Everything students want to know about the Candidacy Committee
and its role in the candidacy process for ordained ministry
in the Christian Reformed Church

M.Div. students at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) who intend to become Ministers of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) come under the care of the seminary’s Candidacy Committee. The purpose of this communication is to explain the candidacy process at CTS and the work of the Candidacy Committee in facilitating that process.

Why do students have to be involved in a candidacy process?

The M.Div. degree all by itself is not tied to a particular church or denomination. The candidacy process specifically has in view preparation for ministerial candidacy in the CRC. (Students preparing for ministry in another denomination or non-denominational church do not need to be involved the candidacy process at CTS.)

I thought that candidacy in the Christian Reformed Church was now handled by the denominational Candidacy Committee?

You’re right! The denominational Candidacy Committee recommends students for ministerial candidacy to the synod of the CRC each June, but only students first recommended to them by CTS faculty. The seminary’s Candidacy Committee is a standing committee of the faculty that oversees the candidacy processes for all M.Div. students--those studying at both Calvin and other seminaries.

Hmm. So there are two different candidacy committees, one denominational and one seminary?

Yup. Sorry for the confusion. In this brochure “candidacy committee” refers to the seminary’s committee unless preceded by “denominational.”

So, what is the Candidacy Committee’s role?

The Candidacy Committee, in close consultation with Mentoring Group (MG) leaders and the Mentored Ministries Office (MMO), has the wonderful privilege of helping students become more fit for ministry.

So it’s not true that the Candidacy Committee has secret cameras throughout the Student Center and apartments trying to gather evidence to keep students out of the ministry?

No comment. Also, no comment on whether those sprinkler heads throughout the building are really sprinkler heads! Seriously, The Candidacy Committee wants every student it ultimately recommends for ministerial candidacy to succeed! Only rarely does the Candidacy Committee not recommend someone for candidacy.
**Does the Candidacy Committee have a role in assessing orthodoxy? Some of us are afraid to really be honest about our theological questions because we’re afraid word will get back to the Candidacy Committee and we’ll be in trouble.**

Of all the student misunderstandings of the Candidacy Committee, this one is the greatest. It’s true that persons aspiring to be ministers in the CRC must agree with the doctrinal teachings of the CRC. And certainly, students who aren’t sure they believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ should probably have a few talks with their MG leader—soon! But the Candidacy Committee rarely engages students regarding their theological orthodoxy. The Candidacy Committee (and the church!) longs for students who seriously wrestle with deep questions of faith. Often the best pastors are those who have struggled deeply with what the Bible teaches and with what they believe. There will never be a safer place for students to ask deep questions of faith than the seminary, and never a better time than during these years of deep theological formation. Question away! Most of your professors and future pastor colleagues have wrestled too! Some still do!

**Who are the members of this Candidacy Committee?**

Rev. Jul Medenblik chairs the committee, Dr. Geoff Vandermolen serves as Director of Vocational Formation, and Dr. Danjuma Gibson serves as Professor of Pastoral Care. The other committee members currently include faculty members Dr. John Bolt, Dr. Mariano Avila, Dr. John Rottman, and board members Ms. Teresa Renkema and Rev. Curt Walters. Finally, Rev. David Koll, Director of Candidacy for the denominational Candidacy Committee, attends most committee meetings and enhances communication between the seminary and denomination.

**Why are board members on the committee?**

Think of board members as representing the churches you will ultimately serve. While board members don’t know students directly, they have years of experience in dealing with pastors and congregations and bring vital perspectives to the work of the Candidacy Committee. When dealing with particular student situations, they bring extremely helpful questions that enrich our deliberations and lead to better decisions for future candidates and the church.

**So the Candidacy Committee is really for students, not against them?**

Let’s talk. As a Candidacy Committee we want students to succeed in ministry. And we have a pretty good idea of the kinds of things that will get future pastors in trouble. Most MG leaders have years of pastoral experience. The psychologists who do psychological assessments have years of experience in observing how seminary students with certain test results fare in ministry. The Candidacy Committee is in the business of enhancing your seminary education and preparation for ministry. Really!

**OK. You brought it up. What about these psychological assessments and the follow-up requirements that come from them? It seems like the psychological assessments have so much clout at CTS!**

This is a really important question that deserves a thorough answer. The Candidacy Committee uses high quality psychologists who thoroughly understand the peculiar demands of pastoral ministry. The committee also consults with other psychologists in Grand Rapids who have extensive experience with pastoral train wrecks—sad situations of breakdown between congregation and pastor that forced the pastor to resign. The psychologists we work with have a very clear picture of the personal and relational capacities needed for effective ministry and make their recommendations accordingly.

**So the psychologists really run the show then when it comes to follow-up requirements?**

First, a word about follow-up, and then a word about who runs the show.
Follow-up

Psychologists make any number of follow-up suggestions or recommendations, including group counseling, individual counseling, Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), marriage counseling, mentoring, ADHD screening, assertiveness training, and so on.

Psychologists use the word *suggestion* for follow-up activities that will aid the student’s further growth and personal/pastoral development, but are not of such crucial significance for candidacy that the student is accountable to his or her MG leader or the Candidacy Committee for how or whether he or she actually engages in these follow-up activities.

Psychologists use the word *recommendation* for follow-up activities that call for student engagement and accountability. *Recommendations* involve areas of growth that the psychologists judge are crucial for successful candidacy and ministry in the CRC. In most cases, the Candidacy Committee and MG Leaders translate these *recommendations* from the psychologists into the Mentored Ministries *requirements* the student must act upon. Students should work closely with their MG leader to understand these requirements and take appropriate action steps.

It’s important for students to realize that over 50% of students will do significant follow-up work springing from psych evals. This kind of growth is a way of life at CTS, not an exceptional event.

So who runs the show?

Or, more precisely, what exact weight do psychologist’s recommendations (which the seminary usually turns into requirements) have when either the student, MG leader, or Candidacy Committee may respectfully disagree with the psychologist’s recommendations?

Fair question. And two answers: (1) A lot of weight. We are engaging professional consultations at considerable institutional cost (ultimately shared by students). It’s true that cardiologists, oncologists, ophthalmologists, and psychologists sometimes get it wrong. They’re fallible. But they are professionals and they get the benefit of the doubt until there is countervailing evidence. It’s good for students to remind themselves that significant formation and personal growth is difficult and painful and can be expected to produce resistance. Who wants to die to self? Who looks forward to facing long-standing matters of character and relationship? To the degree that CTS and the CRC are committed to deep formation, seminary education at times may be arduous. The alternative—not getting the growth needed for effective ministry—is far more painful in the long run, and often tragically destructive.

But there is a second answer: (2) Not absolute weight. Any relaxation of these requirements is a communal judgment made over time. That is, students are expected to engage in the required follow-up activities as soon as possible and are accountable for doing so. But there are instances when circumstances prohibit students from immediately engaging in the required follow-up activities, and when students experience growth through other means (planned or unplanned—God has his ways with us!) that persuade the MG leader, Candidacy Committee, and faculty that the concerns of the psychological assessment have been satisfied. Please note, however, that this is a communal judgment made over time. It is also fairly rare, and usually initiated by the MG leader or Candidacy Committee, not the student.

Rather than resist psychologists’ recommendations, students are strongly encouraged to trust the process even when they can’t necessarily understand the recommendations. None of us see ourselves with total clarity. Again, these psychologists, your MG leaders, and Candidacy Committee members have deep concerns that you flourish in ministry! They are all for you and deeply desire that students function with full emotional health and awareness when they become pastors. Rates of ministerial burn-out, drop-out, and painful separation from churches hopefully will persuade students to avail themselves of every opportunity to enhance their formation for ministry while in seminary.
I’m still a little confused about the relationship between the Candidacy Committee and the MG leader. Who ultimately calls the shots?

The Candidacy Committee and MG leaders work together closely, but each also has a distinct role. The MG leader knows the student best. The Candidacy Committee has two broader functions: first, to bring together the wisdom of many others involved in the formation of particular students such as internship supervisors, other faculty members, and the denominational Candidacy Committee; and second, to ensure that policies and practices are being evenly and fairly applied across all mentoring groups.

OK, so, let me get this straight. You say only rarely does the Candidacy Committee not recommend someone for candidacy. You’re here to help people, not stop them. You say that being theologically searching isn’t a problem. And psych evals, while important, don’t automatically do a student in. So what would cause the candidacy committee to not recommend a student for candidacy?

We want students to see the Candidacy Committee as a group of coaches, not police. This question is a “police question” that pushes us in a direction we really don’t want to go. But since this is a question students ask, we’ll answer the question by referring you to the PQM’s. The WHAT? Yes, the PQMs. Personal Qualifications for Ministry. They are in the student handbook and are also available as a separate handout.

These nine descriptors of one’s personal life and character are a beautiful statement of the kinds of strengths and graces needed for effective ministry. The opening statement in the PQM document gives several important qualifiers for how these PQMs should (and should not) be used. Given those qualifications, these are standards that guide the Candidacy Committee in deciding whom it will or will not recommend for candidacy.

OK. OK. Everyone is for us, and, like peas and broccoli, the psychological assessment is good for us. Great. So when do we do the psychological assessment?

Dates will be announced for early in the fall semester when students will be able to schedule their psychological assessment.

So the Candidacy Committee really loves students, eh?

Absolutely! We love students and are humbled at the front row seats we get as we watch students grow in conformity to Jesus Christ and in formation for ministry. Not a year goes by that the Candidacy Committee does not see dramatic evidence of God working through all of its efforts to help students be more formed and ready for the ministry to which they’ve been called. Hopefully recent changes as well as this communication will be hospitable to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in conforming not just students, but all members of the CTS community to the image of Jesus Christ.

The candidacy process for those seeking candidacy at next year’s synod is explained on the Candidacy web page https://semlink.calvinseminary.edu/candidacy-resources/