

## **Policy #15 -- Addressing Charges of Violating Ordination Exam Procedures**

### **Purpose**

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, in its covenantal role of oversight and support of those preparing to become ministers of Word and Sacrament, must attend to the integrity and trustworthiness of the persons under its care. Plagiarism is a breach of integrity and trust; therefore CPM has adopted this policy to guide a faithful response to incidences of plagiarism.

### **Potential occurrences of plagiarism**

- Ordination Exams
  - The Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCC) committee identifies "areas of verbal correspondence that are consistent with plagiarism".
    - See the *Handbook on Standard Examinations*, June 2017 v 2.2, pp 22ff.
  - In the event that the Committee on Preparation for Ministry receives formal notification that an inquirer/candidate has failed to abide by the PCUSA exam administration plagiarism policy (*Handbook on Standard Examinations*, June 2017 v 2.2, pp 22ff), they shall apply the procedures set forth in this policy.
- Written materials required by this committee
  - If CPM identifies unattributed text in, for example, responses to reflection questions, a statement of faith, a sermon, etc, they shall apply the procedures set forth in this policy.

The CPM Chair shall convene an ad hoc Task Force to investigate the matter. The members of the Task Force shall include the following:

1. The CPM Chair
2. The Chair of the sub-group to which the accused inquirer/candidate is assigned
3. The inquirer/candidate's CPM liaison
4. The Executive Presbyter
5. The Stated Clerk
6. Any other person or persons as deemed appropriate by the CPM Chair, upon consultation with other Task Force members

All communications concerning the matter – from these initial steps to its ultimate conclusion – are to be held in confidence and strictly limited to those whose duties require that they be informed.

The CPM Chair, as Convener of the Task Force, shall share all relevant documentation and evidence with the Task Force in a timely manner, invite feedback, and determine available and timely dates for meeting in person.

The inquirer/candidate's liaison shall then reach out to the inquirer/candidate, inform him or her of the alleged violation of exam procedures, share the documentation and evidence provided to the Task Force, and in consultation, confirm a date for meeting with the Task Force. [See sample letter below].

The meeting with the inquirer/candidate shall take place at the Presbytery office, with the inquirer/candidate physically present, if reasonably possible. The inquirer/candidate may be accompanied by his/her pastor and/or session liaison if desired. If necessary, the inquirer/candidate may appear by Skype, Facetime, or a similar video conferencing service.

The meeting is for the purpose of reviewing the evidence, questioning the inquirer/candidate, and coming to a just response. When the Task Force has completed its questioning of the inquirer/candidate, he or she will be dismissed, and the Task Force will discuss what should happen next.

The Task Force has wide discretion in how to respond – on a spectrum from taking no punitive action at all, to a written warning or reprimand with no further sanction, to suspension with conditions attached, all the way up to recommending expulsion from the ordination process. The facts of the matter shall be weighed, in light of several possible factors:

- The seriousness of the alleged violations;
- The degree of correspondence between the inquirer/candidate's work and published material;
- The inquirer/candidate's intentions (Whether he/she intended to deceive and represent another's work as his/her own);
- Whether the inquirer/candidate fully understood the exam directions and proper citation procedures;
- Any remorse shown for actions taken;
- Any other factors deemed appropriate by the Task Force.

Taking the above into consideration, there are four levels of offense:

- Level 0: a minor, unintentional violation
- Level 1: a minor violation resulting from a lack of understanding of proper citation procedure or expectations for citation
- Level 2: a violation by an individual incorporating one or two short passages of someone else's work without proper citation
- Level 3: a violation by an individual incorporating large portions (e.g. several sentences, complete paragraphs) of someone else's work without proper citation

The consequences of such action remain at the discretion of the Task Force, and, particularly related to levels 2 and 3, should take into account the inquirer/candidate's intent and level of genuine remorse.

- Level 0: no consequence beyond failure of the exam as determined by the PCC
- Level 1: a written letter to the candidate by the Chair of CPM that will be included in the candidate's CPM file, as well as failure of the exam as determined by the PCC
- Level 2: in addition to failure of the exam, the candidate may be subject to further consequences which could include a written reprimand, short-term suspension (less than a year), or participation in a support group to help the candidate learn from his/her mistakes.
- Level 3: in addition to failure of the exam, the candidate may be subject to further consequences, which could include a written reprimand, long-term suspension (more than one year), a support group with conditions attached, such as additional classes to take, professional counseling, etc. The worst offenses, when all factors have considered, could be expulsion from the process.

At the discretion of the Task Force, a support group could be formed for the duration of a candidate's suspension, who in addition to providing support during the suspension, would also make a recommendation to CPM about further steps that might need to be taken.

The Task Force will determine the terms of the suspension, and could include that the inquirer/candidate will not be permitted to take ordination exams, take Clinical Pastoral Education, or participate in an internship. At the discretion of the Task Force, all efforts will be made to not impede academic progress towards graduation, and to limit terms of suspension to steps in the ordination process.

A second offense, no matter the level, will automatically result in moving to the next level. For example, a second "level 1" offense would mean automatic consideration as a "level 2."

If the Task Force's decision is *less* than expulsion from the ordination process, then the Task Force has full authority to act in the name of the CPM and to communicate its decision with the inquirer/candidate in a timely manner. The decision will be given in the form of a letter, written by the CPM Chair, and sent by certified mail on Presbytery letterhead.

If the Task Force's decision involves a sanction with conditions (e.g. suspension), the inquirer/candidate will be required to respond to the Task Force's decision within 30 days of receipt of the letter with his/her acceptance or appeal of the decision and its conditions. Failure to respond after 30 days to a decision of sanction with conditions will be grounds for the inquirer/candidate's sub-group to take up the matter and make a recommendation of expulsion to the full CPM. Failure to respond after 30 days to a decision to recommend expulsion will result in immediate expulsion from the ordination process.

Upon acceptance of a decision and terms, other parties will be informed as deemed appropriate by the Task Force. The decision will be shared with the inquirer/candidate's sub-group at its next stated meeting.

The chair of the CPM will, **while maintaining the candidate's anonymity**, file a brief report outlining the nature of the infraction, the assessed level of the offense, the task force's decision and consequences, and the candidate's response. No names or other identifying information will be included in this report. This file will be maintained with other CPM records and available for review, for comparison's sake, by task forces considering new cases of academic dishonesty.

When a sanction with conditions (e.g. suspension) has been agreed upon, the inquirer/candidate's liaison shall be the point person in working with the inquirer/candidate in seeing that the conditions are fulfilled. Updates and reports of progress are to be provided to the sub-group on a timely basis. Failure to meet conditions will be grounds for the inquirer/candidate's sub-group to take up the matter again and make a recommendation of expulsion to the full CPM.

If the inquirer/candidate wishes, he/she may appeal a Task Force decision within the 30 days allowed. If so, the matter will be taken up by the full CPM at its next available Stated Meeting, following the procedure given below for any other case being referred to the full Committee.

If the Task Force recommends expulsion and the inquirer/candidate appeals the decision, then the matter must be taken up by the full CPM. The sub-group Chair will communicate the matter in a timely manner, along with the Task Force's recommendation, with the rest of the sub-group for their information. The Task Force's recommendation will then be taken up by the whole CPM at its next stated meeting.

For Cases being Referred to the Full CPM: If possible, the full Task Force which considered the matter should be present at the full CPM meeting to present the case and their recommendation. The inquirer/candidate may be present if he/she wishes, may speak and answer questions, and may be accompanied by his/her pastor and/or session liaison if desired. The CPM shall have full discretion to accept, reject, or amend the Task Force's decision/recommendation, and its decision will be final. The decision will then be communicated with the inquirer/candidate in the form of a letter, written by the CPM Chair, and sent by certified mail on Presbytery letterhead. Other parties will be informed as deemed appropriate by the CPM.

As with the beginning of the process, so in its conclusion: All communications – whether oral or written – concerning the matter are to be held in confidence and shall be strictly limited to the Task Force, the CPM, and those deemed by the CPM as “needing to know.” Short of expulsion from the process, neither the identity of the inquirer/candidate, nor the disposition of the case, shall be given in the CPM report in the Commissioner Handbook for the following Stated Meeting of the Presbytery. The matter shall remain private between the inquirer/candidate, the CPM, and those informed by the CPM.

If the final disposition of the case results in expulsion from the ordination process, the action shall be noted in the CPM report in the Commissioner Handbook for the following Stated Meeting of the Presbytery in the same manner as if the inquirer/candidate had been removed from the CPM roll for any other reason (e.g. for being in the process too long and not responding to official CPM communications). As with any other circumstance, the reason for removal will not be given.

## Sample E-mail/Letter for Liaison to reach out to Inquirer/Candidate

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This is \_\_\_\_\_, your liaison to the Committee on Preparation for Ministry. Just recently, you took the \_\_\_\_\_ ordination exam and did not pass it. In your results, in the summary of the reader responses, was the following notation:

*[Example] Special Note to the Presbytery from the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates (PCC):*

*As part of its standard review of all exam submissions for use of uncredited materials, the Theology Exam Task Group has identified evidence in the response to Sections I and II of this exam that in their view indicates a failure to comply with the following examination procedure affirmed by the candidate before beginning work on the exam: "I attest that while writing and submitting my standard ordination exams I will use only resources authorized by the exam instructions and will acknowledge any use of print or digital resources through proper, academic style citation." Documentation of this evidence has been provided to the presbytery committee responsible for the oversight of the candidate.*

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry is the presbytery committee responsible for looking into such matters through a specially created Task Force. Accordingly, we need to meet with you in order to address the above issue raised by the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates. It is important that we meet in the near future.

- **Provide the inquirer/candidate with the documentation provided by the PCC, and explain that it is the evidence that the PCC found and used to determine that a violation had occurred.**
- **Offer dates and times for a meeting at the Greater Atlanta presbytery office (1024 Ponce De Leon Avenue NE, Atlanta, GA 30306).**
- **Inform the Inquirer/Candidate as to the approximate schedule and who will be at the meeting. Let him/her know that if they wish to have their Session liaison and/or their Pastor present for support, they may.**

Thank you for your attention to this message. I hope to hear from you soon. If you have any questions, I encourage you to contact me.