

BEST PRACTICES FOR LOCAL CHURCH DISCERNMENT COMMITTEES (LCDC)

Local Church Discernment Committee (LCDC)

The LCDC is an intentional small group of local church members who gather to listen to, encourage, and provide critical feedback for the Member in Discernment (MID) before that individual enters the MID process and continuing throughout the process. The discernment questions are: "to what ministry is this person being called by God?" and then "is this person being called to a ministry of the church requiring authorization?" The Local Church Discernment Committee may be a standing committee (elders, deacons, council, etc.) or an ad hoc group formed specifically for this purpose.

Organization of Local Church Discernment Committee:

Size: a group of 3-5 people

Membership qualifications:

Ideal members will exhibit the following characteristics and skills:

- Christian character that is respected by the person and the congregation
- Maturity
- Ability to listen for God's still small voice
- Practice of Prayer
- Patience and flexibility
- Ability to maintain confidentiality
- Understanding of the priesthood of all believers
- Ability to make difficult decisions
- Familiarity with the local church (at least two members)
- Experience with the wider church (Association, Conference, National setting)
- At least one person who is not already well-acquainted with the person

Selection

Ideally, this group is selected by the person seeking discernment about authorized ministry, with input from the pastor, other trusted friends, and the governing board of the local church.

Ordinarily the **local church pastor** participates as able/needed.

The **local church** may have a standing committee available for this work, as well.

Accountability and Relationships

The LCDC may take notes of meetings to keep track of progress and recommendations.

The LCDC is accountable to governing body for reporting and recommendations.

The LCDC does its work in covenantal relationship with the person seeking authorization and the local church pastor.

Role of Local Church Pastor

The local church pastor is an important person in the process of someone discerning a call to ordained ministry. This person may be an advisor, mentor, sounding board, and/or an active member of the LCDC. The pastor is not the sole person discerning qualifications and suitability for authorization, however. The consensus of the LCDC is important for adequate discernment.

Information Gathering

For the LCDC to do its best work and make appropriate decisions, specific information is needed from the person seeking authorization:

- Statement of the individual's spiritual journey
- Statement of the individual's understanding of their call in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ at this time
- Résumé or CV
- Beginning self-assessment of The Marks
- Documentation of educational and professional training (e.g. transcripts)
- Three letters of reference in support of the person entering the process for authorization in ministry

Discernment

[*A Discernment Travelogue*](#) is an important resource for intentional discernment work with the person seeking authorization. Study the Travelogue and work through it together. Individual members of the LCDC may want to increase their own intentional work by employing spiritual practices for discernment. Use as a guide when making a decision.

Set aside plenty of time to pray, digest information gathered, listen, pray, listen and pray.

The LCDC will learn to ask questions for clarification and depth of understanding.

The goal of discernment is to help the person understand more clearly "to what ministry is this person being called by God?" and then, "is this person being called to a ministry of the church requiring authorization?"

Sample Agenda

Check-in and Prayer

Discernment Issue

- What issue would be most helpful to talk about today?
- Listen, evoke more information and clarify what is being heard.
- Brainstorm ideas together and pray.
 - ▼ What action steps could be taken?
 - ▼ What clarity is surfacing toward the broader discernment questions?

Close with prayer

Decision-Making

Sample Agenda

When the person or the LCDC discerns a readiness to move ahead, a meeting of decision-making will be scheduled. An agenda for this meeting may follow a format such as this:

Gathering

Prayer for discernment

Focus questions: "to what ministry is this person being called by God?" and "is this person being called to a ministry of the church requiring authorization in the UCC?"

Presentation by the person indicating evidence that this person believes that they are being called by God and the church to seek authorization as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ – written paper, drawings, video, or any other medium may be used.

Questions for discernment The LCDC asks questions related to their own discernment of the focus questions

Discussion

- The person is asked to step out of the room and may be invited to pray.
- The LCDC discusses their sense of readiness for the person to enter the formal process of seeking authorization as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ.
- Prayer for God's guidance in this discernment
- The LCDC comes to a consensus or votes on the question

***Possible outcomes:**

- ▼ "yes, we think so" or "we believe this may be the case" and so we recommend going forward to the next steps in discernment of such a call.
- ▼ "not yet" ... there are some questions still unanswered.
- ▼ "no" ... the call is to lay ministry ... OR the call seems to come from some place other than God and/or the church ... OR this person doesn't seem to have the gifts and graces for ordination in the UCC.

The **decision is communicated** to the person with humility and grace.

Close with prayer

Care must be exercised in communicating the discernment of the LCDC to the person. It is important to express as clearly as possible the reasons for the decision. This will give the person the feedback that they need to discern next steps for answering God's call on their life.

- If the LCDC decides, "yes", the LCDC may find an appropriate way to celebrate this decision and will continue its work with the individual (see below).

- If the LCDC decides, “not yet”, then more discernment time may be beneficial for all involved. Any recommendations may be implemented. When conditions are met or the LCDC feels that sufficient discernment leads to continuing the path toward authorized ministry, another decision meeting with the LCDC is scheduled.
- If the LCDC decides, “no”, the LCDC will continue to meet with the person to discern what God’s call to ministry might look like as a lay person in the church. Celebrating lay ministry is always appropriate.

Meeting with Governing Body

Once it has made its decision, the LCDC makes a recommendation to the local church governing body regarding the person’s desire to answer a call to ordained ministry. The LCDC makes a formal request for a meeting with the governing body and the person. At this meeting, the LCDC shares its work, impressions, and recommendation with the governing body. The governing body will make an official decision regarding recommending the person to the Association Committee on Ministry.

- If governing body decides, “yes”, the LCDC may find an appropriate way to celebrate this decision and will continue its work with the individual (see below). The LCDC may prepare the person for meeting with the Committee on Ministry by reviewing the requirements of the Committee on Ministry for MID status (refer to pages 25-26 of the 2018 Manual on Ministry.)
- If the governing body decided, “not yet”, then more discernment time may be beneficial for all involved. Any recommendations may be implemented. When conditions are met or the LCDC feels that sufficient discernment leads to continuing the path toward authorized ministry, another meeting with the governing body is scheduled.
- If the governing body decides, “no”, the LCDC will continue to meet with the person to discern what God’s call to ministry might look like as a lay person in the church. Celebrating lay ministry is always appropriate.

Meeting With Association Committee on Ministry

The LCDC or local church pastor contact the chair of the Committee on Ministry to ask for a place on the agenda for recommending a person for MID status. A meeting time is scheduled and communicated to the person seeking MID, LCDC, and local church pastor. The LCDC may send a member to meetings with the Association Committee on Ministry. The local church pastor and a member of the governing body may also attend.

The purpose of this time is to be supportive of the person seeking authorization and to share relevant information about the person to the COM. Sharing strengths and areas of growth as discerned by the LCDC will help the COM have a clearer picture of this person’s call to ministry. The Association COM will decide about taking the person into the Member in Discernment (MID) process.

- If the Association COM decides, “yes”, the LCDC may find an appropriate way to celebrate this decision and will continue its work with the individual (see below).
- If the Association COM decides, “not yet”, then more discernment time may be beneficial for all involved. Any recommendations may be implemented. When conditions are met or the LCDC feels that sufficient discernment leads to continuing the path toward authorized ministry, another meeting with the COM is scheduled.
- If the Association COM decides, “no”, the LCDC will continue to meet with the person to discern what God’s call to ministry might look like as a lay person in the church. Celebrating lay ministry is always appropriate.

Ongoing Responsibilities of Local Church Discernment Committee

Purpose of Meetings

- On-going support
- Discernment group for Member in Discernment’s questions or wonderings;
Continue to use *A Discernment Travelogue*
- Prayer
- Listening and reflecting
- Identifying strengths and growth areas using the *Marks of Faithful and Effective Ministers*

Frequency of Meetings

- At least once a month (in person or by phone or teleconferencing)
- At least quarterly in person
- As needed by MID

End of Responsibilities

Regular times for discernment and prayer should continue until the person has completed their Ecclesiastical Council and is “authorized for ministry pending a call” or until ordination occurs.

The MID may wish to invite a member of the LCDC to represent the group at the ordination service or other celebration of authorization.

The local church may wish to acknowledge the work of the LCDC with words of thanks in worship or other ministry setting and formally announce that this particular work is completed.