

# GRANT UPDATE

TO

**THE PANEL ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION**

FROM

**CENTER (CONTINUING EDUCATION NETWORK FOR  
TRAINING, ENRICHMENT, AND RENEWAL)**

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## **Overview**

As stated in CENTER's proposal, over the last five years, CENTER, the Continuing Education Network for Training, Enrichment, and Renewal, has surveyed UUMA members about their continuing education experiences at chapters, in districts, CENTER workshops and other education-in-training organizations. While some continuing education programs are well-received, CENTER has received overwhelming anecdotal evidence stating that continuing education, in its current state, is not working. This information is based on more than one thousand survey evaluations from UU ministers, pertinent conversations and interviews with other professional staff and UU ministers, and in-person feedback from CENTER workshops. These evaluations reveal that there is a need for higher quality, more affordable, relevant programs that address the current needs of UU ministry.

Since receiving the POTE grant, CENTER has been collaborating in the acquisition of information with the Transitions, District Services, and Ministry & Professional Leadership offices of the UUA, the Alban Institute, Presidents and staff at numerous divinity schools including Andover Newton, Harvard Divinity School, Meadville Lombard, and Starr King, and several other ministers who have served on key UUMA and CENTER committees. It was our hope to mine the existing data scattered throughout these organizations to assess the current continuing education system and develop new peer-educational programs.

## **To Date**

To date, we have interviewed leaders at all of the above organizations and have received some materials from them. However, we are still working with them to receive information that will be extremely helpful in understanding the educational needs of ministers, especially in relation to their congregations or agencies. We are aware of some critical records and surveys that we hope to acquire within the next month. Upon receipt and analysis and based on observations from the initial interviews, we will release a survey to our membership regarding ministerial educational needs, specifically related to these critical records.

Because we are dependent on other people's busy schedules and deadlines, problems of understaffing, issues of confidentiality, and in many cases, lack of records, it has taken us longer than we hoped to collect all the information. Though we had expected to have already released our survey to our membership by this time, we did not want to do so until the completion of the data collection. We did not want to "over-survey" our membership, especially since it is difficult to inspire people to participate in surveys in general. We will provide a final report after we have collected all the available data and performed our membership survey.

The goal of CENTER's project, with POTE and the UU Funding panel, was to identify and address the current professional development needs of ministers. Through this project, CENTER has been researching the current professional development programs available, and the strengths, weaknesses, and relevancy of those programs. CENTER has also been researching the current continuing education needs of UU ministers in relation to their congregations and agencies. As this was a lengthy project, we are still in the midst of our research. We predict this research and the conclusions based upon it will be ready in the Summer of 2008. Even though our research is not finished, we have obtained enough information from the interviews with leaders in education to make some initial observations.

## Observations

After speaking with Presidents and staff at several divinity schools, these leaders in education have acknowledged that accessibility and high costs can be a deterrent to those seeking continuing education at their organizations. Schools like Andover Newton believe that if there were a market for continuing education or specific skills, they would surely develop programs to meet that need. Though Harvard Divinity School does not focus on continuing education, it is moving towards becoming a tuition free school in the next few years. This will greatly relieve the students of the tremendous financial burden UU ministers have throughout their lives. However, only a small percentage of UU students are in Harvard's Masters of Divinity program (c. 8-15 UU students/year). Schools like Meadville Lombard are working towards providing more online formats. While this is an exciting opportunity to reach more UU ministers, especially the younger generation, some educational leaders we interviewed expressed that ministers need the in-person contact and peer education to stay connected to a support network. Additionally, those that have tried online education and had bad experiences normally do not come back, according to a professor at Starr King.

One of the great benefits of CENTER's programs is the in-person, collegial setting. However, some of the leaders felt that CENTER's short workshop format at CENTER days needed to be altered to be more effective. Others have expressed that the ministers that lead our Chapters could become more effective with additional training.

We have also received a considerable amount of feedback indicating a lack of program support for ministers in their first five years in fellowship. However, CENTER has found that the number of early endings of ministries within the first five years of fellowship has sharply decreased from 2002 to 2006. (Early endings are defined as ministers leaving settled positions after five years of service or less.) Our preliminary findings show though there is very little in existence in terms of programs to support this group. Initial feedback from the interviews has suggested developing a formal mentoring program and expanding the UUA's First Year Ministers Seminar to address this. (The First Year Ministers Seminar is a UUA-sponsored program that took place last month for the first time in five years and was led by Rev. Jory Agate, a key member on the CENTER committee.)

Also of very serious concern, our research has found that while the number of early endings of ministries in their first five years has decreased, the number of early endings of ministries in the later years of fellowship has increased substantially in recent years. Among ministers in their later years in final fellowship, statistics show that early ministerial departures have increased by one third over the past 15 years, according to John Weston, Transitions Director, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Even more significant, the number of early endings brought about by negotiated resignation in this group has increased by about 50%. With more than 45% of the UUMA membership 15 or more years in fellowship, this issue is of great concern and extremely important to address. Preliminary research also shows that ministers may not be receiving the education in conflict management they need which may be playing a part in this increase. (It seems only 1% of the small grants requested from UUA's MPL office was for conflict management. Though this is in no way a reflection on the education of ministers in conflict management as a whole, this does raise some concern based on the fact that conflict management skills are one of the qualities congregations are saying ministers are lacking in their education.)

CENTER has received feedback from the initial interviews that it may be possible to help decrease the number of early endings in this constituency, in addition to early endings in general, by providing a Good Offices training program, in particular to assist with situations of high conflict. We are in the first stages of reformatting CENTER's programs and testing the feasibility and functionality in response to this early feedback.

## **What Ministers use now**

We realize that although many UU ministers pursue their continuing education through many different avenues such as Alban or divinity schools, nearly half of the 1600+ UUMA members participate in CENTER's workshops. (Our preliminary findings tell us that programs outside of CENTER's programs normally have less than 60 UU ministers participating per program.) It is evident that CENTER has a far greater reach than any other option for UU continuing education. One of CENTER's weaknesses, however, is that up until now, it has not had the financial means or staff to expand its programs. CENTER is working to change this.

## **Preliminary Plan**

Based on our observations, the CENTER Committee has been brainstorming new programs to address the educational needs of UU ministers. These programs will be tested for feasibility through our upcoming membership survey, our workshops on mentoring scheduled for June, and future "Conversations on Excellence" workshops. These outlets will give UU ministers an opportunity to express their questions and concerns for our preliminary plans.

Our revision to CENTER days to address the problem of format would be to shift to a new Residential Conference format that would be five days and four nights, offered annually. The extended program format would allow for more intense study with opportunities for understanding, practice and feedback, all addressing the current ministerial educational needs (ex. Current needs seem to be administrative, management, conflict management, and leadership skills according to Congregational Services and other leaders in education. On receipt of some critical records in the next month and results from our membership survey, we will be aware of additional educational needs that would be addressed in the Residential Conference.) The extended format would also allow for enhanced collegiality, new connections and ways to build competency year to year. We believe our reach will continue to be half our membership, especially considering the improved depth of the programs. We hope to confirm this through our upcoming membership survey.

Another option to address Chapter Leadership is to develop a Chapter Development Training and Post-Training Development program to assist with the weaknesses in the UU's system. The UUMA and CENTER would lead a 3-4 day Leadership Conference with three primary tracks: Good Offices, Mentoring, and Chapter Leadership, all under the umbrella of improving and maintaining Chapter health.

The learning opportunities would be institutionalized through additional training opportunities offered at Convo, a multi-day gathering of all UU ministers that occurs every seven years. The next Convo will be in fall 2009. Further institutionalization will occur as these training opportunities in Good Offices, mentoring and nurturing chapter organizational leadership become part of the planning for the new CENTER Residential 5-Day Conference. Institutionalizing and credentialing the mentoring program is on our future agenda.

## **Feasibility and Functionality**

By providing a support system through Chapter leadership, mentoring, and Good Offices, we hope ministers will have a collegial network to help them access the educational programs appropriate for them. CENTER and the UUMA will require substantial financial support in order to develop the Leadership Conference, CENTER's Residential Conference, and the expansion of First Year Ministers Seminar in collaboration with the UUA. Almost all of these conferences will include 12-14 hours of instructional development for a small group of ministers. Convo 2009 will encompass 10 modules of instruction which will include, but will not be limited to Preaching, Leadership with Thomas Moore, Good Offices, Mentoring, Trauma Ministry, Spiritual directorship, Systems Theory, Ethics, collegiality, and staff relations.

To this end, CENTER and the UUMA have applied to the Large Grants Fund of the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock for start-up funds for these programs. However, sustainability of the programs will require funding for a staff position to manage the programs, and develop and manage the databases, in addition to resources to train the trainers, and conference expenses. With feedback from our membership through a survey and in-person feedback at upcoming workshops designed to discuss these options, we will soon be able to better understand our membership's response to these new ideas and how to develop the programs in a way that best meets our ministers' needs.

As the professional organization that serves Unitarian Universalist ordained ministers, excellence in ministry is the UUMA and CENTER's objective - it is integral to its mission and vision. After testing the feasibility and functionality of these programs, it is our hope that we will be able to more easily accomplish that objective.