

Guidelines for Congregations Interviewing an Applicant for Candidature for Ministry of Deacon.

Introduction

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) believes that all its members are called by God to be ministers. Sometimes people sense this call on their lives and assume it is a call to a Specified Ministry. In the UCA it is a role of the whole church to help people discern whether their call is to Specified or Lay ministry. The UCA is developing a process to help people and congregations to discern the nature of God's call on their lives. If ordination into a Specified Ministry is the setting aside of someone and giving them authority for a particular role of servant leadership in the Church then it is the Church who must discern the shape of God's call on a person's life.

The Process (A brief overview)

On 1 January 1999 the UCA introduced a Period of Discernment (POD). Members, Adherents and Members in Association who sense God's call on their lives and who are unsure of the shape of that call are encouraged to participate in the POD. The POD is a structured process, provided by the Presbytery, to help people discover their gifts and ministry. The POD participant is assigned a Mentor and together they devise a learning plan in which the participant can explore some of the possibilities for their ministry. Whilst for some this period may help to sharpen their sense of call to a Specified Ministry for others it will clarify their place in non-specified ministries within the church and help them to become better trained and equipped for their life-long discipleship.

Those who believe they are being called to a Specified Ministry must then test that call with the wider church. This process involves many councils of the church and all councils must discern a call before the applicant is accepted as a candidate for the Specified Ministries. The local Congregation's Church Council is the first council to test the call. These are the people who know the applicant the best and are often in a good position (though sometimes a difficult one!) to determine whether the applicant should be set aside into a Specified Ministry. The Church Council interviews the applicant and following the interview, decides whether they can discern the same call as the applicant.

It is important to record from this meeting:

- The number of people present,
- The number who believe the applicant is called to a Specified Ministry,
- The number of people who do not discern such a call and
- The number of people who are not sure.

This information becomes part of the application and is passed to the Presbytery and the Synod.

The applicant may choose to withdraw at any time and it would be advisable to withdraw if there is not strong support from one's congregation but the decision does not rest only on the congregation. If the applicant wishes to proceed the application is sent to the Presbytery Ministry Committee along with the record of voting and a confidential report from the applicant's Minister. The Ministry Committee will then schedule an interview with the applicant. The Ministry Committee will seek to discern the nature of the applicant's call. The Ministry Committee will then make a recommendation to the next meeting of Presbytery. The applicant will be required to attend that meeting and be prepared to speak about their sense of call to the meeting and then answer any questions from the floor. The Presbytery will then meet in 'closed session' in which the applicant and all visitors are asked to leave whilst the Presbytery seeks to discern God's call for this person.

Following the Presbytery Meeting the applicant will be required to undertake a medical examination and psychological testing which are organised by the Synod Selection Panel (SSP). These are completed before the applicant is interviewed by the SSP. A representative of Presbytery will accompany the applicant to the SSP meeting, which takes the best part of a day (usually a Saturday) and includes a practical task shared with other applicants present. The SSP considers the applicant's written profile as well as the actual interview in forming their recommendation. Following the interview the SSP will make a formal recommendation concerning the application.

The Role of the Church Council

As you can see the Church Council and local congregation play an important role in the candidature process that needs to be undertaken seriously and with much prayer. When people offer themselves for a Specified Ministry they make themselves vulnerable and should come genuinely asking rather than telling the congregation what their call is. At this point a great deal of responsibility rests with the Church Council to make certain that this applicant gets the best possible care and advice. There is a great deal of harm done when Church Councils fail to be honest with applicants. Encouraging a person to proceed with an application when the Church Council cannot discern a call can end up being cruel and painful to the applicant, not to mention a misuse of the church's resources.

The Presbytery recognises the enormity of the responsibility of interviewing an applicant for the Specified Ministry of MOW and offers the following resources:

- Guidelines for MOW interviews – Appendix 1
- Guidelines for Deacon interviews – Appendix 2 – to include copy of Assembly leaflet, 'The Ministry of Deacon'.
- Guidelines for Youth Worker interviews – Appendix 3

ThePresbytery/Committee offers you whatever support you need. We will pray for God's clear leading and the wisdom that you will need. If you require additional support please contact:

APPENDIX 2: Guidelines for Ministry of Deacon Interviews.

Members of the Church Council should be given notice that they will be involved in an interview with an applicant for a Specified Ministry. They should also be aware of the name of the applicant. Councilors should take an opportunity to seek the opinion of other members of the congregation in a sensitive manner with respect to the applicant, prior to the meeting.

The following details some of the areas to be explored in the interview. In addition sample questions as well as questions for the Council to consider are provided. (NB: These questions are by no means comprehensive nor prescriptive and care should be taken to make the interview as relaxed and encouraging as possible.)

The applicant should be given information about the areas for questioning in advance of the meeting, and should be told that this meeting is part of the process of discernment as to whether the Church confirms the 'call' that the applicant senses.

Period of Discernment Learning

This can be a natural starting point that will help relax the applicant as they talk about something that is fresh and yet familiar in their experience. It is also an opportunity to evaluate how open the applicant is to learning and discovering new possibilities.

- **Briefly describe your experience of the POD.**
- **What learnings or discoveries did you make in this time? Were there any surprises?**
- **What was helpful/unhelpful about the process?**

For the Council to consider –

- *Is this person able to learn or do they already “know it all”?*
- *Would the process of studying in theological college be helpful or difficult to this person?*
- *Would they find the candidating process exciting and challenging or threatening and stressful?*

Faith and Spirituality

- **Briefly tell the story of your relationship with God through your life.**
- **How would you describe your current relationship with God?**
- **What changes or developments have taken place over the years?**
- **How do you nurture that relationship?**
- **Briefly describe your sense of call to this ministry.**
- **How have you tested this call?**

For the Council to consider –

- *Does this person's daily living demonstrate the relationship they describe?*
- *Do you consider this person's lived expression of their relationship with God to be a barrier/asset for developing relationships with others?*
- *Taking into consideration the constraints of language when speaking about the Spirit, are you satisfied that the applicant's sense of call is in harmony with their expressed relationship with God?*

Style and Experience of Ministry

It is important to consider the applicant's basic personality characteristics and ministry style at the point of application for candidature. Theological education and ministry formation may result in some transformations and developments. However, congregations should not expect theological colleges to 'sort out' deep-seated issues of unsuitable personality characteristics and/or ministry style.

- **What has been your most rewarding experience of ministry so far?**
- **What has been your most challenging experience of ministry so far?**
- **How would you rate your ability to see the need for change and then make it happen? Do you have any examples of how you have brought about change?**
- **Why do you believe you are called to ordained ministry rather than Lay Ministry?**
- **Why do you believe you are called to the Ministry of Deacon rather than Ministry of the Word?**
- **Where do you believe your ministry strengths lie eg: pastoral care; social justice awareness and advocacy; making connections with people outside the church; preaching; administration; starting up new things; etc....?**

For the Council to consider –

- *Is the applicant someone that you would go to with a personal issue?*
- *Do you feel safe with this person?*
- *Is this applicant someone for the church's future or are they more suited to maintaining the status quo?*
- *Does the applicant have a realistic assessment of their strengths and limitations?*
- *Is the applicant able to accept different experiences of God's call on people's lives or do they believe theirs is the only valid experience?*
- *Has the applicant fully explored other possibilities for exercising ministry?*
- *Has the applicant a reasonable understanding of the Ministry of Deacon?*
- *Does the applicant have other means of supporting themselves/their families in periods of unemployment? Are they aware that a placement/continuous placements are not guaranteed?*

Expectations of Theological Education and Formation for Ministry

Candidates for the Specified Ministries undertake a programme of study and formation. The applicant may or may not have spent much time considering this process and its impact upon their lives and the lives of their families/partners or close friends.

- **What do you hope to gain from theological study and ministry formation?**
- **What are the gaps in your knowledge and experience of ministry that you will seek to fill in your training?**
- **In what ways do you expect your training will impact upon your family/partner/close friends?**

For the Council to consider –

- *What does this person need to learn?*
- *Is their self-perception of their learning requirements consistent with those of the council?*
- *Is the applicant realistic about the impact of candidature on their family/partner/friends? Have they thought it through carefully?*

Motivation and Personality

Although sometimes difficult to explore, it is important to try to determine the things that are motivating the applicant. It is also necessary to consider whether the applicant has the personality and character to be effective in ministry in the long term. Applicants need to be able to understand the issues of boundary keeping and power that are associated with ordained ministry.

- **What status do ordained persons have in the church today?**
- **What status do ordained persons have in society today?**
- **What do you understand “power issues” to be for persons in ordained ministry?**
- **What do you understand “boundary issues” to be for persons in ordained ministry?**
- **In what ways will your life be fulfilled by being a Deacon?**
- **What will you do if your application is unsuccessful?**
- **How would you handle this disappointment?**
- **What is your usual response to praise?**
- **What is your usual response to criticism?**

For the Council to consider-

- *Is being a Deacon fulfilling a need for acceptance, power, status or self-esteem?*
- *Does this person genuinely feel good about himself or herself or do they have a need to keep bolstering themselves or have others bolster them?*
- *Is the person comfortable with who they are or are they looking to be different?*
- *Is the applicant aware of their personal power?*
- *Are they able to handle the power (both perceived and real) associated with ordination?*
- *Do they have a clear understanding of boundaries or are they inclined to blur their role with their person?*
- *How does the council expect the applicant would respond to an unsuccessful application? Eg: would you expect they would leave the UCA and try elsewhere? Would they leave the church entirely? Would they accept the decision and continue in their ministry as a layperson?*

These areas of exploration and questions are by no means exhaustive and different applicants will warrant different questions. These questions are meant to serve as a guideline only.

At the end of the interview process the Church Council needs to be able to make a recommendation to Presbytery as to the nature of the applicant's call to ministry. Where consensus is not reached the numbers and makeup of the vote needs to be included with the recommendation. If the application is forwarded with reservations from the Church Council a brief description of those reservations would assist the Presbytery greatly.