

Considering the Provisional Status for Receiving Ministers and Churches

The 169th General Assembly (1999) approved an innovative opportunity to widen the Church's ministry, particularly among non-Anglos in the USA. Non-Anglo ordained ministers from other communions desiring to join our Church may not have had the same opportunity to acquire the typical educational credentials called for in our Constitution. Some may come from nations where economic or political conditions greatly limited their capacity for formal training. Yet they have both expertise and experience in developing and serving congregations of their own ethnic background. The provisional status for such ministers enables the individual to become part of the Cumberland Presbyterian church and to *exercise the full privileges and responsibilities of their ordination* while engaging in a course of study and mentoring over a period of no less than two years. This two-year provisional period assists both the minister and the presbytery to become acquainted and grow in their relationship, to share mutual concerns, to exchange ideas and plans for ministry. It allows the minister to become conversant with the "culture" of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, including doctrine, polity, history, and the range of congregational and judicatory life and style. At the same time it grants members of presbytery and the Church at large firsthand contact with the minister's ethnicity and/or culture, and thus enriches, broadens and extends the Church's witness. Evaluations of the minister's progress in what is termed the "assimilation process" are an important part of the provisional period. When the goals of the provisional period have been reached, and both the minister and presbytery desire to finalize the covenant between them, the minister's ordination is fully recognized by presbytery and the provisional status concluded.

The same General Assembly recognized that there are also non-Anglo congregations, fellowships and groups that could wish to identify with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The Constitution had traditionally provided for receiving congregations from a similar ecclesiastical system. But there was no provision for churches coming from a different ecclesiastical polity, such as an independent congregation. So the provisional status for churches and fellowships was put forth as a way of bringing groups into the denomination with an intentional two-year period of "assimilation" much like that of the minister noted earlier. Here again the congregation -- if it is already an organized church with an official board -- can be part of presbytery from the beginning. If it's a fellowship (new church) without an official board, or if in the view of the presbytery it does not meet the criteria to be received as an organized church, then it may come in as a Cumberland Presbyterian fellowship with the same status as any other New Church Development effort. The provisional period affords the opportunity to do leadership training and development,

particularly for the office of elder, along with increasing acquaintance with the denomination and its ministry. Again, presbytery has the responsibility to take initiative with in-coming groups to facilitate genuine assimilation and mutual love. Goals of the assimilation process are to be met over the two-year period, and if both the presbytery and the congregation desire to finalize the covenant, then the provisional status is removed and the congregation is fully a member of presbytery.

At any point during the provisional status, the minister, group or presbytery may decide it is best to discontinue the association. This may be done by either party, with adequate written notice. Presbytery would take official action in this regard. The goal is genuine assimilation and full participation. The two-year provisional status is a minimum, yet the status should not be continued indefinitely. Relationships should be finalized within a reasonable time.

Questions Commonly Asked Concerning the Provisional Period

- 1.) Can a non-ordained ethnic pastor be received under the provisional period? **No.** A non-ordained ethnic pastor is received as a candidate for the ministry and the committee on ministry will work with the candidate as it would any other probationer. The Program of Alternate studies now has a Multi-Culture Ministry track to help train cross-culture pastors.
- 2.) Should the presbytery receive a cross-culture pastor under provisional period if he/she does not pastor a church or fellowship and is not involved in a recognized ministry? **No.** The provisional period is designed to allow ethnic pastors the freedom to continue ministry in which they are already involved. However, if the presbytery plans to develop a ministry to a particular ethnic group, and use the ordained ethnic pastor in this ministry, then the pastor could be accepted into the presbytery under the provisional status.
- 3.) Can an ethnic pastor who is under provisional status do the sacraments? **Yes.** In most cases the ethnic pastor has been doing the sacraments in his ethnic community before coming into the CP Church.
- 4.) Can a presbytery remove an ethnic pastor from provisional status if the ministry the ethnic pastor is working in is terminated or fails? **Yes.** The thing that validates a provisional pastor is his/her ministry. With no ministry, it is hard to justify keeping a pastor under provisional status. However, it is possible that the ethnic pastor could be switched to a new or different ministry to his/her ethnicity and thus continue in the provisional status.
- 5.) Can the Presbytery receive Anglo pastors under provisional status? **No.** Provisional status is a tool the presbytery can use to gain ethnic leadership with current ministry experience who will lead the presbytery in outreach to his/her ethnicity.
- 6.) Can cross-culture pastors and lay leadership under provisional status serve on presbyterial boards? **Yes.** Presbyteries should involve ethnic pastors and lay leaders who are under provisional status in the boards and committees of the Presbytery. Not only does this provide a fast way to learn about the church, it also brings new perspectives, ideas and ethnic sensitivity to the presbytery.
- 7.) Is an ethnic group that presents itself to the presbytery always received as a church under provisional status? **No.** When a group has no board or is very small, it should be received as a fellowship. Then the presbyterial board of missions should consult with the pastor and name a steering committee."
- 8.) Can an ethnic fellowship under provisional status be chartered by the presbytery as a provisional church? **No.** If a fellowship under provisional status reaches a level of maturity to warrant chartering as a church, it is organized as a full fellowship CP Church.

9.) Can a cross-culture pastor or church continue in the provisional period for an indefinite amount of time? **No.** At some point the presbytery and/or ethnic pastor and church have to make a decision. After a fair amount of time getting to know each other (the purpose of the provisional status) both parties must commit one way or the other.

10.) If the presbytery is starting a cross-culture new church development project, is it under provisional status? **No.** The provisional status is for accepting existing churches or fellowships. If the presbytery starts a cross-culture ministry, it is not under the provisional status.

11.) When an ethnic pastor has been received under provisional status, should he/she be asked to receive further training and instruction? **Yes.** In some cases this may only involve CP history, doctrine and polity. In other cases there may be a need for other training and instruction. The point is to prepare, as best we can with the resources we have, the pastor to reach his/her ethnicity.

12.) After the two year provisional period does the presbytery have to receive the ethnic pastor and/or congregation? **No.** The two-year term is a minimum amount of time. Provisional status may need to be extended because specific goals in the assimilation process have not been accomplished. To do assimilation well, the process should take no less than two years of intentional activities that are planned and executed by the presbytery.