Handbook for Preparation for
Commissioned Ruling Elders (CRE)
To Particular Pastoral Service

Adopted by
Committee on Preparation for Ministry
September 18, 2013
Committee on Preparation for Ministry
Presbytery of Baltimore

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Approved 9/18/2013
What is a Commissioned Ruling Elder (CRE)?

A CRE is an elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA) who is granted a local commission by the Presbytery to limited pastoral service as assigned by the Presbytery.

Who commissions the ruling elder?

The Presbytery commissions the ruling elder for a period of one to three years. The commission may be renewed at expiration, or terminated at any time at the discretion of the Presbytery.

What is the ruling elder commissioned to do?

A commissioned ruling elder may moderate the session of the congregation to which he or she is commissioned, to administer the Sacraments, and to officiate at marriages where permitted by state law (G-2.1001).

A commissioned ruling elder is responsible to watch over the people, and provide for their worship and nurture. Permission for specific activities will be included in the contract established between the session of a particular church or organization, with the approval of the Committee on Ministry.

What entities are served by commissioned ruling elders?

The session of any church or recognized organization in the Presbytery of Baltimore may request the Presbytery, through the Committee on Ministry, to provide for its pastoral needs through the commissioning of a ruling elder. The session may enter into a contractual relationship with a ruling elder whose preparation for lay pastoral ministry is certified in this Presbytery, with the permission of the Committee on Ministry.

What is the theological basis for commissioning elders to serve as ruling elders?

God, in Jesus Christ, exercises God’s sovereignty in the Church by calling persons to the role of spiritual leadership. When the Church and the individual answer such a call, they experience a divine commissioning.

Such a mission is worked out in the sacrament of Baptism, which is a person’s radical ordination to ministry in Christ’s name.

Those individuals called by God and elected by local communities of faith to the office of elder are authorized for ministry by church ordination to that office. Ordination at this level sets a person aside and gives ministerial authority to him or her for specific building up of the local church to faithfully engage in God’s mission to the world.
The Presbyterian Church (USA) provides also for certified and commissioned “ministers” within its membership for specialized service to the people of God. For example, there are recognized Certified Christian Educators (G-2.1103) and Commissioned Ruling Elders (G-2.10).

The Presbyterian Church exists in a new kairos in God’s Providence. The context in which the Church is called is a new, not-yet-fully defined and understood cultural era. God calls Christ’s Church to faithfulness now as well as in ages past.

Throughout Christian Church history local faith communities, relying on God’s promise to their God (Covenant) and to be and walk with them to the end of the Age, have had the radical right or claim to have God’s Word proclaimed and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper celebrated and community life ordered by spiritual (pastoral) leaders.

We believe that in the new “kairos” moment, God’s Spirit is providing for new opportunities and for new forms of ministry to build up Christ’s Church through the recognition and development of commissioned ruling elders.

In a strict sense, neither Jesus of Nazareth nor the first disciples and apostles were ordained priests in Judaism. Yet as lay men and women, Jesus and his disciples exercised faithful ministry and service in the name of God’s very Spirit.

Commissioned ruling elders institutionally speaking are a hybrid creation of the Church to respond to special historical and cultural needs of particular faith communities. As baptized Christians, they are ordained (priesthood of all believers) to minister in Jesus’ name. As elders they are ordained to church office. Yet, they are neither called nor ordained as teaching elders for the whole Church. They are commissioned ruling elders (non-clergy).

Commissioned ruling elders are commissioned by the Presbytery of Baltimore to provide spiritual, pastoral leadership for specific congregations or for specific ministries in the world on behalf of the Presbytery. Such “commissioning” is for a specified limited time. Commissioned ruling elders are, however, called and authorized to provide specific leadership, primarily the week-to-week oversight and Christian nurture (in the broad sense of proclaiming God’s word, prayer leadership, celebration of the Sacraments and nurturing in discipleship) in the case of commissioned ruling elders for particular churches, or for prophetic and advocacy ministries in the case of presbytery-wide lay ministries.

Commissioned ruling elders, along with teaching elders, ruling elders and deacons, and certified Christian educators, make up the broad range of Spiritual or Pastoral Leadership within the Body of Christ, the Church, and so incarnate the various gifts of the Holy Spirit for the building up of Christ’s Body.

In so doing, commissioned ruling elders respond to certain aspects or facets of God’s mission to the world in and through the Body of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church. In
recognizing and empowering for service commissioned ruling elders, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Presbytery of Baltimore respond faithfully to God’s kairos call to the Church in this present, newly emerging age.

“Behold, I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

What personal qualities does the presbytery seek in an applicant for commissioned ruling elder ministry?

The Presbytery looks for seasoned elders who have soundness of mind and spirit, and have the judgment and inner freedom to lead, hear and be present to people in need.

The Presbytery requires psychological testing of the applicant at one of the counseling centers of the Ministry Development Council, Inc. (http://www.ministrydevelopment.org/centers.html) during the first year of preparation. CPM considers the results of this testing to be important in determining the fitness of the individual for lay pastoral ministry. The fee for testing will be paid in equal one third shares by the applicant, the applicant’s congregation, and the Presbytery (through the Committee on Preparation for Ministry).

Upon entrance into the process, the presbytery will conduct a background check and a clearance interview. Any concerns a ruling elder has regarding these routine checks should be brought to the attention of the moderator of the session early in the process of preparation.

What spiritual qualities does the presbytery seek in an applicant for commissioned ruling elder?

The Presbytery of Baltimore looks for elders who give evidence of the possession of gifts and graces fit for service to congregations and ministries, including but not limited to:

- Lively faith in the triune God
- The ability to express one’s faith clearly
- Personal maturity, as evidenced by emotional stability, flexibility, integrity in handling personal and family financial matters, and the willingness to accept appropriate responsibility for errors in judgment.
- An inquiring mind, open to learning
- Willingness to further the peace, unity, and purity of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Discernment

CRE training will include several pauses for discernment, such as

- A time of discernment with the session and teaching elder.
- A recommendation from a teaching elder and/or session for a ruling elder seeking to become a CRE.
• A time of reflection and discussion with the candidate, for both models. (See page 11)
• Building in time between the application and the start of the first class.
• An interview between the first and second years of training, to ask where the candidate is within the discernment process.
• A spiritual mentoring/training piece, such as a week of silent meditation or retreat.

All individuals who believe themselves called to this ministry should consult with their session and a member of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry. Upon endorsement of the session, with counsel from the CPM member, the individual may submit an application for preparation for ruling elder ministry.

**What educational preparation does a person need to have to apply?**

Applicants must hold a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university.

**Supervised mentoring**

Upon acceptance into the program, a teaching elder of Baltimore Presbytery will be assigned as a mentor from the beginning of the certification process. The field internship may take place at the church of this mentor or at another church (see Field Internship below).

The mentor will make regular contact with the candidate for continuing discernment of call, theological reflection on the candidate’s studies, and personal support. The mentor should report to CPM annually.

**What is the educational program for preparation for commissioned ruling elders?**

The Presbytery supervises the training of Candidates for Commissioned Ruling Elder, under the supervision of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry and its Joint Committee for CREs. Preparation shall include at minimum:

- Biblical Studies
- Reformed Theology and Sacraments
- Presbyterian Polity
- Preaching
- Leading Worship (including administering sacraments when authorized)
- Pastoral Care
- Field Internship

In addition, the applicant’s preparation shall include supervised instruction and practice within a congregation (not the individual’s home congregation) under the supervision of a teaching elder of the Presbytery of Baltimore, for a period of two semesters (Field Internship).

“Healthy Boundaries” or other sexual misconduct prevention training is required as part of the CRE training. CPM recommends that it be completed close to the end of preparation.
The competencies expected in the required areas of instruction follow. Some applicants may enter with competencies in some areas, and may proceed directly to demonstrate their knowledge. Evaluation shall ordinarily be conducted by written exam but alternative assessment may be conducted at the discretion of CPM.

**Bible: Introduction to the Old Testament**
The individual will have an understanding of the time line of the history and flow of the Old Testament, and will be able to describe the sections of the Old Testament, Pentateuch, History, Wisdom, Literature and Prophets and their flow and contents.

**Bible: Introduction to the New Testament**
The individual will have an understanding of the development, time line, geography, people and themes of the New Testament. The individual will have a sense of the historical background of the New Testament and the order of its writing, the development of the literary genre there (Gospel, history, letters, apocalyptic literature) and the roles these played in the early church.

**Bible: Study/exegesis**
The individual will read the entire Bible. The individual will have an awareness of the variety, character and reliability of the various translations/versions of the Scriptures.

The individual will have an understanding of basic elements of Biblical exegesis including analysis, synthesis, reflection and expansion and refinement.

**Reformed Theology**
The individual will demonstrate beginning knowledge of Reformed theology and history with emphasis on teachings of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, the Westminster Assembly and other Reformed movements. He or she will read the Book of Confessions. The individual will know the tenets of Reformed faith compared to other systems of belief, and the many basic Christian beliefs that are held in common with other Christians.

**Worship and Sacraments**
The individual will demonstrate an understanding that the church, when it is most truly the church of Jesus Christ, is grounded in, centered on, and empowered by liturgical experiences. The individual will show an understanding of the elements of worship and demonstrate skills needed in planning and leading
worship, speaking, reading Scripture, choosing hymns, etc. He/she will know some of the resources available in planning worship services.

The individual will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the theological concepts and foundation of the sacraments and why we celebrate the two we name as sacraments. In looking at the historical background from Reformed Church history and confessional documents, the individual can explain the meaning behind the various ways the sacraments can be celebrated.

**Presbyterian Polity**
Through the use of case studies, the individual will demonstrate an understanding of the connection between the spiritual character of the Church and its human organization and system of agreed upon rules of government.

Evaluation will ordinarily be by examination.

**Preaching**
The individual will show an awareness of the many aspects of sermon preparation, resources for sermons, kinds of sermons and styles of preaching, the cycle of the Christian year, and the lectionary—using it and diverging from it.

**Pastoral Care**
The individual will show an understanding of the components of pastoral care, the needs of both caregiver and recipient, boundary issues, and ethical concerns. The individual will be able to discern between pastoral care and pastoral counseling. Assessment will be by report of the supervised field experience.

**Field Internship**
Each candidate will participate in a field internship experience within the bounds of a congregation for the equivalent of two semesters. The field supervisor will ordinarily be a teaching elder in Baltimore Presbytery. He or she will make available practical experience in congregational ministry, or other approved setting, and reflect theologically with the individual on a regular basis regarding the practice of ministry. A case study approach can provide a practice-reflection-new praxis approach to learning. Structured teaching experiences will be provided.

If a field supervisor leaves his or her position in the middle of an internship, the candidate’s relationship with the congregation shall be reassessed.

Evaluation: a final field internship report will be completed by the field supervisor.

**Field Internship as an integral part of the CRE Training**
Field internship is that part of the curriculum where the student engages in actual practice in order to learn and practice skills and talents that will be necessary in ministry as a CRE.

Objectives:
The objectives of the Field Internship are guided by the overall objectives of ministry in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The boundaries of these experiences include knowledge, skills, understanding of working in a church setting with the installed teaching elder, parishioners and those persons who are in need of the faith-based service of the church.

The program aim is to educate applicants who accept responsibility for providing service to the church, its people, the community and anyone who must interact with the program of the church.

These objectives are related to the current and projected needs of the individual church in enhancing its ministry, expanding its programs, and providing room for the special gifts of those called to serve in this capacity.

The field internship should enable those preparing to serve as CREs to function as competent lay teaching elders and to assume responsibility for the many tasks assigned to them.

1. Initiate or be assigned a specific ministry for a year (i.e. youth, men, women, marriage, couples, or take the talents where God is leading.)
2. Preach on a regular basis including Biblical texts.
3. Test one’s Bible knowledge and interpretation of the same.
4. Test one’s ability to work with teaching elders, staff, groups and individual parishioners.
5. Assess simple to complex problems presented by a broad spectrum of people, and plan for appropriate intervention.
6. Participate in the assessment of church related services, their effectiveness, and help innovate needed changes when appropriate.

The organizing principle for the field internship is that the student must demonstrate his/her learning through behavior, attitude, knowledge, skill, communication, and grasp of the total concept of CRE ministry.

The field supervisor must be able to analyze behavioral components, involve others in the training process, give clear messages as to positive and negative behaviors and share findings with the student, the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, and with the Presbytery at the appropriate time.

Who bears the costs for the program of preparation for ruling elder ministry?
The candidate will bear the costs including:
The cost of the program depends on where courses are taken.
Seminary/on-line courses: as required by seminary
Books, supplies: as required
Field Education: as required
Psychological evaluation: Presbytery will cover one-third. Applicant and home church session to cover the rest.

What is the process of preparation?

Home church endorsement: The individual should approach her/his teaching elder, and discuss the sense of call to serve as a CRE. The individual shall have been a member of the local church for at least one year, and shall be an ordained elder. The Session shall interview the applicant, and provide for an agreed period for discernment. Upon endorsement, the session shall appoint an elder on the Session who will serve as a liaison to the applicant.

Application: An application form is available on the website of the Baltimore Presbytery. This form should be completed by the applicant and his or her Session, and should be emailed to the Presbytery office.) Three letters of recommendation should be requested and sent to the same address (see application form for information on references) and will be forwarded to the Chair of CPM.

Interview: When the application is complete, an interview will be scheduled with a CPM. Based on the results of that interview, the successful applicant will be enrolled in the program of preparation.

A liaison from CPM will be assigned and keep CPM informed of the progress of the applicant.

Program of Study: A program of study will be approved by CPM, who will take into consideration evidence of previous study relevant to preparation for ministry.

Psychological Evaluation: During the first year, the individual is required to schedule and complete a two day psychological evaluation at one of the counseling centers of the Ministry Development Council, Inc. (http://www.ministrydevelopment.org/centers.html). The results of this evaluation will be released to CPM. The individual will advance only after a satisfactory report has been received by CPM.

Course Work: Required courses are in the following areas: Reformed Theology, Worship and Sacrament, Presbyterian Polity, Pastoral Care, Old Testament exegesis, New Testament exegesis, homiletics may be obtained at local seminaries or on-line at the University of Dubuque Theological School (udts.dbq.edu).

Field Internship: Working with a member of CPM, the individual will be assigned to two semesters of field study under the guidance of a teaching elder of the Presbytery of Baltimore in a congregation other than the candidate’s home church. Experiences within this field internship are to prepare the individual for the role and responsibilities of a
CRE. A written field evaluation report will be submitted to CPM by the internship supervisor.

Examinations: Examinations in all the required areas of instruction will be administered at the end of the period of instruction, ordinarily two years. Examinations will be conducted by the CPM, and other members of the presbytery as appropriate.

Final evaluation: Following completion of the program of study, the individual will meet with the CPM and will be assessed for readiness to come before the Presbytery of Baltimore for examination.

Evaluation for certification: The applicant will be examined by the Presbytery “as to personal faith, motives for seeking a commissioned ruling elder position, and the areas of instruction mentioned previously.” (G-2-1002)

Evaluation and Certification

Official records shall be provided for all required instruction.

Mentor will provide a written report detailing the individual’s suitability, strengths and limitations as a CRE.

Evidence of psychological/emotional wholeness will be provided by the Ministry Development Council utilized by the Presbytery of Baltimore CPM and through dialogue with the Session, CPM, and liaisons.

Upon determination that the individual has completed the requirements of the Presbytery, after examination by the CPM and Presbytery, the Presbytery will certify that the individual is ready to be considered for a position as a commissioned ruling elder. Individuals who are certified by the CPM will be considered for commissioning by the Committee on Ministry, based on the needs of the congregation or organization and the gifts of the person. Commissioning is not an automatic outcome of certification.

Ordinarily all elements of preparation will be completed within four years. A candidate may request additional time for adequate cause as determined by the CPM.

Policies and Procedures of the Presbytery

Committee on Preparation for Ministry procedures and requirements

1. Both CPM and COM understand that the role and ministry of CREs is flexible and can be used in a variety of settings including

   a. A congregation or session of a church sees a need that can be filled by a
CRE and has one or more elders who are interested in meeting that need and there is a mutual agreement between the session and the elder that the elder will serve the congregation in the role of CRE. The CRE may not serve in the office of elected session member while serving as a CRE.

b. An individual elder feels a call to serve as a CRE, but not in his or her own church.

2. There are two models:
   a. Under the Congregation Model, the home session agrees to create a position and to offer a contract including appropriate compensation.
   b. Under the Independent Model, an individual is placed on a list maintained by the CPM of available certified CREs. As churches are approved by the Committee on Ministry (COM) of the Presbytery, the list of certified CREs will be provided to the church or organizations. CREs are not permitted to solicit churches or organizations for positions.
   c. After initial placement, a CRE serves under the authority of the COM. The COM must approve all contracts for service prior to a CRE beginning to serve any congregation.

3. CPM is the gatekeeper for determining whether or not those elders who desire this training are suitable.

4. CRE training will include several seasons for discernment, such as
   a. A time of discernment with the session and teaching elder in both models.
   b. A time of reflection between the application and the start of the each course.
   c. At the annual consultation the candidate will be asked where the candidate is within the discernment process.
   d. Work with a spiritual director and possibly participate in a week of silent meditation or retreat.

2. CPM will require Healthy Boundaries or other sexual misconduct prevention training as part of the CRE training.

3. CPM will examine candidates as to personal faith, motives for seeking the commission, and on the areas of instruction [see pages 5-8]; and report them to the Presbytery for certification as ready to be commissioned.

4. CREs who have been previously commissioned and removed from the rolls may maintain their certification for up to three years by satisfactory completion of the following:
   a. Church related continuing education annually, a minimum of 2 CEU’s;
   b. Actively serving in a local congregation on session or as a ministry leader, or by active service at another level of the church.

5. The procedure for recertification once certification of a CRE has lapsed is as follows:
   a. Meet with the session of the CLP’s home congregation to seek their endorsement;
   b. Meet with the CPM to assess the sense of call, and to develop an action plan to be recertified. Candidates may present any evidence they deem relevant in support of their petition. Approval is at the discretion of the CPM.
Committee On Ministry procedures and requirements

1. Normally, congregations or other entities will not have more than one CRE for every seventy-five members.
2. A satisfactory background check will be required prior to the initial commission.
3. A written contract will be required before commissioning. Contracts for Commissioned Ruling Elder will stipulate only those authorities required for the routine duties for the ministry to which they are called.
4. COM will conduct a clearance interview before granting a commission and conduct an exit interview at the end of each commission.
5. Presbytery will not issue ID cards similar to those received by teaching elders.
6. The Healthy Boundaries or other Sexual Misconduct Prevention training will be required prior to commissioning. Those currently serving as CREs will be required to have this training prior to the renewal of their commissions beyond the current term. After this initial training, CREs will have the same training requirements that apply to other active religious leaders in the Presbytery.
7. Within four months of their commissioning, conduct a consultation with each CRE and supervisor to review the position description and the ministry of the CRE and assess if mutual expectations are being met.
8. Require an annual interview with or written report from supervisors or mentors of CREs and from CREs.
9. Additional Training: The Committee on Preparation for Ministry will organize a daylong seminar or retreat for CREs on an annual or biennial basis.
10. The Committee on Ministry will maintain rolls of CREs who are currently commissioned and who were previously commissioned but are not presently commissioned. The Committee on Ministry will publish the names of commissioned ruling elders in the Presbytery Directory.

Presbytery Manual

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry

18.2 Candidates for commissioning as Commissioned Ruling Elders
18.2.1. The Committee on Preparation for Ministry is charged with the examination of those it certifies as prepared to be and suitable for the role of Commissioned Ruling Elder.
18.2.2. The Committee on Preparation for Ministry will present candidates in person to the Presbytery, with a written statement from the candidates concerning their sense of call.
18.2.3. The Committee on Ministry will recommend the commissioning of Commissioned Ruling Elder to particular ministries. The commissioning may take place either within the context of a worship service at a time other than the Presbytery meeting with three or four members of the Committee on Ministry and the Committee on Preparation for Ministry representing the Presbytery or within the context of a Presbytery meeting, the choice being made by those about to be commissioned.
The Committee on Ministry

8.8.5.15.1 Recommend to Presbytery those churches, new church developments, and other ministries appropriate to be ministered to by a Commissioned Ruling Elder (CRE).

- Authorize CREs to lead worship, preach, and undertake such other duties as may be required, in accordance with the Book of Order.
- Recommend to Presbytery the commissioning to these ministries of persons certified as ready to be commissioned and their appointment to said ministries;
- Supervise CREs undertaking commissioned ministries; and
- Review annually the status of elders who are certified and have been commissioned but are currently without a commission and delete from this roll any who have been without a commission for three or more years. Those who are deleted from this roll and wish to be certified ready for commissioning must re-apply through the Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry is to

8.10.4.6 Receive applications from ruling elders of the particular churches of the Presbytery to be Commissioned Ruling Elder; maintain a roll of ruling elders who have applied; supervise their preparation; examine them as to personal faith, motives for seeking the commission, and on the areas of instruction [G-2.10]; and report them to the Presbytery for certification as ready to be commissioned. Review annually the status of elders who are certified but have not yet been commissioned. After three years of non-commissioned status CREs certified ready for commissioning will be deleted from the list of Commissioned ruling Elders certified ready for commissioning.

Section 26, Sessions:

26.7. Commissioned Ruling Elder may, with the approval and supervision of the COM, celebrate the sacraments and perform marriages. No CRE may serve as an active elder in a congregation he or she is serving as a CRE.