



# A Theology and Philosophy of the Ministry of Commissioned Ruling Elders

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Approvals pending for PoB and PNNE*

*The Presbytery of Boston (POB), Presbytery of Southern New England (PSNE) and the Presbytery of Northern New England (PNNE) have determined that their strategy for mission would benefit from a unified policy that guides the training and commissioning of ruling elders. The following manual describes the underlying principles guiding this policy, the process of preparing to serve as a CRE, and the process for commissioning to this service.*

To start it is important that Commissions on Ministry (COM) and Commissions on Preparation for Ministry (CPM) alongside Ruling Elders (RE) exploring a call to serving as Commissioned Ruling Elders (CRE) remember the qualifications and gifts of officers in the ordered ministries of the church.

In the Book of Order, **G-2.0104a** says, “To those called to exercise special functions in the church...God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian Gospel in the church and in the world...”

In **G-3.0301** We are reminded that the presbytery is responsible for, “.....assisting and supporting the witness of the congregations to the sovereign activity of God in the Word, so that all congregations become communities of faith, hope, love, and witness. ..

- a.** Provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard...
- b.** Provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received...
- c.** Nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ...

This process of preparing and commissioning dates to our biblical roots.

In terms of preparation, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus about equipping the saints for ministry (Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13). And in the book of Numbers, elders were named to lighten Moses' load (Numbers 11:14-17).

# The Purpose of This Policy

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Presbytery is responsible for providing worship, preaching, the administration of the sacraments, pastoral care, and leadership for its churches. To support this mission, the General Assembly has, over the years, approved various forms of lay pastoral ministry. Currently, this work is done by Ruling Elders who have been called, trained, and commissioned to ministries by their Presbyteries. To be commissioned for this service, individuals must be properly trained and authorized by the appropriate governing bodies. The purpose of this program is three-fold:

1. To set policies and guidance for training ruling elders in church leadership. This includes training in Biblical and Theological studies, preaching, leading worship, administering the sacraments, as well as areas of practical theology as deemed necessary by the Presbytery and its governing commissions and committees.
2. To set out the procedures and process for commissioning trained ruling elders to provide service of the church.
3. To provide a policy that will allow for Commissioned Ruling Elders to serve in any of the New England Presbyteries (POB, PSNE, and PNNE).

It should be noted, that once commissioned, a CRE can function very much the same as a Teaching Elder, provided that the Presbytery grants specific authorities to the CRE, with one important difference. Teaching Elders, also known as Ministers of Word and Sacrament (MWS), are ordained for life. A CRE may only exercise these authorities within a pre-approved scope defined at the time of commissioning by the Presbytery which is usually for a single church.

It is not the intent of this policy to provide guidance for every possible situation. There are a few items worth noting to help guide CPMs, COMs, and the Presbyteries.

- This work is not exclusive to ministries to small congregations. There are a variety of reasons why any congregation may call a CRE and this should be taken into consideration in discernment processes.
- The goal in calling an individual to serve in a particular ministry is always to provide high quality faithful leadership to congregations and specialized ministries.
- In ordinary circumstances, it is important for the Presbytery as well as its commissions and committees to trust that congregations know their context and are in the best position to select their leaders.
- In addition to ensuring that CREs complete appropriate training, it is important that Presbytery discern that individuals can employ wisdom, are emotionally as well as spiritually mature, and are psychologically healthy enough for ministry. It is the job of the Presbytery to evaluate candidates through interviews and psychological assessments.
- While CREs may ordinarily serve congregations, they may also serve in specialized as well as Presbytery-wide ministries.

- Presbyteries include people whose first language is not English, are disabled, and/or neurodiverse. This diversity must be met with equity and inclusion.
- CREs may serve in their home congregation with the expectation of clarity in the ministry covenant around boundaries and relationship dynamics. Special attention must also be given to the relationship between the congregation and the CRE after the end of a commission, in conversation with COM.

# Structure

To ensure continuity in training, the Presbyteries shall combine their Commissions/Committees on Preparation for Ministry (CPM), or create a joint CRE subcommittee or task force of the three CPMs, to oversee the preparation process for CREs through the Synod of the Northeast's program with Dubuque Theological Seminary. This will help to build trust among the Presbyteries that training is consistent and of similar quality from one Presbytery to the next. Once the training process is complete, the joint CPM shall certify a Ruling Elder as "Ready to Receive a Commission." At this time, the Ruling Elder may begin to apply for positions, begin the process of requesting that the Presbytery commission them to a specialized ministry, or begin the process of being commissioned to a Presbytery wide ministry.

Once the Ruling Elder is certified Ready to Receive a Commission, and has been offered a position where they would serve as a CRE, the individual Presbytery COM that has jurisdiction over the commission will discern with the Ruling Elder and vote on whether to approve a commission. Each commission shall be no longer than three years, renewable with review alongside the COM, with a ministry covenant/contract developed for that period of time.

# Becoming a Commissioned Ruling Elder

## Discernment, Education, Training, and Assessment

### Part I: Discernment

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), discernment is a communal process and includes the ruling elder seeking exploring ministry as a CRE (the candidate), their session, and their presbytery through the Commission on Preparation for Ministry (CPM). The CPM usually joins the discernment process after the candidate has already received some sense of call and has shared this with their session. The following items should be submitted one month in advance of the initial meeting with CPM.

- Application form
- Copies of relevant educational transcripts
- CV or resume or church service and/or relevant work experience
- Letter of endorsement from the session of their home congregation with confirmation that the candidate has been a ruling elder for at least 6 months.

Once these documents have been submitted to the chair of the joint CPM, and with the vote of the joint CPM, the joint CPM (now known as “CPM”) shall meet with the Ruling Elder for the initial interview. If the presbyteries create a joint CRE subcommittee of the three CPMs, future references in this document to “CPM” should be understood to indicate the relevant body.

The CPM will aid discernment in through the following areas and questions:

- **Are you a faithful Ruling Elder?** To enter the preparation process, one must have served at least 6 months as ruling elder. The Book of Order (BOO) (G-2.0104a) reminds us that, to “those called to exercise special functions in the church. . . . God gives suitable gifts for their duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian Gospel in the Church and in the world. Further comments are in G-2.0301 particular to Ruling Elders.
- **Do you have a sense of call?** Is this a general call to the CRE ministry or is it already leaning to a specific area of ministry? How do you imagine fulfilling the functions of CREs outlined in BOO G-2.1001?
- **How have your previous experience and education equipped you for this call?** What additional training and support do you need to be prepared?
- **Are you willing to continue being formed?** That is, are you willing to invest in learning and discerning which, by the Spirit, may take you to deeper, broader or different places than you currently find yourself?

At the initial meeting, the CPM shall vote on whether to enroll the applicant as a candidate for CRE. During or following the initial interview, CPM will guide the development of a **preparation roadmap** based on key competencies and the candidate's past education and experiences as well as the shape of potential future ministry.

Once the Ruling Elder has been received by the CPM and prior to beginning any academic or field education training, the chair shall arrange with the candidate a time for an objective psychological assessment. The cost will be shared equally between the CPM, the CRE candidate and the home congregation. The CPM will designate an appropriate and approved testing center.

*NOTE: If the candidate has any wonderings about moving to ordination as Minister of Word and Sacrament (MWS) they should alert CPM as soon as possible since the tracks for becoming a CRE will likely not transition well to an MWS track. CPM may not recommend you pursue a certificate program if this is the case.*

## Part II: Academic Education

The purpose of education to formation is in order to equip the CRE candidate as fully as possible for the ministry they will undertake. Because commissions are place- and duty-specific there may be educational requirements that are likewise specific.

*NOTE: In the spirit of ongoing formation, there may be additional new educational requirements when a new context/commission is undertaken. While this would be managed through the Commission on Ministry, CPM wants any candidate to be aware of this from the start.*

The competencies described below are required. There are different acceptable ways to accomplish them, and past education and experience will be taken into consideration when developing a roadmap for the candidate's preparation.

Guidelines include:

- Ordinarily a Bachelor's degree or equivalent is required.
- **Academic Competencies** which are required to be met, ordinarily through semester-long courses taken through a PC(U.S.A.) seminaries such as [Union](#)-Richmond, [Dubuque](#) or [Austin](#) which have certificate programs for CREs. The Synod of the Northeast provides a full training educational program beginning in January 2026 and that is the preferred route for educational preparation and ongoing continuing education. Scholarships are available for academic tuition via the Synod of the Northeast.
  - Old Testament
  - New Testament
  - Reformed Theology
  - Reformed Worship & Sacraments

- **Practical Competencies** which may be offered in-house by our presbyteries (or others). They may also be taken at the seminary programs listed above.
  - Preaching
  - Pastoral Care
  - Polity, including moderating session meetings
  - Boundary Training (Needed every 3 years for all elders active in the ministry of the presbytery)
  - Anti-racism Training
  - Additional practical competencies particular to the call might include: Administration, Conflict Management, Christian Education (Children/Youth/Adult), Evangelism, Church leadership, Spiritual formation or advanced work in any of the core areas.

CREs are expected to finance their studies. CRE candidates may wish to seek support from the session of their home congregation. In pursuing education, the CPM and CRE should contact the Synod of the Northeast for input on academic training opportunities. Scholarships are available through the Synod of the Northeast for CREs.

It is expected that active CREs will continue their formation with continuing education. These competencies and resources will still be valuable to accomplish this. Each individual commission should include language for how continuing education shall be completed. If work is done within a PC(U.S.A.) congregation, two weeks or more should be provided for continuing education every year as well as a budget to pursue educational opportunities. In other contexts, more creative options must be utilized for continuing education. CRE's who are new to this ministry are eligible for and encouraged to participate in the Early Ministry Institute from the Synod of the Northeast.

All CREs shall be required to complete the same training required of Teaching Elders per the policies of each Presbytery and the Book of Order alongside any other pertinent Presbytery policies. These include a background check per each Presbyteries policy, Boundary Training, child abuse prevention training and Anti-Racism Training.

### Part III: Field Education

The purpose of Field Education is similar to student teaching and provides an opportunity to practice what has been explored in class. Requirements are developed by CPM for and with each candidate and their context for ministry (if known). Requirement will take into consideration a candidate's prior education and life experience.

- Ordinarily it will be at least a 9 month part-time placement outside of the home congregation and including either Christmas or Holy Week. It could be a full time placement of a shorter duration or another construct developed with CPM.
- For most candidates, the field placement should include:
  - Moderating a session meeting
  - Preaching and leading worship

- o Celebration of the sacraments
- o Celebration of a service of witness to the resurrection
- o Opportunities for pastoral care
- There will be a MWS who will supervise or mentor the CRE candidate. They will meet regularly and the MWS will provide updates to the CPM liaison as well as provide a written final report. This person will be approved by and provided information by the CPM.
- Field education may be set-up with a mentorship model, but must still include experiences outside the home congregation.
- When a student is providing ministerial service to a congregation, monetary provision is expected from the session. This may be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

#### Part IV: Annual and Final Assessments

CPM will appoint a committee member as liaison to a CRE candidate. The liaison should check-in quarterly by email or phone for general support and encouragement. The candidate and liaison shall meet at least once annually in-person or virtually prior to the annual meeting with CPM.

Each year, the candidate will prepare a written report of progress on their plan, concerns, learnings, goals, hopes etc. and submit it to the CPM chair one month ahead of the scheduled annual meeting. CPM will communicate the annual meeting date at least 2 months prior to meeting.

For the final assessment of readiness to receive a commission, the following will be expected:

- Evidence of completion of the roadmap CPM developed including specific evidence of each competency and requirement completion.
- Final report from Field Education supervisor or mentor.
- Current statement of faith
- Final interview with CPM to confirm satisfactory completion of the roadmap and general readiness to receive a commission including emotional and spiritual maturity and appropriate sense of boundaries and ethics.

If appropriate, the CPM will make a motion to recommend the candidate to the presbytery to be certified ready to receive a commission. This process is often carried out in cooperation with the COM which oversees the placement of CREs into specific commissions. The joint CPM file will be shared with COM so that COM will have awareness of readiness areas and can recommend further training as may be required for a particular commission.

*NOTE: Presbytery is the approving body unless a presbytery has commissioned another body to make the decision. The **BOO** grants approval for ministry within the presbytery of care. However, it is the current commitment [if approved] between POB/PNNE/PSNE that a CRE approved in one of our 3 presbyteries could serve in any*

*of our 3 as long as the COM finds there is a good fit between the CRE and the context for the commission. This can be accomplished through collaborative conversations similar to clergy “exec checks” via Presbytery staff and/or COM chairs.*

# Commissioning

Commissioning falls under the purview of Commissions on Ministry. Once the CRE has a potential commission, they should set an appointment as soon as possible to meet with the COM that will oversee the ministry.

If it is a specialized ministry, the COM should first consider whether it wishes to validate the ministry. The same principles that guide the validation of ministries for Teaching Elders should be utilized here. Upon validation of the ministry, the candidate may be interviewed by COM.

The COM will meet with the candidate, who shall provide the following documents to the COM:

1. A Statement of Faith
2. A faith journey statement
3. A Resume or CV
4. A Covenant of Service including
  - Job Description
  - List of duties authorized (e.g. Sacraments, marriages, etc.)
  - Compensation information
  - Information about mentorship relationship

The same principles that guide the CPM process should guide the interview of COM. Additionally, the COM should inquire as to why the Ruling Elder is interested in the commission for which they are a candidate.

Upon approval, the COM shall notify the presbytery of the term of the commission and the name of the teaching elder serving as mentor and supervisor. An appropriate worship service of the presbytery will be arranged to mark the commissioning. COM shall review the commission annually and may renew a commission at the end of the term. Renewal requires a COM vote.

A list of all CREs and their terms of service shall be included in the rolls of the Presbytery. During the commission, the CRE shall have the right to speak and vote at all Presbytery meetings as well as serve as a committee member, commission member, and/or officer of the Presbytery. In principle the membership of the CRE shall be the same as that of a Teaching Elder except that there is an end date to their time as a member. Upon completion of the commission, the CRE shall be removed from the rolls of the Presbytery as a CRE with an official commission but may be maintained on the list COM keeps of those who are trained as CREs and potentially available when other opportunities arise.

## Appendix A: Commissioned Ruling Elder Preparation Timeline

Date from Start	Action
Day One	Ruling Elder submits the following documents to chair of the joint CPM: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application form</li> <li>• Copies of relevant educational transcripts</li> <li>• CV or resume or church service and/or relevant work experience</li> <li>• Letter of endorsement from the session of their home congregation with confirmation that the candidate has been a ruling elder for at least 6 months.</li> </ul>
By Day 30	Chairperson(s) of CPM shares documents with commission members and requests a vote for a meeting to conduct the initial interview.
By Day 90	CPM holds an initial interview with Ruling Elder. At the end of this interview CPM may vote to enroll the Ruling Elder as a candidate for CRE. In this interview, CPM will begin to develop a roadmap for academic and field education to meet the required competencies. This roadmap should be finalized within 3 months of the meeting.
By 6 months	Candidate undertakes an objective psychological evaluation at approved center.
By 6 months	CPM completes the preparation roadmap.
By 6 months	Candidate and CPM meet to review psychological evaluation and preparation roadmap.
Months 6-12	Candidate may begin working on academic and field education requirements.
At 12 months	Annual meeting between candidate and CPM. Candidate provides the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcripts from any academic coursework</li> <li>• Report from mentor or field education supervisor</li> <li>• Reflection on discernment questions</li> </ul>
Months 12-24	Candidate continues working on academic and field education requirements, meeting the CPM at least annually.
Months 18-24+ (as appropriate)	Once all elements of the preparation roadmap have been completed, the candidate should request a final meeting and assessment by CPM. At this meeting, the CPM will review all training and general readiness and may vote to list the candidate as “ready to receive a commission” and refer them to COM for next steps.

