



The General Board of Examining Chaplains & the General Ordination Examination

Frequently Asked Questions

History and Purpose

- **What is the General Board of Examining Chaplains (GBEC)?**
The 1970 General Convention of The Episcopal Church established by canon (III.15) the General Board of Examining Chaplains (GBEC) to standardize the process of examination for ordination. The GBEC administered the first General Ordination Examination (GOE) in 1972 and has given it annually since.
- **Why is there a "General" Ordination Examination rather than a diocesan exam?**
People are ordained in their particular dioceses, but they are ordained on behalf of, and for service throughout, the whole church. Before 1972, each diocese had its own process of examination, and testing varied widely from place to place. The exams' contents depended upon the interests and concerns of individual dioceses and people within them. Some Candidates had lenient examiners and easy questions while others suffered with quirky examiners and inappropriate exams. The GOE is the same for all Candidates no matter where they come from. Evaluators do not know Candidates' identities and have no connection with their Commissions on Ministry, their seminaries or their bishops. The GBEC executive director/GOE administrator and his staff, Readers, the Board, and editors, as well as diocesan officials, carefully review evaluations, so Candidates have the benefit of a series of independent evaluations.
- **Why is there a GOE?**
The canons (III. 8) require that before ordination a Candidate must be examined and show proficiency in (1) The Holy Scriptures; (2) Church History, including the Ecumenical Movement; (3) Christian Theology; (4) Christian Ethics and Moral Theology; (5) Studies in Contemporary Society, including Racial and Minority Groups; (6) Liturgics and Church Music; and (7) Theory and Practice of Ministry. These are known as the seven canonical areas.
- **What do the seven canonical areas specifically include?**
(1) The Holy Scriptures Scholarly approaches to biblical criticism, their values and limitations; principles and practice of exegesis and hermeneutics; chronology, history, important personalities in the Old Testament, New Testament, and Apocrypha; geography of biblical lands; knowledge of world events and their effects upon the development of the Judeo-Christian tradition; Gospel narratives in Johannine and Synoptic traditions, including Acts; theme, contents and historical context of each book of the Old and New Testaments; major theological developments in the entire tradition; and biblical sources of Christian creeds and historical doctrines.

(2) Church History, including the Ecumenical Movement The major events and personalities from apostolic and patristic times through Medieval and Reformation periods to the present, in relation to their historical and social contexts; development of distinctive church institutions, formation of the canon of scripture; doctrinal development (heresies, theological controversies, creeds, classical writings); missionary expansion; Church of England from beginning to present, especially the Reformation period and since (Caroline Divines, evangelical revival, Tractarians, expansion of the Anglican Communion, Anglican role in the Ecumenical Movement); the Episcopal Church from beginning to present in context of American church history in general -- major events and personalities; modern missionary movement (biblical and theological basis, relation to the Ecumenical Movement); and general knowledge of comparative religions.

(3) Christian Theology, including Missionary Theology and Missiology The doctrines: revelation, creation, sin, Christology, atonement, Trinity, soteriology, church, sacraments, missiology, and eschatology; history of Christian thought (Church Fathers, creedal development, Anglican tradition, recent developments); application (ascetical, hermeneutical, apologetic); relation to contemporary understandings of human nature in both individual and social dimensions.

(4) Christian Ethics and Moral Theology The sources of Christian ethics and moral theology, including the Holy Scriptures, Christian tradition and experience; major ethical theories and major figures in the field; the nature, locus and justification for "the good," including the relation between God, Christ and the good; the nature of moral agency, including the understanding of such issues as freedom, responsibility, obligation, virtue, conscience and character; moral judgment, including the knowledge of the relation between religious belief and moral judgment; the place of spirituality in Anglican teaching about the moral life; major moral issues facing Christians, past and present, and how Anglican moral theologians have resolved or might resolve them.

(5) Studies in Contemporary Society, including Racial and Minority Groups Current social issues and problems (poverty, homelessness, hunger, racism, injustice, addiction, crime, illegitimacy, child abuse, environmental pollution, war and peace, etc.); ways in which the church and Christian individuals have addressed and may address these; current concerns particular to major ethnic groups in the USA.

(6) Liturgics and Church Music Christian worship and music according to the contents and use of the Book of Common Prayer and the various hymnals; historical development of Christian worship from Jewish origins to present; theological understanding of the role and function of worship in the life of individuals and of the church; sacramental theology; esthetic and non-verbal elements of worship; the role of music in particular; evolution, contents and use of the Book of Common Prayer and the hymnals.

(7) Theory and Practice of Ministry Theology of vocation and of all forms of ministry; ministerial roles of laity, diaconate, priesthood, and episcopate; duties and responsibilities of clergy in the contemporary church; nature and significance of pastoral care; knowledge of the practice of the following: preaching; counseling, spiritual direction, the education of all ages, parish administration, stewardship, evangelism, polity of our church, and national and local constitutions and canons.

- **But haven't Candidates already been tested in all these areas in seminary?**

The GBEC does not intend to duplicate seminary testing in academic areas but to examine how the Candidate has integrated his or her knowledge in the various canonical areas. It aims to evaluate in the GOE the perception and analysis of issues in the several areas; the application of training and resources; the demonstration of knowledge and pastoral sensitivity; and the articulation of views. Some GOE questions may ask for the integration of disciplines and an understanding of the relationships between them, as well as how to use them in ministry.

The Examiners

- **Who are the Examining Chaplains?**

The House of Bishops elects (and the House of Deputies confirms) members for staggered six-year terms: four bishops, six clergy with pastoral care, six faculty from seminaries or other educational institutions, and six lay people, each with special competence in one or more of the seven canonical areas. Vacancies are filled at interim meetings of the House of Bishops, on nomination of one of the bishops who is a member of the GBEC. All Board members are volunteers.

- **Who are the Readers?**

The executive director/GOE administrator recruits Readers using suggestions from clergy and laity – bishops, Readers, seminary deans, and others – and tries to ensure diversity and a balance of men and women and clergy and laity, as far as possible. Readers come from all walks of life. About half of them are clergy, often with pastoral cures. Some Readers are academics or professional educators. Many clergy Readers, themselves, have taken the GOE. Whether clergy or laity, the Readers work conscientiously and carefully and are aware of the importance of what they are doing. All Readers are volunteers.

Accountability

- **To whom does the GBEC report?**

The GBEC reports to the House of Bishops and to the General Convention.

- **How do I know the General Ordination Exam is fair?**

Unlike most academic exams, the GOE is not created by a single individual but by specialized teams of members of the Board whose proposed questions in each canonical area are reviewed by the entire Board. This Board includes bishops, seminary faculty members, parish priests, and lay people experienced in the church and in education. Together they must approve each part of the entire GOE. This process is designed to eliminate bias in the questions. The Board as a whole, in other words, accepts responsibility for the integrity of the GOE, as it does for that of the evaluation. This is why the names of every Board member appear on the exam certificate.

- **How does the GBEC evaluate its own work?**

The GBEC formally and informally evaluates its work every year. It formally collects and discusses feedback from Examining Chaplains, Readers, editors, staff, and professionals in the field of educational testing. Examining Chaplains evaluate Readers. The Board formally reviews the entire annual process of the GOE creation, administration, and evaluation, and it keeps performance statistics in every area. It also receives feedback from bishops, seminary deans, Candidates, and other sources.

- **How does the GBEC manage its work?**

A salaried executive director carries on the GBEC's work throughout the year.

- **How does the GBEC take into account cultural and ethnic differences?**

As far as possible, the board itself is culturally and ethnically diverse, and so are the selected Readers. The GBEC is also deliberately attentive to possible problems of cultural differences posed by the GOE questions.

The Exam

- **When does the GOE occur?**

By October 15, bishops and seminary deans nominate Candidates (usually students in their last year of theological education). The GBEC offers the GOE once per year -- in January. Those without diocesan sponsorship may be nominated by their seminary deans.
- **Where?**

The GBEC administers the GOE at Episcopal seminaries and at other locations through private administrators appointed by bishops.
- **How long does it last?**

The GOE consists of seven three-hour essay questions over five days. Candidates usually answer two questions per day with at least a half-day break usually in the middle.
- **How does the GBEC create the GOE?**

The board produces a new GOE annually. All members of the GBEC participate in a year-long process of conceiving and formulating questions, based on the seven canonical areas and time constraints of the exam. Board members are divided into teams assigned to the various canonical areas; each team constructs questions designed to give Candidates plenty of opportunity to show their knowledge and understanding. The board approves ideas for questions; teams first work independently in small groups, then seek feedback from other question-writing teams, and finally get feedback from the entire GBEC. In preparing the questions, the board assumes that, at the time of taking the exam, Candidates will have finished two and a half years of seminary training or the equivalent. Copies of previous years' GOE questions are available at www.episcopalgbec.org.
- **What forms do the GOE answers take?**

The GOE has varied and has asked for answers in the following forms: essays or short answers; or multiple-choice or true/false selections; or a combination of some of these. At present, it consists of seven essay questions, each principally representing one of the seven canonical areas. For each question, the GOE may allow for the use of open resources, limited resources, or no outside resources.
- **What does the GOE cover?**

The GOE covers all seven of the canonical areas, the contents of which are defined above.
- **When and how does the GBEC evaluate the Candidates' answers?**

The Board evaluates the GOE annually in February. A team of at least three people -- generally one clergy person, one lay person, and an Examining Chaplain -- evaluates each GOE answer. Readers and Chaplains annually undergo extensive training in using the scales (see below), issues of fairness, etc. Examining Chaplains supervise reading teams. GOE answers with less satisfactory scores receive one or more additional reviews, in some cases by bishops. A minimum of three people, and as many as five, must agree on every score. Additionally, the evaluations, themselves, receive a final review by an editorial team and at least one office staff person.
- **Why is the Candidates' anonymity important?**

The GBEC ensures anonymity during its evaluation process to protect Candidates from bias or preference based on appearance, background, personality, or other circumstances. The evaluators are concerned only with the level of proficiency shown in an anonymously written answer. Their judgments provide honest and thoughtful appraisals for bishops, Commissions on Ministry and Candidates, themselves, to use for diagnosis. Once the Board makes evaluations available to Candidates, it releases results to bishops (and seminary deans if the Candidate is at an Episcopal

seminary). The exam and its evaluation are intended as a part of the assessment of the whole person and all of his or her work.

- **How do the evaluations ensure fairness?**

The techniques used by the Educational Testing Services (ETS) in all advanced placement exams and by other national examining bodies include what the GBEC calls “scales.” Evaluators apply general scales as well as scales specific to each question. These scales define the criteria necessary for each level of scoring. At least three people – two Readers and an Examining Chaplain – must concur with each score.

- **What scores does the GBEC use, and what do they mean?**

The GBEC uses four scores:

4 = Excellent (demonstrates substantial proficiency),

3 = Satisfactory (demonstrates proficiency),

2 = Problematic (suggests inadequate proficiency),

1 = Unsatisfactory (demonstrates inadequate proficiency).

Scores of 4 or 3 certify competency in a canonical area; scores of 2 or 1 carry recommendations that diocesan authorities further assess competency or re-examine the Candidate.

- **How are the scores used?**

The purpose of the GOE is evaluative and advisory. The results are intended to help bishops and their Commissions on Ministry determine whether their Candidates “show proficiency” in the seven canonical areas. The GOE results offer help to diocesan authorities in determining their Candidates’ readiness for ordination and provides valuable guidance in planning continuing education to the Candidate and to his or her mentors. Every diocesan bishop determines exactly how to use the results, and most use them diagnostically to determine areas that may need more work before or after ordination.

- **What happens if a Candidate does not demonstrate proficiency in part or all of the GOE?**

The GOE is intended to be diagnostic, and bishops and Commissions on Ministry make whatever use of the GOE results they deem appropriate. Unsatisfactory the GOE results may or may not hinder ordination. Sometimes re-examination under different circumstances produces different results. Occasionally, a Candidate’s problem may be in writing or language skills. The GOE serves as one of many means of assessing preparation for ministry, to be weighed by diocesan authorities along with the Candidate’s other data.

The Examinees/Candidates

- **Who may take the GOE?**

Anyone may be nominated to take the GOE, and it is preferable for that person to have completed 2 1/2 years of a 3-year program leading to the degree of Master of Divinity. Bishops and seminary deans usually nominate Candidates. Within the last five years, Candidates from 95 out of 105 dioceses have taken the GOE.

- **What can the Candidate do to prepare?**

A person who has read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested his or her studies during preparation should do well on the GOE. Over the last decade, about two-thirds of those who have taken the exam have written good papers (shown proficiency in 6 or 7 areas), about one-fourth have written fair papers (shown proficiency in 3, 4, or 5 areas), and about one-tenth have written poor papers (shown proficiency in 0, 1, or 2 areas).

- **What if English is not the Candidate's first language?**
At the very beginning of the exam, the GBEC asks the Candidate to identify that fact. Examining Chaplains, Readers and others involved in the process account for that in the evaluation. The GBEC may further accommodate Candidates (e.g., translation of the exam or of the responses) on an individual basis.
- **What if accident, illness or a death in the family occurs during the examination period?**
The GBEC provides for such events on an individual basis.
- **How does the GBEC accommodate disability?**
The GBEC provides for learning or physical disability on an individual basis.

Funding

- **What does the GOE cost?**
The fee has varied over the years and is now \$500.
- **Who pays the fee?**
Most bishops pay the fee for their nominees. Those nominated by seminary deans usually pay the fee themselves through the office of the nominating dean. The GBEC does not accept personal checks.
- **Why does the GBEC charge a fee to take the GOE?** The General Convention budget requires that the Board cover part of the cost of administering and evaluating the GOE with an "examination fee".

Additional Questions

- **Visit:** www.episcopalgbec.org
- **Write:** General Board of Examining Chaplains
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