

Ministerial Fellowship Committee

Report to the UUA Board

June 2024

Submitted by Rev. Amanda Poppei, Rev. Dr. Rebekah A. Savage, Co-Chairs

Overview

This year continues in our theme of significant transitions and transformations for the MFC, which began with the 2020 publication of the Commission on Institutional Change's Report: "Widening the Circle of Concern". The MFC has changed dramatically including:

- **new categories** (moving from a 1-5 number system to three potential outcomes, the middle of which holds many possibilities within it);
- **a new approach to interviews** that de-emphasizes recall of facts and focuses instead on developmental needs;
- **increased expectations** around the level of ARAOMC work engaged in by candidates before coming to the MFC;
- **accessibility features** like sending topic areas ahead of the interview and including written versions of questions in the chat;
- **a revised process for Preliminary Fellowship renewals** that centers the professional development plan over evaluations: to focus on the development needs, self-awareness, and self-assessment of the minister in preliminary fellowship, and emphasize the mentor-mentee relationship within preliminary fellowship, while deemphasizing the evaluative process from supervisors. Particular care was taken to incorporate feedback from community ministers in this reimagining
- the **addition of an 8th competency** in the area of Theology;
- **a new approach to the reading list** that moves from a set of required readings to an invitation to build one's own list of multimedia resources, with support from a sample list and enhanced descriptions of each competency.
- and of course **the move to Zoom** interviews following lockdown and the decision to remain on Zoom for now.

(Please do note that any time the MFC institutes changes like this, we offer a period of time in which candidates may be "legacied in"--that is, during which they may submit their materials using the competencies and reading list with which they have been preparing. Candidates who are right now preparing using the current competencies will be able to submit with those competencies for several years to come.)

Finally, we continue to engage in the big, bold work of rethinking our approach to fellowshiping entirely, and following the charge of the Commission on Institutional Change to widen the pathway to fellowshipped ministry.

With change comes challenge and anxiety. We hold how difficult it is for candidates to feel that they have prepared in one way and are being asked to show up in another way. We want to

emphasize that if you have begun preparing, for instance, with 7 competencies and the historical reading list, you may finish your preparation within that framework. We always allow candidates to continue on their path, even as those new to the process begin with the new requirements.

Change also brings new results—and sometimes we come to understand the scope of the change only when we see those results. We have heard from several colleagues, and know that there are others, who hold concerns about what they perceive as an increased number of candidates coming to the MFC and needing either a return visit or some significant additional work before attaining Preliminary Fellowship.

For our Fall 2023, Winter 2023 and Spring 2024 MFC meetings, 36 Candidates were interviewed:

14 candidates were welcomed into Preliminary Fellowship

8 candidates were continued in candidacy with Assigned Contingencies

3 candidate was continued in candidacy until completion of CPE/MDIV/Internship Only for preliminary Fellowship

10 candidates were continued in candidacy with the requirement of a Return Interviews (3 of whom needed to complete their internship)

1 candidate was discontinued from candidacy

5 candidates attended Starr King School for the Ministry

12 candidates attended Meadville Lombard Seminary

Self-disclosed Identifiers:

4 candidates are BIPOC

19 candidates are LGBTQIA+

2 candidates are non-binary/genderqueer

26 candidates are women

8 candidates are men

8 candidates are neurodivergent

Renewals (Fall 2023 to Spring 2024):

34 ministers in preliminary fellowship were granted a first renewal

43 ministers in preliminary fellowship were granted a second renewal

26 ministers were granted full fellowship

We shared the following narrative with our religious professional colleagues, which we would like to offer to the Board now as well:

It is important to note that the change to the new category system—which offers the options of Affirmed in Fellowship, Continued in Candidacy, and Discontinued from Candidacy—has meant a shift in how many people receive the “totally ready to go” category of Affirmed in Fellowship. To be eligible for the category of Affirmed in Fellowship, a candidate must have *completed* all requirements, including their MDiv and Internship. Therefore, many candidates are Continued in

Candidacy with only those requirements left to finish—all around a good result, but sometimes incorrectly interpreted as bad news. We are working on our messaging to candidates in those moments.

The Continued in Candidacy category can also include contingencies (ie, requirements before Preliminary Fellowship) ranging from writing a brief essay, to working with a coach for a few months, to taking another unit of CPE, to returning to see the MFC again. It is a very broad category, and any attempts to compare it to any of the old number categories are challenging and ill-advised. We are seeking to shift our culture from an “I got a 1!” achievement orientation to a “what are my next developmental steps, and can they be done while in Preliminary Fellowship or should I complete them while still a candidate?”

Reviewing our metrics, we *have* seen an increase in recent years in candidates requiring a return visit before moving into Preliminary Fellowship. While this is challenging news to receive for our candidates, our panel chairs are committed to being clear, fair and consistent about why we are asking candidates to return.

The MFC has had in depth conversations about why we have had to ask more candidates to return, and we have made some changes to our policies to try to address this challenge. Here is some of what we have observed:

- During the lockdown period of COVID, we had a rapid decrease in the number of candidates ready for an interview. As lockdown lifted, we saw an influx of candidates who had done much of their preparation online, and who were pushing through for their interview because they understandably felt they had already been delayed by the pandemic. Frequently, we had the sense that these candidates needed more preparation before coming to see us. Put simply, ***they came too soon***.
- Although the number of candidates seeking to see the MFC is now increasing again, it is still below pre-COVID levels. This means that there is no longer a wait to schedule an MFC interview. While this is helpful for candidates’ planning process, our sense is that the wait to schedule actually enforced a kind of pause for many candidates, so that by the time their appointment finally arrived they were more fully prepared for the interview.
- We have experienced candidates, particularly white-identified candidates, coming to us without the lived, embodied work in ARAOMC that we now expect from ministers ready for Preliminary Fellowship.
- We have experienced candidates who, perhaps in part because of lockdown-related challenges, completed the vast majority or sometimes all of their formational work in one region. Although this is not necessarily a challenge, on occasion we find that these candidates are not connected with the larger UU movement, struggle more with our ARAOMC competency expectations and are not following trends and growing edges across our living faith.

We are working to address these concerns, and we invite your participation and support in amplifying our messaging:

- We have changed our policy to require *both* a final evaluation from a CPE site *and* at least a mid-term evaluation from an internship site, in an effort to avoid candidates coming too early to the MFC.
- We encourage all internship supervisors and sites to support interns in engaging deeply with ARAOMC work, and to support white-identified interns in doing this work in embodied, relational ways. We are looking for candidates who can clearly articulate how their ministry is rooted in our work for collective liberation.
- We experience that candidates who work significantly with the Ministerial Formation Network are more prepared and more connected with the larger UU movement. We encourage this involvement for all candidates, and particularly for candidates who are completing their formation within one geographic region.
- The UUA, through the Professional Development Office, is partnering with the UUMA to offer training modules for various types of mentorships, including for intern supervisors, preliminary fellowship, and second minister supervisors. We cannot state strongly enough how helpful we feel this would be to those offering their gifts in this capacity and therefore to candidates and new ministers. We often find that candidates have been prepared for an old version of the MFC, in part because they have worked with mentors who saw the MFC 20, 10, or even just 5 years ago. Staying current is a huge help to our candidates.

Executive Committee and Internal MFC Work:

The MFC Executive Committee model assigns specific responsibilities and portfolios to each member. Currently, these roles are:

Co-chair - Rev. Amanda Poppei

Co-chair - Rev. Dr. Rebekah Savage

Transformation Shepherd - Rev. Michael Tino

Liaison to Seminaries - Dr. Shirley Lange

Liaison to Candidates - Alison Aguilar Lopez Gutierrez McLeod

Together, the Executive Committee hears complaint cases and makes high-level decisions that are ratified by the MFC as a body. The co-chairs work with our wonderful UUA staff (Rev. Darrick Jackson, Rev. Marta Valentin, Rev. Cecilia Kingman, and Marion Bell) to set business meeting agendas and direct the work of the MFC.

Members of the MFC are placed in one of three working groups: the Candidacy Working Group, which focuses on waiver requests from candidates still in the process; the Settlement Working Group, which focuses on the preliminary fellowship process and waivers from ministers in preliminary fellowship; and the Process Working Group, which proposes and implements changes to MFC policies and practices, and moves forward requests to the UUA Board for changes to MFC Rules.

Training

The MFC is responsible for ongoing professional development and training, both mandated (anti-racism training and sexual ethics/boundaries training on a rotating schedule) and as

needed. This year, the MFC gathered for a multi-day in person retreat that focused on examining our internal processes, reimagining our MFC covenant through our shared UU values and covenants, and working through an ARAOMC rubric for observing and evaluating candidates.

The MFC also meets in caucuses for mutual support and introspection. The white caucus of the MFC meets monthly and the BIPOC caucus meets during regular MFC meetings. Most recently the white caucus drafted the ARAOMC rubric for the BIPOC caucus to review, and then together we discussed the rubric at our retreat.

We are grateful for your leadership, and we are honored to serve this movement and its fellowshipped ministry.

Yours in Faith,

Rev. Dr. Rebekah Savage and Rev. Amanda Poppei
Co-Chairs
Ministerial Fellowship Committee