

Good morning,

I speak on behalf of the North Carolina Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, a group of 54 individuals, lay and clergy, whose role is to walk alongside candidates in our conference who are seeking to become ordained as elders or deacons. Our work also includes care of the 8 district committees whose work is to certify candidates for ministry, and equip local pastors among other duties.

As I offer this report on behalf of the Board of Ordained Ministry this morning, you will see on the screens images of candidates who were commissioned or ordained in the previous two years. While we were grateful for the opportunity to gather with a smaller group of people for a service of ordination in 2021, these individuals missed the opportunity to be celebrated by the entirety of the Annual Conference. I hope that as you see their faces you will give thanks for them and their ministry.

One of the things that our Board of Ordained Ministry talks about fairly frequently is the self-awareness of candidates who come before the Board. In fact, one of our denominational leaders noted that the self-awareness of candidates is one of the greatest challenges to navigate for boards of ordained ministry across our connection. How candidates see themselves, how they show up in a room, how they are perceived and received by other people. A greater self-awareness helps candidates more faithfully care for and connect with the people God sends them to serve. Through mentoring, psychological evaluations, through feedback from the Board, through the Residency in Ordained Ministry Program, those who come alongside candidates are consistently inviting them to know themselves and the ways they show up in the world more deeply.

To be honest, gaining greater self-awareness can be painful. My spouse insinuated during a recent conversation that I can be snippy and condescending when I think I'm right. My first reaction to that feedback was not "thank you." It was more a mix of defensiveness, shame and self-righteousness. An unholy trinity that makes hearing another person and engaging in more loving ways rather prohibitive.

Having a better sense of who we are, and what it is like for others to interact with us can be difficult. This is true not only for individuals, but for systems, for organizations.

As much as the Board, and our District Committees invite deeper self-awareness of candidates, we are also called to engage in this same work ourselves, learning more about what it is like to engage with us, and where we might be more intentional, more loving in our work.

To that end, our Board has spent the past few years seeking after greater self-awareness, through feedback from candidates, through engagement with an outside consultant, and through shared conversation across our team. What is it like for candidates to interact with our Board of Ordained Ministry? Where does bias live in our system? What might we change or hope to improve as we come alongside and credential candidates for licensing and ordination?

Today I would like to highlight a few steps we are taking as we seek to live into these questions:

In partnering with a consultant over the past year, we have worked to place a lens of anti-racism and equity over our practices and engagement with candidates. We heard from former candidates about

their experiences with the Board, as well as Board members, who shared what it is like to serve on this team.

One of the pieces of feedback we received from candidates is that they would like to gain greater clarity around what the Board hopes to see and hear from them, within written work and interviews. To that end, we have created an assessment guide that Board members utilized this past year in their cycle of interviews. This guide seeks to name and standardize what the Board hopes to see and hear from candidates who are in the process toward commissioning and ordination. For instance, when a candidate is seeking to be commissioned, Is there evidence of their understanding related to the Wesleyan way of salvation, either in their written work or in their oral interview? How could this area be strengthened? What resources might help in that strengthening? Having piloted the guide last year, we plan to share it with candidates who are preparing for interviews this next year. We are also in the process of creating guides for our District Committees.

Another step toward greater clarity is related to the forms and paperwork that must be submitted as candidates move through the process. Missed deadlines and related delays have been a frustration for candidates. The Office of Clergy Life has created a new platform on the conference website, which details for each candidate which forms have been submitted, and which are still outstanding. Candidates can see if their medical report is up to date, for instance, and can pull the form from the website in order to complete and submit. A green checkmark means the form is submitted. A red x means it is missing. We hope that this will give candidates greater autonomy, and deep sense of relief when those green check marks are lined up in all their glory. Along with this website, the Office of Clergy Life will send regular reminders related to paperwork deadlines.

Currently, a sub-team is meeting to evaluate our psychological assessments and the ways that we can develop greater awareness of the biases that can live within something that seems as innocuous and standard as a psychological assessment. We are also asking how these evaluations might move beyond simply a risk mitigator, and how they could also offer greater self-awareness to candidates, and further encourage access to mental health resources.

Moving forward we will continue to gather data related to approvals and delays as candidates move through the ordination process, working with conference staff to create a platform that can more quickly compute this information each year. If a particular demographic is consistently being delayed, what might be the reason? How can we better support candidates in that category? Are we bumping into hidden biases as we interact with these candidates? Data tells a story and we want to listen and adapt as we pay attention to these stories.

As a Board and as District Committees throughout our Conference, we are committed to shared learning and shared language as it relates to equity and anti-racism. To that end, anyone who serves on the Board or a district committee will be required to attend "Changing the Lens," a learning opportunity from the Office of Race Equity and Justice Ministries. This is a course that invites us to investigate our own bias and how it shows up in our lives and our shared work. Continuing education events will take place on a yearly basis for those who are serving on either the conference or district committees.

While we are hopeful about the next steps that have been outlined today, we realize that there is no finish line. There is no arrival point for creating and upholding systems that are equitable. It is always on-going work. Work that requires experimentation, flexibility, self-awareness, forgiveness, and prayer. We are grateful for your partnership in all of these things.

I would like to close with a word of deep gratitude. Thank you to our candidates-for sharing your experiences, in your written work, in your interviews, allowing us to witness your hope, your passion for ministry, inviting us to celebrate alongside you as the Spirit is moving in your communities. Thank

you for reminding us of the beauty and goodness of God within our United Methodist Church. Thank you especially to those who were willing to offer feedback over the past few years, gracefully inviting the Board to learn more about itself.

A special word of gratitude to those of you who wrote papers and engaged in interviews in the midst of the pandemic. If, over the past two years, you interviewed for certification as a candidate or for licensing with a district committee; or for Day of Discernment, Commissioning or Ordination with the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, please stand so that we can thank you and bless you for meeting that challenge on zoom.

Finally, I am especially grateful to serve alongside our Board of Ordained Ministry team members, dCOM members from our 8 districts, the Rev. Heidi Seifert and the Rev. Beth Hood in the Office of Clergy Life. Thank you for participating in our work with the holy trinity of open-handedness, curiosity and love.

This concludes our report.