

Extraordinary Clause for Ordination, BCO 21-4

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The *Book of Church Order* uses the term “ordinarily” to designate the usual procedure that is to be followed but allows for the courts of the Church to make exceptions to usual practices within the parameters of the PCA Constitution. One such instance is the so-called “extraordinary clause” for ordination of ministers (BCO 21-4) regarding the educational requirements for ordination.

One of the results of the Reformation was that Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican Churches expected their ministers to be educationally prepared for ministry. This is reflected in our *BCO* educational requirements for ordination. The usual preparation for ministry is a college education followed by a three-year divinity program.

Prior to the mid-1960s, the first degree in divinity was called a Bachelor of Divinity (B.D.), just as the first degree in law was called a Bachelor of Laws (LLB). After the 1960s, the nomenclature was changed from B.D. to Master of Divinity (M.Div.). The standard law degree became Juris Doctor (J.D.).

In earlier times one could be tutored for ministry by a minister, or attend a theological seminary. Prospective lawyers could “read law” under an attorney or go to law school in preparation for the law exam. Our *BCO* educational requirements for ministry (BCO 21-4) may be completed in the traditional formal education, having “a diploma of Bachelor or Master from some approved college or university, and also a diploma of Bachelor or Master from some approved theological seminary, or by “authentic testimonials of having completed a regular course of theological studies, or a certificate of completion of and endorsement from a theological study program as approved by the General Assembly and one of the Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in America.”

The *Book of Church Order* specifies that a candidate for the PCA ministry is to submit himself to the care and guidance of the presbytery in his course of study and of practical training to prepare himself for ministry (BCO 18-1, 18-4). The *BCO* does not state the seminary a candidate must or may attend, though *BCO* 21-4 speaks of an “approved theological seminary” as one of several requirements for ordination. The only seminary owned and operated by the General Assembly of the PCA is Covenant Theological Seminary. Historically, the three seminaries that have provided the greatest number ministers for the PCA are Covenant, Reformed, and Westminster seminaries. A review of *the PCA Yearbook, Ministerial Directory* will reveal that Presbyteries have accepted ministers and candidates for ordination from numerous other seminaries, not just Covenant, Reformed and Westminster. Approving a candidate’s choice of a seminary to attend or accepting candidate’s M.Div. from any seminary is a discretionary decision of a Presbytery.

In order to assist Presbyteries, the Six General Assembly approved a curriculum (*BCO* 21-4 b., see *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 1978, p.214, Appendix G, IV).). The Uniform Curriculum is divided into three major areas (Scripture, Doctrine, and Practical Theology) with supervised practical experience required in each area.

With the growth of two-year M.A. programs among seminaries, a question arises whether a two-year M.A. degree from a theological seminary meets the ordination requirements set forth in the *BCO*. If an M.A. is the *only* theological education the candidate has had, and the M.A. has not been supplemented by some program of instruction to cover all of the requirements of the curriculum approved by the General Assembly, then the M.A. alone would not meet the educational requirements because a two-year M.A. degree does not meet the requirements of “a certificate of completion of and endorsement from a

theological study program as approved by the General Assembly and one of the Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in America”.

The General Assembly has spoken to the issue of the proper use of the extraordinary clause.

- In 1976 Tennessee Valley Presbytery asked for an interpretation of the extraordinary clause. The Committee on Judicial Business (later renamed the Committee on Constitutional Business) opined, “The Committee gives the following opinion that each Presbytery has the right and the responsibility to interpret the “Extraordinary Clause” for itself and its action in no way binds the action of any other Presbytery” (*Minutes of the 4th General Assembly*, 1976, p. 72).
- In 1981 the General Assembly adopted the Committee on Judicial Business’ recommendation that “The General Assembly recognizes that the use of the extraordinary clause is left to the discretion of an individual Presbytery subject to the review of the General Assembly and to the process provided for in a complaint. The General Assembly declares that the use of the extraordinary clause should be limited to the extraordinary circumstances of the church or the proven extraordinary gifts of the man. The Assembly would take notice, however, that there has been an increasing laxity in the application of the clause. The Assembly would, therefore, counsel that Presbyteries exercise diligence and care in the use of this provision in order that they not prevent the ordination of a candidate for whom there are truly exceptional circumstances not ordain a person who is inadequately prepared for the ministry” (*M9GA*, 1981, p.122).

Proper Use of the Extraordinary Clause

- In the discretion of the Presbytery, there are extraordinary circumstances in the church that wishes to call the candidate (*BCO* 21-4 h.), or also there are proven extraordinary gifts (*BCO* 21-4 g., h.) exhibited by the candidate and ascertained by the Presbytery.
- If the Presbytery omits any of the educational requirements, it may only do so by a three-fourths (3/4) majority vote and the reason(s) for the omission(s) must be recorded in the minutes (*BCO* 21-4 a.).
- If the Presbytery omits any of the areas of the parts of the trials for ordination, it may only do so by a three-fourths (3/4) majority vote (*BCO* 21-4 c.) and the reason(s) for the omission(s) must be recorded in the minutes (*BCO* 21-4 d.).

The Office of the Stated Clerk may give advice and counsel regarding constitutional and procedural matters. Interpretations of *The Book of Church Order*, *The Westminster Standards*, “The Rules of Assembly Operation,” “The Operating Manual of the Standing Judicial Commission,” and/or *Robert’s Rules of Order* by the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PCA or staff members of the Office of the Stated Clerk are for information only, however, and are not authoritative rulings that may only be made by the courts of the Church. Responses to inquiries are based on information supplied by the inquirer, which may not necessarily be comprehensive. The Office of the Stated Clerk does not represent parties in ecclesiastical judicial cases and may not prepare judicial cases for parties. Parties to potential cases or cases in process are responsible for their own constitutional and procedural knowledge and understanding. The Office of the Stated Clerk does not give legal advice. When legal advice is needed, professional legal counsel should be secured from one familiar with applicable laws and regulations.