



GETTING STARTED IN A LOCAL CHURCH

The discernment process (previously known as the ‘in care’ process) is a relationship between a person, their local church, and an Association. These covenant partners seek to strengthen their relationship with each other and with God to determine if and how a person is being called to an authorized ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. The Central Association takes its role very seriously in maintaining the integrity of the discernment process.

Discernment presents a person the opportunity to:

Reflect about the meaning and significance of his or her decision to explore authorized ministry, while being in relationship with both a local church and an association.

Participate in the life of the United Church of Christ locally, and at the association, conference and national levels.

Grow and mature in faith by discerning areas of personal strength and growing edges, with the help of advisors.

Understand the history and polity of the United Church of Christ and learn about its governing bodies, committees and instrumentalities.

Build a network of caring and collegial relationships with persons in the local church and association who guide his or her pilgrimage of faith.

Acceptance into the discernment process does not commit either the candidate or the Association to ordination. Through study and prayer and in conjunction with a theological education, the possibilities of ministry – lay or ordained – are explored.

Beginning the Conversation

Discernment begins with the basic building-block of the United Church of Christ—the local church. When a candidate begins to wonder about the possibility of God’s call, he or she speaks with the local church pastor about exploring ordained ministry. The pastor and church member should meet with the Diaconate or equivalent church body to discuss, in detail, the possibility of contacting the Association. As soon as the church agrees, the candidate should contact the Central Association Office to schedule a meeting with Committee on Ministry.

Ordinarily, a candidate may not apply to begin the discernment process unless they have been an active member of a United Church of Christ congregation for at least two (2) years.

The path of the local church’s discernment may take many shapes. The Association does expect that the local church determines the sincerity of the candidate as well as identify potential gifts and skills for ordained ministry. The deeper and more honest the relationship is, the more the candidate and church will benefit from this process.



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During these early explorations, the church body, the pastor and the prospective candidate should review the Manual on Ministry of the United Church of Christ and the Policies and Expectations of the Central Association.

Depending on the decision-making style of the appropriate church body the following motion may be put forward: “We the members of the __[committee or board]__ have met with __[name of candidate]__ and support [her/him] in contacting the Committee on Ministry of the Central Association to explore applying for the Discernment Process. We wish to lift up __[name of candidate]__ to be examined and if found acceptable, be received into discernment with the Central Association.”

Application

The prospective candidate should then work with the appropriate church body to complete the application as delineated in the Policies and Expectations of the Central Association, utilizing the Forms as a resource.

Please note: These documents must be mailed in one package to the Administrative Assistant for the Central Association. Only once the completed application is received will an interview be scheduled.

Role of Local Church

While the candidate is the person for whom the discernment concerns, it is the action of the local church that lifts a candidate up to the wider church for consideration. To that end, when a local church has agreed to put forth one of their own, a committee or church body must be identified with the responsibility of following the Candidate’s progress towards ordination. This body ensures that the church’s responsibilities are being met. This body sends 1-2 representatives to the candidate’s initial interview, as well as annual renewal interviews and the final ordination interview(s) to speak to the candidate’s growth and fitness for ministry.

Throughout the process, the Discernment Group should provide nurture and support to the candidate. This care may be extended in many ways, including:

1. Offering opportunities for the candidate to lead worship, to preach, to work with committees, to contribute to church planning, and to interact with the children.
2. Challenging the candidate intellectually, morally, and spiritually; asking some of the tough questions about faith and its application to life.
3. Maintaining regular contact with the candidate even when he or she begins field education at another church.

DISCERNMENT FOR AUTHORIZED MINISTRY



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4. Offering financial support to attend meetings of the Central Association and the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Conference; offering grants, scholarships or no interest loans as an investment in tomorrow's church!
5. Paying 1/3 of the cost for the student to participate in a required Candidate Assessment Program (i.e. psychological evaluation). (1/3 of the cost is provided by the Central Association; the remaining 1/3 is born by the student)

It is highly recommended that the local church celebrate in a Sunday worship service the "Order of Recognition of a Student In Care" from the Book of Worship. This will inspire the attention and commitment by the whole congregation to the discernment relationship.

Role of the Prospective Candidate

The prospective candidate is expected to be intimately familiar with the Manual on Ministry of the United Church of Christ and the Policies and Expectations of the Central Association. These two documents provide detailed guidance with respect to the progression of discernment.

Candidates are responsible for all aspects of the discernment process—including submitting paper-work to the association office two (2) weeks in advance of all meetings and proactively engaging in all expectations.