CRE PASTORAL FORMATION

WHO WILL BE READY TO LEAD?

Commissioned Ruling Elders and the Future of Presbyterian Pastoral Formation

Toward a cumulative pathway of education, supervised practice, discernment, accountability, and continuing formation

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PROPOSAL · RESEARCH REPORT · EVIDENTIARY APPENDICES

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Executive Summary

Commissioned Ruling Elders and the Future of Presbyterian Pastoral Formation

Purpose and central conclusion

This research examines how the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) prepares, commissions, supports, and deploys Commissioned Ruling Elders within a rapidly changing pastoral landscape. Its central conclusion is deliberately limited: the denomination has not adopted a cumulative pastoral formation system, but many of the educational, clinical, supervisory, and institutional components such a system would require already exist in separate places.

The proposed next step is therefore integration rather than invention. Presbyteries, seminaries, congregations, and denominational bodies should explore how existing practices can become a coherent pathway that preserves rigorous preparation for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, strengthens CRE formation, and recognizes prior learning and supervised ministry when a CRE later discerns a call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Why the question is urgent

The PC(USA) reported 8,304 congregations and 17,250 Ministers of Word and Sacrament at the end of 2025. The median congregation had 53 members, and approximately 70 percent of congregations had 100 members or fewer. The denomination also reported 1,092 Commissioned Ruling Elders, 128 new MWS ordinations, and 350 minister deaths during the year. These figures do not prove a simple national pastor shortage, but they establish a pastoral ecology in which one full-time MWS serving one congregation cannot be the only sustainable pattern.

Commissioned pastoral ministry is consequently neither marginal nor experimental. It has developed over several decades in response to economic, geographic, missional, linguistic, and cultural realities. In many congregations a CRE functions as the principal pastor while remaining, constitutionally, a ruling elder commissioned by a presbytery to particular pastoral service.

Principal findings

- **Formation concerns are longstanding.** The 2008 Auburn study found considerable variation in academic depth, field education, and supervision even though CRE curricula had largely converged around a common group of subjects. It identified supervised practice as a conspicuous weakness and raised enduring questions about educational adequacy, pastoral identity, and collaborative ministry.
- **Current practice remains diverse but is developing.** Selected presbyteries now use substantial field education, mentoring, practicums, differentiated formation, continuing education, and cross-presbytery cooperation. Muskingum Valley's three-level program and Detroit's extensive field-education requirement are especially instructive examples.
- **Seminary participation is established.** Union Presbyterian Seminary, the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary offer CRE-relevant theological education. Dubuque now also offers graduate ministry formation specifically organized for current and prospective CREs.
- **The denomination is moving toward greater coherence.** The 227th General Assembly advanced common expectations for CRE preparation, expanded CRE participation in presbytery, reaffirmed the nonhierarchical character of ordered ministry, and continued development of the Senior Ordination Portfolio.
- **Compensation and support remain unresolved.** Presbytery policies reflect different philosophies, and national evidence does not yet support a single compensation formula. The research supports equitable, transparent, FTE-adjusted compensation and appropriate access to benefits without treating CREs as inexpensive substitutes for Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

The proposed formation architecture

The companion proposal recommends a cumulative pathway with four related movements: foundational CRE education; supervised clinical formation in teaching congregations and presbytery cohorts; continuing and advanced formation matched to the responsibilities actually entrusted; and an academically rigorous bridge through which qualified prior education and demonstrated formation can be evaluated when a CRE enters MWS preparation.

Additional formation should correspond to additional responsibility, not to the worth of a congregation or the ecclesial status of a pastor. Organizational complexity may arise from staff supervision, property, finances, conflict, community partnerships, schools, endowments, or multiple ministry sites; membership size alone is an inadequate proxy.

Safeguards and boundaries

CRE ministry remains commissioned service within the ordered ministry of ruling elder, not another order of ministry or a lower rank on a ladder toward MWS ordination. Prior pastoral experience does not automatically replace graduate theological education, and readiness for MWS ordination remains subject to presbytery discernment and constitutional requirements. The undocumented Florida home-congregation prohibition and the unverified East Iowa compensation percentage are not used as evidence.

Recommended next steps

The church should test the proposed architecture through limited pilots rather than immediate denomination-wide imposition. Priority work includes defining common outcomes while preserving contextual flexibility; preparing MWS mentors and clinical cohort leaders; identifying teaching congregations; clarifying transcript and prior-learning evaluation; developing equitable support standards; and collecting national data on CRE deployment, formation, compensation, benefits, tenure, and movement into MWS preparation.

The evidence supporting these conclusions is documented in the Research Report and the Evidentiary Appendices that follow the Proposal.

Toward a Cumulative Presbyterian Pathway for Pastoral Formation

A Research-Grounded, Tentative Proposal for Presbyteries, Seminaries, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Introduction

The Presbyterian Church has long believed that those entrusted with preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and the interpretation of Scripture should be well prepared for that responsibility.

That conviction is not merely professional. It is theological.

The Reformed tradition has characteristically valued disciplined learning because faithfulness requires more than sincerity. Scripture must be interpreted. Theology must be tested. History must be remembered. Human beings and congregations must be understood with care. Power must be exercised responsibly. Pastoral judgment must be cultivated over time.

For generations, Presbyterians invested heavily in schools, colleges, seminaries, and systems of ministerial preparation because we believed an educated church requires educated leadership. The preparation of Ministers of Word and Sacrament has therefore intentionally involved substantial theological education, supervised discernment, examination, and formation.

That commitment should not be abandoned.

At the same time, the ecclesial world in which much of our present pastoral system developed has changed dramatically. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is increasingly composed of smaller congregations, many of which cannot sustain the financial structure of one full-time Minister of Word and Sacrament serving one congregation. Commissioned Ruling Elders have consequently become an increasingly important part of the church's pastoral ecology.

This development is no longer experimental. Commissioned pastoral ministry has been growing and adapting for decades. Denominational research was already examining its preparation and implications by 2008, and more than one thousand Commissioned Ruling Elders are now reported within the church.[1]

The question, therefore, is no longer whether the church should use Commissioned Ruling Elders.

The question is whether the church will continue allowing this system to develop primarily through local adaptation or whether it is time to ask how the educational, clinical, supervisory, and ecclesial practices already emerging across the denomination might be connected intentionally.

This paper proposes that Presbyterians explore a cumulative pathway of pastoral formation that:

- maintains rigorous educational expectations for Ministers of Word and Sacrament;
- strengthens and brings greater coherence to the preparation of Commissioned Ruling Elders;
- distinguishes academic theological education from clinical pastoral formation;
- uses congregations intentionally as supervised learning environments;
- provides sustained formation after commissioning;
- provides additional formation when the scope and complexity of pastoral responsibility require additional competencies; and
- establishes an academically rigorous pathway through which a Commissioned Ruling Elder who later discerns a distinct call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament may build upon previous education and pastoral formation rather than begin again.

1

This is not a proposal to make Commissioned Ruling Elders inexpensive substitutes for Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

Nor is it a proposal to create classes of congregations in which some churches receive adequately educated pastors and others do not.

Every congregation deserves pastoral leadership properly prepared for the ministry entrusted to it.

The question is what preparation that ministry requires.

A Note About the Research Behind This Proposal

This proposal grows from a review of historical PC(USA) materials concerning the development of commissioned pastoral ministry; the 2008 Auburn Center study of Commissioned Lay Pastor preparation; current Book of Order provisions; General Assembly actions and official denominational reporting; the work of the Task Force to Explore the Theology and Practice of Ordination; published CRE policies and curricula from selected presbyteries; current programs at Presbyterian theological seminaries; Board of Pensions benefit structures; and representative presbytery compensation policies.

The research does not demonstrate that the PC(USA) has already adopted the system proposed here.

It has not.

Nor does it establish that most presbyteries are moving in precisely the same direction. Published policies reveal substantial variation.

The evidence demonstrates something more limited but significant:

Many of the components required for a cumulative pastoral formation system are already being developed independently in different parts of the church.

The proposal that follows asks whether those developments should now be considered together.

The accompanying Research Report and Evidentiary Appendices document the evidence in greater detail and identify areas in which national data remain incomplete.

I. Commissioned Pastoral Ministry Developed Because the Church Needed It

Commissioned pastoral ministry did not arise from an abstract desire to redesign Presbyterian polity.

It arose because congregations and communities needed pastoral leadership.

The contemporary history moved through commissioned lay pastoral ministry and eventually toward ruling elders commissioned by presbyteries for particular pastoral service. The terminology evolved, but the basic ecclesiology remained: a presbytery could recognize gifts for pastoral ministry in an ordained ruling elder and authorize that elder to exercise specified pastoral functions in a particular context.

The constitutional distinction remains important. A Commissioned Ruling Elder does not constitute another order of ministry. The person remains an ordained ruling elder commissioned by the presbytery to particular pastoral service.

Depending upon the commission, those functions may include preaching, administering the Sacraments, moderating session, pastoral care, teaching, marriage, and other responsibilities associated with congregational pastoral leadership.[2]

In the lived experience of many congregations, therefore, the CRE is their pastor.

The system expanded substantially over time, and with that expansion came increasing concern about formation.

2

In 2008, Barbara Wheeler of Auburn Theological Seminary's Center for the Study of Theological Education completed a study commissioned within PC(USA) structures examining representative Commissioned Lay Pastor preparation programs.[3]

The study found that programs had largely converged around a common set of subjects but varied substantially in depth, academic expectations, field education, and supervision.

Perhaps most importantly, Wheeler raised the question of whether the church risked creating two groups performing substantially overlapping pastoral functions while providing one with extensive graduate theological formation and another with comparatively abbreviated preparation.

The concern was not that commissioned pastoral ministry should disappear.

The concern was whether the church was preparing people adequately for responsibilities it had already decided to entrust to them.

That distinction remains fundamental to this proposal.

See Appendix B, "The 2008 Auburn Study and the 2026 Landscape."

II. The Denomination Is Already Moving Toward Greater Coherence

The church has not retreated from CRE ministry since those earlier concerns were raised.

It has increasingly sought to clarify and strengthen it.

The Task Force to Explore the Theology and Practice of Ordination, created by the 225th General Assembly and expanded by the 226th, spent several years examining changing forms of ministry and preparation.

The 227th General Assembly in 2026 subsequently approved recommendations establishing common areas for the evaluation of CRE preparation. It also reaffirmed the nonhierarchical character of the church's ordered ministries and approved voice and vote in presbytery for CREs serving commissions. At the same time, the Assembly declined to impose "Commissioned Pastor" as the denomination-wide replacement title for Commissioned Ruling Elder.[4]

That combination is instructive.

The denomination is strengthening recognition of commissioned pastoral ministry while preserving a theological distinction between commissioned service as a ruling elder and ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

That is not a problem to be overcome.

It is a theological boundary a new formation system should respect.

See Appendix F, "MWS Formation, Senior Ordination Portfolio, and Readiness Assessment."

III. Presbyteries Are Already Experimenting With Parts of the Model

One of the strongest reasons to consider a more intentional architecture is that selected presbyteries are already developing many of its pieces.

Muskingum Valley Presbytery provides one particularly useful example.[5]

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3 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "The PC(USA) Is Still Home to More Than 1 Million Members," June 29, 2026, https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2026/6/29/pcusa-still-home-more-1-million-members; Barbara G. Wheeler, Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors: A Study of the Features of Representative Programs (Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, August 25, 2008), https://www.pcusa.org/sites/default/files/clpfinalreport.pdf.

4Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order, 2025–2027, G-2.1001.

5Wheeler, Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors.

Its CRE program is organized into three levels. Level One prepares ruling elders for defined commissioned ministries. Level Two adds preparation for those called to serve one or more congregations. Level Three provides continuing education for commissioned leaders.

The distinction between the first and second levels is especially important.

Level Two does not presume that a pastor of a larger congregation is more worthy, more important, or more genuinely pastoral. It adds competencies associated with additional pastoral responsibilities: worship, preaching, pastoral care, congregational systems, stewardship, mission, sustainable ministry, governance, leadership, and organizational functioning.

That points toward an important principle:

> **Formation should correspond to the responsibilities entrusted to the pastor, not to the worth of the congregation or the status of the pastor.**

Detroit Presbytery offers a different example, emphasizing substantial supervised field education in CRE preparation.[6]

The Presbytery of Florida employs a structured process of Exploration and Discipleship, requires approved theological education, assigns mentors, and evaluates development in multiple areas. Its process includes formative experiences outside the candidate's congregation of membership.[7]

Other presbyteries use different combinations of seminary coursework, examinations, mentoring, internships, continuing education, and supervision.

The evidence, therefore, does not reveal a denomination doing nothing.

It reveals a denomination experimenting.

The problem is that these experiments remain only loosely connected.

See Appendix D, "Comparative Presbytery Formation and Deployment Models."

IV. Presbyterian Seminaries Are Also Building Pieces of the Pathway

CRE expansion is sometimes discussed as though it necessarily represents an alternative to seminary education.

Current seminary practice complicates that assumption.

Union Presbyterian Seminary's Pathways program offers theological and practical education designed in significant part for people preparing for Commissioned Ruling Elder or Commissioned Lay Pastor service.[8]

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary offers an eight-course Certificate in Congregational Leadership used in commissioned-ministry preparation and now provides graduate ministry education specifically organized for current and prospective CREs through its MA in Ministry CRE Cohort.[9]

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6 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Beyond Changing Families, Churches and Institutions," June 30, 2026, https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2026/6/30/beyond-changing-families-churches-and-institutions; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Ordination Task Force Has a Number of Book of Order Amendments It Will Propose," July 7, 2025, https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2025/7/7/ordination-task-force-has-number-book-order-amendments-it-will-propose.

7 Muskingum Valley Presbytery, "Commissioned Ruling Elder Training," accessed September 5, 2026, https://mvpresby.org/cre/; Muskingum Valley Presbytery, "CRE Course Catalog," accessed September 5, 2026, https://mvpresby.org/cre/cre-course-catalog/.

8 Presbytery of Detroit, commissioned ruling elder formation materials, accessed September 5, 2026, https://detroitpresbytery.org/.

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary offers modular certificate-level theological education that some presbyteries use in CRE preparation.[10]

These programs differ substantially in academic level, credit, structure, and purpose.

Their significance lies in the direction of movement.

Presbyterian seminaries are not merely educating candidates for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Some are already providing theological formation for a broader range of Presbyterian pastoral leaders.

That does not yet constitute a CRE-to-MWS pathway.

It does demonstrate that theological education can occur at multiple levels within the same institutional ecosystem.

See Appendix E, "Seminary Programs and the Emerging Educational Continuum."

V. Preserve the MWS Standard; Change the Pathway

The first principle of this proposal is deliberate:

> **The Presbyterian Church should maintain rigorous educational expectations for Ministers of Word and Sacrament.**

The changing economics of congregational life should not become an argument for diminishing theological education.

Pastoral leadership today requires substantial intellectual, theological, relational, ethical, and organizational competence.

Congregations are navigating political polarization, demographic change, trauma, conflict, financial stress, mental-health concerns, declining institutional trust, cultural and religious pluralism, community fragmentation, and difficult questions about the church's public witness.

This is not a moment when pastors need less formation.

The 227th General Assembly itself demonstrated the tension between preserving standards and reconsidering pathways.

During debate over alternative means of assessing candidates for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, some commissioners worried that new assessment mechanisms might weaken the church's historic commitment to an educated ministry. Others argued that the existing assessment system does not serve every candidate or every presbytery adequately.

The Assembly chose neither simply to abandon the existing standard nor to insist that only one mechanism could demonstrate readiness.

That distinction matters.

A person who begins ministry as a Commissioned Ruling Elder may later discover, through actual service and the continuing discernment of the church, a call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

When that occurs, two temptations should be resisted.

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9 Presbytery of Florida, Policies and Procedures for Preparation for Commissioned Ruling Elders, May 17, 2025, https://www.presbyteryofflorida.net/app/download/7 127 708 984/MLD%2BPolicies%2Band%2BProcedures%2B05-17-2025.pdf.

10 Union Presbyterian Seminary, "Pathways," accessed September 5, 2026, https://www.upsem.edu/lifelong-leadership/pathways.

The first is:

"You have served successfully for years. Therefore, the remaining educational expectations no longer matter."

The second is:

"Your previous theological education and pastoral formation do not count. Begin again."

Neither adequately values education.

Neither adequately values formation.

A better question is:

> **What theological education, supervised practice, clinical formation, and demonstrated competencies has this person already completed, and what further formation is necessary for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament?**

The standard remains high.

The pathway becomes cumulative.

VI. Advanced CRE Formation Is Not an Ecclesial Hierarchy

This distinction needs to be explicit because the language of "levels" can easily mislead.

Ruling elder and Minister of Word and Sacrament are distinct ordered ministries.

They are not ranks within a ministerial hierarchy.

Therefore, additional CRE formation cannot appropriately mean:

CRE⟶ superior CRE⟶ MWS.

Nor should it imply:

small-church pastor⟶ midsize-church pastor⟶ large-church pastor.

The proposal is about competencies, not ecclesial status.

Every CRE entrusted with preaching should be properly educated to interpret Scripture and preach faithfully.

Every CRE authorized to administer the Sacraments should understand Reformed sacramental theology and practice.

Every CRE providing pastoral care should possess appropriate pastoral-care and ethical competencies.

Every CRE moderating a session should understand Presbyterian polity, group process, authority, boundaries, and the pastoral dimensions of governance.

These are foundational competencies because the functions require them.

Additional formation becomes appropriate when additional responsibilities require additional competencies.

A ministry involving several staff members, for example, requires knowledge of supervision, personnel systems, role clarity, and organizational leadership that may not be necessary in a congregation with no employees.

A congregation operating a preschool, extensive property, a major endowment, complex community partnerships, or multiple program ministries presents leadership challenges not created merely by the number of people on the membership roll.

A ministry involving significant organizational conflict may require deeper preparation in systems, conflict transformation, leadership under anxiety, and organizational change.

A pastor assuming responsibility for increasingly complex finances may need additional preparation in stewardship, budgeting, and financial governance.

This is not more education because the congregation is more important.

It is **proper education for additional responsibilities**.

A small congregation deserves pastoral leadership every bit as thoughtful, ethical, theologically grounded, and competent as a large congregation.

What differs is not the congregation's worth.

What may differ is the complexity of the ministry entrusted.

VII. Congregational Complexity Is Not the Same as Congregational Size

Membership numbers should therefore not become a credentialing shortcut.

A seventy-member congregation may own substantial property, employ several people, operate a preschool, maintain an endowment, participate in numerous community partnerships, carry a significant conflict history, or manage complicated governance structures.

A congregation with twice as many members may have far fewer organizational demands.

Consequently, this proposal does not recommend:

"CREs serve small churches, advanced CREs serve midsize churches, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament serve large churches."

That would create precisely the hierarchy the proposal seeks to avoid.

Instead, presbyteries should evaluate the actual ministry context.

The question should be:

> **What competencies are necessary to exercise faithful pastoral leadership in this particular ministry?**

This reframing protects smaller congregations from being treated as training grounds for underprepared pastors.

It also prevents education from becoming a proxy for prestige.

VIII. CRE Is Not the First Rung on an Ordination Ladder

Many Commissioned Ruling Elders may faithfully exercise commissioned pastoral ministry throughout their service without ever discerning a call to Word and Sacrament.

Their continuing education should deepen their CRE vocation, not quietly push them toward another ordered ministry.

The better image is therefore not a ladder but **intersecting pathways**.

One pathway allows continuing formation within commissioned ruling elder ministry.

A separate pathway becomes available when the individual and the church discern a distinct call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

At that intersection, previous academic and pastoral formation should matter.

The proposal does not turn MWS ordination into promotion.

It recognizes that vocation sometimes develops through ministry itself.

IX. Four Forms of Formation Should Be Distinguished

A stronger system should distinguish four tasks that are often discussed together but are not identical.

Academic and Theological Education

Seminaries are particularly equipped to provide disciplined study of Scripture, interpretation, Reformed theology, church history, ethics, worship and Sacraments, polity, homiletics, pastoral theology, Christian education, mission, and related fields.

Academic formation places pastors in conversation with knowledge and traditions larger than their own experience.

It develops intellectual humility.

Supervised Pastoral Practice

Ministry cannot be learned entirely in a classroom.

A person must preach, visit grieving families, moderate meetings, navigate conflict, plan worship, deal with money, work with colleagues, encounter resistance, exercise authority, make mistakes, and discover how one's own personality enters pastoral relationships.

That requires practice under supervision.

Clinical Pastoral Formation

Experience alone does not create wisdom.

A person can practice an ineffective pattern for twenty years.

Pastoral experience becomes formation when it is examined.

What happened?

What happened in me?

What was happening in the congregation?

What systemic forces were operating?

How did anxiety affect my behavior?

What assumptions did I bring?

How did theology shape my response?

Where was power operating?

What did I fail to see?

What would I do differently?

What do I need to learn next?

That is clinical formation.

Ecclesial Discernment and Authorization

Finally, the presbytery determines who may exercise commissioned or ordained ministry on behalf of the church.

Education does not commission.

Experience does not ordain.

Competency alone does not establish vocation.

The church discerns call and authorizes ministry.

X. A Proposed Cumulative Formation System

What follows is intentionally provisional.

It is not presented as a finished denominational structure.

It is a model worth testing.

Foundational Preparation for Commissioned Ministry

A ruling elder sensing a call to commissioned pastoral ministry would enter a structured formation process under presbytery oversight.

Foundational theological education would normally be provided through a Presbyterian seminary or another approved institution.

The curriculum should include at least the areas toward which the denomination is already moving:

- Old and New Testament interpretation;
- Reformed theology;
- Presbyterian polity;
- Reformed worship and Sacraments;
- preaching;
- pastoral care;
- Christian education;
- mission and ecclesiology; and
- ethics and pastoral boundaries.

The emphasis should be demonstrated competency rather than mere exposure.

At the same time, the prospective CRE would participate in supervised ministry and a presbytery-based clinical cohort.

Formation would therefore occur intentionally in three settings:

Seminary — academic and theological formation

Teaching Congregation — supervised pastoral practice

Presbytery cohort — clinical and ecclesial formation

The presbytery would then assess readiness for commissioning.

XI. Teaching Congregations

CRE candidates need not receive all practical formation in the congregations they may eventually serve.

In many cases, a healthy congregation with an experienced Minister of Word and Sacrament may provide a particularly rich environment for learning.

Presbyteries could designate selected congregations as **Teaching Congregations**.

Candidates could participate meaningfully in worship planning, preaching, session meetings, pastoral visitation, funerals, stewardship, staff relationships, administration, conflict, Christian formation, community engagement, and mission.

The supervising Minister of Word and Sacrament would do more than sign an evaluation.

The pastor would help the candidate learn the practice of ministry.

Existing presbytery field-education practices provide precedent for this proposal, but the formal designation of Teaching Congregations is not currently a national PC(USA) model.

This arrangement could also address another emerging challenge.

CREs and Ministers of Word and Sacrament would be formed in relationship rather than developing in parallel ministerial cultures.

Mutual trust is more likely to arise through shared ministry than through declarations that the ministries should respect one another.

XII. Presbytery-Based Clinical Cohorts

Initial coursework should not mark the end of formation.

Commissioned Ruling Elders should participate in continuing clinical cohorts during active ministry.

These groups would be small enough for serious case consultation.

Participants might bring a session conflict, a sermon that failed, a pastoral relationship becoming dependent, a funeral that raised unexpected issues, a boundary problem, a personnel challenge, a leadership success worth understanding, an ethical dilemma, or a mistake.

The purpose would not simply be mutual encouragement.

The purpose would be reflective practice.

Some existing programs provide continuing CRE cohorts or continuing-education structures. The specific model proposed here—a presbytery-based clinical cohort centered on disciplined reflection upon actual ministry—is more intentional than current national practice and should therefore be tested rather than assumed.

Seminary-based cohorts and presbytery-based clinical cohorts could serve complementary functions.

The seminary cohort asks:

What are we learning?

The presbytery clinical cohort asks:

What is happening in our ministry, and what are we becoming as pastors?

XIII. Training Clinical Formation Leaders

An experienced pastor is not automatically an effective supervisor.

Presbyteries should therefore have access to people specifically prepared to facilitate clinical formation.

Seminaries could help develop that capacity.

Experienced Ministers of Word and Sacrament, appropriately experienced CREs, pastoral counselors, coaches, or others with suitable preparation might receive additional training in adult formation, reflective pastoral supervision, theological reflection on practice, family and congregational systems, group process, pastoral ethics, boundaries, intercultural competence, conflict transformation, evaluation, and appropriate referral.

This is a proposed role rather than an established denominational credential.

Its purpose would be to help seminaries contribute not only to educating individual pastors but to building the **formation infrastructure of the presbytery**.

XIV. Commissioned Ministry Does Not Have to Reproduce the Solo-Pastor Model

When a congregation can no longer sustain a traditional pastoral position, the reflexive question is often:

"Who can we find to be our pastor?"

Commissioned ministry permits another question:

> **Whom has God already given this congregation or region, and how might their gifts be educated, formed, commissioned, coordinated, and supported?**

Some congregations will appropriately call one CRE.

Others might benefit from a Commissioned Pastoral Team.

One ruling elder might have strong preaching gifts.

Another might be particularly gifted in pastoral care.

Another may bring strength in administration, systems, or stewardship.

Another may have gifts for Christian formation or mission.

Current presbytery practice already demonstrates that ruling elders may be prepared and authorized for different ministry functions.

The specific Commissioned Pastoral Team model proposed here, however, should be understood as an area for experimentation rather than an established national trend.

A team model would require careful role definition, accountability, supervision, and presbytery authorization.

But it deserves testing.

XV. Serving in One's Home Congregation

Presbyteries currently approach service in one's home congregation differently.

Published examples demonstrate at least two approaches.

Some presbyteries ordinarily discourage such service while permitting exceptions.

Others permit it while requiring explicit attention to boundaries, role changes, and the eventual conclusion of the commission.

The research has not identified a reliable national count showing how common either approach is.

The concerns behind restrictions are legitimate.

Long-standing relationships can complicate pastoral authority.

Family relationships may produce dual roles.

Moving from peer leadership to pastoral responsibility may create systems difficulties.

The eventual conclusion of a commission may also become complicated if the CRE remains a member.

At the same time, congregations may contain significant pastoral gifts already known to the community.

A pilot could therefore responsibly test home-congregation leadership where appropriate safeguards exist: external supervision, clinical cohort participation, explicit role and boundary covenants, regular review, clear accountability, and advance planning for the conclusion or alteration of the commission.

This should remain an area of investigation rather than a recommendation that all presbyteries permit home-congregation service.

See Appendix H, "Home-Congregation Service and Indigenous Pastoral Leadership."

XVI. Continuing and Advanced Formation Within Commissioned Ministry

The phrase **advanced CRE formation** should not describe increased ecclesial status.

It should describe continuing preparation for ministries requiring additional competencies.

Every commissioned pastor should remain engaged in continuing formation.

Some ministries will require additional preparation in areas such as advanced biblical interpretation, advanced preaching, congregational systems, organizational leadership, staff supervision, conflict transformation, stewardship and finance, ethics, community leadership, advanced pastoral care, mission and contextual theology, and spiritual formation.

Current examples such as Muskingum Valley demonstrate that differentiated formation can be organized around ministry function and responsibility.

This is the distinction the proposed model should preserve:

> **Foundational education prepares a person for the ministry functions entrusted at that stage. Additional education equips a pastor when additional responsibilities require additional knowledge and skill.**

It is not less education for small congregations.

It is **proper education for every ministry**.

XVII. A Genuine Bridge Toward the Ministry of Word and Sacrament

Some Commissioned Ruling Elders will eventually discern, together with the church, a distinct call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Their previous formation should neither eliminate nor be erased by the MWS preparation process.

Current seminary programs demonstrate that theological education for CREs need not stop at nondegree certificate work. Graduate theological education specifically oriented toward current and prospective CREs now exists.

But another development within the denomination may be even more significant.

In 2026, the 227th General Assembly approved continued development of a **Senior Ordination Portfolio** as a standardized alternative means of assessing readiness in areas historically evaluated through the senior ordination examination process.[11]

The Senior Portfolio does not eliminate theological education.

It does not grant academic credit.

It does not create a CRE-to-MWS pathway.

Its significance is more precise.

It reflects an emerging willingness to distinguish between:

the standards a candidate must meet

and

11 University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, "Congregational Equipping," accessed September 5, 2026, https://www.dbq.edu/UDTS/AcademicPrograms/CongregationalEquipping/; University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, "Master of Arts in Ministry," accessed September 5, 2026, https://www.dbq.edu/UDTS/AcademicPrograms/MastersPrograms/MasterofArtsinMinistry/.

the mechanism by which readiness is demonstrated and evaluated.

That distinction could become important in a future cumulative pathway.

A Commissioned Ruling Elder entering preparation for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament might already possess documented evidence of theological coursework, supervised pastoral practice, sermons, pastoral-care work, clinical reflection, continuing education, leadership experience, and presbytery evaluation.

None of that should automatically satisfy MWS requirements.

But neither should it automatically be ignored.

A seminary and presbytery could therefore assess together:

What accredited academic work has already been completed?

What theological competencies have been demonstrated?

What supervised pastoral formation has taken place?

What graduate theological work remains?

What biblical-language preparation remains?

What historical, theological, ethical, and integrative requirements remain?

What additional supervised formation is necessary?

A future Senior Ordination Portfolio or comparable assessment mechanism could become one means through which accumulated formation is demonstrated and evaluated.

The candidate would still complete whatever further preparation is required for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The result is not a reduced educational standard.

It is a **cumulative pathway toward a rigorous standard, accompanied by a more comprehensive way of demonstrating readiness**.

See Appendix F.

XVIII. Compensation: Supporting the Person Called to the Ministry

Compensation raises one of the most difficult questions in the emerging CRE system because the church must hold together two legitimate realities.

The first is justice for the person whom the church asks to undertake ministry.

The second is the financial capacity of congregations whose inability to sustain a conventional pastoral package is often one reason they seek commissioned pastoral leadership.

The answer cannot simply be a market calculation.

What is this pastor worth?

What percentage of an MWS is a CRE?

What is the lowest salary at which the position can be filled?

Those questions begin in the wrong place.

The more appropriate theological question is:

> **What support does this person reasonably require in order to undertake the ministry faithfully and sustainably?**

Presbyteries already recognize a related principle in establishing minimum terms of call for Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

CRE compensation, however, remains substantially less uniform.

Published presbytery policies demonstrate differing approaches. Some use common pastoral compensation frameworks with adjustments for full-time equivalency. Others employ different compensation structures for commissioned or contracted pastoral service.

The current evidence is sufficient to demonstrate variation.

It is not sufficient to establish a national CRE compensation norm.

Benefits introduce further complexity.

The Board of Pensions now permits eligible commissioned pastors employed at least twenty hours per week by a PC(USA) congregation to participate in significant benefit structures, even though requirements differ from those governing installed pastoral calls.

CRE households also differ considerably.

Some receive medical insurance through a spouse or another employer.

Some do not.

Some enter commissioned ministry after accumulating retirement resources through another career.

Some do not.

Some have dependent children.

Some live alone.

Some are bivocational.

Some depend substantially upon pastoral compensation to support a household.

No just policy can assume that all CRE households have identical support needs.

Nor has this research identified a generally accepted Presbyterian formula that successfully translates educational preparation, hours, ministry complexity, household circumstances, benefits, and local economic conditions into one equitable CRE compensation figure.

That absence should be acknowledged rather than concealed.

A better framework may begin with three questions:

What support does the pastor and household reasonably require for sustainable ministry?

What time, responsibility, and availability does the ministry actually require?

What resources can the congregation reasonably sustain?

When those answers do not align, the solution should not automatically be that the pastor absorbs the deficit.

Presbyteries may need to consider shared ministry, regional arrangements, benefit assistance, presbytery subsidies, bivocational structures, commissioned pastoral teams, or other forms of support.

The goal is neither cheap ministry nor financially inaccessible ministry.

It is:

supported ministry.

Developing better CRE compensation models should therefore be one of the explicit research tasks of any pilot.

See Appendix G, “Compensation, Benefits, and Sustainable Support.”

XIX. Seminaries Could Become More Central, Not Less

The evidence does not support a simple narrative in which CRE education necessarily pushes seminaries to the margins.

Current programs at Union, Dubuque, Austin, and other institutions suggest another possibility.

Seminaries could provide foundational CRE theological education, advanced certificates, graduate coursework, MA pathways, appropriately recognized previous academic work, MDiv education for those later discerning MWS vocation, continuing education, clinical-supervisor training, Teaching Congregation supervisor education, and consultation with presbyteries.

The seminary would cease to be understood primarily as the institution a person attends before ministry.

It could increasingly become an institution accompanying Presbyterian pastoral leaders throughout ministry.

This proposal should not claim that Presbyterian seminaries collectively endorse such a future.

The research has not established that.

It does establish that some seminaries are already expanding their work beyond the traditional single-entry MDiv pathway.

That is enough to make the possibility worth considering.

XX. What This Proposal Is Not

This proposal does not argue that every small congregation should have a CRE; small congregations need less educated pastors; larger congregations deserve better educated pastors; every CRE should pursue advanced formation; every CRE who pursues advanced formation should seek MWS ordination; CRE experience substitutes for theological education; the MDiv standard should be reduced; congregational membership determines pastoral competence; Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Commissioned Ruling Elders are interchangeable ordered ministries; or commissioned ministry should become a means of securing inexpensive pastoral labor.

The proposal argues for a simpler principle:

> **Every ministry should be served by leaders properly educated, formed, supervised, and supported for the responsibilities entrusted to them.**

XXI. A Pilot Before a Polity Overhaul

The church does not yet know enough to impose a national system of this complexity.

It knows enough to test one.

A consortium of willing presbyteries and Presbyterian seminaries could establish a multi-year pilot.

Participating presbyteries should represent differing contexts: rural, small-town, metropolitan, racially and culturally diverse, presbyteries with extensive CRE leadership, and presbyteries where installed MWS leadership remains more common.

The pilot might include:

- a common foundational curriculum;
- shared competency standards;
- Teaching Congregations;
- trained pastoral supervisors;
- presbytery clinical cohorts;
- trained cohort facilitators;

- commissioned pastoral-team experiments;
- home-congregation experiments where presbyteries judge them appropriate;
- continuing and advanced formation;
- a defined process for assessing previous academic work; and
- an intentional educational bridge for CREs who later discern a call toward MWS preparation.

Compensation and benefits should be part of the study rather than an administrative footnote.

Evaluation should include pastoral competency, quality of preaching and teaching, congregational health, pastoral retention, pastoral well-being, quality of supervision, conflict management, financial sustainability, adequacy of compensation and benefits, impact on pastoral households, congregational affordability, continuing-education participation, presbytery workload, movement into additional CRE responsibilities, and movement into MWS preparation when a distinct call is discerned.

The purpose would not be to prove the proposal correct.

The purpose would be to discover what happens.

XXII. What Is Evidence and What Is Proposal?

For clarity, the argument should distinguish these explicitly.

The research demonstrates that:

- Commissioned pastoral ministry has expanded substantially over several decades and is now an established part of PC(USA) pastoral leadership.
- The denomination has long been concerned about variation in CRE preparation.
- The 2026 General Assembly moved toward common CRE competency expectations while reaffirming nonhierarchical ordered ministry.
- Presbyteries currently employ significantly different systems of CRE education, mentoring, field formation, continuing education, compensation, and deployment.
- At least one presbytery currently uses a three-level CRE formation structure.
- Some presbyteries require substantial supervised field formation.
- Presbyterian seminaries currently provide CRE-specific theological education.
- Graduate theological education specifically designed for current and prospective CREs now exists.
- The denomination has approved continued development of a Senior Ordination Portfolio as an alternative means of assessing readiness in areas traditionally assessed through senior ordination examinations.
- Commissioned pastors may participate in broader Board of Pensions benefit structures under specified conditions.
- Published presbytery policies differ concerning home-congregation service.

The research does not yet demonstrate that:

- a national cumulative CRE-to-MWS pathway is intentionally emerging;
- most presbyteries favor such a pathway;
- one compensation formula is preferable;
- home-congregation CRE ministry is broadly accepted;
- commissioned pastoral teams are widely used;
- clinical cohorts are presently standard CRE practice;
- seminaries collectively favor a cumulative CRE-to-MWS model; or
- differentiated formation based upon ministry complexity has denominational consensus.

This proposal therefore recommends testing:

- a cumulative education system;
- Teaching Congregations;
- presbytery-based clinical cohorts;
- trained clinical cohort leaders;
- commissioned pastoral teams;
- structured continuing formation corresponding to ministry complexity;
- a formal academic bridge from CRE formation into MWS preparation;
- appropriate use of emerging competency-based assessment practices within that pathway; and
- support-based rather than credential-priced approaches to compensation.

The distinction between evidence and proposal is important.

The church should know when it is being told what is already happening and when it is being invited to imagine what could happen next.

XXIII. Questions That Should Remain Open

A credible proposal should not hide its uncertainties.

How should competencies be defined and assessed?

How much standardization belongs at the national level?

What should remain with the presbytery?

What belongs academically to the seminary?

What belongs clinically to the presbytery?

How should Teaching Congregations and supervisors be selected?

Under what circumstances can home-congregation commissioning be practiced safely and faithfully?

Can commissioned pastoral teams provide coherent pastoral leadership?

How should previous theological study be recognized?

Which MWS competencies necessarily require graduate-level study?

How might the Senior Ordination Portfolio or other emerging assessment methods contribute to evaluating cumulative formation?

What compensation constitutes reasonable support?

What should happen when congregational capacity and reasonable pastoral support do not align?

How should formation transfer across presbytery boundaries?

And how do we ensure that differentiated preparation according to ministry complexity never becomes a hierarchy of pastoral worth or congregational importance?

The governing answer to that last question should remain clear:

Every congregation deserves properly educated pastoral leadership.

Additional education is not a reward for serving a larger or more prestigious church.

It is preparation for additional responsibilities.

XXIV. The Pieces Are Already Present

No presbytery or seminary identified in this research appears to have assembled the entire system proposed here.

That should be said clearly.

But the pieces are increasingly recognizable.

The denomination is moving toward common CRE competencies.

Muskingum Valley is experimenting with progressive levels of preparation and continuing formation.

Detroit incorporates substantial supervised field education.

Florida uses a multi-stage discernment process involving approved seminary education, mentoring, and developmental assessment.

Union Presbyterian Seminary provides structured CRE theological education.

Dubuque provides certificate education and graduate ministry formation specifically oriented toward CREs.

Austin provides modular theological education used in commissioned-ministry preparation.

The 227th General Assembly has affirmed stronger CRE evaluation standards, nonhierarchical ordered ministry, expanded CRE participation in presbytery, and continued development of the Senior Ordination Portfolio.

The Board of Pensions has developed benefit structures capable of including eligible commissioned pastors.

Presbytery compensation practices show significant variation and no settled national formula.

None of these developments proves that the system proposed in this paper is the right one.

Together, however, they make the question reasonable.

The proposal is therefore not chiefly an invention.

It is an attempt to recognize a pattern and ask whether the pieces might belong together.

Conclusion: Preserve the Standard. Build the Pathway. Support the Ministry.

The Presbyterian Church should resist two easy responses to its changing pastoral landscape.

The first is nostalgia: organizing the entire pastoral system around a model that a growing number of congregations can no longer sustain.

The second is educational retreat: responding to that reality by lowering expectations for those entrusted with pastoral leadership.

There is another possibility.

We can preserve the historic Presbyterian commitment to an educated ministry while redesigning how formation occurs.

We can insist that every congregation deserves pastoral leadership properly educated for the ministry entrusted to it.

We can educate Commissioned Ruling Elders well.

We can provide serious supervised practice.

We can build sustained clinical formation.

We can provide additional formation when additional responsibility requires additional competency without turning education into an ecclesial hierarchy.

We can form CREs and Ministers of Word and Sacrament in relationship rather than in parallel systems.

We can use healthy congregations as places where ministry is learned.

We can prepare people to supervise that learning.

We can use Presbyterian seminaries more broadly rather than less.

We can recognize commissioned ruling elder ministry as a faithful vocation in its own right.

We can adequately support the people whom the church asks to undertake that ministry.

And when a Commissioned Ruling Elder and the church later discern a distinct call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, we can create a pathway that honors what has already been learned while preserving rigorous theological formation for that ordered ministry.

The question before us is therefore not whether Commissioned Ruling Elders should replace Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

That question is too narrow and unnecessarily adversarial.

Nor is the question whether small congregations can make do with less education.

They should not have to.

The better question is:

> **What system of theological education, supervised practice, clinical formation, continuing development, ecclesial discernment, assessment, and material support will equip each pastoral leader for the ministry the church actually entrusts to them?**

We already possess many of the pieces.

The evidence is sufficient to justify asking whether they can be intentionally connected.

The next faithful step is not to assume the answer.

It is to test the possibility.

Commissioned Ruling Elders and the Future of Presbyterian Pastoral Formation

Research Report Supporting *Toward a Cumulative Presbyterian Pathway for Pastoral Formation*

Purpose of This Report

This report examines the development, preparation, deployment, and emerging role of Commissioned Ruling Elders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and places those developments within the larger changing landscape of Presbyterian pastoral leadership and theological education.

It supports the companion proposal, *Toward a Cumulative Presbyterian Pathway for Pastoral Formation*, but it serves a different purpose.

The Proposal asks what the church might do.

This Research Report asks:

What has happened?

What is happening now?

What does the available evidence permit us to say?

The distinction is important.

The evidence does not demonstrate that the PC(USA) has already embraced a cumulative system of pastoral formation linking CRE preparation, continuing formation, graduate theological education, and preparation for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

It has not.

Nor does the evidence demonstrate that most presbyteries are moving toward one particular model.

It does demonstrate that many of the components of such a system already exist independently.

The task of this report is to document those developments carefully enough to determine whether bringing them into intentional relationship is a reasonable next step.

1. The Changing Presbyterian Pastoral Landscape

Any discussion of Commissioned Ruling Elders must begin with the congregational ecology in which their ministry is developing.

At the end of 2025, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reported 8,304 congregations and 17,250 Ministers of Word and Sacrament.[12]

The demographic relationship between congregations and membership is particularly important.

The median PC(USA) congregation now has only **53 members**.

Approximately **70 percent of PC(USA) congregations have 100 members or fewer**. Those congregations contain only about 24 percent of total denominational membership.

At the other end of the distribution, congregations with more than 300 members constitute only about 8 percent of churches but contain approximately 46 percent of all PC(USA) members.

The 3,832 congregations with 50 members or fewer together contain 98,990 members—only slightly more than the 94,274 members belonging to the denomination's 37 largest congregations.

The implication is not simply that the denomination is getting smaller.

12 Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, "Certificate in Ministry," accessed September 5, 2026, https://www.austinseminary.edu/academics/certificate-in-ministry.

It is that pastoral leadership must be provided across a highly uneven congregational system.

The traditional model of one congregation calling one full-time Minister of Word and Sacrament remains viable in many places. It is increasingly difficult to sustain in others.

The ministerial numbers add another dimension.

In 2025, the denomination recorded **128 new ordinations** to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament and **350 deaths of ministers**. The total number of candidates preparing for ministry was 658.[13]

Those figures should not be interpreted simplistically as proof of a national pastor shortage.

Geographic distribution, vocational choices, specialized ministries, part-time service, congregational finances, retirement patterns, validated ministries, and congregational expectations all affect whether a congregation can obtain pastoral leadership.

They do establish that deaths substantially exceeded new ordinations during the year and that the denomination is navigating a changing pastoral ecology.

At the same time, the denomination reported **1,092 Commissioned Ruling Elders in 2025**.[14]

CREs, therefore, are not a marginal curiosity within the PC(USA)'s pastoral system. They constitute an established form of pastoral leadership.

See Appendix C, "National Context and Denominational Trends."

2. CRE Ministry Is Not a Recent Innovation

The contemporary form of commissioned pastoral leadership developed over several decades.

Earlier Presbyterian terminology referred to Commissioned Lay Pastors. Subsequent constitutional development more clearly located this ministry within the ordered ministry of ruling elder: the individual is not an unordained layperson temporarily made into a minister, but an ordained ruling elder whom a presbytery commissions to particular pastoral service.

That theological clarification matters.

Commissioning does not create another ordered ministry alongside ruling elder, deacon, and Minister of Word and Sacrament.

The person remains a ruling elder.

The presbytery authorizes that ruling elder, for a defined commission, to exercise particular pastoral functions.

Those functions may include preaching, leading worship, administering the Sacraments, moderating session, pastoral care, teaching, and other responsibilities authorized by the presbytery.

The historical growth has been substantial.

Available denominational records indicate that the number of commissioned leaders grew rapidly during the first decade of the twenty-first century, moving from roughly 200 around 2000 to nearly 900 by the end of that decade.

Growth then slowed, with totals remaining generally in the 900s for several years.

More recently, the number again exceeded one thousand.

The 2025 total was 1,092.

Annual variation cautions against describing this as a simple, uninterrupted upward line.

The longer historical pattern is nevertheless clear.

13Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Beyond Changing Families, Churches and Institutions."

14Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "PC(USA) Is Still Home to More Than 1 Million Members."

Commissioned pastoral leadership has moved from a relatively small practice to an established feature of Presbyterian ministerial life.

See Appendix A for the historical chronology.

3. Why Commissioned Pastoral Ministry Developed

The most important early national research remains Barbara G. Wheeler's 2008 report, *Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors: A Study of the Features of Representative Programs*, prepared by the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education.

The Office of Vocation and the Committee on Theological Education commissioned the research in 2007.

The project had two components.

PC(USA) Research Services surveyed executive presbyters concerning policies, numbers of Commissioned Lay Pastors, deployment practices, and evaluations of the ministry.

Auburn then conducted a qualitative examination of representative preparation programs.

The Auburn study examined six seminary-based programs, nine presbytery-based programs, and six other programs operated through colleges, ecumenical institutions, training schools, or synod structures.

Wheeler found two major reasons presbyteries were using commissioned pastoral leaders.

The first was economic and geographic: providing pastoral leadership to congregations and other ministries unable to support or obtain a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

The second was missional and cultural: developing leaders for racial/ethnic, immigrant, and emerging communities where culturally and linguistically appropriate MWS leadership was not readily available.

This second purpose is important because it prevents CRE ministry from being understood solely as a response to congregational poverty.

From relatively early in its development, commissioned pastoral ministry was also a strategy for cultivating leadership arising from particular communities.

That distinction remains important for future policy.

See Appendix B for a comparison of the Auburn findings with the 2026 landscape.

4. The First Major National Warning About Formation

The 2008 Auburn study found something paradoxical.

CRE preparation appeared highly diverse because programs were administered differently.

Beneath that administrative variation, however, the curricula were remarkably similar.

Nearly every program followed the subjects then specified constitutionally: Old Testament, New Testament, Reformed theology, Presbyterian polity, preaching, Christian education, worship and Sacraments, and pastoral care, sometimes including professional ethics.

The apparent diversity was therefore largely diversity of delivery rather than diversity of curriculum.

The more troubling finding concerned depth.

Most programs studied required approximately **120–135 classroom contact hours**.[15]

Wheeler calculated that this amounted roughly to the classroom equivalent of about three undergraduate courses.

Only a small number of programs required formal field education.

15Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "PC(USA) Is Still Home to More Than 1 Million Members."

Requirements for supervised pastoral practice were often vague, and the accompanying national survey reported difficulty in some presbyteries locating appropriate supervisors or mentors.

The level of academic expectation also varied.

Some programs described their work as introductory college-level education with reduced reading and writing expectations. Others understood the courses primarily as continuing education for elders rather than academic study.

This led the report to a fundamental question:

Was the amount and depth of education sufficient for the responsibilities the church was authorizing CREs to perform?

The study did not answer that question conclusively.

It did identify a structural problem that remains recognizable today:

The church had developed a curriculum before it had fully decided what kind of pastoral formation the ministry actually required.

5. The Auburn Study Identified the Missing Element We Are Still Discussing: Supervised Practice

One finding in the Auburn report is particularly important for the present proposal.

Wheeler identified **supervised field education** as one of the most conspicuous omissions from the standard commissioned-pastor curriculum.[16]

Seminary educators had long considered supervised practice one of the most effective ways to learn ministry and to assess a person's fitness for it.

Yet only a small number of the programs studied required formal field education.

The problem was not simply insufficient hours.

It was the relationship between knowledge and practice.

A candidate could study preaching without sustained supervised preaching.

A candidate could study pastoral care without a substantial process for reflecting upon actual pastoral relationships.

A candidate could study polity without extensive experience moderating sessions or navigating organizational conflict.

A candidate could study theology without sustained reflection on how theological convictions actually shape pastoral judgment.

The 2008 study therefore anticipated one of the central arguments of the companion proposal:

Academic theological education and supervised pastoral formation are related but different tasks, and both are necessary.

Contemporary presbytery examples indicate that some have moved substantially in this direction.

Detroit, for example, now requires extensive field education for CRE preparation.

That does not demonstrate a national norm.

It demonstrates that substantial supervised practice is already possible within the existing system.

16Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "PC(USA) Is Still Home to More Than 1 Million Members."

6. The Auburn Study Also Anticipated Competency-Based Formation

The 2008 study identified two broad educational approaches.

Most programs required candidates to complete a predetermined core curriculum.

A smaller group worked differently.

Those programs established knowledge and competency goals, assessed what the candidate already knew, developed an individualized learning plan, and then required evidence that the standards had been met.

Evidence could include prior transcripts, new coursework, independent study, examinations, and demonstrations of ministerial skill.

This is striking in light of current denominational discussions.

The concept of cumulative or competency-based formation is not foreign to Presbyterian CRE preparation.

It was already present in representative programs nearly two decades ago.

The unresolved issue was standardization and quality assurance.

Who determines that a competency has actually been demonstrated?

How rigorous is the assessment?

What knowledge requires formal academic study?

What competencies are best demonstrated in practice?

Those questions remain relevant.

7. The Fundamental Identity Question Has Never Completely Disappeared

Wheeler eventually named the issue provocatively:

“Second-Best Pastor or Extraordinary Elder?”

The language belongs to the historical report, but the question remains recognizable.

If a CRE is understood primarily as a less extensively educated substitute for a Minister of Word and Sacrament, commissioned ministry almost inevitably develops a status hierarchy.

The MWS becomes the fully prepared pastor.

The CRE becomes the person used when the congregation cannot obtain one.

That interpretation has consequences for educational standards, compensation, collegial relationships, and congregational expectations.

Wheeler suggested another possibility.

What if the commissioned leader were understood primarily as a **ruling elder in specialized service**?

That framing allows preparation to correspond more directly to the particular ministry entrusted.

It also makes differentiated preparation more theologically intelligible.

Different commissions may require different competencies without creating different levels of human or ecclesial worth.

The contemporary constitutional terminology—Commissioned Ruling Elder—moves significantly in this direction.

But the practical tension remains.

When a CRE preaches weekly, administers the Sacraments, provides pastoral care, moderates session, leads funerals, teaches, and functions as the congregation's principal pastoral leader, the distinction between ordered ministries remains theologically real while the functional overlap becomes substantial.

That is one reason the relationship between CREs and Ministers of Word and Sacrament requires continued attention.

8. The Earlier Research Also Anticipated Collaborative Ministry

One of the more striking passages in the 2008 study asked whether using commissioned leaders simply to reproduce the traditional solo-pastor model might sometimes prevent struggling congregations from considering more creative arrangements.

Among the alternatives Wheeler named were cooperative ministries and relationships in which commissioned elders and Ministers of Word and Sacrament might provide leadership together.

Nearly two decades later, denominational conversations continue to include collaborative forms of ministry.

The continuity of the question is significant.

The challenge is not simply:

Who can replace the pastor a congregation can no longer afford?

A more constructive question is:

What combinations of gifts, ordered ministries, educational resources, congregations, and presbytery support might provide faithful pastoral leadership in a changing ecclesial environment?

That opens possibilities considerably larger than substitution.

9. The Current Denominational Conversation Has Become More Explicit

The 225th General Assembly created the Task Force to Explore the Theology and Practice of Ordination.

The Assembly subsequently broadened its work to include ruling elders, Commissioned Ruling Elders, membership, church structure, accountability, and related questions.

The 226th General Assembly extended the work.

By 2025, the task force was considering recommendations concerning core competencies for CREs; CRE participation in presbytery; training for those overseeing preparation for ministry; specified coursework for Ministers of Word and Sacrament; psychosocial and vocational assessment; the ordination examination process; and the communal and collegial character of ordered ministry.

These were not isolated questions.

The denomination was reconsidering how preparation, assessment, ordered ministry, and changing ministry contexts relate to one another.

The 227th General Assembly in 2026 acted on that work.

Among its actions were movement toward common CRE competency expectations, expanded participation of CREs in presbytery, reaffirmation of the nonhierarchical character of ordered ministry, and continued development of an alternative assessment mechanism for candidates preparing for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The significance is not that the General Assembly endorsed the cumulative formation system proposed in the companion paper.

It did not.

The significance is that several assumptions underlying the existing system are now being examined denominationally.

10. The Senior Ordination Portfolio Is Especially Significant

One of the most consequential developments is the Senior Ordination Portfolio.

Presbyteries already possess constitutional authority, under specified circumstances, to approve alternate means of assessing readiness in areas ordinarily addressed by standard ordination examinations.

The 2026 action moves toward development of a **standardized alternative** rather than relying entirely upon case-by-case exceptions.

The proposal was controversial.

Some commissioners argued that an alternative assessment mechanism could weaken the Presbyterian commitment to an educated ministry.

Others argued that the existing assessment system does not serve every candidate or ministry context adequately.

The Assembly approved continued development of the portfolio.

Its implementation remains future work; current denominational reporting identifies approximately fall 2029 as a likely target rather than a guaranteed implementation date.

The Senior Ordination Portfolio matters to this research for a particular reason.

It begins to separate two questions that have often been conflated:

What must a person know and be able to do?

and

By what method must that readiness be demonstrated?

Those are not necessarily identical questions.

A portfolio does not eliminate theological education.

It does not grant academic credit.

It does not create a CRE-to-MWS pathway.

Nor should pastoral experience automatically substitute for academic preparation.

But the portfolio concept recognizes that evidence of readiness can be assembled and evaluated in more than one form.

That has implications for a future CRE who has accumulated theological coursework, supervised ministry, preaching experience, clinical formation, continuing education, and demonstrated pastoral competencies before discerning a call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The emerging assessment system does not itself create a pathway.

It makes such a pathway easier to imagine without assuming that maintaining standards requires erasing everything a candidate learned before entering formal MWS preparation.

See Appendix F.

11. Contemporary Presbytery Practice: There Is No Single CRE Formation System

Current presbytery policies continue to demonstrate considerable variation.

That variation should not automatically be characterized as failure.

Presbyteries possess constitutional responsibility for determining preparation appropriate to a particular commission.

Contextual adaptation is therefore part of the system by design.

The difficulty arises when contextual flexibility makes it difficult to know whether comparable pastoral responsibilities are being entrusted to people with sufficiently comparable preparation.

The available evidence from selected presbyteries suggests several recurring elements in CRE formation: academic or theological coursework, presbytery discernment and examination, mentoring or supervision, and some form of practical ministry development.

The weight given to each differs considerably.

The examples that follow illustrate the range.

They should not be treated as a national census.

12. Muskingum Valley: Explicitly Differentiated Formation

Muskingum Valley Presbytery currently offers one of the clearest examples of intentionally differentiated CRE formation.

Its program is organized into three levels.

Level One: Generalist Commission

This provides foundational preparation for ruling elders serving defined ministries of the presbytery, including possibilities such as chaplaincy, regional care, worship leadership, preaching, sacramental leadership, session moderation, and mission leadership.

Level Two: Congregational Ministry Commission

This builds on Level One for ruling elders called to serve one or more congregations as commissioned pastors.

Additional attention is given to worship, preaching, pastoral care, congregational systems, stewardship, mission, leadership, governance, and sustainable ministry.

Level Three: Continuing Education

This provides ongoing formation in preaching, pastoral practice, spiritual formation, and ministry leadership.

The significance is not the specific number of levels.

It is the educational logic.

Additional formation is attached to **additional responsibility**.

The system does not require the conclusion that a small congregation deserves a less educated pastor.

Instead, it demonstrates how a presbytery can ask what competencies a particular ministry requires and design preparation accordingly.

Muskingum Valley's curriculum also extends beyond the older eight-course template. Its current offerings include self-knowledge, spiritual formation, ethics and boundaries, mission, family systems, sustainable ministry, governance, community engagement, and practical ministry laboratories.

This represents precisely the kind of curricular development the Auburn study suggested was needed.

13. Detroit: Field Education as a Serious Formation Requirement

The Presbytery of Detroit illustrates a different strength.

Its CRE preparation process requires a substantial field-education experience—currently approximately **480 hours**, according to published presbytery materials.[17]

17Wheeler, Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors.

Candidates also complete approved theological preparation, meet periodically with the presbytery body overseeing their preparation, undergo examination, preach for evaluation, and are interviewed for readiness.

After commissioning, mentoring and presbytery oversight continue.

Detroit therefore provides important evidence that substantial supervised ministry can be incorporated into CRE formation without requiring the entire MWS educational pathway.

This addresses directly one of the central deficiencies identified by the Auburn research almost twenty years ago.

It also provides precedent for the companion proposal's Teaching Congregation concept.

That designation itself is a proposal.

The supervised-practice principle is not.

14. Florida: Formation as a Developmental Process

The Presbytery of Florida provides another instructive model.

Its current preparation policies divide the process into two phases: **Exploration and Discipleship**.

The policy notes that, in broad terms, these correspond to inquiry and candidacy for preparation to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, though the processes are not identical.

The presbytery evaluates development in several areas, including education for ministry, spiritual development, interpersonal relationships, personal growth, and professional development.

Each prospective CRE receives a mentor.

The process also includes formative experiences beyond the candidate's congregation of membership, including assigned preaching, observation of session meetings, and observation of worship.

This is significant because it understands CRE preparation as more than completion of courses.

Formation includes the development of the person who will exercise pastoral leadership.

Florida also demonstrates the continuing importance of seminary-presbytery partnership rather than assuming a presbytery must provide all theological instruction itself.

This report does **not** use Florida as documentary evidence for a formal prohibition on eventual service in one's home congregation because the exact approved policy language establishing such a prohibition has not been located in the current published materials reviewed.

That distinction is intentional.

15. Seminary–Presbytery Partnership Is Not New

The relationship between presbyteries and seminaries in CRE formation has a long history.

The 2008 Auburn study found that multiple PC(USA)-related seminaries were already offering Commissioned Lay Pastor instruction.

Only a minority of presbyteries in the accompanying survey provided all required instruction themselves.

Many relied to some degree on seminaries, colleges, synods, ecumenical institutions, or other providers.

The question is therefore not whether seminaries should suddenly become involved in CRE education.

They have been involved for decades.

The more important question is:

What kind of involvement should seminaries have now?

16. Union Presbyterian Seminary: Accessible Foundational Formation

Union Presbyterian Seminary's current Pathways program provides ten online courses designed in significant part to support preparation for Commissioned Ruling Elder or Commissioned Lay Pastor ministry.

Five are identified as foundational: Biblical Interpretation, Reformed Theology, Church History, The Christian Life, and Mission and Evangelism.

Five address practical ministry: Polity and Administration, Teaching the Bible, Worship and Sacraments, Introduction to Pastoral Care, and Preaching.

The program is deliberately accessible.

Courses are online, include live participation and assignments, and may be completed without a rigid sequential structure.

Union explicitly tells participants to work with their presbyteries because the seminary does not determine whether completion satisfies a presbytery's requirements.

This preserves an important ecclesial distinction.

The seminary educates.

The presbytery discerns, examines, commissions, and oversees.

Union also provides continuing-learning opportunities for CREs beyond initial coursework.

This indicates movement beyond initial preparation toward continuing formation.

17. University of Dubuque: Movement Toward Graduate Formation

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary represents another significant development.

Dubuque has long provided theological education used in commissioned pastoral preparation.

Its current offerings include a Congregational Leadership certificate and graduate ministry education.

Most significantly for this research, in 2026 Dubuque introduced an **MA in Ministry CRE Cohort** designed specifically for current and prospective Commissioned Ruling Elders.[18]

The cohort emphasizes theological study alongside peer relationships, collaborative learning grounded in actual ministry, denominational conversation, and continuing vocational formation.

This development matters because it challenges the assumption that CRE preparation must necessarily remain nondegree theological education.

A CRE may begin with accessible foundational preparation and later pursue graduate theological education without abandoning commissioned ministry.

That is one of the clearest current examples of theological education becoming cumulative in practice.

It does **not** yet constitute a denominational CRE-to-MWS pathway.

Nor should this report claim that MA credits automatically apply to an MDiv without the seminary's current academic policy establishing that relationship.

What the evidence does establish is that graduate theological education specifically designed for CREs now exists within a seminary that also offers MDiv formation.

That is significant enough.

18Wheeler, Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors.

18. Are Seminaries Afraid CREs Will Replace MWS Formation?

The available evidence does **not** support a broad claim that Presbyterian seminaries are resisting CRE formation because they fear it will replace the MDiv or Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

The institutional behavior examined here points in another direction.

Union actively provides CRE education.

Dubuque provides both certificate and graduate formation.

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary offers certificate-level theological education that some presbyteries use in commissioned-ministry preparation.

Historically, multiple Presbyterian seminaries participated in commissioned pastoral education.

At the same time, concerns about maintaining rigorous preparation for Ministers of Word and Sacrament are real.

They surfaced explicitly during the 2026 General Assembly debate over alternative ordination assessment.

Those concerns should not be dismissed as institutional self-interest.

They express a genuine Presbyterian theological conviction: the church benefits from ministers who have received substantial biblical, theological, historical, ethical, and practical education.

The more useful question is therefore not:

Will CRE education replace seminary education?

It is:

Can seminaries become responsible for a wider continuum of Presbyterian theological education without diminishing the distinctive preparation expected for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament?

Current examples suggest that this is possible.

They do not establish that Presbyterian seminaries collectively endorse such a model.

The broader North American seminary environment also complicates a simple narrative of collapse. Preliminary Association of Theological Schools data for fall 2025 showed MDiv enrollment increasing 2.4 percent among a same-school cohort of reporting institutions.

One year of enrollment data does not establish a durable reversal.

It does show why claims that alternative pastoral education is plainly displacing MDiv education would be premature.

19. The Relationship Between CREs and Ministers of Word and Sacrament

This remains one of the least settled areas.

Theologically, the distinction is clear.

A CRE remains a ruling elder.

A Minister of Word and Sacrament is ordained to a different ordered ministry.

Functionally, however, overlap can be extensive.

A CRE may become the principal preacher of a congregation, administer the Sacraments, moderate session, provide pastoral care, teach, lead funerals, and exercise many responsibilities congregants associate with “the pastor.”

That creates several recurring tensions identified in both historical research and current denominational discussion.

One concerns status.

If the CRE is continually described as the person used when an MWS cannot be obtained, commissioned ministry easily becomes interpreted as second-tier pastoral leadership.

Another concerns preparation.

If two people exercise substantially overlapping pastoral functions but one has received years of graduate theological education and the other comparatively brief preparation, questions about adequacy inevitably arise.

A third concerns compensation and support.

Functional overlap can coexist with substantially different compensation and benefit structures.

A fourth concerns collegial identity.

CREs may experience themselves as pastors while Ministers of Word and Sacrament properly emphasize the constitutional distinction between ordered ministries.

The answer need not be to erase the distinction.

Indeed, doing so would create new theological and constitutional problems.

A more promising direction is to strengthen the relationship.

Teaching Congregations, MWS supervision, joint continuing education, clinical cohorts, and collaborative ministry arrangements could form CREs and Ministers of Word and Sacrament **with one another rather than alongside one another**.

This is a proposal arising from the evidence, not a national practice already established.

20. Continuing Formation Is the Underdeveloped Middle

Much of the denominational discussion has focused on two moments:

preparation for initial commissioning;

and preparation for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The years between them—or the many years of CRE service when no MWS call is ever discerned—receive less systematic attention.

That is a weakness.

Pastoral competence develops through practice.

But practice without structured reflection can reinforce poor habits as easily as good ones.

Current examples such as Muskingum Valley's continuing-education level and seminary-based CRE cohorts indicate that some institutions are attending more intentionally to post-commission formation.

The logical next development is a clearer distinction between two kinds of continuing formation.

Educational continuing formation deepens theological knowledge and pastoral skills.

Clinical continuing formation examines actual ministry.

The first is particularly appropriate to seminaries.

The second belongs naturally within the presbytery, where pastoral practice, accountability, ecclesial relationships, and local context meet.

That division of labor is an inference and proposal.

It is not yet a denominational standard.

21. Why Clinical Cohorts Matter

The word *clinical* is important.

A peer-support group and a clinical formation cohort are not identical.

A clinical cohort brings actual practice under disciplined reflection.

A pastor might present a session conflict, difficult pastoral-care relationship, failed sermon, staff problem, ethical question, congregational transition, leadership success, or personal pattern of overfunctioning.

The group does not merely offer advice.

It examines what occurred; what the pastor perceived; what the pastor missed; what emotions were activated; what systemic dynamics were operating; what theological convictions influenced the response; how authority and power were used; what alternative responses were available; and what further formation may be needed.

That kind of reflective practice has deep precedents in pastoral education even if it has not been standardized in CRE preparation.

A presbytery that expects CREs to undertake substantial pastoral responsibility has an interest in creating environments where that practice can continue to be examined.

The specific presbytery-based clinical-cohort model proposed in the companion paper should therefore be understood as a pilot proposal, not as a description of current national practice.

22. Formation Appropriate to Complexity Is Not a Hierarchy

A cumulative system will need to be careful with language.

“Advanced CRE” can easily sound like a higher ecclesial rank.

“CRE for small churches” can sound like a declaration that small congregations deserve less theological education.

Neither is the intention supported by the evidence.

The better principle is:

Every person should be properly prepared for the ministry the church entrusts to them.

Some competencies are foundational wherever a particular function is exercised.

Anyone entrusted with preaching requires appropriate biblical interpretation and homiletical preparation.

Anyone administering the Sacraments requires Reformed sacramental understanding.

Anyone providing pastoral care requires competence in care, ethics, boundaries, and referral.

Anyone moderating session requires appropriate knowledge of polity and leadership.

Additional responsibilities may require additional competencies.

Staff supervision requires competencies not necessarily required where there is no staff.

Complex property and financial systems require competencies not necessarily required in simpler organizations.

Significant organizational conflict requires additional systems and conflict-leadership capacity.

Large community ministries may require partnership and organizational leadership skills.

These differences are not measures of congregational worth.

Nor do they necessarily correlate with membership size.

A congregation of seventy members can be organizationally more complex than a congregation of two hundred.

The relevant variable is **scope of responsibility**, not prestige or size.

Muskingum Valley's current model provides evidence that this principle can be operationalized within presbytery practice.

It does not yet establish a validated national complexity-assessment system.

23. Home-Congregation Service Reveals the Importance of Context

Presbytery policies differ concerning whether CREs may serve congregations in which they are members.

This research has not established a reliable national count of presbyteries prohibiting, discouraging, permitting, or actively using home-congregation commissions.

That question belongs in the Evidentiary Appendices as an area requiring additional national research rather than a statistic to be guessed.

Published policies demonstrate at least two approaches.

Some presbyteries ordinarily discourage such service while allowing exceptions.

Others permit it with explicit safeguards concerning boundaries and transitions.

The disagreement is revealing.

Presbyteries restricting the practice recognize real risks: dual relationships, family relationships, difficulty moving from peer to pastor, unclear authority, boundary complications, and difficulty returning to ordinary membership when a commission concludes.

Presbyteries permitting it recognize another reality: pastoral gifts may already exist within a congregation, especially where outside pastoral leadership is difficult to sustain.

The question is therefore not easily resolved by ideology.

It is a formation and systems question.

Could external supervision, clinical cohorts, explicit role covenants, regular review, and clear transition planning mitigate the risks?

That is an appropriate subject for pilot study.

See Appendix H.

24. Compensation and Benefits: The Evidence Shows No Common Formula

CRE compensation is one of the clearest areas in which presbyteries have not reached a common model.

Published presbytery policies reviewed in this study demonstrate differing approaches.

Heartland Presbytery, for example, establishes minimum terms for pastoral positions, including contracted positions, and permits compensation to be scaled proportionately for part-time service.[19]

Other presbyteries structure compensation differently for commissioned or contracted pastoral relationships.

The evidence is sufficient to establish variation.

It is not sufficient to identify a national norm or preferred formula.

That distinction is important.

The variation reveals a fundamental unresolved question.

Is compensation primarily determined by educational credential, pastoral function, hours worked, complexity of responsibility, congregational capacity, household need, local cost of living, or some combination of these?

19Presbytery of Detroit, commissioned ruling elder formation materials.

No broadly accepted national formula emerged from this research.

That absence is itself a finding.

25. Benefits Policy Is Beginning to Recognize a More Diverse Pastoral System

The Board of Pensions redesign of the Benefits Plan is particularly relevant.

The Board explicitly acknowledged that the previous benefits system had been designed for a different model of pastoral leadership and family structure.

Under the redesigned plan, the **Congregational Pastors Package** is required for installed PC(USA) pastors but may also be offered to eligible Ministers of Word and Sacrament and commissioned pastors working at least twenty hours per week for a PC(USA) congregation.[20]

Other benefit options provide additional flexibility for eligible employees.

This does not resolve CRE compensation.

It does demonstrate institutional recognition that Presbyterian pastoral leadership no longer fits a single employment model.

It also challenges an assumption sometimes made about CRE ministry: that benefits are unnecessary because a CRE presumably has insurance through a spouse, another job, or retirement.

CRE households vary.

A just support system cannot be based on one presumed family arrangement.

See Appendix G.

26. From Compensation to Support

The historical Presbyterian rationale for minimum terms of call points toward a more constructive framework.

The church does not merely purchase pastoral labor.

It seeks to provide sufficient support for the person called to undertake the ministry.

That distinction becomes especially important for CREs.

If commissioned ministry exists only because it is cheaper than MWS ministry, the system contains a structural incentive to undercompensate CREs.

If, on the other hand, every commissioned position must reproduce the entire financial structure of a traditional full-time installed call regardless of context, many congregations seeking commissioned leadership may find it inaccessible.

The evidence does not provide a formula that resolves this tension.

It suggests three questions that should be studied together:

What support does the pastor and household reasonably require for sustainable ministry?

What time, availability, and responsibility does the ministry actually require?

What resources can the congregation reasonably sustain?

When those answers do not align, the presbytery may need to become part of the solution rather than allowing the difference to fall entirely upon either the pastor or the congregation.

20University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, “Master of Arts in Ministry.”

That may mean shared ministry, regional ministry, benefits assistance, commissioned teams, bivocational arrangements, or direct presbytery support.

This framework is a theological and policy proposal arising from the evidence.

It is not a current national compensation formula.

27. A CRE-to-MWS Pathway: What Exists and What Does Not

The research does **not** show that the PC(USA) currently has a nationally designed CRE-to-MWS pathway.

That distinction must remain clear.

CRE service does not constitute the first stage of MWS ordination.

Nor should it.

Many CREs will never discern a call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Their commissioned ministry is not incomplete.

Nevertheless, several developments make a cumulative pathway increasingly conceivable.

First, CRE education is being provided by theological seminaries in selected programs.

Second, graduate theological education designed specifically for CREs now exists.

Third, competency-based approaches have historical precedent in CRE formation.

Fourth, substantial supervised field education exists in at least some presbyteries.

Fifth, the denomination is developing the Senior Ordination Portfolio as a standardized alternative means of demonstrating readiness in areas historically assessed through standard examinations.

These developments do not create a pathway by themselves.

They remove some conceptual obstacles to one.

The central principle would need to be:

Previous formation counts, but it does not automatically substitute.

A CRE discerning a call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament could undergo a serious assessment of prior academic work, supervised ministry, theological competency, and pastoral formation.

The seminary and presbytery could then determine what remains necessary to meet the full expectations for MWS preparation.

The standard need not be lowered.

Duplication can be reduced.

28. Why the Senior Portfolio Changes the Conversation

The Senior Ordination Portfolio may eventually prove significant beyond the examination system itself.

The traditional model tends to assess preparation through discrete educational and examination events.

A portfolio creates the possibility of assembling and evaluating evidence accumulated across formation.

For an experienced CRE, such evidence might eventually include academic transcripts, exegetical work, sermons, theological reflection, supervised ministry evaluations, pastoral case studies, ethics work, clinical reflections, continuing education, evidence of leadership, and presbytery assessment.

That does not mean every item should satisfy an MWS requirement.

Nor does the portfolio itself grant academic equivalency.

It means the church may have a mechanism for asking a more sophisticated question than:

Did this person take the same route as everyone else?

The question can become:

What evidence demonstrates readiness, and what further education and formation are still required?

That is the conceptual significance of the portfolio for this project.

29. What National Trends Can We State With Confidence?

Several trends are sufficiently documented to state confidently.

First, the PC(USA) is increasingly a denomination of small congregations.

The median congregation has 53 members, and roughly 70 percent have 100 members or fewer.

Second, the number of Ministers of Word and Sacrament continues to face downward pressure.

Deaths substantially exceeded new ordinations in 2025, and the overall MWS total declined during the year.

Third, CRE ministry is established rather than experimental.

The denomination has more than one thousand CREs and has maintained a substantial commissioned-ministry presence for many years.

Fourth, CRE formation remains decentralized.

Presbyteries retain substantial authority and employ different preparation, supervision, deployment, and compensation practices.

Fifth, theological seminaries remain significantly involved in CRE formation.

Current programs demonstrate that CRE education is not developing wholly outside the seminary system.

Sixth, selected CRE programs are moving beyond the older eight-course curriculum.

Field education, systems theory, spiritual formation, ethics, organizational leadership, continuing education, and graduate study are visible in current examples.

Seventh, the denomination itself is reconsidering competency and assessment.

The Ordination Task Force, CRE competency work, and Senior Ordination Portfolio demonstrate movement in this direction.

Eighth, the pastoral employment and benefits system is becoming more flexible.

The Board of Pensions redesign explicitly acknowledges a more diverse pastoral landscape.

Those trends do not prove the companion proposal.

They establish the conditions under which the proposal deserves serious consideration.

30. What We Cannot Yet Claim

Several propositions require more evidence.

We cannot yet say that most presbyteries favor a tiered or cumulative CRE formation system.

We cannot say how many presbyteries prohibit CREs from serving their home congregations.

We cannot establish from currently available national data how CRE compensation compares with MWS compensation on a full-time-equivalent basis.

We cannot say how many CREs later enter preparation for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

We cannot yet compare retention, congregational outcomes, preaching quality, pastoral well-being, or conflict outcomes across different CRE formation models.

We cannot say that Presbyterian seminaries collectively favor a cumulative CRE-to-MWS pathway.

We cannot demonstrate that commissioned pastoral teams are widespread.

We cannot yet identify a validated method for matching levels of formation to ministry complexity.

These are not weaknesses to conceal.

They identify the research agenda that should accompany any pilot.

31. The Strongest Finding: The Pieces Already Exist

The most significant conclusion from the research is not that the denomination has already decided where it is going.

It has not.

The significant finding is that the pieces of a different system are already visible.

From the Auburn research comes the recognition that CRE education needed greater depth, field formation, competency assessment, and clearer identity.

From contemporary presbyteries come differentiated formation, substantial field education, mentoring, developmental assessment, and continuing education.

From seminaries come accessible foundational programs, CRE-focused graduate education, and continuing learning.

From the General Assembly comes movement toward common competencies and more flexible but standardized assessment of readiness.

From the Board of Pensions comes recognition that pastoral support must accommodate more than one employment pattern.

From the denomination's congregational statistics comes the unmistakable reality that a pastoral system designed primarily around one full-time MWS serving one congregation cannot by itself meet the circumstances of thousands of Presbyterian churches.

None of these developments requires the church to diminish the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Taken together, they suggest almost the opposite.

They make it possible to imagine a system in which theological education is extended more broadly, pastoral formation becomes more sustained, seminaries serve more leaders over longer periods, presbyteries assume greater responsibility for clinical formation, and rigorous preparation for Ministers of Word and Sacrament remains the standard for that ordered ministry.

32. Implications for the Companion Proposal

The evidence supports several principles underlying *Toward a Cumulative Presbyterian Pathway for Pastoral Formation*.

It supports distinguishing theological education from supervised and clinical formation.

It supports seminary-presbytery partnerships.

It supports strengthening supervised practice.

It supports continuing CRE formation after commissioning.

It supports formation corresponding to ministry responsibility rather than congregation size.

It supports experimentation with competency-based assessment.

It supports investigating cumulative theological education.

It supports treating compensation and benefits as questions of sustainable pastoral support rather than merely the market price of a credential.

It supports stronger formation relationships between CREs and Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

The evidence does **not**, by itself, establish that the precise system proposed is the correct one.

That is why the companion paper proposes a pilot rather than immediate denominational restructuring.

Conclusion

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been living into an alternative pastoral system for more than a generation without fully designing that system as a whole.

Commissioned pastoral ministry emerged because congregations and communities needed leaders.

Presbyteries developed training.

Seminaries became educational partners.

CREs assumed increasingly substantial pastoral responsibilities.

Questions arose about preparation, identity, supervision, compensation, and the relationship between CREs and Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

Those questions were clearly visible in national research by 2008.

They have not disappeared.

What has changed is the context in which we are asking them.

The denomination now contains thousands of small congregations.

Deaths of Ministers of Word and Sacrament substantially exceeded new ordinations in 2025.

More than one thousand CREs are reported nationally.

Selected presbyteries have developed formation systems substantially more sophisticated than the early commissioned-pastor model.

Seminaries are providing CRE-specific continuing and graduate education.

The General Assembly is examining competencies and alternative means of assessing readiness.

The Board of Pensions has redesigned benefits for a more varied pastoral system.

The church, therefore, does not need to choose between maintaining high standards for Ministers of Word and Sacrament and developing Commissioned Ruling Elders.

That is a false choice.

The research points toward a more constructive question:

> **Can the Presbyterian Church connect theological education, supervised practice, clinical formation, continuing development, ecclesial discernment, and material support into a coherent system that prepares every pastoral leader properly for the**

ministry entrusted to them while preserving the distinctive and rigorous preparation appropriate to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament?

The evidence does not yet answer that question.

It does demonstrate that the question is no longer hypothetical.

The church is already building many of the pieces from which an answer could emerge.

Evidentiary Appendices

Supporting *Toward a Cumulative Presbyterian Pathway for Pastoral Formation* and the Research Report *Commissioned Ruling Elders and the Future of Presbyterian Pastoral Formation*

Appendix A — Historical Development of Commissioned Pastoral Ministry

A.1 Purpose

This chronology identifies major developments in the emergence of commissioned pastoral ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

It is not intended as a complete history of ruling elder leadership or Presbyterian patterns of pastoral supply. Its narrower purpose is to trace the development of the contemporary ministry now described in the Book of Order as a ruling elder commissioned to particular pastoral service.

A.2 Chronology

Period	Development	Significance
Pre-1983 predecessor traditions	Presbyterian predecessor bodies used several forms of lay preaching, commissioned service, stated supply, and other arrangements when Ministers of Word and Sacrament were unavailable.	Commissioned pastoral leadership has precedents older than the contemporary CRE system.
1983 reunion	Reunion created the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), requiring inherited practices to be reconciled within a common polity.	The denomination had to determine how ruling elders and other leaders might provide pastoral service where conventional MWS leadership was unavailable.
1980s–1990s	Presbyteries continued seeking authorized forms of pastoral leadership for congregations and ministries unable to obtain or sustain Ministers of Word and Sacrament.	Commissioned pastoral ministry developed principally in response to pastoral and missional need.
Mid-1990s	Commissioned Lay Pastor became an increasingly regularized form of ministry in PC(USA) polity and practice.	Presbyteries acquired clearer processes for preparation and authorization.
Late 1990s	The denomination more clearly associated commissioned pastoral service with ordained elders and expanded the functions presbyteries could authorize.	Commissioned ministry became increasingly rooted in the ordered ministry of ruling elder.
2000	Approximately 200 commissioned leaders were reported nationally.	The ministry remained relatively small but was beginning substantial expansion.
2007	PC(USA) Office of Vocation and Committee on Theological Education commissioned a national study of Commissioned Lay Pastor preparation.	The denomination recognized that expansion raised significant educational questions.
2008	Barbara G. Wheeler and the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education completed *Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors: A Study of the Features of Representative Programs.*	The study documented variation in educational depth, limited field education, competency-based experiments, seminary partnerships, and unresolved questions about identity and preparation.
By the end of the 2000s	National numbers approached 900 commissioned leaders.	Commissioned pastoral ministry had moved from a marginal practice toward an established pastoral resource.

Period	Development	Significance
2011 Form of Government revision	Terminology shifted toward ruling elders commissioned to limited pastoral service.	The change clarified that commissioning does not create another order of ministry.
2010s	“Commissioned Ruling Elder” became increasingly common terminology.	Language more clearly reflected the underlying ecclesiology of ruling elder commissioning.
2010s	National numbers remained generally in the 900s.	Initial rapid growth was followed by institutionalization rather than disappearance.
2020s	CRE totals again exceeded 1,000.	Commissioned pastoral ministry remained a significant feature of Presbyterian pastoral leadership.
2022	The 225th General Assembly created the Task Force to Explore the Theology and Practice of Ordination.	Questions concerning preparation, ordered ministry, and changing leadership patterns returned to the national agenda.
2024	The 226th General Assembly extended and broadened the task force’s work.	CRE development became part of the wider examination of ordination and ministerial formation.
2026	The 227th General Assembly approved movement toward common CRE competency expectations, expanded CRE participation in presbytery, reaffirmed nonhierarchical ordered ministry, declined to impose “Commissioned Pastor” as the denomination-wide title, and continued development of a Senior Ordination Portfolio.	CRE recognition increased while the distinction between ruling elder commissioning and ordination to Word and Sacrament remained intact.
2025–2027 Book of Order	G-2.10 continues to locate commissioned pastoral ministry within the ordered ministry of ruling elder.	Any cumulative formation system must operate within this ecclesiological framework.

A.3 Continuing Constitutional Principles

Current polity establishes several principles important to interpreting this history.

A Commissioned Ruling Elder remains a ruling elder.

Commissioning authorizes particular pastoral functions; it does not constitute another ordination.

Presbyteries retain responsibility for preparation, examination, commissioning, supervision, and renewal of commissions.

An MWS is assigned as mentor and supervisor.[21]

These principles explain why a cumulative pathway must not portray CRE ministry as a lower ecclesial rank beneath the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Appendix B — The 2008 Auburn Study and the 2026 Landscape

B.1 Why the Wheeler Study Matters

Barbara G. Wheeler’s 2008 report provides the strongest historical baseline identified in this research.

21 Heartland Presbytery, 2026 minimum terms of call and pastoral compensation policy, accessed September 5, 2026, https://heartlandpby.org/.

The study examined twenty-one representative preparation programs:

- six seminary-based programs;
- nine presbytery-based programs; and
- six programs operated by other educational or ecclesial institutions.

B.2 Comparison: 2008 Questions and 2026 Developments

Issue	Wheeler/Auburn Finding, 2008	Evidence by 2026	Assessment
Core curriculum	Programs converged around OT, NT, Reformed theology, polity, preaching, Christian education, worship/Sacraments, and pastoral care.	GA227 moved toward common competency expectations in substantially these areas.	Strong continuity with greater national coherence.
Educational depth	Most programs required about 120–135 classroom contact hours. Wheeler questioned whether this was sufficient for the responsibilities authorized.	Some current programs add substantial local formation, practicums, graduate study, or extended field education.	Evidence of deepening in selected programs, not national uniformity.
Field education	Formal supervised field education was rare.	Detroit now requires approximately 480 hours of field education; other presbyteries use internships, mentoring, and practicums.	Significant development in selected presbyteries.
Mentoring and supervision	Presbyteries reported difficulty locating qualified mentors and supervisors.	Current polity requires an MWS mentor/supervisor for commissioned CREs.	Constitutional clarity has increased; quality of supervision remains variable.
Competency-based formation	A minority of programs assessed prior competencies and individualized preparation.	CRE competency language and Senior Portfolio development place competency and alternative assessment more prominently in current conversation.	The concept has moved closer to the center.
Seminary involvement	Seminaries were already major educational providers.	Union, Dubuque, Austin, and other institutions continue to provide CRE-relevant education.	Strong continuity.
Graduate education for CREs	Preparation was predominantly nondegree or continuing education.	Dubuque now offers graduate ministry formation specifically organized for current and prospective CREs.	Significant new development.
CRE identity	Wheeler raised the “second-best pastor or extraordinary elder?” question.	GA227 reaffirmed nonhierarchical ordered ministry while expanding CRE participation.	The tension remains, but theological boundaries are clearer.
Collaborative ministry	Wheeler raised cooperative models involving commissioned elders and MWSs.	Collaborative and differentiated ministry remain active areas of experimentation and discussion.	Still emerging.
Continuing formation	Long-term formation received less attention than initial preparation.	Muskingum Valley has an explicit continuing-education level; seminary CRE cohorts also exist.	Developing but not standardized.
Compensation/status	Wheeler warned of the danger of two differently educated and compensated classes of pastoral leaders.	Presbytery compensation approaches still vary substantially; benefits structures have become more flexible.	Largely unresolved.

Issue	Wheeler/Auburn Finding, 2008	Evidence by 2026	Assessment
CRE-to-MWS pathway	No systematic pathway existed.	Graduate CRE education, competency assessment, and Senior Portfolio development make cumulative formation more conceivable, but no national pathway exists.	Major unresolved opportunity.

B.3 Historical Conclusion

The issues motivating the present proposal were visible by 2008.

What has changed is that more of the institutional pieces needed to address them now exist.

Appendix C — National Context and Denominational Trends

C.1 PC(USA) Congregational and Ministerial Landscape, 2025

Measure	2025
Congregations	8,304
Ministers of Word and Sacrament	17,250
New MWS ordinations	128
Reported minister deaths	350
Candidates preparing for ministry	658
Commissioned Ruling Elders	1,092
Median congregation	53 members
Congregations with 50 or fewer members	3,832
Membership in congregations with 50 or fewer	98,990
Membership in 37 largest congregations	94,274
Approximate share of congregations with 100 or fewer members	70%
Share of membership in those congregations	24%
Share of congregations over 300 members	8%
Share of membership in congregations over 300 members	46%

C.2 Interpretation

These figures establish a denomination numerically dominated by small congregations while membership remains disproportionately concentrated in larger congregations.

They also show that reported minister deaths substantially exceeded new ordinations in 2025.

They do not, by themselves, establish a national “pastor shortage.”

Geography, compensation, retirement, specialized ministry, call preferences, part-time service, and congregational expectations all affect pastoral availability.

The evidence supports the narrower conclusion that one full-time MWS serving one congregation cannot by itself address the circumstances of thousands of PC(USA) congregations.

C.3 CRE Trend

The long-term CRE trend should be described as **substantial expansion followed by institutionalization at a significant level**, not uninterrupted annual growth.

Available denominational data indicate rapid growth from roughly 200 around 2000 to nearly 900 by the end of that decade, followed by many years near or above that level and more recent totals exceeding one thousand.

A final production version should include a fully verified year-by-year or selected-year series only where official statistics have been confirmed.

Appendix D — Comparative Presbytery Formation and Deployment Models

D.1 Purpose and Limitation

This appendix compares selected presbyteries because their published practices illuminate different approaches to CRE preparation, supervision, field formation, or deployment.

It is **not a national census**.

No claim about what "most presbyteries" do should be inferred from this table.

D.2 Comparative Matrix

Presbytery/ Region	Academic Formation	Field / Practical Formation	Mentoring / Supervision	Continuing Formation	Home-Congregation Evidence	Distinctive Feature
Muskingum Valley	Seminary courses plus local theological and practical formation.	Local practicums and ministry laboratories.	Integrated presbytery oversight.	Explicit Level 3 continuing education.	Not established from reviewed source.	Three levels: Generalist Commission, Congregational Ministry Commission, Continuing Education.
Detroit	Approved CRE theological preparation.	Required field education of approximately 480 hours.	Presbytery oversight and continuing mentoring/supervision.	Ongoing review after commissioning.	Not established from reviewed source.	Strong documented field-education requirement.
Florida	Approved theological education; current process uses seminary-based formation such as Union Pathways or equivalent.	Exploration/ Discipleship process includes assigned preaching, session observation, and worship observation beyond the candidate's congregation of membership.	Mentor during preparation; MWS supervision after commissioning.	Development assessed across several domains.	No formal home-congregation prohibition is claimed here because approved documentary language has not been located.	Explicitly treats preparation as developmental rather than simply course completion.

Presbytery/ Region	Academic Formation	Field / Practical Formation	Mentoring / Supervision	Continuing Formation	Home-Congregation Evidence	Distinctive Feature
Cincinnati	Presbytery-approved educational preparation.	Prior preaching or formation may be considered in some circumstances.	COM/CPM oversight.	Not fully established from reviewed sources.	CRE ordinarily does not serve the home congregation but may be permitted.	Illustrates a presumption against rather than an absolute prohibition.
Southern New England shared policy	Regional training in partnership with theological education providers.	Shared preparation across participating presbyteries.	Joint oversight.	Regional structure intended to increase consistency.	Published policy permits home-congregation service with safeguards.	Cross-presbytery standardization and portability concerns are addressed explicitly.
Maumee Valley	Multiple leadership tracks using seminary or equivalent preparation.	Specialized internships and formation according to ministry function.	Presbytery oversight.	Leadership Academy supports continued development.	Particular functions may occur in the home congregation; training experiences may occur elsewhere.	Multiple ruling-elder leadership tracks rather than a single undifferentiated CRE credential.
Heartland	Formation not the primary issue in reviewed compensation source.	—	—	Continuing-education and leave expectations appear in pastoral compensation policy.	Not established.	Common pastoral minimum framework applied to installed and contracted pastoral positions, prorated by FTE.

D.3 What This Comparison Demonstrates

This sample demonstrates that educational delivery varies, practical formation varies, home-congregation policies vary, and differentiated formation by ministry function already exists.

It does **not** establish how common any one approach is nationally.

Appendix E — Seminary Programs and the Emerging Educational Continuum

E.1 Program Comparison

Institution	Program	Level	Core Content	Delivery	Relationship to CRE Formation	What It Demonstrates
Union Presbyterian Seminary	Pathways	Nondegree / continuing theological education	Biblical interpretation, Reformed theology, church history, Christian life, mission, polity, teaching, worship/Sacraments, pastoral care, preaching	Primarily online	Explicitly supports CRE/CLP preparation	Seminary-based foundational CRE education.

Institution	Program	Level	Core Content	Delivery	Relationship to CRE Formation	What It Demonstrates
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary	Certificate in Congregational Leadership	Noncredit certificate	OT, NT, preaching, Christian education, caregiving, polity, Reformed theology, worship/Sacraments	Online	Designed for CRE/lay pastoral candidates	Classic CRE curriculum in accessible format.
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary	MA in Ministry / CRE Cohort	Graduate degree	Bible, theology, ministry practice, leadership, ethics, supervised/integrative work	Online graduate study	CRE-specific cohort for current and prospective CREs	Graduate theological formation can be designed explicitly for CREs.
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary	Certificate in Ministry	Certificate	Church history, theology, worship/preaching, education, pastoral care, polity, ethics, biblical studies among offerings	Online	Used by some presbyteries for commissioned-ministry preparation	Modular seminary formation while the presbytery retains commissioning authority.

E.2 What the Evidence Supports

The evidence supports three conclusions.

First, seminary involvement in CRE formation is longstanding.

Second, CRE theological education now ranges from noncredit certificate work to graduate-level study.

Third, seminaries and presbyteries continue to occupy different ecclesial roles.

The seminary educates.

The presbytery discerns, examines, commissions, and oversees.

E.3 What the Evidence Does Not Yet Support

The research does not establish that Dubuque MA credits automatically satisfy MDiv requirements.

The final report should therefore avoid describing current graduate CRE education as automatically "stackable into the MDiv" unless a current academic policy is obtained.

The evidence is sufficient to say that **graduate theological progression for CREs now exists within institutions that also offer MDiv education**.

Appendix F — MWS Formation, Senior Ordination Portfolio, and Readiness Assessment

F.1 Current Distinction

Current polity maintains distinct processes for commissioning a ruling elder to particular pastoral service and preparing a person for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Nothing in the Senior Ordination Portfolio changes that distinction.

F.2 What the Senior Portfolio Represents

The 227th General Assembly approved continued development of a standardized Senior Ordination Portfolio as an alternative means of assessing readiness in areas historically evaluated through senior ordination examinations.

Implementation is not complete.

Current denominational reporting identifies approximately fall 2029 as a likely target, not a guaranteed implementation date.

F.3 What It Changes — and Does Not Change

Question	Current / Traditional Structure	Senior Portfolio Direction
Presbytery discernment remains required?	Yes	Yes
Theological education appropriate to MWS preparation remains required?	Yes	Yes
Portfolio automatically waives academic requirements?	No	No
Portfolio grants academic credit?	No	No
Readiness must be demonstrated?	Yes	Yes
One standardized written-exam format is the only possible assessment mechanism?	No; alternatives already exist under specified circumstances.	The portfolio would create a more standardized alternative pathway for assessment.
Presbytery remains involved in evaluation?	Yes	Yes

Appendix G — Compensation, Benefits, and Sustainable Support

G.1 The Unresolved Policy Problem

No broadly accepted national CRE compensation formula emerged from this research.

The evidence demonstrates variation, not consensus.

G.2 Verified Models

Model	Example	Description	Strength	Unresolved Question
Common pastoral minimum with FTE adjustment	Heartland	Minimum terms apply to installed and contracted pastoral positions; salary may be scaled for part-time service.	Treats pastoral work within a common support framework.	Benefit requirements and actual household needs may still differ.
Contextual contracting	Present in various presbytery systems	Compensation negotiated according to hours, role, local capacity, and pastoral relationship.	Flexible.	Without strong minimums, flexibility can become inequity.
Benefit-inclusive support	Board of Pensions Congregational Pastors Package	Eligible commissioned pastors serving at least 20 hours weekly may be offered significant denominational benefits.	Recognizes more than one pastoral employment model.	Availability does not mean every congregation can afford or elect participation.

G.3 Removed Example

An earlier working draft used a specific East Iowa percentage differential.

That example has been removed because the current official policy document was not verified during the source-ledger process.

No numerical East Iowa claim should appear in the final report unless subsequently documented.

G.4 Board of Pensions Developments

The redesigned Benefits Plan acknowledges changing patterns of pastoral service and household structure.

Eligible commissioned pastors may participate in significant benefits structures under specified conditions.

This demonstrates increased flexibility in the denomination's support system.

It does not resolve what constitutes adequate CRE compensation.

G.5 Theological Framework

The proposal's central compensation question is:

> **What support does this person and household reasonably require in order to undertake the ministry faithfully and sustainably?**

This is the theological argument of the project, not a quotation from a Board of Pensions document.

It should be presented as interpretation and proposal.

Two additional questions belong beside it:

What time, responsibility, and availability does the ministry require?

What resources can the congregation reasonably sustain?

Where these do not align, the presbytery may need to participate in creating a sustainable ministry structure.

G.6 Research Need

National data are still needed concerning:

CRE effective salary;

FTE;

medical coverage;

pension participation;

dependent coverage;

bivocational income;

household reliance on pastoral compensation;

continuing-education support;

vacation and study leave;

and years of commissioned service.

Without such data, national claims that CREs are generally undercompensated or adequately compensated should be avoided.

Appendix H — Home-Congregation Service and Indigenous Pastoral Leadership

H.1 What the Evidence Establishes

The research confirms that presbytery policies vary.

It does not establish a national prevalence rate.

H.2 Verified Examples

Model	Example	Policy
Ordinarily discouraged, exceptions possible	Cincinnati	CRE ordinarily does not serve in the home congregation but may be permitted.
Permitted with safeguards	Southern New England shared policy	Home-congregation service may be permitted with explicit attention to boundaries, relationships, and transition when the commission concludes.
Different rules for particular functions	Maumee Valley and similar systems	Certain ruling-elder functions may occur in the home congregation while other formation or internship experiences occur elsewhere.

H.3 Florida

Presbytery of Florida is **not** included as a documented example of categorical prohibition.

Current local practice has been described as “not serve a home congregation,” but the relevant manuals are in transition and approved written policy establishing the rule has not been located.

For purposes of this published research, that claim should therefore be omitted.

Florida remains useful evidence for outside-congregation formative experiences during CRE preparation.

H.4 Reasons for Restriction

Concerns include:

dual relationships;

family ties;

unclear authority;

movement from peer to pastor;

boundary complications;

and difficulty returning to ordinary membership after a commission concludes.

H.5 Reasons to Study Permission With Safeguards

Congregations may contain significant pastoral gifts already known to the community.

A categorical rule can prevent those gifts from being developed locally.

The appropriate research question is therefore not whether home-congregation service is inherently good or bad, but whether identifiable safeguards can reduce the risks sufficiently in selected contexts.

H.6 Research Need

A national policy census should classify presbyteries as:

prohibit;

ordinarily prohibit but allow exceptions;

permit with safeguards;

permit;

or policy unclear.

Until such a census exists, no national percentage should be claimed.

Appendix I — Emerging Models of Differentiated and Collaborative Ministry

I.1 Differentiated Formation Without Hierarchy

Muskingum Valley provides strong evidence that differentiated formation can be organized around **scope of ministry rather than status of pastor**.

Its levels correspond to different responsibilities and continuing formation.

This supports the proposition that additional education can be related to additional responsibilities without implying that one congregation or pastoral leader is more valuable than another.

I.2 Multiple Leadership Tracks

Maumee Valley and similar programs demonstrate that ruling elders can be prepared for different ministry functions.

This shows that Presbyterian pastoral leadership need not be treated as a binary choice between:

MWS;

or one undifferentiated CRE role.

I.3 Commissioned Pastoral Teams

The present research has **not** established that formal CRE pastoral teams are widespread.

The idea belongs to the proposal.

Existing evidence makes it plausible because ruling elders may already be prepared and authorized for different functions.

A Commissioned Pastoral Team should therefore be described as:

a pilot model;

an experiment;

or a possibility worthy of study.

It should not be described as an established national trend.

I.4 Teaching Congregations

Existing field-education practices provide precedent for supervised CRE formation.

Detroit's substantial field requirement is the clearest example in this study.

Florida also requires several formative experiences in congregations other than the candidate's own.

The formal **Teaching Congregation** designation is nevertheless a proposal of this project, not a national PC(USA) program.

Appendix J — Seminaries, MDiv Formation, and Institutional Concern

J.1 Question

Are Presbyterian seminaries resisting CRE development because they fear it will replace MWS formation or the MDiv?

J.2 Finding

The evidence does **not** support that as a national factual claim.

Current institutional behavior includes:

Union providing CRE-oriented theological education;

Dubuque providing CRE certificate and graduate formation;

Austin providing theological education used by some presbyteries for commissioned ministry;

and historic seminary involvement documented by the Auburn study.

This demonstrates participation in CRE formation.

It does not establish the private attitudes of seminary leaders.

J.3 Appropriate Conclusion

The strongest defensible statement is:

> **The research did not identify evidence that Presbyterian seminaries as a group are opposing CRE expansion out of concern that CREs will replace MWS formation.**

The report should not claim:

"Seminaries are not worried."

Absence of public evidence is not evidence of absence.

J.4 ATS Context

Preliminary fall 2025 ATS data showed a 2.4 percent increase in MDiv enrollment among a same-school reporting cohort.[22]

This is relevant context.

It does not establish a durable reversal of long-term enrollment pressures and should not be used to generalize specifically about PC(USA)-related seminaries.

Appendix K — Evidence, Inference, and Proposal

K.1 Directly Supported by Current Evidence

The available evidence supports the following statements:

Commissioned pastoral ministry has expanded substantially since 2000 and is now established within the PC(USA).

CRE preparation has historically varied in depth and field formation.

Presbyterian seminaries have participated in CRE preparation for decades.

22 Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Congregational Pastors Package," accessed September 5, 2026, https://www.pensions.org/what-we-offer/benefits-packages/congregational-pastors-package/.

The 2008 Auburn study identified concerns about educational adequacy, limited field education, CRE identity, and collaborative ministry.

Some presbyteries now require substantial supervised formation.

At least one current presbytery operates an explicit three-level CRE formation model.

Some presbyteries intentionally differentiate ruling-elder preparation according to ministry function.

Graduate theological education specifically organized for CREs now exists.

The 227th General Assembly continued development of the Senior Ordination Portfolio and moved toward greater coherence in CRE expectations.

Current polity requires MWS mentoring/supervision of commissioned ruling elders.[23]

Presbytery compensation approaches vary.

The Board of Pensions makes significant benefit structures available to eligible commissioned pastors.

Home-congregation policies vary.

K.2 Reasonable Inferences

The evidence makes the following interpretations plausible:

the denomination is giving increasing attention to competency-based formation and assessment;

seminary and presbytery roles could be differentiated more intentionally between academic and clinical formation;

continuing CRE formation is likely to become increasingly important;

graduate theological education can be pursued cumulatively over time;

greater standardization may improve trust and portability between presbyteries;

and closer formation relationships between CREs and MWSs may strengthen collegiality.

These should be presented as interpretations, not settled denominational policy.

K.3 Proposals Requiring Testing

The following remain proposals:

a cumulative CRE formation architecture;

formal Teaching Congregations;

required presbytery-based clinical cohorts;

a formal preparation process for clinical cohort leaders;

Commissioned Pastoral Teams;

a standardized advanced-formation framework based on ministry complexity;

a defined academic bridge from CRE formation to MWS preparation;

and a national support-based CRE compensation methodology.

Appendix L — Priority Questions for Further National Research

CRE Deployment

How many CREs are actively commissioned?

23Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order, 2025–2027, G-2.1004.

What proportion serve congregations?

What proportion serve specialized ministries?

How many serve as principal pastoral leaders?

How many serve on staffs with Ministers of Word and Sacrament?

How many serve multiple congregations?

How many serve congregations in which they were members before commissioning?

Formation

How many presbyteries require seminary coursework?

How many require internships?

How many require specified field hours?

How many require mentoring before commissioning?

How many require continuing cohorts or structured continuing education?

How are competencies assessed?

Home-Congregation Service

How many presbyteries prohibit it?

How many ordinarily discourage it?

How many permit it with safeguards?

How many permit it without additional restrictions?

What outcomes differ among those approaches?

Compensation and Benefits

What is median CRE effective salary by FTE?

How does it compare with presbytery MWS minimums?

How many CREs receive medical and pension benefits?

How many depend on another household member's insurance?

How many are bivocational?

How many households depend primarily upon CRE compensation?

CRE-to-MWS Movement

How many CREs enter MWS preparation annually?

What prior coursework is recognized?

What barriers do experienced CREs encounter?

Do CRE entrants demonstrate distinctive strengths or gaps?

Seminary Relationships

Which PC(USA)-related seminaries provide CRE preparation?

Which programs carry academic credit?

How many CRE students later pursue graduate theological degrees?

What do seminaries understand as the appropriate relationship between CRE and MWS formation?

Outcomes

How does CRE tenure compare with MWS tenure?

How do congregations evaluate preaching, care, leadership, and availability?

Does extensive field education predict stronger outcomes?

Do clinical cohorts improve retention, boundaries, conflict management, or well-being?

Do team models produce different outcomes from solo commissioned ministry?

Appendix M — Reconciled Source Ledger Summary

The detailed Source Ledger is maintained separately. The following sources provide the principal evidentiary foundation.

Source	Authority	Principal Use
PC(USA), *Book of Order 2025–2027*	Primary constitutional	Ordered ministries, CRE authorization, preparation, supervision
Barbara G. Wheeler, *Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors* (2008)	Formal denominationally commissioned research	Historical baseline for curriculum, depth, field education, competency, identity
PC(USA) 2025 statistical reporting	Primary denominational statistics	Congregational size, MWS totals, ordinations, deaths, candidates, CRE totals
GA227 / Ordination Task Force sources	Primary denominational	CRE competencies, nonhierarchical ministry, CRE participation, Senior Portfolio
Muskingum Valley Presbytery	Primary presbytery	Three-level CRE formation and differentiated competencies
Presbytery of Detroit	Primary presbytery	Extensive field education
Presbytery of Florida	Primary presbytery	Exploration/Discipleship, mentoring, developmental formation
Presbytery of Cincinnati	Primary presbytery	Home-congregation policy example
Southern New England policy	Primary regional/presbytery	Shared preparation and home-congregation safeguards
Union Presbyterian Seminary	Primary seminary	CRE foundational theological education
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary	Primary seminary	CRE certificate and graduate formation
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary	Primary seminary	Modular CRE-relevant theological education
Board of Pensions	Primary denominational benefits	Benefits redesign and commissioned-pastor eligibility
Heartland Presbytery	Primary presbytery	Common pastoral minimum/FTE compensation model
Association of Theological Schools	Primary sector data	MDiv enrollment context

Appendix N — Working Evidentiary Conclusions

1. CRE ministry is established, not experimental.

The denomination has lived with substantial commissioned pastoral leadership for more than two decades.

2. Questions about educational adequacy are longstanding.

They were formally documented by the Auburn study in 2008.

3. The response has generally involved strengthening formation rather than abandoning commissioned ministry.

Current examples include extensive field education, differentiated preparation, mentoring, continuing formation, and graduate theological study.

4. There is no single national CRE formation model.

Contextual flexibility remains significant.

5. Seminary involvement is longstanding and continues to develop.

The evidence does not support a simple seminary-versus-CRE narrative.

6. The denomination is reconsidering the relationship between standards and assessment.

The Senior Ordination Portfolio is a significant current example.

7. Additional preparation can correspond to additional responsibility without implying a hierarchy of congregational worth.

Muskingum Valley provides a concrete current example.

8. Home-congregation service is a genuine area of presbytery variation.

No national prevalence rate has been established.

9. Compensation remains unresolved.

Current evidence demonstrates different philosophies and structures but not a national formula.

10. The principal innovation of the companion proposal is integration.

The proposal does not invent seminary CRE education, field education, mentoring, continuing formation, graduate study, competency assessment, or flexible benefits.

It asks whether those existing elements can be designed intentionally as a more coherent pastoral formation ecology.

Closing Note

These appendices are intentionally conservative in their claims.

Where evidence is incomplete, the document says so.

Where a model exists only in selected presbyteries, it is identified as an example rather than a national trend.

Where a recommendation originates with this project, it is labeled as proposal.

Where an earlier example could not be verified—such as the East Iowa compensation percentage—it has been removed.

Where a current local practice could not be documented in approved policy—such as the Presbytery of Florida home-congregation restriction—it has not been presented as formal evidence.

That discipline is essential to the credibility of the final report.

The goal is not to make the evidence appear stronger than it is.

It is to make the argument strong enough that it does not need exaggeration.