

# A New Vision for National Ordination Examinations: An Invitation to Discussion

## Preface

What are the national ordination examinations all about? Does the church really need them? What do they do well, or not so well?

This paper sets forth a new vision for the examinations, so that they can become a moment of blessing, in which candidates begin to demonstrate their ability to exercise pastoral wisdom and imagination.

Part I of the paper sketches out this vision in detail. This part of the paper will be especially useful to those of you who are candidates for ministry, members of Committees on Preparation for Ministry, teachers in seminaries, readers of ordination exams, or leaders of other church bodies involved with pastoral training and formation. It will help you understand the rationale for the exams and where they fit in the ordination process.

Part II is for those of you who are interested in new models of examination that are being considered by a task force on the nature and future of national ordination examinations, appointed by the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations.

This part of the paper is brief and suggestive. The task force will benefit from your comments and ideas.

Part III of the paper is for those who would like additional supporting material. Appendix One explains the mechanics of the current examination process. Appendix Two notes new initiatives that the PCC is instituting to strengthen the exams, and Appendix Three sets forth the mandates of the new task force.<sup>1</sup>

Please make use of those parts of the paper that interest you most.

Members of the task force welcome your critique and response. Please contact us via Timothy Cargal, staff to the task force, at:

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Thank you!

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<sup>1</sup> The paper summarizes key findings from the self-study report that the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations submitted to the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008) about the goals of the examinations, areas in which the examination process needs to be strengthened, and possibilities for changing the timing of the examinations.

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## Contents

### **Part I**

- A. Disputes about Ordination and Ordination Exams
- B. Examinations that Help the Church Assess Readiness for Ministry
- C. A Vision of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament
- D. Grounding the Examinations in the Ordination Questions
- E. Pastoral Imagination and Wisdom

### **Part II**

- A. The Search for New Models
- B. A Pilot Program

### **Part III**

- Appendix One: The Current Examination Process
- Appendix Two: Strengthening the Exams and Examination Process
- Appendix Three: A Task Force for a Pilot Program

## Part I

### A. Disputes about Ordination and Ordination Exams

Disputes over ordination reflect larger upheavals in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today. These disputes have often focused on who is eligible for ordained office. Questions of sexuality have especially been at the center of anguished debate.

Fundamental questions about ordination are evident in other ways. Congregations with limited financial resources are increasingly hiring Commissioned Lay Pastors, who though not ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, can perform most of its functions. Among those who have been ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament are many who are routinely approved by their presbyteries for specialized ministries or even secular positions that seem remote from the core functions of the office. Seminaries continue to train and graduate candidates for ministry, yet half or more will be unable to find a called position. Those who do serve as pastors of congregations sometimes find themselves overwhelmed by the demands of running the church like a secular business, where proclamation of the gospel seems secondary to maintaining institutional viability.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that vigorous disputes arise over preparation for ministry. What traits should candidates for ministry have? What kind of education do they need? What are the particular responsibilities of congregations, presbyteries, seminaries, and national bodies in overseeing preparation for ministry? Do these responsibilities dovetail, and do these different bodies communicate with each other, or do candidates for ministry simply face a bewildering bureaucratic apparatus that seems designed to put obstacles in their way rather than provide them guidance and accompany them with prayer?

Within the process of preparation for ministry, perhaps no item causes more anxiety and even frustration than the national ordination examinations. These exams were instituted in the 1960s in an effort to establish consistent educational standards, but their rationale is no longer clear to many in the church. Some candidates with stellar academic records in seminary resent having to repeat the exams because, in their judgment, a reader who has never met them judges from afar that they do not know their theology or polity. Other candidates who seem marginally fit for ministry overcome their presbyteries' doubts by passing the exams, although the exams do not by themselves adequately demonstrate readiness for ministry. Questions arise about the abilities of the exam readers and how they are chosen. A church stressed about ordination is stressed about preparation for ministry, and the ordination exam process is often the flash point at which this stress is vented.

For several years, the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCCEC, or simply PCC), the denominational committee responsible for overseeing the writing and grading of the exams, has struggled with these questions. In 2008, the committee completed a two-year self-study process and reported the results to the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. The assembly approved the committee's report along with a

set of recommendations to explore better ways for the examinations to achieve their goal of assisting presbyteries in discerning candidates' readiness for ministry.<sup>2</sup>

The denomination as a whole will continue to debate matters of ordination. Changes in the ordination exam process will not by themselves resolve more basic questions about the theology and practice of ordination. But the PCC does believe that a new sense of clarity about the purpose of national ordination exams can provide important insights about ordination that will be of value to candidates and presbyteries alike.

We, the members of the task force on the nature and future of national ordination examinations, ask all of the partners concerned with assessing candidates' readiness for ministry to work together for examinations and an examination process that better fulfill their promise. We call for a radical shift in thinking about the examinations, so that candidates, presbyteries, and seminaries alike will be able to affirm the positive role that examinations can play in strengthening pastoral leadership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We welcome response from the wider church, so that those who disagree with our vision can challenge us to new insights, and so that those who find themselves persuaded by our vision can help us learn how better to implement it in the actual examination process.

#### B. Examinations that Help the Church Assess Readiness for Ministry

Many candidates (and perhaps seminaries and presbyteries, too) today see the examinations as just another hoop to jump, in what is already a long and involved road to ordination.<sup>3</sup> Candidates sometimes wonder why they must take an ordination examination in an area for which they have already passed a seminary course. Upon receiving their grades, candidates do not always understand readers' comments or what readers were looking for. The examinations may result in frustration rather than learning and spiritual discernment.

Imagine a different scenario: A candidate has completed basic seminary work in the foundational documents of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He or she has extensive, supervised field experience in the church, and so has seen how biblical exegesis makes a difference for preaching; how Reformed theology and confessions inform a pastor's teaching and priorities personally and for the church; how a Reformed understanding of worship and sacraments shapes the liturgical life of a congregation; and how Presbyterian polity guides decision-making and life together in sessions, presbyteries, and the wider church.

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<sup>2</sup> The complete report is available at: <<http://www.pcusa.org/exams/pccec.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> For the current exam process, see Part III of this report, Appendix One. We are using the term candidate here to refer to all persons who are pursuing ordination in the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], regardless of whether they are formally in the inquiry or candidacy stage of presbytery care. The examinations are also required of ministers of other denominations seeking membership in the PCUSA (G-11.0404a[2]).

The candidate is asked to take written examinations in four areas—Biblical Exegesis, Theology, Worship and Sacraments, and Polity—as well as a multiple choice exam on Biblical Content. Each examination invites the candidate to exercise pastoral wisdom and imagination. Each asks the candidate to draw on the church’s foundational documents in order to illuminate church life and to guide the decisions that pastors and congregations make.

The candidate comes to these examinations prayerfully, perhaps taking them in a church setting rather than in a seminary classroom, and beginning each examination period with worship rather than the distribution of examination booklets. The candidate prays not simply to pass the examinations but, more importantly, that the examinations might truly be a means by which he or she will grow in wisdom and faith. People throughout the denomination join the candidates in prayer on the days that the examinations take place.

Readers from the wider church provide an assessment of the completed examinations. Their goal is not simply to issue a grade of satisfactory or unsatisfactory, but rather to provide insights that will enable a candidate and his or her presbytery to have an extended conversation about the candidate’s readiness for ministry. The candidate values the examinations because they allow him or her to get a better sense of his or her strengths and weaknesses in pastoral ministry. The presbytery values the examinations because the readers provide a perspective from the larger church that helps the presbytery to see things about a candidate that it might otherwise overlook or incorrectly interpret.

### C. A Vision of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament

This vision of ordination exams fits within a larger Reformed vision of ministry and the church. Chapter III of the *Book of Order*, “The Church and Its Mission,” boldly calls the church to be “the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity” (G-3.0200), to proclaim “in Word and Sacrament that the new age has dawned” (G-3.0300a), and to “engage in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice” (G-3.0300c[d]). The *Book of Order* further declares that “the Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ” (G-3.0400).

The Reformed tradition has emphasized that the church sets aside certain persons as ministers of the Word and Sacrament to help “to equip and enable [the whole people of God] for their tasks within the church and their mission to the world,” including the responsibility to reach out “in concern and service to the life of the human community as a whole” (G-6.0202b).

The Reformed tradition has also emphasized that those who would lead the church faithfully in its mission to the world must manifest certain personal gifts and character traits, and must receive adequate academic preparation. A significant report on “The Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” commended

by the 204<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1992) for church-wide study and response, carefully identifies and discusses these factors.<sup>4</sup>

The report notes that “the formal educational requirements for those preparing for ordination . . . need to be properly rigorous, reflecting the key role these officers play in interpreting the church and its mission and equipping the church for its ministry to the world” (p. 78). “Ministers . . . need to know the text of Scripture and principles for interpreting it that respect its integrity. They also need to know the theological tradition of the church . . . and the challenges made to it by modern critical thinking” (p. 77).

The report argues, however, that “these kinds of knowledge and skills alone are, while necessary, insufficient. Ministers must also be able to discern where and how the promises and claims of God in Scripture intersect with human life in a particular context for ministry, and they must be able to communicate those promises and claims clearly and effectively to the whole company of God’s people” (p. 72). Seminary preparation must be supplemented by practical experience, for “some things can only be learned, and some skills only developed, in the exercise of ministry” (p. 78).

The two areas of pastoral formation that the report emphasizes—intellectual preparation and practical experience—are also the key areas in which the church assesses candidates’ readiness for ministry. As part of this assessment, presbyteries evaluate seminary transcripts as well as candidates’ personal faith and ability to exercise appropriate pastoral wisdom, judgment, and imagination in the actual exercise of ministry.

We, the members of the task force on the nature and future of national ordination examinations, believe that national ordination exams can provide additional assistance to presbyteries in their discernment process. By asking candidates to relate the church’s biblical, theological, and constitutional resources to the church’s ministry in the world, the exams go beyond the seminary classroom into the actual practice of ministry. Ordination examinations provide an important moment for candidates to integrate biblical and theological knowledge with pastoral wisdom. At their best, they can be a unique opportunity for candidates to bring together what they have learned in seminary and in the church.

#### D. Grounding the Examinations in the Ordination Questions

National ordination examinations can be vitally important in a second regard: they lift up common, church-wide standards of readiness for ministry in a time in which candidates for ministry come from a wide variety of personal backgrounds:

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<sup>4</sup> The report is available from Distribution Management Services (DMS #272-92-411), as well as in the Minutes of the 204<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1992). Page numbers refer to the DMS version of the report.

- Some have been life-long Presbyterians, but many have moved through several denominational or religious traditions before joining a Presbyterian church, sometimes as late as during seminary
- Some have been raised in a Christian church; others had a conversion experience in their college years as they participated in a campus ministry program or a parachurch organization
- Some are members of racial and ethnic groups that have not been widely represented previously in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- Some have a strong college background in the liberal arts and took religion classes at the undergraduate level, but many have educational backgrounds in other areas and have difficulty meeting the demands of reading and writing that a theological education requires
- Some have a clear sense of call to pastoral ministry; others seek ordination to other forms of validated ministry or are uncertain of their vocational plans
- Some come straight from college to seminary, but many are older, second-career students
- Some come with basic Bible knowledge; others are reading the Bible almost for the first time

Preparation for ministry also takes place in an ever greater variety of ways:

- Some candidates for ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) attend a Presbyterian seminary; others choose a seminary based on location or theological reputation, rather than Presbyterian affiliation
- Some seminaries require a year-long internship; in other cases, students have a few hours of field work each week over the course of a year, while continuing their seminary studies
- Some students never take a class in Reformed theology, worship, or polity (which are not necessarily required courses even at PCUSA seminaries), while other students have several courses in these areas
- While candidates must attend accredited theological institutions, the level of theological preparation in different institutions and under different instructors varies greatly
- Some candidates have been closely guided and nurtured by their Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM); others feel disconnected from their presbytery and



see *Book of Order* requirements as bureaucratic hurdles that stand in the way of their personal call to ministry

The church welcomes this diversity of background and preparation. At that same time, it affirms that ministers have a common responsibility to represent and transmit the church's biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical heritage faithfully. Knowledge of this heritage, and ability to work with it pastorally, are presupposed in several of the ordination vows (W-4.4003), which all candidates for ministry take when they are ordained.

The national ordination examinations relate directly to these vows and help to ensure that candidates take them with integrity.

- Ordination vow “b”: to accept the Scriptures and their witness to Jesus Christ (Bible Content Examination, Bible Exegesis Examination)
- Ordination vow “c”: to receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the church's confessions (Theological Competence Examination, Worship and Sacraments Examination)
- Ordination vow “e”: to be governed by the church's polity (Church Polity Examination)
- Ordination vow “i”: to proclaim the good news in Word and Sacrament (Bible Exegesis Examination, Worship and Sacraments Examination)
- Ordination vow “j”: to be active in the church's government and discipline (Church Polity Examination)

National ordination exams can ensure that candidates know the church's foundational documents (the Scriptures, the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order*, which includes the *Directory for Worship*, the *Form of Government*, and the *Rules of Discipline*) and are able to use them effectively in pastoral situations. The examinations can encourage candidates, regardless of their personal or educational background, to immerse themselves in the basic theology and polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and to relate this theology and polity to the diverse contexts of ministry in which they will be serving.

The examinations of the PCC have a limited but distinct purpose. Seminaries are especially concerned to test a candidate's academic competence; presbyteries evaluate the adequacy of a candidate's theological views and his or her personal gifts for ministry. Ordination examinations focus on a third area of concern (shared by the seminaries and the presbyteries): a person's ability to integrate what he or she has learned in seminary and through practical church experience, with pastoral situations. The ordination examinations offer candidates a significant opportunity to move from thinking of

themselves as students in an academic context, to thinking of themselves as pastors and leaders in the church and for the world.

### E. Pastoral Imagination and Wisdom

These rationales for national ordination examinations hearken back to the overture from San Francisco Presbytery in 1963 that led to their creation. The overture noted that:

Presbyteries . . . vary widely in the level of knowledge and ability they require for ordination so that candidates for the ministry often seek a less exacting presbytery to examine them.

The wide latitude in requirements for entrance into the ordained ministry in practice shifts the burden for setting ministerial standards to the seminaries rather than the presbyteries as constitutionally provided.

Such wide latitude in entrance lowers the esteem accorded to the ministerial vocation and makes it increasingly difficult to recruit the ablest [persons] for the ministry in competition with such exacting fields as science, medicine and law.

In view of the turnover of committee personnel and the rapid expansion of skills and knowledge required in the ministry, many candidates' committees feel the need for more specific guidelines in examination standards.<sup>5</sup>

We, the members of the task force on the nature and future of national ordination examinations, still find these arguments to be persuasive. A system of national ordination examinations can continue on balance to be more helpful to the church than their elimination. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a national church body of interdependent congregations. It is characterized by ever greater mobility of candidates and ministers from one part of the country to another and by a wide diversity of levels of academic preparation and church experience. In such a time, national ordination examinations can play an important even if limited role in lifting up the church's core theology and polity. They represent the church's commitment to ordaining candidates for service to the whole church even as they minister in their particular and diverse contexts.

At the same time as we affirm the role of national ordination exams, we recognize the wisdom in calls for the presbyteries to take the lead in assessing their candidates' readiness for ministry. Precisely because presbyteries know their candidates personally, national examinations should not replace presbyteries' judgments but rather should help to fill them out.

The ordination examinations are uniquely valuable as one place in the process of assessing readiness for ministry in which the presbytery learns from the perspectives of

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<sup>5</sup> Minutes of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1963), Part I, p. 36.

individuals representing the larger church. Ordination examinations resemble certifying examinations in professions like law and medicine. Or to use a different analogy: just as an attending physician may ask a partner who knows nothing about a particular patient to review the patient's charts and the attending physician's judgments, so too national ordination examinations can offer a presbytery a valuable second opinion about a candidate's readiness for ministry.

Readiness for ministry encompasses a host of academic and personal factors that go far beyond the parameters of the ordination examinations. But ordination examinations do play a distinct role in lifting up the significance of the church's shared legacy in the Scriptures, the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order*. The examinations help to ensure that all candidates for ministry, regardless of their personal background and their particular course of theological education, are well-grounded in these foundational documents and are able to use them effectively in pastoral situations.

The ordination examinations work from the premise that this grounding involves more than rote memory. What ministers need is a practical wisdom informed by the Bible and the constitutional documents that orient their ministry over a lifetime. Seminaries, presbyteries, sessions, and the PCC alike are committed to training ministers who will draw on this rich legacy "with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love" (W-4.4003g) to speak to the most urgent matters of faith and life in the church and the world today.

## **Part II**

### A. The Search for New Models

The PCC recognizes that the current system of nationally designed and graded examinations has inherent weak points. The examinations may tempt presbyteries to rely excessively on the judgments of readers from the wider church, rather than encouraging presbyteries to assume responsibility for examining their candidates. Some respondents to the PCC have suggested that presbyteries could tailor examinations to candidates with different backgrounds and in different contexts of ministry. Similarly, others have proposed a system in which ordination examinations are nationally-designed but locally-graded in order to give presbyteries greater involvement in the examination process.

Frustration may arise when the judgments of the ordination examination readers differ widely from those of the members of a candidate's CPM or his or her seminary teachers. The current process does allow a CPM to appeal a grade, but the PCC sustains such appeals only under extraordinary circumstances. A presbytery may provide alternate means of testing competence in an examination area (G-14.0472), but because this exception can be considered only after a candidate has twice failed to pass the national examinations, it may emotionally burden a candidate and a presbytery, especially when they together sense that the candidate has a clear call to the ministry of the Word and

Sacrament.<sup>6</sup> The opposite situation is also possible: passing ordination examinations may actually hinder a candidate and a presbytery from asking necessary questions about whether the candidate is truly called to ordained ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

More effective long-term partnerships among sessions, CPMs, presbyteries, seminaries, and the PCC are needed if the church as a whole is better to discern candidates' readiness for ministry. The time is right for the church to explore new models of assessing readiness for ministry that will help the church realize more fully the promise of national ordination examinations.<sup>7</sup>

### B. A Pilot Program

In light of these far-reaching concerns, the PCC has committed itself to exploring new models of national ordination examinations.<sup>8</sup> Its task force on the nature and future of national ordination examinations would like to design exams and an examination process that will:

- better serve as a moment for a candidate to demonstrate integrative learning and pastoral wisdom and imagination
- more fully invest presbyteries in providing gifted members to read ordination examinations
- more fully enable racial-ethnic participation in the examinations and examination process

Many candidates currently take the exams immediately after the first two years of seminary. They have not always had sufficient course work or significant experience in pastoral situations to be able to demonstrate the kind of integrative learning and pastoral wisdom for which the exams call.

The pilot program will ask participants to wait to take the exams (with the exception of Bible Content) until after they have completed:

- all the foundational courses in Bible, Theology, Worship, and Polity that the exams presuppose (including classes in biblical exegesis, the *Book of Confessions*, Reformed theology and worship, and Presbyterian polity)

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<sup>6</sup> Candidates with disabilities that affect test-taking ability may also demonstrate competence in the examination areas by alternate means administered by the presbytery (G-14.0472).

<sup>7</sup> The PCC reported to the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly a series of measures that it wishes to implement immediately to strengthen the exams and the examination process. See Part III of this report, Appendix Two.

<sup>8</sup> For the mandates of the task force working on these questions, see Part III of this report, Appendix Three.

- a significant practicum in pastoral ministry (e.g., full-time for at least one year), with mentoring from an ordained pastor about how Bible, Theology, Church and Sacraments, and Polity shape ministerial practice

The pilot program will work closely with several presbyteries so that they together with the task force can capture a new vision for the exams. The program will also explore new strategies for selecting readers, organizing reading groups, and coordinating the judgments of the presbytery and those of PCC readers, who give selflessly of their time and are strongly supportive of the rationale for national ordination examinations.

We, the members of the task force on the nature and future of national ordination examinations, hope that relocating where the exams fall in the preparation process can enable them better to fulfill their goal of asking candidates to demonstrate integrative learning and pastoral wisdom. We also know that new models of national ordination examinations will require a new level of investment from the wider church. Any broader efforts to change the timing of the exams must be careful not to impose undue hardship on candidates, who will have to wait 1-2 years longer than they might under the current system to be ordained. The church must ensure that candidates have adequate financial support and pastoral mentoring as they make the transition from seminary, take ordination examinations later in seminary or perhaps even after seminary, and then seek a call.

We trust that our proposals will help the PCC to realize more fully its goal of ordination examinations that offer candidates a unique, integrative moment for demonstrating pastoral wisdom and imagination. We welcome advice and counsel from the wider church.

### **Part III**

#### **Appendix One: The Current Examination Process**

The PCC currently administers five examinations, as outlined in the *Book of Order* (G-14.0431): a multiple-choice Bible Content Examination on major themes, events, and people of the Scriptures (normally taken in the first year of seminary); and four written examinations in the areas of Bible Exegesis, Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, and Church Polity (normally taken after two full years of seminary [G-14.0431]).

The written examinations are graded by minister and elder readers elected by the presbyteries (G-11.0103m, G-14.0432) regionally. Four groups meet in the fall, and two in the spring. Each group meets for three and a half days. Prior to each meeting, the PCC develops and distributes resource papers to readers and encourages them to undertake additional preparation on their own. When the reading group meets, the PCC provides additional orientation to each examination question and to the examination process as a whole.

Because readers seek to discern how well a candidate communicates in writing his or her ability to relate the church's biblical, theological, and constitutional resources to issues in ministry today, the perspective of both ministers and elders is important. In order to encourage readers to focus on the content of the examinations, candidates' names and personal information remain anonymous. Each examination is graded (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) by at least two readers. In overseeing the process, the PCC works to ensure that readers' grades have a high degree of consistency, even though readers have diverse backgrounds and differing levels of formal theological training.

Pass rates on individual examinations in recent years have ranged between 63% and 71%. Approximately half of the candidates who take all four examinations at the beginning of their senior year of seminary satisfactorily complete them at that time. Another 15% or so of these candidates will complete the examination requirements in January of their senior year.

Additional statistical evidence indicates that after a second attempt to complete an examination satisfactorily, the likelihood of success decreases substantially. The PCC believes that the presbytery of care should determine whether such a candidate could better demonstrate readiness for ministry through an alternate means of examination or is better suited for a form of service to the church different from the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

## Appendix Two: Strengthening the Exams and Examination Process

The PCC has identified four areas in which the examinations can and should be strengthened: examination content and format, grading procedures, timing of when candidates take examinations, and racial-ethnic representation in the composing and grading of examinations.

### A. Examination Content and Format

The PCC regularly reviews examination content and format, seeking to ensure that each examination meets the goal of asking candidates to draw on the church's foundational documents to order to interpret and respond to pastoral situations wisely and imaginatively. The 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008) approved a recommendation from the PCC to revise the descriptions of examinations in order to align them more closely with these goals<sup>9</sup>:

(1) *Bible Content*. This examination shall assess the candidate's knowledge of the form and content of the Bible.

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<sup>9</sup> See Minutes of the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008), p. 1279. The principal changes in language were in the descriptions of the Open Book Bible Exegesis and Theological Competence Examinations.

(2) *Open Book Bible Exegesis*. This examination shall assess the candidate's ability to interpret an assigned passage of Scripture by demonstrating attention to the original language of the text, an understanding of the text's historical and literary context, and an ability to relate the text effectively to the contemporary life of the church in the world.

The candidate shall have access to Hebrew and Greek texts, translations, commentaries, and other exegetical tools.

(3) *Theological Competence*. This examination shall assess the candidate's capacity to make effective use of the Reformed theological heritage, including the church's confessional documents, in relating the gospel to the church and the world today.

(4) *Worship and Sacraments*. This examination shall assess the candidate's understanding of the meaning and purpose of corporate worship and the Sacraments, familiarity with the Directory for Worship and *The Book of Confessions*, and their application to the life of worshipping communities.

(5) *Church Polity*. This examination shall assess the candidate's working knowledge of the constitutional structure of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the method by which differences are properly resolved and programs to fulfill the mission of the church are determined.

The PCC has also revised the format of the Bible Exegesis Examination. The old examination emphasized detailed exegetical work that at points duplicated assessments for which a candidate's seminary and presbytery are already responsible. The *Book of Order* requires candidates to pass Hebrew and Greek exegesis classes in seminary. Presbyteries review the candidate's seminary transcript, including this work in Hebrew and Greek, before certifying that the candidate is ready to receive a call (G-14.0450c). In addition, candidates normally provide an exegetical paper and sermon to their presbytery (G-14.0305j in the 2005 *Book of Order*, now part of an Advisory Handbook [see 2007 *Book of Order* G-14.0402]).

In light of these seminary and presbytery requirements, the new exam, while retaining the church's concern for responsible exegesis, places emphasis on the text's application to the church and the world.<sup>10</sup>

## B. Grading Procedures

The examinations will be credible to candidates and the wider church only to the degree that grading is fair and reliable. The PCC must be confident that readers have adequate knowledge and training to make accurate judgments about candidates' answers.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information about the new exam format, see:  
<<http://www.pcusa.org/exams/explanation.htm>>.

The PCC works with presbyteries to recruit competent readers. It prepares resource papers and provides training prior to each grading session. New technologies (such as DVD presentations about each of the examination questions) are being utilized to help improve this training.

The PCC is particularly concerned to improve the grading of the Bible Exegesis and Theological Competence Examinations. Survey results indicate that readers feel less secure in grading these two examinations than the others; seminary representatives have also expressed concern about the grading of these two examinations. The PCC benefits from the insights of elder readers without specialized training who can help to judge a candidate's ability to communicate to a general church audience, but the PCC must also ensure that they have adequate knowledge and experience in each examination area. Again, recruitment and training are key.

Because the current grading format (three and a half days at a regional grading site) makes it difficult for some pastors and elders to participate who could otherwise make a vital contribution, the PCC is exploring changes to reading group schedules. Potential trade-offs in doing so will be carefully weighed, since the current reading group process provides for an intensity of focus and mutual learning and support.

### C. Timing of When Candidates Take Examinations

Because the purpose of the ordination examinations is to provide information to CPM's that will help them assess readiness for ministry, the examinations presuppose that candidates:

- have completed seminary work that familiarizes them with the church's foundational documents (such as courses in the confessions, Reformed worship, and church polity)
- have sufficient practical experience in ministry to be able to relate this foundational material effectively to various kinds of pastoral situations

In 2010, presbyteries approved a recommendation from the PCC that candidates take the four written ordination examinations only after they have completed adequate academic work and practical experience in these areas<sup>11</sup>:

Inquirers and candidates are encouraged to take the Bible Content Examination in their first year of seminary. The other four examinations shall ordinarily be taken by inquirers or candidates only after completion of two full years of theological education, or its equivalent, and shall be taken only upon approval by the committee on preparation for ministry of the inquirer's or candidate's presbytery, which shall first attest that the inquirer or candidate has completed adequate

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<sup>11</sup> See Minutes of the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008), p. 1280.



academic preparation in each examination area and adequate supervised experience in the practice of pastoral ministry. (G-14.0403)

#### D. Representation of Racial-Ethnic Persons in the Composing and Grading of Examinations

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is committed to increasing the membership and the participation of different racial and ethnic groups in the denomination. Ordination examinations must be sensitive to the church's racial and ethnic diversity, including new immigrant groups, while lifting up common, church-wide standards of theology and polity.

The PCC is deeply concerned that pass rates of racial-ethnic candidates on the ordination examinations are significantly lower than those of white candidates. Pass rates of white candidates in recent years on each examination have ranged between 65% and 77%. Pass rates of other candidates have averaged between 27-54%.

The PCC has adopted several strategies to address this concern. It actively recruits people to be members of the PCC and readers who are familiar with the pastoral contexts of different racial-ethnic groups and have cultural sensitivity in the formulation and grading of examination questions. In addition, the PCC provides for translation of the examinations into Spanish and Korean, and grading of those examinations by persons competent in those languages.

The PCC is working with the General Assembly Nominating Committee, the presbyteries, and the seminaries to increase the number of racial-ethnic identify persons who serve on the PCC and as readers. Additional strategies, however, are necessary. The PCC has constituted a panel of persons to assist the PCC in ensuring that examination questions do not have unintentional cultural biases but rather allow candidates to relate the church's foundational documents to diverse cultural contexts. The PCC has also committed itself to exploring how the examinations can better serve all candidates to integrate theological, biblical knowledge with the particular pastoral contexts in which they will be serving, including racial-ethnic contexts.

The PCC believes that the presbyteries play an especially important role in guiding racial-ethnic candidates through the examination process. First, presbyteries can interpret to all of their candidates, including racial-ethnic candidates, the examinations' significant but limited role in discerning readiness for ministry. The perspective of examination readers from the wider church must supplement, not replace, the judgment of the CPM, which knows its candidates personally. Second, the results of ordination examinations offer a presbytery an opportunity to work with its candidates to discern what further steps are most appropriate to help them to demonstrate readiness for ministry: additional seminary studies or field experience, assistance with preparation for taking the examinations, or alternate means of examination administered by the presbytery itself.

#### Appendix Three: A Task Force for a Pilot Program

The task force on the nature and future of national ordination examinations has been created in accord with the following mandates:

- a. Be appointed by the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee
- b. Have 8-12 members, with representatives of the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee, at least one Presbyterian seminary, and at least three presbyteries
- c. Study examination and certification processes in other denominations and profession
- d. Determine how national ordination examinations can better enable candidates, including racial-ethnic candidates, to relate the church's foundational documents to particular contexts of ministry
- e. Develop a pilot program in which candidates, including racial-ethnic candidates, take ordination examinations only after completion of their seminary work and a significant internship in a supervised pastoral context
- f. Report its progress to the PCC by Jan. 1, 2012