

WHAT HAPPENS AT AN ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE?



The **objective** is to reach a decision on behalf of the Church as to whether to send a candidate for training for the Ministry of Word and Sacraments or Church Related Community Work. This is achieved by reaching a careful and balanced view of a candidate's potential for ministry in the URC and advice about appropriate training. Reaching such a decision is easier said than done, because subjective and personal elements in any assessment or person cannot be eradicated and should in fact find their place. The question 'Can I see this person as my minister or CRCW?' is a valid one. However, it is important that a judgement on a person's suitability for ministry is more than just intuitive and is determined by an appraisal of a candidate's potential to display and develop qualities and skills deemed necessary for ministry.

The criteria for ministry have been a matter for continuing debate for the Assessment Board. Assembly 1996 agreed *Criteria for Assessment* but the fundamental qualifications identified in *'Preparing Today for Tomorrow's Ministry 1982'* are still valid. Although originally written in relation to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments these fundamental qualifications apply equally to Church Related Community Work

- (i) A total commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and a growing experience of shared life in the Spirit so that the worship and service of God becomes the minister's central and controlling passion. We need radical dissenters from the false worship of our society, whose dissent does not drive them (timidly or defiantly) into a ghetto, but out into the world.
- (ii) A growing familiarity with an understanding of the Bible and the Christian tradition, especially - but not exclusively - in its Reformed development, constantly extended and enriched by wide reading and by a study that neither evades the critical questions, nor allows them to silence the central message. We need men and women whose ears are accustomed to listening to the word of God in the scripture and who know how to nourish others with that same word.
- (iii) An informed and passionate involvement in the issues of the contemporary world. Clearly this is not to ask for a pretended omniscience. It is to ask for men and women aware of the world they live in and committed to doing the will of God in its affairs.
- (iv) Because we live in a society which is mobile and pluriform, the church must be as varied and open as the human situations to which it must minister. We need, therefore, not one style of ministry, but many, exercised by women and men, white and black, conservative and radical, working class and middle class, paid and unpaid. We need to look for and encourage very varied gifts, temperaments and abilities.

(v) It follows that one minister cannot fulfil all roles. Collaboration and teamwork will be the marks of a relevant ministry, not omnicompetence. The gifts for animating and enabling groups and teams of colleagues, and for evoking the skills of others and the readiness to take a subordinate place – these are the marks of genuine leader and are more to be desired than the gifts which attract attention to an outstanding individual.

(vi) The church is a community of persons of very different ages and in different stages in their discipleship, seeking to share good news with others. The arts of interpersonal communication are fundamental to its life. We need ministers skilled in these arts, aware of the many different levels at which communication takes place, able to exercise and help others to exercise the arts of preaching, of teaching adults and children, of listening and counselling, and having enough sensitivity to be able to encourage the use of music, drama, dance and visual symbol in worship and in the communication of the gospel.

(vii) We need ministers who know that they must be learners all through life, who recognise that their initial training can be only a small beginning, who remain to the end eager to reach out for fuller understanding, greater competence, deeper discipleship.

The **Assessment Panel** at an Assessment Conference is drawn from the Assessment Board appointed by the General Assembly. It includes experienced ordained, commissioned and lay members, those with particular gifts in counselling, personnel management, theological perception, those with personal knowledge of various styles of ministry, community development work and from differing theological stances. A normal Panel will consist of 4 members balanced as far as possible in the various categories. Each candidate will have 2 in-depth interviews with members of the Panel working in pairs. The task is demanding, searching and at times deeply moving, and assessors are all too well aware of the responsibility laid upon them.

The Panel receives all the paperwork in the Candidate's application. Interviewers read these papers before meeting the candidate so that the interview can be conducted in the light of the individual's concerns and personal statement.

Interviews take account of previous experience in the church and the community, the circumstances of a call, a candidate's devotional life, expectation of future ministry and views about the training they feel they need. The application form and various references, including a report from the Synod form the basis of discussion, but the Conference provides the opportunity to go much deeper. Often the candidates are faced with questions about their faith or themselves which have never occurred to them before, and it is clearly a learning process for them, let alone the assessors. For candidates for Church Related Community Work the interviews will include a 10 minute presentation on their understanding of faith producing actions which make a positive difference to people and their communities.

Personal Development A professionally trained person in the field of Personal Development assists the Assessment Conference through appropriate tests and conversation in order to help evaluate potential and identify particular problems.

Group Exercises All candidates take part in two group exercises which help to demonstrate their awareness of current issues, pastoral sensitivity and the ability to work collaboratively.

The **Education and Learning Board** at an Assessment Conference consists of representatives of the Resource Centres for Learning and the Education and Learning Committee. Board members meet with each candidate to discuss the training programme appropriate for the ministry for which the candidate is applying. The following Code of Practice has been agreed by the General Assembly:

(i) The Assessment Conference shall take careful account of any wishes expressed by a candidate.

Factors to be taken into account will include: -

- (a) The Resource Centre for Learning (RCL) milieu which will best enable the student to develop personally and spiritually,
- (b) The kind of course most suitable;
- (c) The size and balance of the student body at any particular time,
- (d) The final choice is without prejudice to the admission procedures of the college.

A subsequent change of Resource Centre at the request of the candidate will only be recommended if good reasons can be clearly stated to all concerned.

(ii) In the interest of all concerned, a candidate may contact or visit any of the three RCLs before the Assessment Conference.

Pastoral care is exercised by a chaplain, who is not part of the Assessment process. The chaplain's role is to lead worship and be available to candidates for support and debriefing. The assessors are very much aware of the role of Synods both before and after the Assessment Conference in ensuring that pastoral support is offered to all candidates, whether or not they are commended for training.

Worship is an important part of the Assessment Conference and is led by the chaplain.