

**THE PRESBYTERY OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA
COMMITTEE ON PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY
THE REVEREND ROBERT J. TUTTLE, CHAIR
APRIL 29, 2014**

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry recommends the following to the Presbytery of Western North Carolina:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- I. THAT** Benjamin Rhyne Garris, a member of Banner Elk Presbyterian Church and a student at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, be enrolled as a candidate following the required examination by Presbytery.

- II. THAT** Alex Patchin McNeill, a member of Asheville First Presbyterian Church and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, be enrolled as a candidate following the required examination by Presbytery.

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM) is hoping that you will help to identify and encourage people whom you feel that God is calling into the ministry to be a teaching elder. Care for people who are feeling a call to the ministry of Teaching Elder is a shared responsibility of the Session and the Presbytery. The process is described below.

“It is important that those who are to be ordained as teaching elders to receive full preparation for their task under the direction of the presbytery. For this purpose, a presbytery shall enter into covenant relationship with those preparing to become teaching elders and with their sessions and congregations. This relationship shall be divided into the two phases of inquiry and candidacy.” (*Book of Order G-20601*)

Inquiry Phase:

In order to begin the inquiry phase, an applicant must be a member of the sponsoring congregation, shall have been active in the work and worship of that congregation for at least six months, and shall have received the endorsement of their session. This person is then examined by your CPM, and if approved, is enrolled as an Inquirer.

“The purpose of the inquiry phase is to provide an opportunity for the church and those who believe themselves called to ordered ministry as teaching elders to explore that call together so that the presbytery can make an informed decision about the inquirer’s suitability for ordered ministry.” (*G-2.0603*) A person must be an Inquirer for at least one year.

Candidacy Stage:

When an Inquirer believes through their discernment that they are called to the position of teaching elder, they can request that they become a Candidate. The Inquirer will meet with their Session and explain their sense of call. The Session can endorse them and recommend them to the CPM. The CPM, through its discernment, can decide to recommend them to the Presbytery. At the recommendation of the CPM, the Inquirer comes before the presbytery to share part of their faith journey and their sense of call.

The Presbytery can then ask them questions in respect to their sense of call, not questions of content of an ordination exam. They can ask about "their Christian faith, forms of Christian service, and motives for seeking the ministry." (Adopted from a previous *Book of Order*.)

The Purpose of the Candidacy Phase:

"The purpose of the candidacy phase, then, is to provide for the full preparation of persons to serve the church as teaching elders." (*G-2.0604*)

Preparation for a Call:

Before a person may take a call in our presbytery, they must have completed the following:

- Pass the Bible Content Exam.
- Pass the four Senior Ordination Exams (Biblical Exegesis, Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, and Church Polity).
- Complete a two-day battery of assessments administered by a Career & Personal Counseling Center.
- Complete one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education training (CPE).
- Normally complete at least one year at a PCUSA seminary.
- Meet annually with the Committee on Preparation for Ministry.
- Have been an inquirer at least one year and have been a candidate at least one year.

Must be Approved by CPM to Receive a Call:

A Candidate may not begin to enter negotiations about a call as a teaching elder without the approval of the CPM, which has been delegated this task. When a candidate has completed the above, the CPM will examine the candidate and determine if he/she is ready to begin looking for a call, and if so, will "certify the person ready to receive a call." The Candidate will also have their Personal Information Form (PIF) reviewed and approved by CPM. If the person receives a call, the candidate will be examined by the receiving presbytery.

At recent meetings, your Committee on Preparation for Ministry conducted interviews with two Inquirers who asked, with the support of their sponsoring congregations and Sessions, that they be enrolled as Candidates in the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. We recommend them to you today for your approval.

Ben Garris comes with the support of his congregation and the recommendation of the Session of Banner Elk Presbyterian Church. His written call to ministry/faith statement is contained in this packet (see CPM Attachment 1).

Alex McNeill comes with the support of his congregation and the recommendation of the Session of First Presbyterian Church in Asheville. His written call to ministry/faith statement is contained in this packet (see CPM Attachment 2).

FOR YOUR INFORMATION:

- Darren W. Utley, a member of Southminster Presbyterian Church and a Candidate from the Presbytery of Western North Carolina, has accepted a call as Associate Pastor of the Fairfield Presbyterian Church in Mechanicsburg, Virginia.
- Katherine Blankenship, a member of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church and a Candidate from the Presbytery of Western North Carolina, has accepted a call to work in a validated ministry with the Asheville Youth Mission in their Raleigh location.
- William Wilson was enrolled as an Inquirer on January 15, 2014. William is a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Asheville and has been accepted at Princeton Seminary.

CPM ATTACHMENT 1

Statement of Call

Ben Garris

I was born just shy of three months premature weighing two pounds and ten ounces. Doctors did not expect me to live, and once they realized I was going to make it they believed that I would live a handicapped life. God had other plans for me. I knew early on that in my miraculous birth, and healthy life that followed that God specifically had a plan for my life. I grew up going to church with my identical twin brother and I grew up knowing of the love of God and of his son Jesus dying for my sins so that I could have eternal life, but I did not realize there was a difference between knowing about God and personally knowing and experiencing God. In late elementary school one summer I was at a Christian camp and I remember having this fear of not knowing of whether or not I was going to heaven or hell. That summer there came a time when the counselors addressed this fear. In quoting Romans 10:9 they told me that if I confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord and that he had died on the cross for my sins, and I believed in my heart that God raised him from the dead three days later, I would be saved. When I understood this as what I believed I have never doubted my fate again. One could say I experienced the peace that passes all understanding.

In my growing up in the church and in attending church camp I found that I was among the people who were searching for meaning, for answers to difficult questions, and for ways to live in a world full of beauty and harshness. In all my beginning years of going to church I hadn't experienced the value of sacred teaching like I found at camp that summer. The notion of sacred teaching mediates God's grace to people who search for God's goodness in a world oriented toward despair. In that moment where the camp counselor taught me the promises of scripture found in Romans 10:9 I was able to experience God's grace in a way that I had never before while attending church.

When I had turned 18 I was approached by the late Jim King of Banner Elk Presbyterian and asked to serve a remaining year on Session for a member who was moving. I graciously accepted and began the process to become an Elder in the church. I learned a lot about what goes on administratively and what all the church entails outside of Sunday worship, but most of all I found that I loved the opportunity to serve God. I finished out the year I had served while still in college, and a couple years later I was asked to serve a full term on session. I found that my efforts and talents and energy felt most rewarding whenever I was doing something for the church because I felt like I was working for God. Upon graduation from Appalachian State I was still wondering what God really wanted to do with my life, and a college friend of mine introduced me to the idea of military chaplaincy. I started researching and praying about it the summer after I had just graduated in 2011. I felt instant elation and excitement upon researching this unique call of ministry and it was as if everything I discovered about ministry in the military was describing me and my desires and talents.

I have always admired and had the utmost respect for our military men and women; maybe because many of my family members have served in the military or because I was born on the 4th of July but either way I have wished to do my part too. In military chaplaincy not only do I get to serve God but I get to serve our great nation and the men and women who serve us. I feel that it is vitally important for Chaplains to be present in order to show Christ' love and God's presence as peace makers in all situations because God promises to never leave us or forsake us. As a Chaplain I would have the opportunity to provide pastoral care and counseling as well as educate men and women preparing for marriage and walk with those who are grieving the loss of their loved ones.

CPM ATTACHMENT 1

Statement of Call

Ben Garris

God calls us to make disciples of all nations and to share the gospel with everyone and as a Navy Chaplain I feel I will be able to fulfill this calling and best glorify God with my talents. Functioning in a pluralistic environment there is a code of respect and honor toward those practicing all religions or no religion at all. It is my hope that in such an environment I will gain a greater understanding of different cultures and world views that will no doubt allow me to grow in my own faith and understanding of God while remaining true to who I am. In a pluralistic environment it is vital that I know the content of not only my own faith tradition but of others as well so that I may best teach about God's good news.

By God's guidance I have found myself at Union Presbyterian Seminary where over the last two years I have grown under the pressures of rigorous scholasticism and ministry experience both at First Presbyterian Church in Richmond and a summer internship here at Montreat. Courses in biblical languages like Hebrew and Greek have tested my learning beyond regular modes of study; meanwhile, pastoral care, preaching and worship, and teaching ministry have granted tangible experiences with the Church. My summer internship here as a Chaplain to the summer staff has strengthened my interpersonal skills as well as my worship confidence by planning and implementing worship with the Worship Planning Team. At First Presbyterian in Richmond I have been very active as an intern working with their middle school and high school youth. In both circumstances I have been given opportunities to develop lesson plans, lead bible studies and small group discussions, and lead parts of worship.

I continue to see God's guidance and blessing throughout my faith journey. For instance, this January I spent two weeks going through the Navy's Direct Commission Officer Indoctrination Course with long training days from 0400 to 2200 (4:00 AM-10:00PM). This gave me a taste of military life and has only confirmed in my heart the discernment of God's call in my life to military chaplaincy. I have also recently completed all of the standard ordination exams this past February and since then have served as a mentor to a few eighth grade boys who have recently completed confirmation. God continues to work in my life and in the lives of those around me and I am thankful for the opportunity to serve Christ as a vehicle of God's love and grace to the world around me.

I still have much to more to learn and indeed will continue learning long after seminary, but God is gracious and even uses those of us others would have never thought would have ended up in ministry. I am living proof that God has a sense of humor.

CPM ATTACHMENT 2

March 27, 2014

Dear Members of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina,

My name is Alex McNeill, I have been under care with First Presbyterian and the Presbytery of Western North Carolina since 2005, just before I started seminary. I have been a member of First Presbyterian Church since my family moved to Asheville when I was 12. Growing up, my family moved around *a lot*. I was perpetually the new kid, showing up on the first day of school not knowing a soul, or in the middle of the year, shyly standing at the front of the classroom introducing myself to my new peers. However, wherever we were, I always considered whichever Presbyterian Church my family attended my new home away from home. I was the kid to start a game of tag in the fellowship hall, or camp out on the pews during youth lock-ins, or run to help finish the home-baked communion bread after worship. I found my way through an awkward adolescence by first making friends in choir. I participated in one church's first-ever youth handbell choir, merrily ringing my bells in the balcony wearing my maroon choir t-shirt. At First Presbyterian, I joined the three-member youth choir, along with my brother and my soon to be best friend. The three of us stood at the front of the congregation singing our hearts out to fill the voluminous sanctuary.

Not surprisingly, it was at church where I first heard my calling towards ministry. I knew that God wanted me to help church feel like home for everybody. It was through deep involvement with First Presbyterian's youth group, serving as a ruling elder on Session, singing in the youth choir, and participating in this church community that I first understood how my gifts could be used to glorify God. Though I did not know where the Spirit was leading me, my sense of call was nurtured and affirmed by those who had helped shape my faith within the church, both peers and mentors.

I went to college, and later to seminary knowing that I wanted to live and work so God could use me in some way to nurture a faith community, to make real the salvation offered through Christ, and help others to sense the movement of the Holy Spirit in their own lives. What I didn't quite know then, but learned throughout my time at college and in seminary, is that part of my calling has been to work so that all God's people might be able to find a place at Jesus's table. Growing up, I didn't know that many people felt left out or abandoned by their faith communities. In college I met so many people for whom that was true, and I couldn't stand by when they also felt abandoned by God. I learned that one of my gifts is to help to heal those wounds, and to repair a shattered sense of belonging in Christian communities with the possibilities for reconciliation. Quite without realizing it, I had become an evangelist. I began to preach the Gospel of God's love for all of creation, and the new life promised by dropping our nets and going to follow Christ's example.

It was at a meeting of my Committee for the Preparation of Ministry where it was first suggested by one of the members that I might be called to ministry specifically with gay and lesbian community. This question has rested on my heart since. I admit that there have been times when I wanted to run away from my calling, and when I prayed for a well traveled path. For the past 9 years since I became an inquirer for ministry in the Presbytery of Western North Carolina, I have felt unwavering in my sense of call to preach, teach, and live the Gospel of Jesus Christ with and for a community. For many years I could not quite name how that calling would be best used. After

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seminary I continued to gather skills for ministry at a faith-based non-profit, helping to teach and train people of faith to welcome all in their churches, and by preaching and writing on God's Word in the world and in Scripture. I had faith that God was preparing me to live out my call in a particular way, though I could not articulate what it would be. This is the challenge of being on a path still in formation. I could only see a few steps ahead of me, not where it would end up. However, I have a confession. I had a hard time regularly attending church for a few years since seminary. You see, somewhere along the way, how I experienced my body started to shift. I started to feel that familiar tug of a call, not towards a new profession, but towards a new gender. I was born female but for the longest time, using the word 'woman' to describe myself felt like clothes that just didn't fit right. For years I tried to tug at the fabric of femininity to adjust it to fit me, but try as I might I just ended up feeling uncomfortable. I spent the better part of seminary and the years following it trying to ignore this call, and downplay its significance. Instead as I felt less and less at home in my body, church started to feel less and less like home too.

I really started noticing it during hymns. At first I would pretend my voice was that of a choirboy, high pitched and clear. But after awhile I didn't want to sing any more, and during church I tried to shrink away, hiding behind the veil I had put up between God and myself. Finally, to avoid that feeling, I stopped going to church. Eventually, the feeling of having a veil between God and myself expanded to include everyone else. I had shrunk so far back, that I didn't feel comfortable anywhere.

When I was tired of running away from God's call I decided to try a leap of faith. After spending several years considering the possibilities, several months in therapy, and many many prayers, I found the courage to begin medically transitioning my body from female to male. Two years ago, under a doctor's supervision, I began a weekly injection of testosterone, which slowly begins to change my body's shape and lowers my voice. It doesn't happen all at once, but over the course of about a year, and then is maintained throughout one's lifetime.

As soon as my voice started dropping, I noticed that I started doing something I hadn't done in a long time, singing. I also desired to do something I hadn't done in an even longer time...return to regularly attending church. I didn't just want to sing, I wanted to sing hymns. I didn't just want to go somewhere, I wanted to go to church. And finally, I felt reconnected to my call to be ordained. It's amazing how much my discomfort in my own skin had affected how I felt in the pulpit, leading worship, and nurturing congregants through their own faith journeys. The minute I started feeling like myself again, and truly the person I felt God called me to be, I was able to see my calling to ministry as clearly as it was when I first began this process. It didn't feel like I was someone different, it felt like I was finally becoming myself. It's funny what happens when you stop hiding from God and let God back at the potter's wheel. My hope is that when we see each other the mechanics of the process seem less important than the fact that I am living out God's call for me in the world.

I now ask your approval to become a candidate in the Presbyterian Church, USA because I have finally come to a clearing in my path. I know the journey to follow my calling is a life-long one, but I can finally see how Christ is asking me to use my gifts for ministry in His church.

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In August, I accepted a position as the executive director of More Light Presbyterians, a non-profit dedicated towards helping all feel included within the Presbyterian Church, USA. The day I received the job offer, I cried tears of joy and thanksgiving to God that I could live out my calling to ministry in my vocation. I feel particularly blessed that I have the opportunity to preach and teach the Word in local congregations and in my writing and to nurture a community in living out its calling and service to Christ. What I have discerned in the years since the question was first posed by a member of my CPM is that my ministry has particular resonance by many in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community, the truest expression of my calling is to strengthen the discipleship of the whole people of God. I believe that Christ is calling me to live out my gifts for ministry through ordained service to the PC(USA).

I come to you in a clearing after a long journey on a path that sometimes felt barely visible in the underbrush. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue to discern God's will for my life with the blessing and guidance of the Session of First Presbyterian Church and the Committee for the Preparation for Ministry of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. Thank you for journeying with me these past nine years, for shining a light if the path got hard to follow, and for believing with me that no matter what, I was being led by Christ to this place.

In faith,

Alex Patchin McNeill