

## **Ministerial Fellowship Committee Annual Report to the General Assembly**

Jackie Clement and Rebekah Savage, co-chairs - June 2022

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. While our charge is clear, the scope of the work and connections throughout the denomination are broad. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Committee now meets by teleconference to interview candidates for preliminary fellowship; to review renewals of preliminary fellowship; to grant full fellowship; and to consider circumstances and charges that could lead to a change in the fellowship status of a minister. It is our hope to move one meeting a year to an in-person gathering for training and team building.

In our second year as co-chairs, we affirm that the new internal leadership model put in place in 2020 is better meeting the needs of the committee and its work. 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.

### Transformation Work

While the primary work of overseeing ministerial fellowship continues, the committee also invests significant energy in working to better reflect the 21st century, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural mission of the Association. To that end, we have incorporated the goal of transformation into all the work of the committee and have created two ad hoc task forces. The Wider Path Task Force, chaired by Rev. Dr. Michael Tino, is working on implementing a path to ministerial fellowship that addresses the needs for spiritual leadership in our modern institutions, one that is not rooted in a nineteenth century academic model. The Moving Forward Task Force, chaired by Rev. Amanda Poppei, continues to look for ways that our work can support the conclusions of the COIC Widening the Circle of Concern report.

Recognizing the vibrancy of entrepreneurial ministries and the changing needs for spiritual community within society generally, we are opening to a new view of how ministers are best equipped for that work and best supported by the structures of the Association. Changes made to date include:

**Category Reform:** This was our first year implementing the new categories for candidate interviews, replacing the hierarchical 1-5 system with determinations of affirmed in fellowship, continued in candidacy or discontinued from candidacy. We found that the new system fulfilled our hope of focusing more on formation and continued growth and less on fitting into a particular picture of “minister.” We also found that it required a new, more conversational style of interview that invited the candidate’s view of their own developmental needs. As with all important systemic changes, it came with challenges and new insights. While it required significant time

for the Panel Chairs to organize and will require ongoing monitoring we are pleased that this project of many years is meeting our goals.

**Career Assessment:** The MFC psychologists and the UUA Ministerial Credentialing Director, Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kwong, have been evaluating and addressing various concerns about the career assessment experiences of UU candidates for the ministry. Individual conversations with each Ministerial Development Center took place between December 2021 and March 2022, focused on (a) addressing any specific complaints about each center that had been submitted by candidates, (b) recommended improvements in psychological assessment tools, (c) encouragement to continue providing access to virtual assessments post-pandemic and (d) discussion about important perspectives related to antiracism, gender identity, family constellations, disability issues, decentering Christianity, etc. In addition, a survey regarding the career assessment experience was created and distributed to 150 candidates and recently fellowshiped ministers, with 81 respondents. The results of the survey are being analyzed and will be disseminated broadly, as well as being shared with the career centers. A description of the Career Assessment process and how we use the results has been drafted for inclusion in the credentialing manual for candidates.

**Conflict of Interest Policy:** Although members of the MFC annually affirm the conflict of interest policy for all UUA volunteers, we felt that we needed something more directly tied to the work of the committee. At our March 2022 meeting we adopted an MFC-specific policy to address members' relationships with staff, aspirants and candidates and the ministerial complaint process.

### Moving Forward

While we are proud of the changes made thus far, more is left to do. New and ongoing efforts to improve the work of the committee include:

- **Revisioning the Preliminary Fellowship renewal process:** The current system is a highly evaluative one offering multiple views of how a new minister has functioned and giving little thought to the ways in which ministries continue to grow. We hope to shift the emphasis to developmental needs in alignment with the philosophy of being a “learning” rather than a “learned” ministry. The new system will also expand to better represent community and entrepreneurial ministries as the current system is heavily focused on congregational ministry.
- **Complaint process reformation:** Significant work has been done in the past decade to change the process by which complaints against ministers can be filed, investigated and adjudicated. Still, we strive to make the system even more accessible, more fair and transparent, and more informed about the residual impacts of trauma. We have drafted and will be proposing further rule changes for the Board’s consideration. We also continue to educate new investigators and ourselves.

- **Dismantling White Supremacy Culture:** This work requires large efforts such as those mentioned above, but also happens in smaller though still critical ways. White and BIPOC Caucuses continue to meet regularly to learn, support and hold each other accountable as we undertake both personal and systemic work. We engage in a regular schedule of training including ARAOMC work, boundary issues and trauma informed ministry. We also continue our practice of having Process Observers for power and privilege, in addition to process observation for logistics.

While the system of formation and credentialing 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.

### Transitions

The following individuals transitioned off of the MFC in the past year: Nick Allen, Rev. Maddie Sifantus, Dr. Donald Brunnuell (psychologist), Dr. Michael Lyde and Rev. Pamela Wat (UUMA representative). Additionally, we said goodbye to Rev. Karen Rassmussen who had accepted a one-year invitation as a substitute to fill the third panel. We will very much miss their wisdom and dedication to this work.

The following individuals joined the committee: Rev. Jacqueline Brett (UUMA representative), Rev. Katie Romano Griffin, Alison Aguilar Lopez Gutierrez McLeod, Rev. Paul Langston-Daily, Elizabeth Norton, and Dr. Nathalie Edmond (psychologist). We are delighted to welcome their skills and passion to this work.

Our thanks to everyone on the committee who continued to fill the many other leadership roles and to those who stepped into new roles. The three working group chairs continued their leadership: Rev. Greg Ward with the Settlement Working Group, Karen LoBracco with the Candidacy Working Group and Rev. Amanda Poppei with the Process Working Group. Rev. Greg Ward also continued to serve as Panel Chair for candidate interviews joined this year by Rev. Dr. Michael Tino and Rev. Amanda Poppei. The Panel Chairs have our great appreciation for shepherding the transition to the new system of categories given as determination in candidate interviews.

### Meeting Data

The following data provides a glimpse of the candidate interviews held from September 2021 through March 2022. Because of the move to the new category systems the numbers are not directly comparable to previous years, with the exception of the number of candidates interviewed. For the past two years, the number of candidates coming before the MFC decreased as the COVID pandemic interrupted their formation process. The MFC is staffed to interview 63 candidates per year. In 2020-21 we saw just 54 candidates and this year only 36.

- 36 candidates were interviewed in the past year

- 12 were welcomed to preliminary fellowship without contingencies
  - 4 were continued in candidacy until completion of requirements
  - 9 were continued in candidacy with contingencies to be met
  - 9 were continued in candidacy with the requirement of a return visit
  - 2 were discontinued from candidacy
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- 15 candidates came from the two Unitarian Universalist “identity seminaries”, 8 from Starr King School for the Ministry and 7 from Meadville Lombard Theological School
  - 8 candidates interviewed identify as BIPOC
  - 19 candidates identify as LGBTQI
  - 5 candidates interviewed self-identified as non-binary or gender queer, 27 as women, and 4 as men
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- 34 minister completed their first renewals
  - 44 ministers completed their second renewals
  - 39 ministers were granted Final Fellowship

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 four new complaints of ministerial or candidate misconduct
- No ministers were removed from fellowship
- Two ministers were placed on probation as the results of complaints
- No ministers currently in probation successfully completed their probationary period
- Three ministers resigned their fellowship

### Closing

The personal and collective toll of the past two years continues to impact not only our candidates and ministers, but the members of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, as well. Living with the trauma and anxiety in these times should not be discounted. That our members continue to show up and do the work with passion and commitment is continually inspiring. And we do not do the work alone. This endeavor 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