

Speak, Lord, Your Servant is Listening

A Guide for Discerning, Preparing,
and Beginning the journey toward
Licensed or Ordained Ministry



Introduction

You may have felt a nudge in your spirit, a growing pull to serve in a deeper, more dedicated way. Perhaps others have noticed gifts for ministry in you. You may be wondering:

“Am I being called to set apart ministry?”



This booklet is a companion to help you prayerfully reflect on that call, take practical steps forward, and prepare for discernment with your District Committee on Ordained Ministry (dCOM).

What is “Set Apart Ministry”?

"Set apart ministry" refers to individuals called, recognized, and authorized by the Church to serve in licensed or ordained ministry. This includes roles such as:

- Licensed Local Pastor
- Associate Member
- Deacon
- Elder

Each path carries distinct functions, but all are grounded in a call to serve God and the Church with faithfulness, leadership, and love. The distinct functions are outlined on the next page.

Licensed Local Pastors

Licensed to Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service, a local pastor answers God's call by serving a local congregation or extension ministry. When appointed, the local pastor performs pastoral duties, including preaching and teaching; leading in worship and liturgy; receiving new members; performing the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion; and the services of marriage, burial, and confirmation. The local pastor's authority is limited to the appointment setting. The local pastor is not ordained and serves by virtue of a license for pastoral ministry after completing certified candidacy, licensing school, and annual conference requirements. Local pastors are clergy members of the annual conference.

Ordained Deacons

Deacons are ordained clergy who lead the people of God through ministries of Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice. Deacons proclaim the word through preaching and teaching, and have sacramental responsibility. Some deacons serve congregations in ministries of Christian education, music, outreach, administration, pastoral care, or as pastors in charge of local congregations. Some deacons serve outside the church in such ministries as social-service organizations, schools, legal services, or as chaplains.

Ordained Elders

Elders lead and serve the Church in the ministries of Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service. Elders' primary responsibilities are communicating the faith and proclaiming God's Word through preaching and teaching. Elders administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion and order the Church's ministry. Most elders serve as pastors in charge of local congregations. However, elders may also serve in a variety of extension ministry (§343) settings (such as chaplaincy or pastoral counseling).



Licensed or Ordained?

In the United Methodist Church, licensing and ordination are two distinct stages of authorized ministry. A **licensed local pastor** is approved by a bishop to serve a specific congregation, typically after completing initial requirements and under supervision; they are authorized to preach, lead worship, and administer the sacraments within that appointment, but their authority is limited to that context.

Ordination, on the other hand, is a broader and more permanent recognition of a person's call and readiness for ministry across the whole church. Those who are ordained as elders or deacons have completed more extensive education, formation, and evaluation, and are entrusted with ministry that is not tied to a single appointment but to the wider mission of the church.



Education Journey

The educational paths for licensing and ordination differ in depth and scope. Once they are licensed, **local pastors** begin the foundational coursework through the Course of Study (often offered through approved seminaries) or begin seminary-level education while serving in an appointment. This pathway is designed to equip them for effective ministry in a specific local context. In contrast, those seeking **ordination** as elders or deacons are generally required to complete a full graduate theological degree from an accredited seminary, before they can apply for provisional membership. The ordination track is more extensive, reflecting preparation for broader leadership and ministry across the wider church.



Scriptural Reflection

Take a moment and read 1 Samuel 3:1-10.

Samuel initially mistook God's voice for something familiar — when you sense a pull toward ministry, how do you discern whether it's truly God's calling or your own expectations, desires, or influences from others?

Eli played a key role in helping Samuel recognize God's voice — who are the wise, spiritually mature people in your life that you trust to help you discern a call to ministry, and are you actively seeking their guidance?

Samuel's response was immediate and open: "Speak, for your servant is listening." Are you genuinely willing to listen and respond to God's call, even if it leads you outside your comfort zone or current plans?

The message Samuel received was difficult and required courage to share — how do you respond to the possibility that ministry may involve hard truths, sacrifice, or rejection?

As Samuel grew, the community recognized God's hand on his life — what gifts, affirmations, or opportunities have you already seen that might point toward a calling to ministry, and how are you stewarding them right now?

Recognizing a Call to Ministry

Discerning a call to ministry is rarely a single moment. More often, it unfolds over time — through patterns, nudges, and confirmations that gently (and sometimes persistently) draw you forward.

While every call is unique, many who enter set-apart ministry recognize several common movements in their journey:

A Growing Inner Conviction

You may feel a persistent sense that God is inviting you into something more. This often isn't loud or dramatic — it may feel like a quiet but steady pull that doesn't go away, even when ignored.

A Deepening Love for People and the Church

A call to ministry is not just about personal purpose — it's about people. You may notice an increasing desire to serve, guide, care for, or advocate for others, especially in spiritual or vulnerable moments.

Affirmation from Others

Often, others see gifts in us before we fully recognize them ourselves. Trusted mentors, pastors, or friends may name qualities such as leadership, compassion, wisdom, or spiritual maturity. Pay attention to repeated affirmations — they may be part of God's voice.

Opportunities That Open Unexpectedly

Sometimes calling is clarified through experience. You may find yourself stepping into roles — teaching, leading, praying with others, organizing ministry — where your gifts come alive and bear fruit.

A Willingness to Be Stretched

A genuine call often leads beyond comfort. You may feel both drawn and challenged — excited by the possibility of ministry, yet aware of the sacrifice, growth, and uncertainty it may require.



Remember

It's important to remember: clarity and doubt often coexist.

You can feel called and still question yourself.

You can feel unready and still be chosen.

You can move forward without having everything figured out.

Discernment is not about having absolute certainty — it is about faithfully responding to what you understand today, while remaining open to how God continues to shape your path.

Become an Admitted & Certified Candidate



Requirements

To be licensed or ordained, you must first become an Admitted Candidate, you will need to complete the following:



- Be a member of a UMC for at least one year.
- Ask the clergy person you met with to complete the Recommendation Form
- Complete the Biographical Form
- Write a Call Statement
- Complete the Candidate's Disclosure Form
- Upload all forms and documents to the "Request Interview to Become an Admitted Candidate" form.

Where are the forms?

All required forms can be found at:

<https://vaumc.org/candidates-for-ministry/>

After your materials are reviewed, you will be scheduled for an interview with the District Committee on Ordained Ministry (dCOM). The dCOM helps discern and evaluate your call to ministry.

Writing a Call Statement

Your call story is sacred. When writing your call statement, reflect on:

- Your spiritual journey — How has your faith developed over time?
- Moments of clarity — Can you name a time when you felt God nudging you toward ministry?
- Affirmation from others — Have people identified leadership, pastoral, or spiritual gifts in you?
- Scripture or life experiences that helped shape your sense of calling.
- Why this path? — Why do you feel called to be a licensed or ordained minister in this tradition?

Helpful Tips:



- Be honest. Your story doesn't need to be dramatic — just authentic.
- Keep it clear and personal. Avoid using overly formal or “churchy” language.
- Ask a mentor or clergy person to read your draft.

Writing Prompts

Describe how you have experienced God's call to ministry over time. What key moments, relationships, Scripture passages, or inner convictions have shaped your sense of calling? How has this call been affirmed, challenged, or clarified through your community and lived experience?

Describe the kind of ministry you believe you are being called to. What are your core gifts, passions, and burdens? Who do you feel especially drawn to serve, and in what ways do you sense God inviting you to participate in the mission of the church moving forward?



Talk with a Clergy Person

Before beginning formal processes, schedule a time to speak with a trusted clergy person or your pastor. Read *The Christian as Minister* or *Blessed Wrestling*.

Here are some suggested talking points:

- Share your sense of call and what led you to this conversation.
- Share insights gleaned from the book you read.
- Ask about their own call story and ministry journey.
- Inquire about different ministry paths (licensed, ordained, deacon, elder, etc.).

Remember to come prepared with questions and an open heart.



Tips for Your dCOM Interview

- Prepare all your required documents.
- Prepare to share your faith journey and call verbally.
- Be prayerful. Invite God's peace and presence into the process.
- Be authentic. They are not expecting perfection — they are looking for clarity and readiness.
- Be open to feedback. Discernment is a process, not a destination.
- Bring a spirit of humility and learning.

If admitted by the dCOM, you will receive an email with instructions to login to Unity where you will complete the Certified Candidate track. You must be a certified candidate in order to pursue licensing or ordination. All the required forms can be found on the track instructions and online at <https://vaumc.org/candidates-for-ministry/>.

Reflection Questions



Questions for Reflection

How have you experienced God's presence in your life lately?

What brings you deep joy and spiritual energy?

What are your biggest fears or hesitations about ministry?



How do you see yourself serving the Church five years from now?

What biblical figure do you relate to the most and why?

Resources





Books

- *The Christian as Minister* (GBHEM)
- *Blessed Wrestling* by Jessie Colwell (Abingdon Press)
- *Listen. Discern. Respond: A Guide to Answering God's Invitation* by Dale Carl Fredrickson
- *Understanding Your Call: Knowing How 11 Biblical Figures Understood Their Calls from God* (Market Square Books)

Videos

A curated collection of videos about call can be found on YouTube. Find the videos at www.vaumc.org/call



Discernment Days



By virtue of our baptisms, every Christian is called by God in a myriad of ways – as laity serving in local churches, missionaries serving abroad, meeting the needs of the local community, to the set-apart ministry of the licensed and ordained and so much more.

Discernment Day is an opportunity for you to explore your sense of call with others who are also discerning. Through prayer practices, age appropriate small groups, and topical discussion groups, you will be provided space to learn more, connect with others, and discover your next steps.

Learn more at <https://vaumc.org/discernment-day/>.



Final Encouragement

Discerning a call is sacred work. Whether you move forward into set apart ministry or discern another path, you are responding to God's invitation.

Take each step with faith, wisdom, and courage. The Church needs your voice, your gifts, and your willingness to listen for God's call.

If you recognize even a few of these signs in your life, consider taking the next step: Share your sense of call with a trusted clergy person or mentor.

Discernment is not meant to be done alone.

Contact Information

Phone 804-521-1141
Website www.vaumc.org/call
Email clergyexcellence@vaumc.org

*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.
Give me clarity where I am uncertain,
courage where I am hesitant,
and peace as I take each next step.
Help me to trust not only in my calling,
but in your presence with me through it. Amen.*
