

Ministerial Fellowship Committee Annual Report to the General Assembly

Rebekah Savage and Jackie Clement, co-chairs - June 2021

The Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) is a by-law defined committee of the UUA Board of Trustees charged with broad responsibilities for credentialing Unitarian Universalist ministers for service in our association of congregations and for ensuring the ethical integrity of our credentialed ministry. The Committee meets three times each year to interview candidates for preliminary fellowship, to review renewals of preliminary fellowship, to grant full fellowship, and to consider circumstances and charges which could lead to a change in the fellowship status of a minister.

This has been our first year serving as co-chairs of the committee within the new leadership structure internally designed and implemented in 2019-20. It has been a privilege to serve the denomination in this capacity and we are so grateful for the guidance and contributions of many dedicated UUs, both on the committee and in the wider UU world. Our shared leadership has been only one of many changes implemented in the past year, but it is a good place to start the story of our year since it arose from an unfolding understanding of how we can create a more open and welcoming process for our credentialed ministers.

Leadership Restructuring

One of the significant changes in the past year came with the reorganization of our leadership structure. In defining the new structure, our goal was to increase the transparency and participation in defining and implementing the future of the MFC. The duties of the chair were redistributed among the five-member Executive Team and the chair position itself adapted for co-leaders. Where in years past, the chair was solely responsible for a broad leadership portfolio, we moved towards a new model that embraced communication and a collaborative leadership style. The new model was defined over several meetings in 2019 and 2020 and leaders elected by the committee of the whole at the March 2020 meeting. Using a sociocratic process, Rev. Dr. Rebekah Savage and Rev. Jackie Clement were chosen and affirmed by the members of the MFC to serve as co-chairs. Nick Allen was chosen to engage external communications to the UUMA and Joint Ethics Board as well as internal communications to the committee on matters related to Executive Team meetings. Dr. Joetta Prost was chosen to fill the portfolio focussing on external communications with candidates and theological schools. Rev. Dr. Michael Tino accepted the role of shepherding the committee's internal transformation work. In this first year, the new structure has fulfilled our hopes of making the leadership more open, distributed and transparent. We have mirrored that same transparency in selecting members for other roles such as working groups, transformation efforts and the structures necessary for candidate interviews.

Transitions

Since the last meeting of the General Assembly, the MFC held three meetings: in September and December of 2020, and in March of 2021. The September meeting started with 2 new committee members. The following individuals transitioned off of the MFC in July of 2020: the

chair, Rev. Shana Lynngood, Rev. Jennifer Hamlin-Navias. We will very much miss their wisdom and dedication to this work. We were also deeply saddened when Rev. David Pettee left the position of Ministerial Credentialing Director after 18 years of service. In his staff role, David was an integral part of the credentialing process, an ally in transformation work and an invaluable resource of institutional memory. David's death so soon afterwards remains a shared grief.

The MFC lost many in this past year who touched our work and our lives. David Pettee, Elandria Williams, and Hope Johnson are but a few whose work touched that of this committee.

In July of 2020 we welcomed Rev. Pamela Wat as the third UUMA representative on the committee, Rev. Dr. Michael Tino as a Board appointed member and Rev. Kären Rasmussen who accepted a one-year temporary assignment to fill out the third panel (more on that below).

Our thanks to everyone on the committee who continued to fill the many other leadership roles and those who stepped into new roles. Revs. Greg Ward and Maddie Sifantus continued as co-chairs of the Settlement Working Group. Karen LoBracco accepted leadership of the Candidacy Working Group and Rev. Amanda Poppei accepted the chair position for the Process Working Group. Rev. Maddie Sifantus, additionally, took on the challenge of being a Panel Chair along with Revs. Greg Ward and Jackie Clement. Panel Chairs are responsible for facilitating the interviews with candidates.

Meeting Data

The three annual MFC meetings are scheduled to accommodate twenty-one candidate interviews at each meeting. In 2017, we moved from two panels to three, increasing the number of candidates interviewed per session from 20 to 30. This was done to help provide more spots more quickly for candidates waiting to see the committee. By 2018, the waiting list was cleared though we maintained the three panels moving to seven candidates per panel. While the original intention for moving to three panels was to eliminate the waiting period for candidates, once it was achieved we came to understand the value in making the interview process more spacious. The tyranny of time is one manifestation of White Supremacy Culture that deeply affects the MFC. By increasing the number of panels we can see roughly the same number of candidates (21 instead of 20), but can offer each candidate more focus with less time pressure to move quickly to the next interview. The associated costs of this move include the requirement for a third psychologist and 15 panel members. Through 2020 the 15th seat was filled on a temporary basis. As the UUA Bylaws define the MFC as having "no fewer than 14 members," we made the decision early in 2021 to make three-panel configuration permanent and requested that the Appointments Committee recruit a fifteenth member to serve a full term.

Ideally this now allows us to interview 21 candidates, however, in this past pandemic year not all interview slots were filled. There were a number of cancellations and candidates who deferred seeing the committee for many reasons.

The following data provides a glimpse of the candidate interviews held from September 2020 through March 2021:

- 54 candidates were interviewed in the past year
 - 47 granted preliminary fellowship with or without minor contingencies
 - 7 candidates were making progress towards ministry and were asked to return to the MFC
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- 21 candidates came from the two Unitarian Universalist “identity seminaries”, 7 from Starr King School for the Ministry and 14 from Meadville Lombard Theological School
 - 11 candidates interviewed identify as BIPOC
 - 26 Candidates identify as LGBTQI
 - 4 candidates interviewed self-identified as non-binary or gender queer, 32 as women, and 18 as men
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- 49 minister completed their first renewals
 - 51 ministers completed their second renewals
 - 49 ministers were granted Final Fellowship
 - With the exception of the temporary 15th member to fill the three panels, there were no panel member substitutions during any of our three meetings.

As a part of our mission, the MFC is responsible for considering the circumstances and charges which could lead to a change in the fellowship status of a minister. This year:

- We received two new complaints of ministerial or candidate misconduct
- One minister was removed from fellowship and one candidate was removed from the formation process
- No ministers were put on probation as the results of complaints
- No ministers currently in probation successfully completed their probationary period

Significant Projects

As mentioned above the ongoing work of the MFC includes the granting of preliminary fellowship, reviewing renewals toward full fellowship and processing complaints brought against ministers and candidates. This is the work most visible to our congregations and other institutions. There has always been a level of internal work as we engage in training and process improvement that is less visible. However, in this past year, the COIC report *Widening the Circle of Concern* called us to new levels of transformation. While the projects undertaken and planned may reach new levels of transformation, we must acknowledge that it would not have been possible without the great work of MFC chairs and members who went before along with the COIC and UUA administration. We build on the foundations they established. The most significant projects undertaken in the past year include:

Widening the Path: The most significant point of transformation the COIC report pointed us to was to redefine the pathway to credentialed ministry. As *Widening the Circle of Concern* affirms, “We need to reduce the barriers to entry for those who seek to serve as religious professionals.

This is true for all people, but these barriers are especially damaging for Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and other marginalized people, who tend to have fewer financial resources due to historic and continuing patterns of discrimination.” To begin addressing this charge, we held a joint meeting with representatives of the UUMA, UUA Board and administration, and the Religious Education Credentialing Committee. From this work the Wider Path Task Force was created to engage stakeholders in defining a new, more accessible process for ministerial candidacy. The Next Steps Task Force was also created to mine the COIC report for additional ideas that could also improve the work of the committee. As the Executive Team member tasked with coordinating transformation efforts, Rev. Dr. Michael Tino is overseeing the work of both groups.

Category Reform: This past year also saw the culmination of an effort that has been in the works for some years - reforming the decision categories granted to candidates who interview with the MFC. For some time we have seen the 1-5 number rating system as a vestige of a hierarchical, oppressive system. In January 2021, the Board approved a rules change to establish the following categories as outcomes of an interview to be implemented beginning September 2021:

Rules of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee

Rule 9A. 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.

Career Assessment: A Career Assessment (CA) is one of the requirements that candidates for UU ministry must undertake. Over the years, problems have arisen as the evaluative instruments and Career Center counselors were not always supportive of a diverse population of candidates. The Career Assessment, while imperfect, is the best tool we have found to provide information not available to us in other ways. The 3 professional psychologists who serve on the MFC are well aware of the shortcomings of any standardized testing and particularly those included in Career Assessments. They constantly monitor the feedback included in assessments applying UU and ARAOMC lenses to the information received by the committee. It is important to understand that the CA is only one of many evaluative instruments included in candidate packets. As such, it always stands in context of self-evaluations by the candidate and evaluations from those who have worked with the candidate in internship and CPE settings, as well as academic records and more. More than the content of the assessment, the MFC is interested in how a candidate has responded to the content and to any recommendations of the Career Center. We recognize that the CA is a single point in time and hope to see appropriate growth throughout the formation process. In response to concerns

raised this past year the MFC has committed to the following actions to minimize any harm that may come from the process.

- Continue our ongoing relationship of the past 4 years with the Career Centers, helping them to improve their process and align more fully with our needs and values
- Produce a description for candidates of how we use the CA
- Develop and administer a survey of those who have completed the CA regarding their experience of the process
- Work with Centers to ensure that they have the pictures and bios of their personnel available to prospective clients
- Continue to emphasize ethics and integrity as part of the ministerial formation process and in the MFC interview

Continued Work to Dismantle White Supremacy Culture: The significant work of dismantling the inherent White Supremacy Culture of the MFC requires large efforts such as those mentioned above, but also happens in smaller though still critical ways.

- White and BIPOC Caucuses have been established where MFC members can continue to learn, support and hold each other accountable as we undertake both personal and systemic work
- The work of reparation and restoration of relationships is sometimes necessary within the committee and also more publicly. In September 2020 we publicly apologized to Rev. Dr. Kristen Harper for the many racist and sexist actions she experienced as a member of this body.
- As a regular practice we have instituted multiple Process Observers at every candidate interview and business meeting. One observer reports on the use of power and privilege, while a second observer reports on logistics.

Move to Online Meetings: As for all committees, the pandemic forced us to move to fully online meetings beginning in March 2020. The success of that and subsequent meetings was largely due to the hard work of the UUA staff and the grace of everyone involved as we navigated new ways of being together from a distance. Because ministry is a deeply relational endeavor we have worked hard over the past year to refine the ways in which we conduct candidate interviews. In December 2020, after three successful online meetings, we made the decision to retain the online format for interviews going forward. In addition to the cost savings for both the committee and candidates, this will allow us to decouple times dedicated to training and team building from the interview meetings. We will add a fourth annual meeting to be held in person over the summer for these purposes.

Moving Forward

In the 2016 annual report, MFC Chair Jessie King wrote, “It has become eminently clear that we must not only continue this committee’s good work around understanding equity, race, and gender issues; but we must turn this critical lens on our own systems, values, and processes.”

This past year has been largely focused on this effort. The changes already implemented have made a difference, but there is still much to do. All of the transformation plans listed above have begun, but there is still much to do.

The Next Steps Task Force is helping to define the ways in which we can continue to respond to the COIC report, and we continue to refine existing processes. One such effort is regarding the annual renewals that ministers in preliminary fellowship file. As defined, the process is highly evaluative. In the model of being a “learning ministry,” the Settlement Working Group is developing a proposal to focus more on the developmental aspects of new ministries.

We are also preparing a rule change for the Board’s consideration on how complaints against ministers are handled. The current process places a great deal of the burden on those who have experienced harm, asking them to relive the experience three or more times as claims of misconduct are investigated.

While the system admittedly contains its imperfections, we are proud of the many hours and hard work volunteered by the committee members in addressing these imperfections while simultaneously attending to the core work of the MFC.

Closing

Under the best of conditions the work of the MFC requires a daunting number of hours. In this past year, as those serving on the MFC have faced all the personal and collective trauma of the pandemic, they have continued to show up and to do the work. But we do not do the work alone. The endeavor of granting credentials to our professional ministers would not be possible without the work of the Ministries and Faith Development staff team. Rev. Sarah Lammert, Co-Director of MFD; Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kwong, Ministerial Credentialing Director; Rev. Marta Valentin, Professional Development Director; and Marion Bell, Ministerial Formation Specialist, deserve enormous appreciation. The work of welcoming and supporting new ministers could not happen without their efforts.

This is daunting, difficult, inspiring work and we are the better for having done it. It is our dearest hope that the Association and the many institutions served by our credentialed ministers are also the better for the work of the many engaged in the Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Jackie Clement and Rev. Dr. Rebekah Savage