

Formal Proposal for MFC Category Reform

Last revised December 2020

Introduction

We propose to replace the central question of the MFC interview.

Since the MFC came into its modern form in the 1920s, our interviews have asked: *Is this candidate competent for ministry?* We are no longer certain this is the right question to center in our interviews. It is a question steeped in a history of racial bias, gender exclusion, and elite protection. In practice, we affirm that it is impossible to separate competence from normative biases and culturally narrow ideals of ministry, especially in a short interaction. So long as the interview primarily measures competence, oppressive practices in assessing it will remain, no matter how we revise our guidelines for basic competence or “name” our biases in interviews.

We instead propose the following questions be central to the MFC’s decision regarding a candidate’s entry into ministerial fellowship:

- Has the candidate embodied a call to the Unitarian Universalist ministry, including their identity as a Unitarian Universalist, during their formation?
- Does the candidate have the support they need to carry out their call?
- Will the candidate assume their ministry in accountable covenant with the Association and other professional ministers?
- Does the candidate show commitment to lifespan learning and growth in ministry?

We propose to replace the category system with a simpler decision, coupled with deeper feedback.

Our category system, which ranks candidates 1-5, was created in the 1980s to replace a pass/fail approach to entering fellowship. Its principle was to demand greater discernment and preparation from candidates not yet competent for ministry, but showing promise.

Categories are perceived by candidates as ordinal rankings, and it is difficult to convey the fullness of our feedback through a single number. For the panel, categories are fuzzy (“1 or 3?”). For candidates, categories are perilous. Meeting the requirements of Categories 2, 3, or 4 requires candidates to have financial resources to spare for significant periods of time before being allowed to apply for settled ministries, as well as the means to travel to see the committee again (if one day we resume in-person meetings). Opportunities for learning are instead dominated by a high-stakes classification exercise.

We imagine MFC decisions that bring the fullness of our interview into the candidate's formation, and decisions that create a less rigid, perilous moment at the end of candidacy. We are proposing that the numbered categories be replaced with three possible decisions, the first two of which could come with specific required steps before being admitted to the next stage of ministerial fellowship. This allows the Committee to uphold expectations of candidates without always imposing professional penalties and puts greater weight on preliminary fellowship as a time to grow in ministry.

- **Affirmed in Fellowship: Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry.**

A candidate affirmed in fellowship is given counsel always. When needed, candidates are given professional development requirements that must be completed during preliminary fellowship, which would be reported as part of the renewal process. Preliminary fellowship renewal paperwork will require updates on specifically addressing these requirements.

- **Continued in Candidacy: Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry with contingencies that must be satisfied before entering preliminary fellowship.**

A candidate continued in candidacy is given specific contingencies to satisfy before entering preliminary fellowship. These contingencies must be ones that the committee feels cannot be adequately addressed in preliminary fellowship or that the committee feels must be addressed to avoid doing harm to people in future ministry settings. Contingencies for any candidate could include a return visit to the committee if the committee felt strongly that they needed to witness evidence of the candidate having met the contingency.

- **Discontinued from Candidacy: The Committee has serious doubt about the individual's suitability for Unitarian Universalist ministry, based at least in part on evaluations and feedback presented in the candidate's packet.**

A candidate discontinued from candidacy is not immediately eligible to return for an interview. Candidates would be advised about what concerns would need to be addressed before a return is possible. The candidate would be able to apply to the MFC Executive Committee for a return and would be expected to have shown significant progress towards meeting the concerns of the committee before a return visit is approved.

Rule Change Requested of the UUA Board

We ask the UUA Board to approve the following changes to Rule 9:

9. Interview Procedure

No applicant shall receive Ministerial Fellowship without being interviewed at least once by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

Following the interview the candidate will be informed by the Committee of its decision.

Candidates receiving either a Category I or a Category II for Preliminary Fellowship **affirmed in fellowship with professional development requirements** shall be required to satisfy all contingencies **requirements before being granted full fellowship.** ~~within three years of the Committee's decision. Failure to do so will result in nullifying the original decision.~~

A. Decision Categories

Affirmed in Fellowship: Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry.

Continued in Candidacy: Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry with contingencies that must be satisfied before entering preliminary fellowship. The Committee may, in some cases, require a return interview.

Discontinued from Candidacy: The Committee has considerable doubt about the individual's suitability for Unitarian Universalist ministry, based at least in part on evaluations and feedback presented in the candidate's packet.

Category I

~~Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry with no contingencies other than satisfactory completion of degree, internship, and Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE).~~

Category II

~~Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry provided specific contingencies are met satisfactorily.~~

Category III

~~Encouraging progress for Unitarian Universalist ministry, but with issues to be addressed, (i.e., academic, personal, institutional understanding, etc.) so that the MFC requires a return visit. If specific work has been outlined, it must be completed before a return visit.~~

Category IV

~~Considerable doubt as to whether the candidate meets the general qualifications for Unitarian Universalist ministry.~~

~~Category V~~

~~The MFC sees no potential for the candidate in Unitarian Universalist ministry, and discourages the candidate from further preparation.~~

B. Return Interviews

Applications to appear before the Committee from candidates who have **been discontinued from candidacy** ~~previously received a Category IV or V~~ shall be reviewed and approved by the Executive Committee at its discretion.

Implementation Timeline

These categories will go into effect for the Fall 2021 meeting or 9 months after the rule change is approved by the UUA Board, whichever is later.

Policy Changes for MFC to Pass

We propose the following changes to MFC policies:

7. Scheduling of Interviews

B. Return Interviews

~~Candidates who received a Category III may meet with the Committee again a year (or later) after the initial interview. Candidates who received a Category IV or V decision by the MFC~~ **have been discontinued from candidacy by the MFC** must receive MFC Executive Committee approval before scheduling a return interview.

No changes to other sections of policy 7.

10. Length of Candidate Status and Removal of Candidate Files

Candidate Status is limited to seven years from the date that candidacy was granted. Any Candidate file which has been inactive for seven years may be destroyed by the Ministerial Credentialing Office.

~~A Candidate who receives a Category IV will be removed from Candidate Status after four years following the date of their MFC interview.~~

~~A Candidate who receives a Category V will be removed from candidate status.~~

No changes to other sections of policy 10.

13. Progress towards Full Fellowship and Ministry Eligible for Renewal

Full Fellowship will be awarded when three successful renewals of Preliminary Fellowship are completed **and all professional development requirements given at the time of the minister's interview with the MFC have been satisfied.**

No changes to other sections of policy 13.