



Covenants for Orders

Ordained persons exercise their ministry in covenant with all Christians, especially with those whom they lead and serve in ministry. They also live in covenant of mutual care and accountability with all those who share their ordination, especially in The United Methodist Church, with the ordained who are members of the same annual conference and part of the same Order. The covenant of ordained ministry is a lifetime commitment, and those who enter into it dedicate their whole lives to the personal and spiritual disciplines it requires.

—The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church

Ordained clergy in The United Methodist Church are members of an order, and orders have responsibilities and purposes. These are spelled out in paragraphs 301 through 309 of the *Discipline*.

Order membership

All ordained clergy become members of an order upon election to full membership and are to participate in the order.

Organization of an order

- The bishop convenes and provides spiritual leadership for the order.
- The annual conference provides funds for the order through the Board of Ordained Ministry.
- The BOM nominates (and the order elects) from the order membership a chairperson every quadrennium. The chairperson is a voting member of the Board of Ordained Ministry executive committee.

The functions of the order

- Gather regularly for continuing spiritual formation (Bible study, issues facing church and society, theological exploration of vocational identity and leadership).

- Assist in plans for individual study and retreats.
- Develop a bond of unity and common commitment to the United Methodist mission and ministry.
- Nurture mutually supportive and trusting relationships among order members.
- Hold order members accountable to the above purposes.

Purpose and nature of covenant

A covenant in a faith context is a mutual exchange of promises for the good of the body, its purpose and ministry, and discipleship to God.

Many religious orders have a rule, which is a form of covenant. The members agree to the actions prescribed by the rule in order to remain in the order. For example, the Rule of Benedict revolves around practices in five areas: prayer, work, study, hospitality, and renewal/Sabbath (see benedictfriend.org). Covenant/Accountable Discipleship groups' covenants revolve around the four areas of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion.

Content of order covenants

Each order may develop into covenantal form the practices and promises that seem most critical in their context. Given the above-stated purposes of an order, covenants may include these components:

- **Preamble**

Why do we exist as a United Methodist Order of Deacons or Elders? What are the key values we share? What is our relationship to God and to the church? What are our spiritual and institutional commitments? What are the responsibilities of the order as a community, and what are the responsibilities of the individual member?

- **Key areas of promise**

1. Spiritual growth

- **As a gathered community:** Determine how frequently the order will meet for worship, learning, or spiritual retreat.
- **As individuals:** Identify the spiritual disciplines members will promise to pursue for their own spiritual development.

2. Vocational development

- **The order** will organize for the members opportunities for reflection upon and renewal of vocation, continuing development of the practice of ministry, self-care, boundaries and ethics, and issues facing the church and society.
- **The member** will participate in the order gatherings and pursue opportunities for vocational development.

3. Accountability and support

- **The order** will facilitate opportunities for order members to gather in small groups regularly to develop collegial trust, support and encourage each other, and hold each other accountable to maintaining personal health and personal renewal, ethical relationships and practices, their relationships with each other and God, and their commitment to The United Methodist Church's mission and ministry.
- **The members** will participate in a collegial small group for the above purposes.

- **Conclusion**

Briefly state the aspirations of the order (for example, to grow in Christlikeness, in faithfulness to the calling, and in trusting relationship with each other), and conclude with a benediction.

Preparing and renewing the covenant

An order with many people, such as an Order of Elders, may assign the development of a covenant to a small representative group. An order with a smaller number of members, such as an Order of Deacons, may gather as an order to develop a covenant.

The process for preparing a Covenant Discipleship Group covenant can be adapted for this purpose.

Members may recommit to the covenant annually at clergy session or an annual gathering of the order. This is an opportunity for new full members to commit to the covenant.