

# 10 Simple Steps to Ensure Legal Ordination

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Have you ever wondered what it takes to become ordained? If you have, then you are not the only one. When you do a Google search for “what does it take to become ordained,” you will find more than 100 million search results. While there is much good information online for the topic of ordination, there is also a lot of misinformation on the subject.

Hence, how do you know what information you should pay attention to?

The answer to that question, in large part, is going to depend on what you are wanting to know regarding ordination. My guess is that when you do an online search on ordination you are thinking about the spiritual aspects of ordination -- e.g., the spiritual connection of ordination between human beings and God, or the ordination ceremony that involves the spiritual act of the elders and church leaders praying for and laying hands on the one being ordained.

While that is a necessary aspect of ordination, it is also my guess that when you are researching and asking inquisitive questions about ordination, you are unaware of its legal aspect. **Maybe you have heard of legal ordination, but you are not sure what it means and the implications it has on you as a minister.**

In this post, we will look at why legal ordination is necessary for every pastor. Also, we will examine ten steps that you can implement in your church's ordination program to ensure that your ordination and the ordination of those ordained by your church meet the requirements of legal ordination.

However, before we do that, let us first look at what it means to become legally ordained.

## Becoming legally ordained through your church or ministry

Most ministers are under the impression that in order for their ordination to be “valid” they can only become ordained through a *more established* church organization. In addition, ministers buy into the myth that, “I cannot be ordained through my own church.”

We hear similar sentiments from pastors and ministry leaders at our conferences, but **the fact of the matter is that both of these notions are incorrect.**

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In fact, you are able to start a church, establish it on a solid legal foundation, and then become legally ordained through the very church you started.

Now, you may be thinking, “Getting ordained through my own church sounds great, but can I just get ordained online?” Well, the truth of the matter is **you *can* be ordained online, however, please think twice before doing so.** Let me explain.

(Recommended reading: [\*“3 Things Every Minister Should Know About Housing Allowance”\*](#))

## “Are online ordinations valid for legal purposes?”

If you were to do an Internet search for online ordinations, you would find no shortage of available options. Although online ordinations are easy and convenient to obtain, the important question to ask is, “**Are online ordinations valid for legal purposes?**”

In recent years, the states and Congress have expressed concern over the proliferation of online and mail order ordinations. Those concerns are not regarding the ordination of ministers as a whole, but whether the ministers who receive an online ordination are authorized to solemnize marriages.

In *Cramer v. Commonwealth*, a group of ministers ordained by the Universal Life Church (ULC) had their rights to conduct marriage ceremonies revoked by the Circuit Court of Richmond, VA. This group of ministers appealed the decision to the Supreme Court of Virginia. The ministers asked the Supreme Court of Virginia to rule that a minister who provides documentation proving his/her ordination from a religious organization be allowed to conduct marriage ceremonies in the state of Virginia.

The Supreme Court of Virginia heard the appeal from the ministers of ULC in order to decide whether it was truly a religious organization. Below are some of the highlights from the case:

1. It was determined that the relationships between the ministers of ULC and ULC itself were nearly nonexistent.
2. It was also revealed that ULC’s ordained ministers had few meetings with a congregation. In some instances, there were no meetings or gatherings at all.
3. The meetings or gatherings that did occur usually were at one's home or at public locations (such as restaurants). Moreover, the topics discussed during the gatherings were not often of a religious nature.

The lower court denied the officiants the right to perform weddings on the premise that ordained ministers conducting such ceremonies should be in the ministry full-time.

However, the Supreme Court of Virginia disagreed with the lower court’s ruling and stated that in Virginia there were plenty of good ministers that served their congregations well while also maintaining other employment. This, however, was not enough for the Supreme Court of Virginia to rule in favor of the appellants.

(Recommended reading: [\*“Are You Sure Your Ordination is Legal?”\*](#))

## Why legal ordination is necessary

The Supreme Court of Virginia made certain that this particular case had nothing to do with religious freedom. Due to the legal nature of marriage, the need for a legally ordained minister is necessary. The Supreme Court of Virginia recognized the "necessity that the marriage contract itself be memorialized in writing and by a person of responsibility and integrity and by one possessed of some educational qualifications."

In essence, there are two things that we can take away from this ruling:

1. **The Supreme Court of Virginia looked for a formal process**, and it held that the selection or election of an ordained minister "must be a considered, deliberate, and responsible act."
2. **The states cannot give preference to more established churches.** In other words, you can become legally ordained through the very church that you start. Now that is some good news!

## Creating an ordination program in your church

As we have just seen, the courts have determined that to receive a legal ordination, it does not matter how long your church has been in existence or how large your church is. Yet, **how can you be sure that the ordination you receive from your very own church and the ordinations that others receive from your church are legal in the eyes of the courts?**

We teach at all of our [Ultimate Church Structure Conferences](#) that it is necessary that your church create an ordination program. This fulfills the requirement that all ordinations "**be a considered, deliberate, and responsible act.**"

To help fulfill this requirement, your church should create a licensing and ordination program that is comprised of the ten components shown below:

1. Make sure that all of your corporate documents, such as the articles of incorporation, [bylaws](#), and board meeting minutes contain language stating that you intend on having or already have a licensing and ordination program.
2. Require that a certain set of criteria be met by the applicant, such as classes, on-the-job training, volunteer work at the church, and involvement in the local ministry. Keep a good record of all ministers that are licensed or serving under the apprenticeship of a pastor.
3. Require an application with a fee.
4. Require an [exam](#) to be taken and passed with a minimum required score.
5. Establish a formal process of commissioning.
6. Assign the ordination an expiration and renewal date.
7. Require a renewal process by either application or written letter requesting a renewal.
8. Keep a good record of all ministers that are commissioned, licensed, ordained, active, inactive, and revoked.

9. Make sure that his/her role as a minister is conveying your church's message and mission.
10. Require that the minister maintain a meaningful relationship with the ordaining church by attending conferences or services at least once a year.

**It is important to note that even though you are the lead pastor of the church you planted, you should still abide by the requirements of your church's ordination program.** This ensures that your ordination remains legal in the eyes of the law.

If your ordination program contains all ten components, it will meet the requirements of all fifty states in regard to licensing and ordination.

## **A solid foundation for the future of your ministry**

As a pastor, you can be assured that with the proper legal foundation, you can be ordained through your church, and you can ordain others too!

Ordination is a topic that lays heavy on the hearts of many pastors and ministry leaders across the country. It is for this reason we cover the topic of legal ordination and establishing an ordination program in your church or ministry at all of our [conferences](#).

**When you are armed with the right knowledge and strategies that you will learn at our conferences, you can be assured that with the proper legal foundation, you can be ordained through your church, and you can ordain others too.**

If you happen to have any questions regarding your ordination or your church's ordination program, please give our office a call at 844-625-1237, or join us at one of our [Ultimate Church Structure Conferences](#) where we address ordination and the ten components discussed above in more detail.

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- [\*"What You Need to Know About Your Pay, Part 1"\*](#)
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Blessings,  
Raul Rivera