

Ordination is the rite by which people whom God and the church have called to ordained ministry are set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands. It is a recognition of a particular calling from God and its acceptance by an individual. Ordination gives initial authorization to perform duties and exercise the prerogatives of ordained ministry. In the United Church of Christ ordination is carried out by an association in cooperation with a local church.

## History and Background

To ordain is to order or shape. God ordained creation, bringing it into being and then pronouncing it good. In Jesus of Nazareth, God reordered and re-ordained all of creation and infused it with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is present in all of creation and every life. Churches are communities ordained by the Holy Spirit to be signs of, and witnesses to, the restoring work of God in Jesus Christ. All Christians are ordained into a life, both personal and corporate, that carries the power of Jesus Christ for the sake of the whole world.

Because the church is ordained to order its life so that it marshals its gifts for the maximum faithfulness to the reign of God, from among its ranks it calls certain men and women to special service. These are sisters and brothers who in their personal lives exhibit a compelling love of God and the Christian community.

While all of us are called as

Christians to follow Jesus fully and faithfully, some members of the church are “ordained to preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and the rites of the Church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership” (United Church of Christ Constitution, Article V).

Throughout church history, people experienced their calls to ministry in the following ways:

- The call to be a Christian is **the call to discipleship**-- to hearing and doing the word of God. Baptism is the answer to this call, whether accepted by the recipient or by adults on behalf of a child.
- **The secret call** is the inner experience that causes a person to feel summoned by God to serve in a particular way.
- **The providential call** is an invitation or direction which comes through having been given the necessary talents and God-given direction to fulfill the demands of ministry.
- **The ecclesiastical or church call** is extended by a part of, or the entire, community of faith for a person to do specific ministry in a particular time and place. Ordination is the response to this call.

Our United Church of Christ forbearers put great emphasis on education. Accordingly, the United Church of Christ values a learned ministry. This usually means that ordained ministers have a college and a seminary degree. The education is to help the ordained minister as he or she serves as:

- **Priest** in administering the rites of the church, including the sacraments of baptism and communion.
- **Pastor** in caring for and comforting people in their personal and corporate lives, in joy and sorrow and in building leadership within the congregation.
- **Teacher** in instructing and enlightening others in the meaning of faith and the traditions of the faith.
- **Prophet** in preaching, interpreting and leading others toward corporate response to the word of God in the Bible.
- **Administrator** in managing and leading the organization of the church.

## Common Practices

Ordination in the United Church of Christ is meant to provide people committed to the nurture and up-building of local churches and the denomination. Men and women are ordained for church-related ministries. They become pastors to local churches; staff in associations, conferences and national bodies; administrators and chaplains in health care institutions; military chaplains; teachers in church-related colleges and seminaries; and ministers in other church-related settings.

As long as ordained ministers are engaged in church-related ministry, they hold ministerial standing as ordained ministers of the United Church of Christ. Ministerial standing is the authorization granted by an association

to perform ordained ministry. With ministerial standing, an ordained minister is a voting member of his or her association and conference and can be a participant in the denomination's pension and health insurance programs. When an ordained minister no longer has a church-related ministry, her or his ministerial standing is terminated, unless a leave of absence is requested. All authorizations for ordained ministry are subject to periodic review and disciplinary action by the association and may be removed for cause.

## Skills and Attributes Needed

The **Manual on Ministry: Perspectives and Procedures for Ecclesiastical Authorization of Ministry** lists a series of criteria for ordination. They include a general liberal education, skills, faith affirmations and personal qualities. Among these skills, faith affirmations and personal qualities are:

- Sense of responsibility.
- Ability to communicate.
- Open, affirming style.
- Skill in preaching and worship leadership.
- Maturity
- Commitment to the mission of the church.
- Commitment to service in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.
- A sense of having been called by God to ordained ministry

# Ordination

## Responsibilities

Procedures and perspectives for ordination are outlined in **Manual on Ministry** for use by association committees on the ministry. (Order from United Church of Christ Resources. Telephone, toll-free, 800-537-3394.) The manual describes responsibilities of the candidate for ordination, the candidate's local church and the association or conference.

A candidate for ordination asks the official board of his or her church to recommend to the association committee on the ministry that the candidate be ordained. Usually the student is in care of the association, so the request for ordination is not unexpected. The candidate requesting ordination usually provides the following for the association committee on the ministry:

- A three-part ordination paper dealing with the person's theological perspective and grasp of the historic Christian faith; understanding of the history, theological roots, polity and practice of the United Church of Christ; and the person's faith pilgrimage and understanding of ministry.
- A sermon by the candidate.
- Verification of membership and participation in a local church of the United Church of Christ.
- Verification of current student in care relationship.
- Certification of educational attainment, including a bachelor's degree

or its equivalent; a master of divinity degree, or its equivalent, from a theological seminary approved by Local Church Ministries (through the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team), or notification that such a degree will be granted prior to ordination; documentation of ability, skills, knowledge and training for ordained ministry.

- At least four letters of reference, including one from the seminary, one from the student in care advisor, and one from an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ.
- A Ministerial Profile prepared by the candidate.
- A statement of where the candidate is in the process of seeking a call.

The candidate meets with the association committee on the ministry to be examined. The ordination examination determines the candidate's abilities; reasons for seeking ordained ministry; educational and theological attainments; knowledge of the history, polity and practices of the United Church of Christ; growth in Christian faith and experience; personal qualities; and preparation and fitness for the call the person is considering or the type of ministry the person is seeking.

If the committee is satisfied that the person meets the requirements for ordination, it recommends the person to the association. The association committee on the ministry then arranges for an ecclesiastical council

and plans with the candidate how the candidate's ordination paper will be shared with the delegates to the ecclesiastical council. If ordination is approved following the ecclesiastical council's examination of the candidate, the association instructs its committee on the ministry to proceed with plans for the ordination service. The association, candidate, local church and other calling body, if any, participate in planning the ordination service.

In a service of worship surrounded by family, friends and other ordained ministers, the candidate makes a commitment to serve the church, share the gospel, pray regularly, search and share the scriptures and lead a compassionate, truthful and loving life of devotion through the church. Then by prayer and the laying on of hands, the person is ordained.

## Issues Facing the Church

- Local churches have the right to ordain individual members as deacons, elders, trustees, moderators or any special office within the life of the local church. These ordinations are valid only in the local church where they are conferred, and only for the specified position. Ordination can be repeated for the same person for a different office, or in a different congregation. What does ordination mean then?
- Should ordination be "for life" even if the person serves in a church-

related ministry for only a short time?

- Many of those the United Church of Christ approves for ordination have difficulty finding a call in congregations which perceive them as "different" in some way. What can be done to overcome these preconceived attitudes?

## Questions

- How can you find out more about the way your association makes decisions on ordination?
- What qualities do you think are most important for people who are ordained?
- What is ministerial standing and how is it conferred?
- What is the responsibility of an ordained United Church of Christ minister to other ordained colleagues and to the United Church of Christ?