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**A GUIDE FOR PREPARING WRITTEN MATERIALS FOR UNITED
METHODIST PROBATIONARY MEMBERS AND MEETING WITH YOUR
BOARD OF ORDAINED MINISTRY
(Revised August 1998)**

During the past few years a number of UM students have come to me for advice as they prepare their required written materials and as they get ready for their interview with their conference Board of Ordained Ministry. Here then are some suggestions which may be of help to you.

I. PREPARING WRITTEN MATERIALS

A. General Suggestions

1. Give careful attention to the appearance of your work. Is it attractive and easy to read? Are there any typing errors or misspelled words? All this reflects upon you, so don't overlook it. Given what computers can do, you should be able to turn in material of desktop publishing quality.
2. In most of the material you are asked to state your own ideas and opinions. In doing that, however, it is helpful to use SHORT quotations from other sources (Scripture, Christian writers, contemporary theologians, etc. But don't overdo quotations. Simply use them occasionally to support the points you yourself are making. Your paper should not come across as an academic research paper. But neither should it simply be a personal reflection paper. Strive for something somewhere in-between.
3. Use GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE. There will be persons on your Board who are very sensitive about this issue. . See the document *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal* for a discussion of this issue in relationship to the UM church.

When referring to people, humanity or humankind, or men *and* women, is preferable to man or mankind. When referring to God it is appropriate to use masculine biblical metaphors for God such as Father, Lord, King, etc. But I would also encourage you to use some of the feminine biblical metaphors (for example: "Like a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you"--Isaiah 66:13).

It is also appropriate to use the masculine pronoun, He, in reference to God although sometimes it is better to repeat "God" as long as it does not become too awkward. For example, "God so loved the world that God gave his only Son that whoever believes in God should not perish but have eternal life." There will be some on your Board who would like you to avoid masculine pronouns for God altogether or to be inclusive (he/she) in your use of pronouns for God.

I personally am not comfortable referring to God as “She,” or using “Mother” as a *name* for God since scripture never does. God is said to be “like a mother” (Isaiah 66:13) but is never addressed as “Mother” or referred to as “She.” There are some important theological reasons for this (See Alvin Kimel, ed., *Speaking the Christian God* and John Oswalt’s article “Why We Don’t Call God Mother” in *Good News*, Jan-Feb. 1995).

4. Work at eliminating evangelical cliches and “red flag” words and phrases from your material. Words and phrases such as “born again,” “saved,” “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” can set some people off. Don’t compromise your personal and theological integrity. State what YOU believe. But try to state it in words and phrases that will enhance communicating your ideas to others.

5. Get your material in on time! Late material tells your Board something about your ability to manage time. If you need more time to complete the material it is best to make a formal request to the conference designate.

B. Suggestions Concerning Specific Questions

Here I am basing my suggestions on the questions found in Paragraph 414.8 of the 1996 *Discipline*. Most Annual Conferences require candidates for Probationary Membership to submit written responses to these questions or adapted versions of them.

a) Describe your personal experience of God and the understanding of God you derive from biblical, theological, and historical sources.

You could probably write a book on this, but I would suggest that 3-4 pages (double-spaced) are appropriate--unless you have been given specific length guidelines. Notice the two key areas your response should center around: your personal experience and your understanding. The one is more affective, the other more cognitive.

There are different ways you can deal with these two areas. You can treat them separately (This is what I understand about God; this is an account of my personal experience of God), or you can combine them (This is what I understand; this is how I’ve experienced what I understand. Or this is my experience and it has led me to this understanding).

In presenting your understanding of God you might focus on some of the great biblical affirmations about God. For example, the three great Johannine affirmations: God is spirit, God is light, God is love. Or you could discuss several of the key divine attributes (For discussion of the attributes of God see Thomas Oden’s *The Living God*, A.W. Toner’s *The Knowledge of the Holy*, Donald Bloesch’s *The Almighty God* or Ray Dunning’s *Grace, Faith and Holiness*. For Wesley on the divine attributes see the relevant chapter in Thomas Oden’s *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity*).

You could also let your discussion revolve around some of the key divine activities--God as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. Finally, you could use a trinitarian framework. God

as Father (creator, provider), Son (redeemer, reconciler), and Holy Spirit (sanctifier, enabler). These are just a few suggestions to get your mind working.

Notice the question asks you for biblical, theological and historical sources in relation to your understanding of God. It is important, then, that you cite some of these. By “theological” my guess is that they mean modern/contemporary sources (19th & 20th century.). By “historical” my is guess is that they mean classical theological sources (pre-19th century).

I would also encourage you to check out material related to the doctrine of God in our *Articles of Religion* and *Confession of Faith* (see 1996 *UM Discipline*, pp. 57-69).

b) What is your understanding of humanity, and the human need for divine grace?

Here your answer needs to take into account both “the grandeur and the misery” of humanity, as Pascal put it. Humans are both “created in the image of God,” “a little lower than God,” and yet radically fallen—sinners who stand in need of divine grace. As the *Discipline* puts it, “As sinful creatures, however, we have broken that covenant [the covenant with God], become estranged from God, wounded ourselves and one another, and wreaked havoc throughout the natural order. We stand in need of redemption” (p. 41).

Check out relevant materials in the *Articles of Religion* (VII & VIII) and the *Confession of Faith* (VII), and the 1988 Theological Statement (1996 *Discipline* 41, 44).

There is a helpful discussion of human sinfulness in Ray Dunning, *Grace Faith and Holiness*, 275-301, and Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 46-133.

c) How do you interpret the statement Jesus Christ is Lord?

This, of course, was the earliest Christian confession. For discussions of the biblical meaning of ascribing the title, “Lord,” to Jesus, see the following:

William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, 408-420.

Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 195-237.

Colin Brown, ed., *Dictionary of New Testament Theology, II*, 510-519.

Peter Toon, *Jesus Christ is Lord*

In thinking about the extent of Christ’s Lordship, I find it helpful to think of four spheres of Lordship:

1. the personal sphere—He is lord of the individual Christian
2. the communal sphere—He is Lord of the Church

3. the societal sphere—He is Lord of societies, cultures, governments and nations
4. the cosmic sphere—He is Lord of the heavens and earth.

It is the task of the Church to announce and work toward the actualizing of his Lordship in all these spheres. Our concept of Christ's Lordship should include all four. Evangelicals have traditionally stressed the personal aspect of Lordship, but have tended to neglect the other three. Here is an opportunity for you to show your board that your understanding involves them all! An emphasis on the societal sphere should lead to a concern for social justice. A concern for the cosmic sphere, likewise, should lead to a concern for care of the environment. Colossians 1:15-20 is a good biblical passage to key in on.

d) What is your conception of the activity of the Holy Spirit in personal faith, in the community of believers, and in responsible living in the world?

Notice the three areas to be discussed: The Holy Spirit in (a) personal faith (b) the community of believers, and (c) responsible living in the world. Make sure you address all three. In relation to c., you might want to refer to Wesley's *General Rules* (1996 *Discipline*, 69-72) and/or *The Social Principles* (1996 *Discipline*, 84-106) as specific efforts by Methodists to live responsibly in the world through the Holy Spirit.

See the relevant material in the 1996 UM *Discipline* (p. 41, 65). There is a brief outline of the various activities of the Holy Spirit in John Lawson's *Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, 117-119. See also Thomas Oden's *Life in the Spirit*, p. 31ff.

In terms of the individual believer someone has summarized the Holy Spirit's work as follows.

- The Holy Spirit *convicts* us of our sin (repentance)
- The Holy Spirit *convinces* us of Christ's adequacy for salvation (faith, new birth)
- The Holy Spirit *confirms* us of our salvation (assurance)
- The Holy Spirit *conforms* us to Christ's image (sanctification)
- The Holy Spirit *completes* Christ's mission through enabling us to obey the Great Commandment and fulfill the Great Commission

e) What is your understanding of the kingdom of God; the Resurrection; eternal life?

Here are three important biblical concepts. Try to briefly summarize the key elements in a biblical understanding of each. Here are some sources you may want to consult as you prepare your answers:

Kingdom of God

Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 119-121.

G. E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*

The Presence of the Future

Theology of the New Testament, 57ff.

Howard Snyder, *A Kingdom Manifesto*

Models of the Kingdom

Resurrection

Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 193-195.

G.E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 315-327.

Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph Martin, & Daniel Reid, eds. *A Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 805-812.

Eternal Life

Joel Green, Scot McNight, & I.H. Marshall, eds., *A Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 469-471.

G.E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 254-269.

f) What are the theological tasks of a probationary member and commissioned minister with special reference to Part II of the *Book of Discipline*?

Carefully read Paragraph 63. Section 4—Our Theological Task (1996 *Discipline*, 72-74). Notice the third sentence in the second paragraph (p72): “Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling ‘to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.’”

You could shape a good answer by writing a few paragraphs about how some of the various things you will be doing as a pastor involves those four things—testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective.

Another approach would be to frame your answer around the outline in the text. Our theological task, it says, is “critical and constructive,” “both individual and communal,” “contextual and incarnational,” and “essentially practical.”

g) The United Methodist Church holds that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and

confirmed by reason. What is your understanding of this theological position of the Church?

Here is your opportunity to talk about the Wesleyan (or so-called Wesleyan!) Quadrilateral. Thomas Langford notes that the notion of the Quadrilateral “has become a pervasive characteristic in United Methodist theology.”

Read carefully the section “Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria” in “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” (1996 *Discipline*, 74-80). There is everything there for you to present an understanding of the Quadrilateral which sees Scripture as the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine but also stresses the role of tradition, experience, and reason in enabling us to properly understand and interpret Scripture. In other words, as someone has put it, “Understanding the Quadrilateral as the rule of Scripture within a trilateral hermeneutic of tradition, experience and reason.”

For material on the quadrilateral see the essays by Albert Outler and Ted Campbell in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church*, ed. by Thomas Langford. And also the more recent (1998) *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* ed. by Stephen Gunther. For a negative assessment of the quadrilateral see *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia* (especially pp. 46-55) by William Abraham.

h) Describe the nature and mission of the Church. What are its primary tasks today?

Notice the two elements you are asked to describe: the church’s *nature*, the church’s *mission*. A good place to start is in paragraph 201 of the 1996 *Discipline* (p. 115) where a local church is defined.

Notice the key elements in the first part of the definition. And then notice the three-fold mission of the church in the last sentence (the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world). You could probably answer the question simply by elaborating on the various elements in this definition.

To help you do that also read the material that precedes paragraph 201 on p. 114-115 and what follows it in paragraphs 202-204.

Having described the nature and mission of the church, you are then asked, What are its *primary tasks* today? Here it would seem appropriate to briefly talk about some of the key challenges facing the church as it enters the 21st century .

For more on the nature and mission of the church see:

Donald Miller, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*

Alvin Lindgren, *Foundations for Purposeful Church Administration*, 38-59.

Howard Snyder, *The Community of the King*

Gabriel Facre, *The Christian Story*, 155-194.

Thomas Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 261-365.

i) Discuss your understanding of the primary characteristics of United Methodist polity.

Here you will probably want to discuss key concepts such as episcopacy (*Discipline*, 34-37), conference--annual and general (*Discipline*, 24-26, 30-32), itineracy (*Discipline*, 200-201). See the texts used in United Methodist Polity class for more information.

j) How do you perceive yourself, your gifts, your motives, your role, and your commitment as a probationary member and commissioned minister in the United Methodist Church?

You are asked to describe yourself in four areas: gifts, motives, role and commitment. The first two areas obviously are personal and unique to you. Simply describe what you perceive your gifts to be and what motivates you in ministry.

The last two relate more to your being a probationary member. See the material on pages 184-186 in the *Discipline* for the role of probationary members. In relation to commitment, you could affirm your willingness to be accountable to the annual conference and to serve under the supervision of a district superintendent (see no 4. Of p. 185 of the *Discipline*).

k) Describe your understanding of *diakonia*, the servant ministry of the church, and the servant ministry of the probationary member and commissioned minister.

Notice the material on p. 110-111 and the bottom of p. 178 in the *Discipline* which relates to servant ministry in the church. For a biblical word study on *diakonia* see Colin Brown's *Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol 3*, p. 544-549. Notice also the Service Requirement (p. 180 bottom) which relates to probationary members.

l) What is the meaning of ordination in the context of the general ministry of the church?

Make sure you read the key paragraphs in the 1996 *Discipline* on ordination (pp. 110-111, 170-171). Notice how ordination is set within the context of the general ministry of the Church—the context the question asks you to set it in.

See the discussion of ordination in Dennis Cambell's *The Yoke of Obedience*, p. 94ff, and Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, pp. 26-33).

m) Describe your understanding of an inclusive church and ministry.

Galatians 3:28 provides a good biblical basis for an inclusive Church (see also Acts 10:34-35); Ephesians 2:11-22). See also Section IX. Called to Inclusiveness (*Discipline*, p. 112).

Some of the “isms” that an inclusive church should be free of are ageism, sexism, racism, sectarianism, ethnocentrism, etc. Inclusive language is also an issue here. An inclusive ministry involves, among other things, “open itineracy.” This means according to the *Discipline* that “appointments are made without regard to race, ethnic origin, gender, color, marital status, or age” and that “sensitive attention should be given in appointing clergy with physical challenges to responsibilities and duties that met their gifts and graces” (p. 268)

n) You have agreed as a candidate for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world and the most effective witness of the gospel, and in consideration of their influence as ministers, to make a complete dedication of yourself to the highest ideals of the Christian life as set forth in Para. 304.2, and to this end agree to exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to bodily health, mental and emotional maturity, integrity in all personal relationships, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, social responsibility and growth in grace and the knowledge and love of God (Para. 304.2,3) What is your understanding of this agreement.

You might want to briefly state why you agree with this (the necessity of holiness among leaders. See the passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 related to the characteristics for elders). You also might want to briefly describe some of your current practices which reflect your attempt to live this call to complete dedication out.

See the chapter in Richard Neuhaus’ *Freedom for Ministry* entitled “The Pursuit of Holiness” (p. 208ff) for an excellent discussion of the need for church leaders/pastors to lead an exemplary life.

II. PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- A. Give attention to your appearance. Look your best. Dress like a professional, yet don’t appear overdressed or overly “slick.”
- B. Pay attention to your body language during the interview. For example, if you are rubbing your hands together or looking down at the floor while you are talking, what are you communicating about yourself to the committee? Be aware of the setting of the interview. Are you seated in a circle, or around a table? Oftentimes the setting can provide clues to the dynamics involved in the process.

- C. Answer questions to the best of our ability. If you don't understand what is being asked, asked for clarification. If you are unable to respond to a question because of lack of knowledge or experience, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," or "That's an area where I need to do some more study," or "I'm hoping to learn more about that when I take a course in _____," or "As I understand it now in this stage of my growth, I think....."
- D. Don't get defensive. Remember: God has not called you to be a missionary to your Board of Ministry! State what you believe and your reasons for your beliefs. But give others the right to disagree with you and to question you without being threatened. Oftentimes what the Board is really concerned about is not your position on an issue as much as your attitude towards those who think differently. They want to know if you are an "open" or a "closed" person. Sometimes the best thing to do is to "agree to disagree in love."
- E. If you are asked why you chose a non-UM seminary like Asbury, don't criticize the UM seminaries in your response. Stress the positives about Asbury and why you came here, but let them know that there are a lot of good things happening at UM seminaries as well.
- F. Remember: "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you." God has brought you this far. He will see you through. So relax! Rest in the Lord (see Isaiah 41:8-10). Look upon this as an opportunity to grow and learn. If your Board of Ministry asks you to do something in order to enhance your personal growth or strengthen a need you have, accept that as the Word of God to you, and do it wholeheartedly.