

Not just hoops

By [E. Carrington Heath](#)

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Earlier this year I attended an ordination service for a good friend. During the course of that worship service she went from being a faithful lay member of the United Church of Christ to an ordained UCC minister. She took the vows required of clergy in our tradition and received the symbols of ordained ministry all in the sight of a community that had affirmed God's call on her and overseen her formation. I love ordinations because they remind me of what it is I and other clergy do, and of what ordination means to me.

I have been listening to a few different conversations on the ordination process, both in my tradition and in others. I've heard people saying that the ordination process is just a bunch of meaningless hoops, that it's just buying into the "system" of denominations, that it's elitist, that the expectations are unreasonable, and that it's all just a bureaucratic distraction from the work of the church.

With all due respect, I disagree.

I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), a process I've heard described by others as the Protestant-ordination-process equivalent of the Marine Corps. In order to be ordained we were required to attain a Master of Divinity degree, complete a supervised internship, do a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, learn two biblical languages, take a two-day psychological assessment, and pass five ordination exams, all while meeting regularly with our Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry and writing page after page of reflections upon our calls and the meaning of ordination.

It was a long process, and yet, when my ordination day came I knew that I was ready. And, more importantly, I knew that my denomination also knew I was ready, and that they had discerned God's call upon me to the particular ministry of the Word and Sacrament. Could I have chosen an easier route? Sure. But I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to know that a community stood beside me, helped prepare me, and thought I was ready.

Eight years later I transferred my ordination to the United Church of Christ, which again meant more essays, more meetings, more discernment, and another psychological assessment. And yet, when Privilege of Call was extended to me, I knew that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

These days I am the spouse of a seminarian. My partner is in the very last phase of her own ordination process in an association known across the country for its rigor. And, again, I am seeing why challenging ordination processes matter. She is going to be a superb minister and she has been made even better by embracing this journey with willingness and faith.

All of this is to say that I have spent a lot of time around ordination processes. And in that time there are some things I've learned about the processes, and why they still matter:

It's not all just "jumping through hoops."

The people serving on ordination committees are not just coming up with random lists of requirements for prospective clergy to complete because they want to make it harder on them. They have instead figured out the experiences that they believe will aid you in your discernment and your future ministry.

No, you may not enjoy CPE. But when you are called to your first traumatic death in the parish, you will be grateful for it. Likewise, you might know you are a pretty emotionally and psychologically healthy person who doesn't need a psych assessment, but because we have this process you will be glad to know your colleagues are as well. The "hoops" matter because they aren't obstacles; they are checkpoints on a long process, each with their own purpose.

It's supposed to be hard.

This process is difficult for a reason. There are high expectations. There are tests of both your adaptability and endurance. There are things that will challenge you spiritually and intellectually. But they are not unreasonable.

I hear so many people, for instance, saying that the Presbyterian ordination exams are ridiculously difficult. And, yes, they are tough. They are tough in the way that the bar exam is tough. But they are also worthwhile. The exams are not tests of one's theology. Instead the exam taker is given a case study to consider and asked

to write how they would respond as a pastor, and how they understand the theology behind their response. When you think about it, that may not be easy, but it's also not so unreasonable.

(For clarification: Two readers grade the exams. If both do not pass the writer, the writer fails. If one passes the writer, and one does not, it goes to a third reader. It is in actuality a very fair process that provides a consistent standard in order to evaluate all candidates. And, if someone does not pass, though most do, they may take the exam again.)

It's supposed to cost something.

I get that seminary is not cheap. And I also understand that moving from the place you know to a new place is not easy. But, why did we expect that there wouldn't be a cost? When Jesus told us to drop the nets and follow him, I think he meant that. That's why I always had profound respect for my second-career seminary classmates who had sold their houses, packed up their families, and moved onto campus. As they explained to me, ministry was going to demand that they be ready to move to wherever God was calling them. Why not start learning how to do that now?

This is not to say that seminary should be cost-prohibited for someone who is called to ministry. Quite the contrary. My sincere wish is that denominations, churches, and seminaries together would find ways to lessen the debt load of new clergy, and make sure that a seminary education is attainable to everyone, regardless of economic means.

It's not for everyone.

Ordination is not a route that everyone should take. That's not because it is "elite" or makes the recipient "special." That's because ordination is a specific calling, no greater or lesser than any other Christian calling. For those called to ordination as ministers, the call is specifically to proclaiming the Word and celebrating the sacraments. That is not everyone's call, which is good because there is plenty of work to go around.

Some are predicting that as a generation of ministers retires we will have a clergy shortage in some denominations. I actually don't believe that is true. I think it is more likely that fewer clergy will be required, that we will sometimes serve more than one parish, and that lay members will assume responsibility for more forms of

ministry.

The reality is that the church needs more good, dedicated lay leaders than ordained clergy. We need people who love Christ and love Christ's church, and who can carry that love into the world in new ways. We need people of diverse skills and callings who will share in ministry.

It's not about you (or me).

When I began my ordination process it was explained to me that my period of discernment was going to be a three way conversation between God, myself, and my denomination. I was pretty sure God was calling me to ordained ministry, but ministry is not something to which you self-ordain. (I mean, technically you can . . . just go to one of those websites that will sell you an ordination.) Instead, ordination is a communal process.

Think what you want about denominations and their local judiciaries, but in the end they are just the structures that arise around community. And for those of us who pursue denominational ordination, they are the bodies who help us to discern God's call by sitting with us, questioning us, listening to us, and guiding us.

And they are also the same bodies to which we become accountable after ordination. There is something about being accountable in your ministry to a body bigger than yourself, or even your own congregation. It gives me comfort to know that in my denomination ministers are held to a high standard, and that there are certain expectations placed on those who serve God's people.

The way we prepare our future clergy for ordination does matter. We are in the middle of one of the great transformations of the church. We need nothing less than clergy who have discerned their call, have been affirmed in community, and have been empowered to lead their church into the future that God has prepared for us all.

Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)