



Mennonite Church
USA

Mennonite Church
Canada

Growth and Orientation of Licensed Pastors

Credentialing Packet

Introduction

Being licensed for ministry is the entry point into what is normally a life calling for pastors. It is a sacred step in the experience of the minister and his/her family, as well as the congregation to which one has been called. Generally the period of licensing extends for two years, although this may be longer if either the candidate or conference deems it wise. This two-year period in ministry provides an important opportunity for intentional reflection on one's self as a ministering person and the style of one's ministry. It also allows special attention for personal growth and the formation of good practices for effective ministry throughout a lifetime of service. In the words of *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, "this two-year period provides opportunity to discern the minister's gifts, abilities and aptitude."

The area conference is very interested in the well-being of new pastors and doing everything possible to see them succeed in their assignments. The goal is that new pastors will experience a deep confirmation of God's call in their lives, and receive the support they need to make ministry a joyful and fulfilling way of life. These pages describe the various activities, expectations, and opportunities being offered to licensed pastors.

General Expectations

During the period of a ministerial license the area conference should consider the following expectations for licensed pastors:

1. To participate in the regular activities of the area conference, such as meetings with pastoral peers, conference sessions, and pastor/spouse retreats.
2. To fulfill the continuing education expectations for new pastors (defined below).
3. To meet regularly with the mentor according to the attached guidelines.
4. To participate in the orientation activities planned by the conference and denomination for new pastors.
5. To prayerfully consider the possibility of ordination to long-term ministry, and if there is both inner and outer confirmation, to prepare for this new commitment to Christ and the church.

This document for use by:

Licensed Ministers

Mentors

Conference Ministers

Conference Ministerial Leadership Committees

Orientation Activities

Each area conference and denomination represents a unique setting for ministry. To function effectively it is important that new pastors be oriented regarding the beliefs, structures, culture, available resources, and expectations of the conference which grants them the credentials for ministry. This is particularly important for pastors who have little background in the Mennonite Church and/or did not attend a Mennonite college or seminary. The Ministerial Leadership Committee, along with the conference minister, should assume responsibility for this orientation. Minimally this might include:

- a review of pertinent conference and denominational statements on faith and practice. (The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* is one such document.)
- an introduction to the structures of the conference and denomination. (This should include, if possible, a visit to the offices of conference and denominational staff.)
- an overview of the ethos or characteristics of Mennonite life, traditions, and practices that are unique to the community in which the pastor has been called to serve.
- a review of the resources that are available to the pastor for his/her support and growth in ministry.
- a description of the specific expectations of pastors in the conference and denomination.

Education and Experience Expectations

New pastors may bring a variety of backgrounds regarding education and preparation for ministry. While Mennonite Church polity suggests the Master of Divinity is the “standard” of training for pastors, this level of training is not possible for all those called to ministry. Area conferences do well to be clear regarding educational expectations for pastors who serve in their context. Minimally these expectations should include a college or seminary level course in:

- Anabaptist/Mennonite history and theology,
- Anabaptist/Mennonite hermeneutics, and
- Mennonite understandings of leadership, authority, and polity.

In addition a given pastor may need training in particular areas of ministry (such as preaching, administration, pastoral care, vision casting, etc.) which he/she will be expected to carry out.

A variety of programs are available for pastors with limited training. These include Pastoral Studies Distance Education (a correspondence program) with five units of study, Internet courses being offered through the seminaries, conference-based seminary courses, and short-term courses being offered on the seminary campuses. The area conference may arrange structured readings with periodic times of conversation for pastors needing specialized training, or even develop needed courses in cooperation with a local seminary of another denomination.

In connection with granting a ministerial license, the area conference needs to develop an understanding with the pastor regarding its educational expectations and a schedule for completing this work. Some of the courses may require more time than the licensing period allows for the study expected. A long-term plan for continuing education for the pastor will be helpful both during the licensing period and in his/her continuing ministry.

In some cases the area conference may wish for a potential pastoral candidate with little prior exposure to Mennonite Church USA to actively participate in a Mennonite congregation for a determined period of time before being granted a ministerial credential.

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Mentoring

One significant component to the support and growth of new pastors is the provision of a mentor during the two-year period of licensing. Mentoring is “the practice of walking beside, giving support and advice, by one experienced in ministry to someone new to the ministry” (Mennonite Polity glossary). Included in this packet is a detailed description of a plan for mentoring new pastors. Area conferences are encouraged to provide such a special relationship for new pastors to contribute to their growth and enrichment in ministry.

Contracting

In connection with granting a ministerial license, the conference minister would do well to spell out the expectations of new pastors and review this with each candidate. This should include the “general expectations” stated above, educational expectations, and anything else that needs to be clearly understood by the person being licensed and the area conference leaders. Signing the document can be one step toward clarifying an understanding between the new pastor and the conference. A copy of the document should be given to the chair of the congregation where the pastor serves, and to his/her overseer and mentor so that all the appropriate parties are aware of these understandings with the area conference. Details of these expectations will also be entered into the Ministerial Leadership Registration Database.

Preparation for Ordination

At least six months before the end of the period of licensure, the conference minister should be in touch with the new pastor and congregation where he/she serves to begin the process of discernment and review in preparation for the possibility of the pastor’s ordination. Details of this preparation are spelled out elsewhere in this packet. (See “Congregational Discernment for Ordination.”)

This document last edited: 7/13/10