

Advisory Opinions: Note 16

Criteria for Validating Ministry of Continuing Members

Since reunion, G-11.0403 has provided guiding criteria to presbyteries in determining “who shall be its continuing members.” Every presbytery has been required to have a process for regularly reviewing the work of ministers not serving in parish or governing body positions.

In 1997, the 207th General Assembly approved the final proposals for implementation of the Task Force on “A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination to Office in the PCUSA.”

The 207th General Assembly approved and the presbyteries ratified two additional sentences to G-11.0403:

“In making this determination the presbytery shall be guided by written criteria developed by the presbytery for validation of ministries within its bounds. These criteria shall be based upon the description of the nature of ordained office found in G-6.0100 and G-6.0200 ...” (*Minutes*, 1997, Part I, p. 381 (31.0215-.0230))

Thereafter the presbyteries began to adopt such written criteria. A wide range of written criteria has been adopted.¹ A number of presbyteries reviewed the language of G-11.0403 a-e and determined that language was adequate on its face to enable it to determine who its members should be. It is now clear that the latter approach is not constitutionally adequate.

A recent decision by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission gives the presbyteries much more detailed advice on what is required by G-11.0403:²

1. Simply incorporating the language of G-11.0403 a-e as a presbytery’s “written criteria” does not constitute compliance with the provisions of the 1997 amendment.
2. There is no constitutional requirement to tailor such criteria to each applicant’s requested ministry.
3. Such criteria should “provide applicants with reasonable notice as to what is specifically required for validation that so they have ample opportunity to comply prior to their submission of applications.”³
4. When a Committee on Ministry recommends against validating a particular ministry, the minister must be provided “an opportunity to be heard and a consideration of [his/her] positions without prejudice.”⁴
5. The criteria may include consideration and review of “relevant materials from prior years for the purposes of showing a pattern that has continuity with present statements or actions”, even if that pattern occurred during a period where a ministry had been validated for the minister.⁵
6. “[T]he burden is on the minister to demonstrate that the proposed ministry should be validated.”⁶

The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission did not provide specific direction as to what must be included in such written criteria. Their decision suggests that criteria that clarify the guidelines found in G-11.0403 a-e to reflect the presbytery’s own vision of its mission would pass constitutional muster. The presbytery’s criteria could also be quite specific and include examples of the constitutional material contained in G-6.0100 and G-6.0200. Illustrative, but not limiting, a presbytery might well consider as criteria, ministry which:

G-6.0101 shows the “...pattern of the one who came "not to be served but to serve." (Matt. 20:28)

G-6.0104 “may emphasize special tasks and skills...”

G-6.0106a “Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world.”

G-6.0108 “adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in The Book of Confessions and the Form of Government.”

G-6.0201 “work as may be helpful to the church in mission,”

G-6.0202a “duty to be grave and prudent, and an example to the flock,”

G-6.0202b “commend the gospel to all persons and that communicate its joy and its justice.”

G-6.0202b “equip[s] and enable[s] the [people] for their tasks within the church and their mission in the world;”

G-6.0202b “devoting special attention to the poor, the sick, the troubled, and the dying;”

G-6.0202b “reaching out in concern and service to the life of the human community as a whole.”

G-6.0202b “in ecumenical relationships.”

G-6.0203 “...as educators, chaplains, pastoral counselors, campus ministers, missionaries, partners in mission, evangelists, administrators, social workers, consultants, or in other specific tasks appropriate to the ministry of the church, they shall evidence a quality of life which helps to share the ministry of the good news. They shall exercise pastoral care of those for whom they are responsible and shall seek to fulfill their ministry by serving Christ and their fellow men and women, strengthening the church and equipping it for concern and service to the life of the human community. In addition to fulfilling the particular responsibilities to which they are called, they shall participate in a congregation, in their presbytery, and in ecumenical relationships, and shall be eligible for election to the higher governing bodies of the church and to the boards and agencies of those governing bodies.”

Clearly the Scriptures and The Book of Confessions provide a wide range of examples of ministry that could be included in written criteria. The Williamson decision provides no restrictions on a presbytery’s historic responsibility and right to determine who its members are and what they shall be doing, but rather teaches us that presbyteries must lay out those criteria for the public to see and understand.