

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT BEST PRACTICES

Purpose of Psychological Assessments

Psychological assessments are used by Committees on Ministry to supplement written materials, interviews, reference letters and other sources in the discernment process with Members in Discernment, those with Lay Ministerial Standing, and other authorized ministers who are supported by and accountable to the Committee on Ministry. These assessments are in-depth and integrated studies of a person's emotional and psychological make-up that are performed by professional career counselors. The report from the assessment provides the Committee on Ministry with information from an external neutral party with expertise in the field. A psychological assessment is one tool that should be part of the deep discernment by the committee in discerning an individual's fitness for ministry.

Psychological assessments and their resultant reports can increase self-awareness and understanding of strengths, limitations, vulnerabilities, and potential pitfalls in the practice of ministry. The psychological assessment uncovers interests, aptitudes and skills that can assist the one being assessed in gaining realistic perceptions of ministry and various ministry contexts. Used in this way, the psychological assessment is a discernment tool that aids in determining a fit with ministry setting(s) to which they are feeling called. Initiating these assessments early in the discernment process establishes a foundation for healthy, life-long ministry practices, such as ongoing psychological counseling, receiving critique from others, personal growth and spiritual formation.

Committees on Ministry can use the reports, alongside the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers and the UCC Ministerial Code, to build individualized plans of personal and professional development (Preparation and Formation Plans for Members in Discernment; Programs of Growth in cases of Fitness Reviews).

The psychological assessment is also appropriate anytime an authorized minister is in discernment or considering a career change. In these cases, the committee on Ministry may or may not be involved with the assessment process and they may or may not receive the report, depending on whether the minister initiates the assessment under the recommendation of the Committee on Ministry or on their own.

Choosing a Provider¹

The Committee on Ministry will specify the provider of the psychological assessment. It is helpful for a Committee on Ministry to contract with only one or two providers so that the reports received are similar in style and structure across all candidates. When choosing a provider, a Committee on Ministry will want to make sure the provider is sensitive to the values of the United Church of Christ, and that the provider is able to furnish references from other judicatories, upon request.

Attributes to evaluate when selecting a provider include, but are not limited to:

- **Experience working with those in ministry:**
 - ▼ experience in engaging ministers and Members in Discernment or those in formation for ministry in psychological assessments;
 - ▼ experience assessing both ministers and Members in Discernment, with the difference clearly reflected in the written report;
 - ▼ understanding how the personality and psychological make-up of a minister affects the life of a congregation or ministry setting;
 - ▼ experience with ministers in non-parish settings, such as health-care chaplains, military chaplains, judicatory ministers, or community-based ministers.

- **Level of engagement with the candidate:**
 - ▼ the process of the assessment;
 - ▼ whether and how the evaluation is shared with the subject;
 - ▼ type of follow-up provided to the subject of the assessment.

- **Level of engagement with judicatory ministers and Committees on Ministry:**
 - ▼ communication with those for whom the reports of the assessments are prepared;
 - ▼ dialogue about the assessment tools that are used;
 - ▼ information included in the final report;
 - ▼ sample of a report;
 - ▼ availability for follow-up conversations with appropriate Associate or Conference staff and/or Committee on Ministry members.

- **Accreditation:**
 - ▼ if part of a larger network, the process for accreditation in that network;
 - ▼ counselors' certifications, education and specialized training;
 - ▼ multiple staff who perform assessments.

¹ Psychological/Career Evaluation Center Task Force, New Jersey Association, United Church of Christ.

- **Values of the United Church of Christ and cross-cultural competence:**
 - ▼ demonstrated competence working with, and sensitivity toward, persons of color, and/or those from particular racial or ethnic communities, LGBTQ and gender non-binary persons, persons living with disabilities, chronic disease, or mental health concerns, or anyone else without societally-assigned privilege.

- **Logistical concerns:**
 - ▼ comfort receiving payment from multiple entities for the same assessment;
 - ▼ scale of cost, and the effect of sliding-scale payment on the amount of information in the report;
 - ▼ location, accessibility to public transit, accommodations for persons with disabilities, and the ability to work with people for whom English is a second language;
 - ▼ timing and schedule for assessments (*i.e.*, one day, two days, weekday times only, evenings, weekends);
 - ▼ process for registering with the provider, and the lead time needed to schedule evaluation;
 - ▼ timing for receiving the written report following the evaluation.

Assessment Process

It is appropriate to prepare the one being assessed by giving them an information sheet about the process; a sample information sheet for Members in Discernment is included at the end of this article.

A psychological assessment typically involves (1) inventories taken prior to the actual assessment day(s), (2) one-on-one and/or group sessions with the assessor over one to three days, and (3) a follow-up session when the assessor presents the minister or Member in Discernment being assessed with an overview of the key themes in the report. The one being assessed is then given a chance to reflect on the report.

Various inventories may be used to identify an individual's understanding of their history, psychological patterns, personality styles, skills, interests, reactions to various pastoral roles, and academic or intellectual strength. Commonly employed inventories include, but are not limited to:²

- Autobiographical and medical history, which provide a context for understanding the results of other inventories;

² Midwest Ministry Development Service, "What to Expect from a Candidate Assessment," <https://www.uccfiles.com/docs/What-to-Expect-from-a-Candidate-Assessment-Midwest-Min-Devel-Srvcs-2019.doc>

- Psychological Inventories, such as the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2)* and *Sentence Completion*, which identify both positive and negative psychological features, symptoms, and factors such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem, health concerns, interpersonal difficulties, anger management, resilience, concern for others, responsibility, willingness to acknowledge positives and negatives, capacity for self-reflection, and unusual thought patterns;
- Personality style inventories, such as the *Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (Step II)*, and the *Wagner Enneagram Personality Style Scales*, which identify a preferred manner of operating in the world, natural strengths and corresponding weaknesses;
- Vocational inventories, such as *Strong Interest Inventory*, *Campbell Interest and Skill Survey*, *Skills and Satisfaction Inventory*, *Ministry Role Identification Profile*, which identify a candidate's interests in a wide variety of occupations, leadership, learning contexts, skills and ministerial roles. Other inventories may allow reflection on various situations found in ministry as well as the candidate's desire to maintain a program of self-care.

Receiving and Interpreting the Report

The Psychological Assessment may be used by the Committee on Ministry as a discernment tool in several processes, including, but not limited to, the Member in Discernment process, an application for authorization in the UCC, and a program of growth following Fitness Review. The report becomes part of the ministerial file and is the property of the United Church of Christ, and, thus, the one being assessed must release it to the attention of **Title** rather than name, (e.g., Associate Conference Minister, Chair of the Committee on Ministry). A Sample Release of Report Form can be found on page 10 of this article.

It is typical for the report to include summaries of the process, inventories used, counseling session(s), group work, and the response of the person being assessed. A helpful report will include areas of strength and growth, with recommended courses of action as needed.

Upon receipt of the report, the members of the Committee on Ministry read the entire report, noting themes or issues of concern. If there are any confusing or unclear portions within the report, it is appropriate for the Associate Conference Minister or Chair of the Committee on Ministry to contact the counselor directly, as specified in the contract with the provider.

The Committee on Ministry meets with the subject of the assessment regarding their response to the assessment and report, including the assessor's recommendations, as well as areas of concern noted by members of the Committee on Ministry upon reading the report. As the individual responds to the process and the report, the members of the Committee on Ministry listen for responses that indicate preparation and fitness for ministry including: (1) integration of the psychological assessment process and report with the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers and the UCC Ministerial Code, (2) reaction to the authority of both the Committee on

Ministry and the assessor, and (3) willingness to live into covenantal partnership with the wider church.

It is important that the members of the Committee on Ministry address concerns of bias on the part of the assessor toward the one being assessed. If bias is named or suspected, it is appropriate for the Committee on Ministry to follow up with the assessor.

In the discernment process, the members of the Committee on Ministry integrate the information from the report with their own sense of the candidate and the candidate's history. Employing the Marks of Faithful and Effective Ministers and the UCC Ministerial Code as guides, members of the Committee on Ministry or a subcommittee can develop, with the candidate, a program of professional formation or growth.

Payment

The Committee on Ministry, in conjunction with the Association Council or Board, determines how the cost will be covered. For Members in Discernment, it is common for the cost to be divided into thirds, with equal payment coming from the three primary covenantal partners in the discernment of a Member in Discernment's call to ministry: (1) the Association (or Conference acting as an Association), (2) the Local Church of membership, and (3) the Member in Discernment. For other processes for which an assessment is required or voluntarily requested, the payment is to be determined by the Committee on Ministry in accordance with Association by-laws.

Resources

Hackenberg, Rachael, in *COMma*, May 2016, https://www.ucc.org/may_2016.

“Sample Candidate Report,” LeaderWise, Mar 2019 <https://www.uccfiles.com/docs/Sample-Candidate-Report-LeaderWise-March-2019.docx>

“Sample Two-Day Candidate Program Report,” Midwest Ministry Development Services, 2019 <https://www.uccfiles.com/docs/Sample-Candidate-WX-Report-Midwest-Min-Devel-Srves-2019.docx>

Sample Information Form for the Psychological Assessment³

For those seeking authorization for ministry

The psychological assessment is a series of psychological and social inventories taken by a ministry candidate, followed by interviews conducted by qualified professionals. The resulting report provides the candidate and the Committee on Ministry with insight into areas where personal growth is needed, challenges and gifts for ministry, and the alignment between strengths, goals, and the work of ministry.

Timing. Since it often takes significant time to be placed on the assessor's schedule and have the report received by the committee, the candidate must initiate the assessment as soon as possible after being received as a Member in Discernment. This provides maximum opportunity for both the candidate and the members of the Committee on Ministry to embrace and respond to the information provided. The assessment is required before the Member in Discernment may be seen for an ordination interview.

Locations / agencies. The assessment requires a day (or portions of several days), plus written work prepared by you in advance. The agency(ies) available to you is (are):

[Agency Title]

[Agency Address]

[Agency Phone]

[contact person]

[email address]

[website]

Financial support. Payment is divided in three equal portions to be paid by (a) the Member in Discernment, (b) the Member in Discernment's Local Church of membership, _____, and (c) the _____ Association of which the Local Church and Member in Discernment are a part. The Member in Discernment must contact their Local Church of membership and Association to request and arrange for payment. Associations are generally aware and prepared to make this contribution upon request; a candidate may want to discuss the anticipated financial contribution with the Local Church of membership at the time they request becoming a Member in Discernment in that church. In the case that a church is unable to afford this cost, the Committee on Ministry negotiates the portion of payment from the other two partners, being mindful of the financial burden of the one being assessed.

³ Adapted from Committee On Ministry, Section A, Northern California Nevada Conference, United Church of Christ
<https://ncnc.dreamhosters.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Vocational-Psychological-Assessment-Guidelines-1.pdf>.

Receipt and Maintenance of Report. Following review of the draft report by the one being assessed, they must sign a release so that a final copy of the report will be forwarded to the appropriate Association representative. The report becomes the property of the United Church of Christ and will be placed in the Member in Discernment’s ministerial file. The content of the report will be available to and discussed by the full Committee on Ministry and it may be shared with the appropriate Association or Conference Staff as well as other persons who need to know the information in the report.

Sample Release of Report⁴

The _____ Association/Conference Committee on Ministry is charged, on behalf of the United Church of Christ, with clarifying and testing the call of persons who feel called to ordained ministry. This is done so that both the one feeling called and the Church are satisfied that the person seeking ordained status will be well suited to exercise the functions of that title and position.

A variety of requirements and procedures are used to fulfill this responsibility. One such requirement is having an evaluation done by an approved psychological assessor during the first year of the discernment process. It is important for both the candidate and the Committee on Ministry to understand the implications of the report. Therefore, the Committee on Ministry requires each candidate to sign the following statement:

“I agree to release my psychological assessment report to the United Church of Christ, to the attention of _____ (Title/Role) of the _____ Association Committee on Ministry. I acknowledge that this report becomes the property of the United Church of Christ and will be placed in my Member in Discernment file. I further understand that the content of the report will be available to and discussed by the full Committee on Ministry and it may be shared with the appropriate Association or Conference Staff, as well as other persons who need to know the information in the report.”

Signature

Date

⁴ Adapted from NJ Association MID Process and Requirements Appendix D: Release of Career Counseling Report https://www.njassociation.com/uploads/2/4/2/6/24268563/appendix_d_2015w.docx