

# The Ecclesiastical Council

## An Introduction

The Ecclesiastical Council offers us a picture of how our polity plays out. We believe that when the Church gathers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are able to discern God's will. The purpose of an Ecclesiastical Council is to discern if a person is called to the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. The United Church of Christ entrusts to the clergy and lay delegates of an Association the authority to approve or deny a candidate for ordination. This discernment is important; it edifies and builds up the body of Christ.

When a candidate has completed all the requirements as a Member in Discernment (MID), the Windham Association Council supports their candidacy for ordination by calling an Ecclesiastical Council.

**To lay delegates:** If this is your first time as a delegate you may feel intimidated by the process or even by the questions that clergy ask. It is important to remember that we believe in the Priesthood of all Believers. This means that each of us who follow Jesus Christ has been called, in some sense, to some ministry. Ordained ministry is no more or less important than the ministry to which God has called lay members.

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God alone is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: everyone gets in on it; everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! (1 Corinthians 12:4-11; *The Message*)

You may one day be a member of a church where today's candidate will serve as your pastor. Your questions are important and valuable to this Ecclesiastical Council. Your presence here is vital to the legitimacy of our claim that God the Holy Spirit works through the discernment of this gathered body. We believe this claim is true whenever the Church gathers, be they local churches, Associations, Conferences or General Synod. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20).

As we proceed through the Ecclesiastical Council, let us remember that the work we do together in this place is God's work, accomplished in and through us by the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We believe God is about to move in our midst. It would not be out of place for us to take off our shoes because, as we gather here in Christ's name, we stand on holy ground!

## Sample Questions

You will be sent the candidate's ordination paper. We ask all clergy and delegates to read this in advance of the Ecclesiastical Council. The Ecclesiastical Council also creates a unique opportunity for the local church to engage in a conversation about their own theology, ethics

and ministerial practice. Here are a few suggested questions which may help to spark discussion.

1. If you could preach only one sermon, what would be your text and main point?
2. Speak with us about your relationship with Jesus Christ.
3. How will you seek to balance the roles of priest, pastor and prophet?
4. How do you see the Holy Spirit working in the church today? In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?
5. What do you see as the difference between ordained ministry and lay ministry?
6. Talk with us about your prayer life.
7. I do not belong to a church; give me a good reason why I should!
8. With what religious questions do you wrestle?
9. Why do you love the UCC?
10. What would you change about the UCC?
11. What component of ministry are you most energized by? Which is your “growing edge”?
12. What is your understanding of one of the following significant issues?

evil	sacraments	scriptural authority
salvation	sin	atonement
incarnation	resurrection	evangelism

## Conclusion

Thank you to all the delegates, clergy and local churches who commit to this work of discernment. You strengthen the body by your efforts. We know that there are many requests for your time and energy. We know that these Association events require traveling long distances for many. Yet, this work of listening to the Holy Spirit and examining candidates for ministry is what sustains our way of church for future generations. Thank you. And may the Peace of Christ be with you.