

COMS Case Studies - 2018

Case 1: Human Sexuality

Karen Waters* is a 30-year-old chaplain serving at a hospital. Karen holds an M.Div. from Fuller Theological Seminary, which she earned about four years ago. She has been a member of a Covenant church for about five years and has applied for a first-time Ministry License because she desires to be credentialed in the Covenant. In the course of the COMS interview, Karen explained that she personally holds a dissenting view on the issue of human sexuality. However, she was able to articulate the ECC position and promised that she would not cause division within the church by promoting her private opinion. In its deliberations, the COMS members disagreed about how best to proceed with Karen. Some did not wish to grant the license, while others wanted to give Karen a chance to re-write her paper and do some additional reading and reflection. After consultation with the superintendent, the COMS agreed to invite Karen to do a re-write, to meet with a mentor, and re-interview with some COMS members in one month. She agreed to do that. The second interview went well, and the COMS felt comfortable approving Karen for the Ministry License.

Ordered Ministry comments:

- In this case study, the COMS followed Standard #5 as outlined in the “Protocol of Care” document.
- The COMS is free to set the recall interview according to its own schedule and discernment. The COMS in this example set it for one month in the future, but many COMS would not be able to do it until the next round of interviews, about six months in the future.
- When a COMS has discerned that it is willing to approve a license for a candidate who holds a dissenting position, it should specifically go over expectations with the candidate. This means that the COMS should explain to the candidate what it means to live and serve within the ECC position. For example, when the candidate dissents on human sexuality, the COMS should go over the Human Sexuality Guidelines for Covenant Ministers (what a minister may do and may not do). Similarly, when a candidate dissents on baptism, the COMS should go over the ECC Policy on Baptism and clarify expectations.

Case 2: Women in Ministry

Frank Johnson* (mid-40s) is a pastor of a 60+-year old ECC congregation. He had been disciplined for years in Covenant churches in his conference and had had his call to ministry confirmed in Covenant churches, first through internships, and finally through a call to pastoral ministry. The church Frank serves is quite theologically conservative, which aligns well with Frank’s personal theology. Although Frank and the church identify themselves as deeply Covenant, they did not agree with the ECC position which affirms women in all levels of pastoral leadership. Frank identified as a complementarian on the issue and stated that he would support women in certain levels of church leadership, but not all. Frank was respectful in his attitude, but wondered why he could not be ordained because “Covenant freedom” should give him the right to do so.

Frank was approved for a license by the COMS, but told that he needed to do some personal work on the issue of women in ministry. Frank applied for ordination three separate times. The first two times he was not passed by the COMS because they were not satisfied that he could adequately represent the ECC position on women in ministry while holding a dissenting view. Although discouraged, Frank did not abandon the process. He had multiple meetings with the superintendent to

*names have been changed

process the issue, grow in his understanding, and ask questions. On his third attempt, the COMS was satisfied with Frank's answers on the issue and his ability to represent the ECC position.

Ordered Ministry comments:

- Note that in this case study, the candidate had regular meetings with the superintendent over the course of years. It was not a quick process, and required a significant investment of time.
- Follow-up and commitment to the process was required by both parties (candidate and conference staff). Mutual respect and trust were required for this to be successful. The COMS abided by Standards #1 and #3 in the "Protocol of Care" document.

Case 3: Baptism

Carlos Hernandez* is a 51-year old solo pastor of a Spanish-speaking Covenant church. He holds a Master's from Fuller Theological Seminary. He comes from an Assemblies of God background and has been in the ECC for about two years. He is not fluent in English. Carlos passed his COMS interview for a Ministry License and has held it for about two years. His COMS interview was conducted in Spanish. On his most recent license renewal application, Carlos did not check the box stating that he agreed with the ECC's position on baptism. When asked about it, he said that he could no longer check that box, nor did he agree to abide by the ECC's Policy on Baptism. He unequivocally stated that he would not baptize infants. Spanish-speaking members of the COMS and conference staff talked with Carlos and met with him to process this apparent change of position. These colleagues attempted to explain the ECC position clearly, and to give Carlos the chance to ask questions and seek clarity. In the end, after several months, Carlos still refused to check the box and therefore his license was not renewed.

Ordered Ministry comments:

- If a candidate who is in dissent on an ECC position does not speak English well, it is very important to have ECC colleague(s) who can assist in translation. If at all possible, COMS should recruit members that are ethnically and culturally diverse. It is not only language that is the issue, it is awareness of cultural issues. In this case, it was essential that other Hispanic Covenant ministers be the ones to follow up with Carlos. See Standard #2 in the "Protocol of Care" document.
- COMS must strive to be culturally sensitive. However, ECC guidelines and policies apply to all credentialed clergy, and the standards must be applied fairly. See Standard #8 in the "Protocol of Care."
- It is the expectation of the Ordered Ministry that every credentialed person sign the ECC Policy on Baptism.
- In this case, the COMS followed Standard #5 in the "Protocol of Care" and the result of the discernment was that the license was not renewed.

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