

# PCUSA STANDARD ORDINATION EXAMINATIONS STUDENT HANDBOOK

## INTRODUCTION

This Handbook is designed to offer basic information for students preparing to take the PCUSA Standard (Senior) Ordination Examinations. While the information contained in the Handbook is certainly not definitive, it is our hope that it will answer basic questions. Perhaps, it will even help ease the natural anxiety many students experience when faced with preparing for the examinations. We are reminded of the story of a country doctor whose near-term pregnant patient was exceedingly worried about labor and delivery. The doctor invited her to take a short ride in his car, and proceeded to drive past a grade school. There, on the playground were dozens of small children at recess. The doctor turned to his patient, “See those kids?” he asked, “Well, they all got here the same way.”

When we consider all who have become ordained clergy in the last decades, we know it is indeed possible to be successful when taking the examinations. Although the process may seem daunting, many before us have found it can be done.

The Standard (Senior) Ordination Examinations are given two times each year for all students seeking ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Additionally, the Bible Content Examination is administered once a year. The Bible Content Examination is designed to be taken early in a student’s seminary process in order to assess basic Biblical knowledge. The four Standard Ordination Examinations are created to assess students’ knowledge in Bible Exegesis, Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, and Church Polity. The *Book of Order* stipulates that these four examinations may be taken by inquirers or candidates after completion of two full years of theological education and shall only be taken upon approval by the Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

The Standard Ordination Exams consist of essay questions that are created by the Office of Examination Services at the Presbyterian Center in Louisville. They are proctored by an official at each theological institution, and read (graded) by representatives from each presbytery. No reader is allowed to grade an exam from a student under care of the reader's own presbytery, and any identifying information concerning the student (name, age, institution, race/ethnicity, etc.) is absent. Because these exams are designed to test a candidate's readiness for ministry, copies of the graded exams, including reader comments, are sent to the candidate's presbytery committee for evaluation. The exams are administered just prior to the beginning of each semester – typically the final weekends of August and January.

The 2008 examinations will be held as follows: (See page 4 for registration information.)

Week of December 23, 2007	Bible Exegesis books released (see page 11)
January 25-26, 2008	Spring Ordination Exams (Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, Presbyterian Polity)
January 31, 2008	Open Book Bible Exegesis portion of the Ordination Exams due
February 1, 2008	Bible Content Examination
Week of July 21, 2008	Bible Exegesis books released
August 22-23, 2008	Fall Ordination Exams (Theological Competence, Worship and Sacraments, Presbyterian Polity)
August 28, 2008	Open Book Bible Exegesis portion of the Ordination Exams due.

The schedule is as follows:

Friday	8:30 – 8:55 a.m.	Instructions
	9:00 a.m. – noon	Theological Competence Exam
	1:15 – 1:30 p.m.	Instructions
	1:30 – 4:30 p.m.	Worship & Sacraments Exam
Saturday	8:40 – 9:00 a.m.	Instructions
	9:00 a.m. – noon	Church Polity Exam

	12:15 – 12:30 pm	Instructions and announcement of Biblical Exegesis passages
Thursday	9:00 a.m.	Exegesis papers due to proctor

Winter exam grades are released March 24th, and fall exam grades are released October 27<sup>th</sup>.

## **THE BIBLE CONTENT EXAMINATION**

In many ways, taking the Bible Content Examination is a different experience than sitting for the other four Standard Ordination Examinations. That being the case, we will offer just a brief overview in this handbook. The Bible Content Exam tests a student’s basic knowledge of the content of the Bible. It is offered only once a year. As the PCUSA website information on ordination exams states: “The Bible Content examination is intended to assess one’s knowledge of stories, themes, and pertinent passages in the Old and New Testaments.” It is ordinarily taken in the first year of seminary and contains 100 multiple-choice questions about the Bible (NRSV). The test is graded electronically, and it is pass/fail (to pass, you must have 70 or more correct answers). Because it is a multiple-choice examination, preparation for the Bible Content exam is fairly cut and dried. Strategies for preparation include:

- A visit to the Office of Student Affairs, where a binder of retired exams may be purchased for \$10. The binder also includes some preparation advice.
- A website has also been developed by a former seminary student (see *Links*, below). The site contains retired tests, and has the advantage of a self-testing feature.
- Although being tested on the entire Bible sounds particularly daunting, many students report that test questions have a tendency to repeat themselves from year to year. It is helpful to become familiar with them. Of course, nothing replaces a thorough knowledge of the Bible, but testing yourself using retired tests goes a

long way toward success.

While taking the Bible Content exam during the first year of seminary may be difficult for some, the knowledge gained in preparation is undeniably helpful for future studies.

Secure an application form from your presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry, or from the PCUSA website. Forms and a fee of \$85 are sent to the address on the form. **It must be postmarked no later than December 7, 2007.** PCUSA Inquirers/Candidates may apply by **November 15, 2007 and receive a discount.** The early registration cost is \$70. A written confirmation is sent to each applicant. The Bible Content Examination will be offered February 1, 2008. It is given in the McGaw Common Room, beginning at 10:00 a.m. Please arrive no later than 9:30 a.m. for instructions. A continental breakfast will be provided. The exam is two hours long. Students are notified by email that grades may be picked up in person in the Office of Student Affairs.

*Links:*

<http://www.whitneyhq.com/biblecontent>

<http://www.pcusa.org/exams/bible.htm>

## THE STANDARD ORDINATION EXAMINATIONS

### FIRST STEPS

Your presbytery of care determines who is ready to write senior ordination exams, and an official form must be signed in order to register. Allow yourself plenty of time to have the authorization form signed. **The CPM chairperson or liaison must sign the authorization and date it.** The Presbytery CPM chairperson has copies of the form, or you may obtain a form from the PCUSA website. The assumption is that you will write **all four** exams at once. If the Presbytery allows you to write less than all four exams on the first attempt, explicit **written permission** must accompany the authorization form. Check the form to be sure it is complete

and accurate, include the appropriate fees, and submit it on time to the General Assembly offices in Louisville, Kentucky. As of this writing, there is a fee of \$85 per exams (including retakes).

However, there is a discount for early registration (\$70 per exam).

Early Registration deadline for January 2008 exams is November 16, 2007

**Final** Registration deadline for January 2008 exams is December 27, 2007

Early Registration deadline for August 2008 exams is June 16, 2008

**Final** Registration deadline for August 2008 exams is July 15, 2008

Again, **do not wait too long** to get going on the registration process. Contact your CPM liaison well in advance to get the process rolling.

*Links:*

<http://www.pcusa.org/exams/forms.htm>

### TAKING THE EXAMS AT MCCORMICK

Candidates sitting for exams at McCormick will take them in the Language Resource and Writing Center. A continental breakfast is provided on each day of the exams. You may use the computers in the Resource Center, bring your own laptop, or write by hand (exams written in pencil will not be graded). If you bring your own laptop, it is a good idea to arrive early so that you can set up and test your computer. Let the proctor know ahead of time if you will be bringing your own equipment. There is no need to bring a printer, because the common Resource Center printer will be used. With that in mind, make sure you factor in printing time when taking the exams. Extra time for printing is not allowed.

Here are important things to remember:

- Bring the authorization sheet that has been mailed to you from the PCUSA

- Don't forget clean, unmarked copies of the current *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions*
- Arrive by at least 8:30 a.m. for an orientation session
- You will be asked to include your ID number on each and every sheet of paper you submit! This number is the only way your exams are identified – please do not write your name on anything
- Remember to number each page
- Double space and use 12-point font size

If you have special needs, contact your presbytery of care to arrange for an appropriate alternative setting for taking the examinations.

#### HOW THE EXAMS ARE GRADED

Presbyteries elect graders who read the exams. These readers are ministers and laypersons deemed competent judges of readiness for ministry. Readers gather in groups for grading exams, and two readers grade each exam. If there is disagreement, a third reader (unaware of the previous reader's decisions) grades the exam. The papers are scored as follows:

- 5 – Outstanding
- 4 – Very Good
- 3 – Adequate
- 2 – Less than Adequate
- 1 – Poor
- 0 – Nothing Written on Exam Question.

A 3 or above is considered Satisfactory. A 2 or below is considered Unsatisfactory, and the exam must be retaken.

When grades are released, they are posted outside the proctor's office. Next to your ID number you will see a list of each exam and a "S" or "U." The exams themselves, with reader comments, arrive by mail within a couple of weeks.

### PREPARING FOR THE EXAMS

Ordination exams are designed to test a candidate's readiness for ministry. The format of the exams reveals the intent behind them: reality-based essay questions. In other words, it's not about how much information you can remember; it's about how you apply what you've learned in class to practical situations faced by everyone in ministry. How you approach such a situation shows the reader how ready you are for ministry. Ordination exams differ from seminary exams. In seminary, you are tested on academic knowledge, but ordination exams place emphasis on how Reformed tradition and Presbyterian practices are applied in ministry situations. The ordination exams also differ from situations you may have encountered with your presbytery committee. The Committee on Preparation for Ministry is interested in exploring the content of a particular candidate's theological perspective, which is not taken into consideration by exam readers.

Questions posed on the ordination exams call for a theologically or ecclesiastically based response. They also call for a pastoral response. The bottom line is, as Lesley Davies, Executive Secretary of the Presbyteries' Committee Procedures for Senior Ordination Examinations notes: "Would the reader want this person to be their mother's pastor?" It is possible to go too far in this direction, however. As Presbyterians, we value a balanced approach! Sensitive pastoral responses must be backed up by solid theological and ecclesiastical information. From this standpoint it may be argued that completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), as well as a year of field studies is good preparation for taking the exams. As no two candidate's

schedules or personal journeys are the same, it is very much a decision that rests with the candidate, guided by their presbytery committee.

Begin by obtaining two copies of the current *Book of Order*: one copy for use in preparation, and one clean, unmarked copy for the examinations. You will also need a current, clean, unmarked copy of the *Book of Confessions*. There is an excellent study edition of the *Book of Confessions*, which is quite useful for preparation, but this edition is not allowed for use during the examinations (as your clean copy). These may be ordered from the Office of the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee (see *Links*, below), or through such entities as Amazon.com.

Many students find it helpful to create a 3-ring binder for each of the four examinations. These are used to collect notes and handouts from appropriate courses, such as Reformed Theology or Polity. It is also wise to make a list of prominent Reformed theological doctrines (Sovereignty of God, etc.) and to include a cogent definition of each doctrine in your binder. This binder is also a good place to include notes and handouts from any faculty review sessions. A note concerning faculty review sessions: these are generally held in the weeks just prior to the examinations. We hope to have some dates on this website for you in the near future. Even if you are not planning to take the next set of exams, it is helpful to attend, and begin setting up your binder. Although life is hectic during any given semester of seminary, it is helpful to identify which courses are obviously going to be helpful to you for the Ordination exams (Worship and Sacraments, Polity, Reformed Theology, any Biblical studies) and begin saving appropriate notes from these classes for your study binders.

It is also helpful to familiarize yourself with the current instruction sheets that accompany each test. These take some time to read and digest, and knowing beforehand the

information they contain saves time during the exams. The instruction sheets are found with copies of retired ordination exams. Copies can be obtained from the JKM library, or from the Louisville Seminary web site (see *Links*, below). These retired exams will be extremely helpful in your preparation process.

The PCUSA web site offers an ordination handbook in PDF form. It contains many excellent suggestions on exam preparation. You may also order hard copies of retired exams from the website.

One reason it is helpful to carefully study retired exams is to familiarize yourself with different types of questions. It is good practice to read the questions over several times and make certain you understand *specifically* what is being asked. Look at the verbs in the question – they often give clues to what answer is expected. Assess how many times a position or problem is mentioned as a clue to its importance. Taking the questions apart and analyzing them is a helpful practice for both individuals and groups. Teaming up with another person, or joining a study group is a great way to prepare for the ordination exams. Try looking carefully at the exam questions, and then share ideas about what is being asked. Does the response call for a citation from the Book of Order, or the Book of Confessions, or does it require knowledge of a certain doctrine – if so, which one? As you spend the next several weeks in reading and preparation, remember that strategizing with others helps balance your preparation process between theory and application. Not only that, studying alone for long periods can be depleting. After all, we Presbyterians value community – right?

One successful exam-taker offers this advice:

“For students who are not confident consider having just one regular study partner instead of a study group. I had wanted to be in a group of at least four but due to my time constraints and commuter status, it just wasn't possible. I think it turned out to be fortuitous because I studied only with one other person. It was very important to have someone to be accountable to, even though we only met two or three times before August. Working with just one other person forced each of us to articulate our thoughts;

instead of sitting back and letting the smarter people from the group explain something. We also felt free to admit when we were confused; if I were in a larger group I might not have wanted to expose my ignorance or delay the progress of the group. Of course, this works only with a reliable partner who is willing to commit to meet and to do the work.”

Another helpful practice is to try your hand at writing answers to retired exam questions.

The three exams that are taken “in house” at McCormick (Theology, Polity, Worship and Sacraments) are each broken down into three sections. When you take the exam you will have one hour per section. So, select a question from an old exam and time yourself as you write the answer. As you may expect, the time goes much too quickly! That is one reason it’s so helpful to see just what it feels like to respond to an exam question within the allotted time. This technique is even more productive if you can obtain a retired test with a sample answer and the reader’s response to that answer. It can be valuable to see how another candidate responded, and how well that response was received.

A student adds:

“Two weeks before the exam my partner and I focused on writing the answers to practice questions on our own - we tried to meet every two or three days. When we met, we would discuss our answers. We contacted three former students who were kind enough to let us borrow their exams, so we had both answers and grader comments with which to check our answers. Even though my study partner and I often felt discouraged and overwhelmed, we kept reminding each other we only had to pass two questions on each of the exams. It was very important not to give up and to keep encouraging each other that we could do this.”

Here are some good practices to keep in mind when writing responses to the questions.

Remember to respond *exactly* as requested: does the question ask you to respond to three issues? To two people? Make sure that is what you do. Can the question be broken down into parts? If so, make sure you answer both parts, and seek to connect your answers. Where it is applicable, connect part one to part two. It also is quite helpful to create a brief outline, or make notes about what you would like to say before beginning to write. The single most important advice given to students taking the ordination exams is to **answer the question that is asked, in the manner**

**you are required to answer it.** Don't be tempted to answer the question you *wish* you had been asked!

Some questions ask you to address your answer to a hypothetical parishioner. Don't hesitate to "speak" to that person directly, using the pastoral language and tone you would use in the given situation. This allows the graders to "listen in" and see you in action. Here are the main qualities most readers seek to consider:

- Can you provide a thoughtful, real-life answer to an issue likely to arise in your ministry?
- Do you understand the central issues at stake?
- Do you make the best use of Reformed understandings?
- Are you familiar with, and are you guided by, the Constitution?
- Can you use Scripture, the Reformed tradition, and the Constitution not to just throw around citations, but to give support and guidance?
- Do you seek after reconciliation and a redemptive response to problems?

One successful student writes:

"It is important to remember there is a little luck and subjectivity in this process. My study partner and I noted that on some of the exams we borrowed, the two graders had very different opinions of an answer. Each exam we looked at (and all three were from very good students) had both 5s and 2s. We concluded it was important just to try and honestly answer each question, putting ourselves in the role of pastor, but also to realize that depending on the viewpoint of a particular grader that answer might be either a 5 or 2. The exams are not perfect and students who do not pass everything the first time should not beat themselves up; there are just too many uncontrollable/subjective factors."

As you will note, the above information pertains specifically to three of the four examinations: Polity, Worship and Sacraments, and Reformed Theology. Preparation for the Bible Exegesis portion of the exams is in some ways more problematic. Each time the ordination exams are offered, two books of the Bible (one Old Testament book and one New Testament book) are selected for the open book Bible Exegesis Examination. Approximately one month before the exams, the PCUSA posts these texts on the website. You may choose which book you

wish to exegete for the exam. As part of the exegesis includes the ability to show your facility with the appropriate original language, that may influence your choice of books. Students then generally familiarize themselves with the appropriate book. Old Testament and New Testament faculty usually offer review sessions. A text such as "Elements of Biblical Exegesis" by Michael Gorman is useful for students who want to review important elements of good exegesis. It is permissible to use any and all resources for the Biblical Exegesis exam, including *Bibleworks*. On the last day of the exams (Saturday), you will receive the Bible Exegesis portion to take home, complete, and return to the proctor by 9:00 a.m. the following Thursday.

A note about the JKM Library: Barry Hopkins, Head of Public Services, reminds students that the library stands ready to help candidates prepare for the Ordination Examinations. This includes posting the last five years of all four of the exams on the JKM website. He warns, however, that comments on the graded exams are most often handwritten, and it is difficult to make readable scans available. The library will make a special effort to be open generous hours during the open book exegesis portion of the exams. And last, but not least, JKM will make appropriate commentaries available on reserve during the Bible Exegesis Examination period.

As you have probably guessed by now, there is really no way to cram for the Standard Ordination Examinations. It is most helpful to work in regular stretches, and to observe good self-care while doing so. There is much more that may be said about preparation for taking the exams. In an effort to answer your questions in a timely manner, we have just included basic information here. Of course, everyone has his or her own individual learning style, and what works for some candidates may not work for everyone. Remember the words of Paul, and "Be encouraged!"

*We would like to continue to improve information available for candidates taking the Standard Ordination Examinations. If you have comments or suggestions, please email Pat*

*Locke.*

*Links:*

<http://www.jkmlibrary.org>

[http://www.lpts.edu/Academic\\_Resources/OrdExamsnewaccess.asp](http://www.lpts.edu/Academic_Resources/OrdExamsnewaccess.asp)

<http://www.pcusa.org/exams/ordination.htm>