Association (or even before). The makeup of the MDC will vary depending on the structure of a local church. A typical model calls for 4 to 6 members—one or two chosen by the MID, one or two chosen by the governing body, one member of the governing body itself, and the pastor.

The MDC assumes responsibility, together with the pastor, for fulfilling the steps analogous to those detailed in the current Manual on Ministry regarding the local church’s role in the in-care process. The MDC should meet regularly with the MID. Its purpose is to create a supportive and exploratory environment in which the individual can risk testing his or her vocational aspirations. It represents the local congregation in helping this individual discern the particular gifts for
ministry which God has given; it also provides a forum for exploring the individual’s possible call to authorized ministry. This involves reviewing the MID’s personal history, experience in the local church, and spiritual journey.

Discernment is a way of arriving at understandings, decisions and outcomes. There are varieties of discernment practices among UCC congregations. They will look different in the various settings of the UCC and will reflect the cultural and racial diversity of our denomination. Areas of discernment to explore with the member include his or her:

- understanding of Christian faith and practice including beliefs about God, Christ, and the church, and commitment to a Christian life including worship, prayer, and service.
- sense of call
- gifts for ministry
- understanding of call to authorized ministry as distinct from the call of God to all people within the community of faith. This includes discussion of the differences among licensure, commissioning, and ordination;
- vision of functioning as an authorized ministry, including discussion of some of his/her role models in authorized ministry and how s/he might function differently from them;
- questions about authorized ministry and anticipated challenges as s/he imagines fulfilling the office;
- approach to conflict;
- experiences in leadership;
- understandings of the physical and emotional stamina and maturity needed to function effectively as an authorized minister;
- anticipated preparation for authorized ministry, including a discussion of whether relocation is possible for seminary, regional educational programs, and/or mentoring;
- financial situation, recognizing that preparation for authorized ministry can be expensive and time-consuming;
- questions about employment during the time of preparation for authorized ministry, including concerns about balancing academic preparation and work;
- questions about household and relationship, including how significant others feel about his/her decision to pursue authorized ministry and how s/he anticipates balancing preparation and family.
- Discuss: Have you had these sorts of conversations with members in your congregation before? How have they gone? What has been important to emphasize, in your experience?

It is vital that the member and the MDC enter into and continue in discernment as the open-ended spiritual practice that it is. No one truly knows the outcome of discernment at the
beginning. It is a process of conversation, prayer, listening, waiting, gathering and sharing information and insights, and most especially, being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.