

FAQs for Seminary Students Considering Ordained Ministry



God seems set on hiring me – What do I need to know?

By Meg Lassiat with Deborah Bushfield*

1. How do I choose a theological school?

If you intend to become an ordained United Methodist minister, give some serious thought to attending one of the [thirteen United Methodist seminaries](#). They are located throughout the country and all offer a variety of focus areas for ministry. In addition, you'll get some required courses that aren't necessarily offered at non-UM schools, such as United Methodist history, doctrine and polity. All UM seminaries are approved by the [University Senate](#) (a must when earning your degree). It's also nice to know that there are more scholarship opportunities available for certified candidates attending UM seminaries (like the Special Seminary Scholarship for young adults who are enrolled at a UM school).

Choosing a seminary is similar to choosing a college. Take the time to learn the differences in the institutions and set up visits – all schools will welcome you on campus, and many offer events specifically for those considering attending seminary. Check out www.yasn.org for a list of upcoming events for prospective students as well as links to the thirteen UM theological schools.

If you are considering attending seminary at a school other than one of those related to The United Methodist Church, you must first make sure that institution is approved by the University Senate. Otherwise, your degree won't be recognized by the church and will not fulfill your ordination requirements. These seminaries are approved by the University [Senate](#).

2. What's the best kind of degree for the ministry to which I feel called?

In order to become an ordained deacon or elder in the UMC you will need an undergraduate degree (bachelor's) in any major you choose. Those who want to be an elder will need a Master of Divinity, while those who are interested in serving as a deacon will need either a Master of Divinity or a master's in their area of specialization – along with the established Basic Graduate Theological Studies. Some people who come to seminary have majored in religion while others have degrees in different fields such as education, business, social work, communications, etc. Additionally, you'll want to consider any post-graduate education that may prepare you beyond a Master's Degree (like a Ph.D. if you want to teach in a seminary).

Seminaries each have their own required classes and curriculum and if you plan to be ordained you will need to check with your annual conference and seminary to make sure your classes will fulfill all the ordination requirements. Be sure to take a wide range, and don't leave out any non-religious classes offered, such as management or church finance. This is the time for you to soak up as much information as possible. Any additional knowledge and expertise you can acquire, along with the interests you've developed during your undergraduate years, will help you focus your studies in particular areas of ministry. Seminaries offer a wide range of degrees and areas for specialization, so see what's out there that fits your call for serving in ministry.

3. How much will my seminary education cost, and where can I look for financial assistance, loans, and scholarships?

It depends on the tuition, rooming rates and other fees at the seminary you choose. Annual tuition and fees vary greatly so look for that information on the institution's Web site. Wherever you decide to attend you should be able to find scholarships or other types of financial aid. Costs can vary widely, however several places

www.explorecalling.org

FAQs for Seminary Students Considering Ordained Ministry



offer financial assistance. Check out the Fact Sheets located [here](#) for detailed information about seminary tuition and fees.

The General Board of Higher Education & Ministry has an [Office of Loans & Scholarships](#) that awards college and seminary scholarships to United Methodist students attending an accredited institution. Certified candidates who are younger than 30 and attending a UM seminary, may apply for the *Special Seminary Scholarship*. Talk with both your annual conference board of ordained ministry and your district committee on ministry for info about receiving financial assistance through your annual conference. Certified candidates generally have access to more funds, and are able to obtain them fairly early in their schooling so it's important to become a certified candidate as early as possible (before starting seminary if that works for you). Also, check out [YASN.org](#) to find links to each UM seminary's financial aid page.

Local churches, UMW's and UMM's, and other groups sometimes offer scholarships, and in some conferences, money is available for racial/ethnic and female students. You'll have to do some investigating to hunt it down, but the money is definitely out there, and it's worth the search. Occasionally, even major corporations have grants available. Don't forget to check out ecumenical organizations (such as the [Fund for Theological Education](#)). Don't discount any possibility.

4. I have debts from college and am looking at piling up a lot more in seminary. How much debt is too much?

Frankly, a large debt will be hard to manage – if not impossible. Clergy have historically received small salaries, especially in light of their advanced education. Unfortunately, this is ruled by tradition, culture and church economics. Investigate all the possible funding sources listed above. Additionally, you will help yourself by thinking carefully about your budget and expectations while you are in seminary. Don't buy a new car – keep fixing up your old one, and if you have to replace it, buy a used one. Buy used books when available, and wear out your wardrobe before replacing it. Eating out and “cooking for one” are expensive, so put together a group of friends to share cooking responsibilities and expenses – it will save you money and the community you build will be a great support during seminary. If you can, get summer or part-time jobs and try to save everything you earn to pay off the big debt due 6 months after you finish graduate school. Think carefully about your purchases and commit to living on as small a budget as possible during seminary. Under no circumstances get yourself into debt higher than \$50,000. If you do, you'll carry this burden until your unborn children are teenagers.

5. Money is tight. Is it a good thing to serve part-time in a church while I'm in seminary?

Earning money is not a good enough reason to take a church, especially if it's at the expense of your education. What are the benefits and challenges for you in working at a specific congregation? Churches typically expect always-on-call employees, and you may find that you are doing catch-up church work when you actually need to be studying. Of course, many seminaries require that their students work in a ministry setting, but they usually set these up with supervision, follow-up, mentoring, and defined job responsibilities. In this type of situation, working at a church will also contribute to your education, so you will want to consider that.

However, there are many other money-making options you could consider – secular jobs with defined hours, and no after-work demands. These tend not to be all-absorbing; they often pay better than church while still allowing time for study. Don't automatically take a church position without considering all your options. **You will be in full-time paid ministry throughout your career – you only have one time in your life to attend seminary and focus on the studies that are important during this time.**

FAQs for Seminary Students Considering Ordained Ministry



6. I've been offered a job as an associate pastor while I'm in seminary, but I really want my own church. Is there an advantage to being an associate?

You've been given the gift in seminary of taking the time to learn. It's a tough call to give up some of that time. However, the right associate pastorate can provide a gold mine of information, experience, and mentoring. Think of it as an internship – which it really is. After seminary, you'll be serving in your own appointment (for elders that will most likely be your own church) and may never get another opportunity for on-the-job training like this. Remember, you have your entire future career to work out your own ministry style and serve as the sole or lead pastor. Consider what's best for you at this stage and how taking this kind of position will help you prepare for life after seminary. And...see number 5 above.

7. What if I want a break between seminary and actually starting full-time ministry?

This works for some people. It can be a good idea if you have goals and a plan, want to take time for learning or serving in a non-traditional setting. If you just want time off to catch your breath and get a little rest, again it could be good if you know that at the end of that time, you will be recharged and ready to take up your commitment. In any case, be sure you talk to your board of ordained ministry and find out what they think is reasonable for someone on your ordination path. Each BOM has different expectations and taking a year off could be a detriment to your ordination process. You don't want to find yourself caught in a misunderstanding.

8. How do I start the process of becoming ordained?

Ask your church pastor, deacon or campus minister to give you the contact information for your district superintendent. This person needs to know your intentions. If you are ready to begin a formal process of exploring candidacy for ordained ministry, you need to write a letter to the DS and she/he will work with the district committee on ordained ministry to assign to you a candidacy mentor. That person should have all the official info you'll need and can help you begin the process of becoming ordained. Your candidacy mentor will help you enter the discernment and candidacy process. Your district superintendent is also available to talk to you informally about your call and about the possibilities for serving in and beyond your annual conference. Click here to see if your annual conference board of ministry has a web page with more detailed [information](#).

9. How long does it take to become an ordained deacon or elder?

Let's see, if you include seminary and the provisional period, it's at least 5 years. The UMC and your annual conference have specific educational and commissioning requirements you must meet during the candidacy and provisional process. Some steps can be done simultaneously rather than sequentially so it is to your advantage to be in touch with your district committee on ministry and become a certified candidate earlier in the process, rather than later. Visit Steps to Ordained [Ministry](#) for more information. And check out your annual conference BOM page for more detailed [information](#).

10. What does the process look like?

You will need to check with your annual conference board of ordained ministry, your district superintendent, and your district committee on ordained ministry to be clear about the specific ordination requirements for your annual conference. There is variation from one annual conference to another. Check out the [Ministry Page](#) at GBHEM.org for a general overview of the steps into ordained ministry.

FAQs for Seminary Students Considering Ordained Ministry



11. Is it okay to start the candidacy process and not go all the way through?

Absolutely! The candidacy process is designed to help you discern if God is calling you to ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church. It's all about discernment and decision-making. If you feel at any time that this isn't for you, or that you need to pursue another avenue of vocational service, you can put things on hold. Just be sure you maintain communication with your candidacy mentor and district committee on ministry. This will help you keep your options open if you want to re-enter the process later. A common misunderstanding is the belief that you must have your mind made up before you begin candidacy. In fact, candidacy is designed to be a discernment process that will actually help you realize whether you're on the right track. Use the tools provided to help you focus and identify your sense of call.

12. How important is it to have a candidacy mentor?

It's not only important; it's a required part of our process! Having the right candidacy mentor will save you years of uncertainty, and rev up your learning curve. It will also help you build a good foundation for your future ministry. Nearly every effective clergyperson has had a strong and trustworthy candidacy mentor. In addition, in many annual conferences you will be assigned to a peer group that can give you support along the way. You need others in your situation to share with and look up to. In addition to the candidacy mentor assigned to help guide you through the candidacy process, you should also find individuals who can share their experience and insights with you so you will have a variety of perspectives to consider.

13. I agree with about 95% of United Methodist polity and social principles. However, I have a lot of trouble with a few issues. Should I let those disagreements stop me from being a UMC pastor? Is there a way to reconcile this?

This is one reason you're in seminary. It's time to do some deep thinking about what you really believe, how you are called to live out your vocation and how you can engage in affecting change. Also you need to remember that what feels set in stone today may feel very different ten years from now. That goes for your own thoughts as well as the church's position.

14. I'm single. Is it okay to date a member or attendee of the church where I'm serving?

NO! Did you hear this? NOOO!!! Okay, so what if you are falling in love? Quit the position at that church, get another job, *then* date that person. There is no way to stress what a minefield this is. If things go well, you might be okay. But if they don't, you will alienate the member, that person's family, their friends, and you risk any hope for effective ministry at that church. It's a snowball that just keeps rolling. In either case, your relationship will provide way too much fuel for gossip, as well as reasons for church members to think they have a right to examine and critique your personal life. In addition, there's the matter of ethics. As a person of "power" (or authority) in the church, the relationship is always lopsided, with the power in your court. It is a truly awkward way to start a relationship. Think teacher-student. Pastor-congregant is even worse.

15. What if my spouse has a fulltime career and cannot be a "traditional" pastor's spouse?

Then you'll be joining about 85% of your ministry colleagues. It's not the 1950's anymore; churches no longer get 2 for 1. Your spouse should feel free to participate in church activities that she/he enjoys, but don't expect service as your assistant, first lady/gentleman, UMW chair, UMM chair, Bible School director, Sunday School teacher, or church pianist. You may have to help the congregation understand this as well, but remember

FAQs for Seminary Students Considering Ordained Ministry



your spouse signed on to be there for you – not for your church. There is a vital difference. And while you may understand this, there may be times you need to address these issues with the church's members.

16. How can I prepare for the stresses that ministry places upon the pastor's family?

One way is to plan ahead. What will your boundaries be between church and home? How will you make personal decisions when you have to decide between the two? The church needs to realize that they are hiring you, not your family. Your family shouldn't feel they must conform to a particular role. If your spouse or family enjoys church activities, that will be great. If they don't, it's perfectly okay for them to find different ways to participate. They need to find spiritual fulfillment too. If expectations seem to get out of hand, rely on other resources to support you – your family, friends outside the congregation, colleagues, or even a good counselor. Regardless of where you serve, setting boundaries between work and personal life will be crucial to your long-term fulfillment and support in ministry.

17. Now that I've gotten the ball rolling, it feels like the candidacy/ordination process is beginning to take over and it's rolling over me. I'm starting to feel overwhelmed and unsure. How do I get back that feeling of simply moving ahead with my decision?

Examine your call. Is it still true? Do you still feel that this is God's plan for you? Are you equipped with the proper talent? Have you obtained the needed skills? If all of your answers are positive, ask yourself if your anxiety has to do with your age, life stage or other life circumstances you may be experiencing. We all go through those times of transition and questioning. Many qualified and committed people feel overwhelmed in the midst of process. It's normal; rely on your support network to help you get through it. Just because you feel anxious doesn't mean what you're doing is wrong. Go to your candidacy mentor and peer group to debrief. Also consider talking with a trusted pastor or friend, or perhaps a counselor or therapist. You also might consult a vocational or career counselor for more clarity. However, keep in mind that candidacy is a time of discernment and if you're questioning things, that means the process is working. Trust where God is leading you, and work through the questions. Roll with it, not under it.

*The Rev. Meg Lassiat is the director of student ministries, vocation and enlistment, the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

Deborah Bushfield is a freelance writer who is a lifelong United Methodist and the co-author of the book, *Things They Never Taught You in Seminary* (Herald Press).

Copyright © 2010 by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church.