

Ministerial Fellowship Committee

Report to the UUA General Assembly

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Restorative Practices (and How They're Changing the MFC)

The MFC has been using restorative practices in our interviews for about two years and the feedback we have gotten from candidates about the process has been really favorable. We are focusing on the relationship and the whole candidate rather than a traditional interview style steeped in hierarchy. We have incorporated breaks and reset opportunities during the panel to make sure the candidate has the opportunity to share their knowledge fully.

By adopting restorative practices we are deepening not only our relationship with one another, setting up a care and accountability structure for newly fellowshipped ministers, but we are also in the process deepening the collective understanding and dedication to Unitarian Universalism for all involved. What we have found is that the contingencies we are asking candidates to fulfill before entering preliminary fellowship are becoming more finely crafted, with specific reasons being given for each. We have noticed that people who pay close attention to the reasons contingencies are given have more positive outcomes when they return to us. We have also seen a concurrent decrease in the number of people being discontinued from fellowship.

We have moved our misconduct adjudication from only a traditional disciplinary model of punishment and exclusion to a restorative one of community building and repairing harm. We are shifting our understanding of accountability to focus on empathy, personal responsibility, and rebuilding broken trust. This integration of restorative conflict models moves the conversation from the only "punishment" is the removal of fellowship, to one of inclusion and repair. The MFC is actively asking, "how can this minister remain in fellowship?" in all but the most egregious cases.

The whole of the committee is deeply committed to these shifts in culture and during our retreat this year, a restorative justice trainer came and helped us gain more understanding and common language around restorative practices. We are all really proud of the work we are doing to shift from a hierarchical structure to a more community-building framework.

Cultural Shifts

This year, with the approval of the UUA Board, we added two members to the MFC appointed by the Canadian Unitarian Council. Because our body serves to credential UU ministers for Canada as well, it is important that we have an accountable understanding of the differences in national culture as well as UU expression in the two nations. We are excited to be working with

our CUC-appointed members, and are actively compiling resources for the US-based members of the committee to become more culturally competent when we interview Canadian candidates.

We have also overhauled our meeting schedule to make our three meetings a year more physically and psychologically sustainable for our members. We have found that our dedication to restorative practices simply takes more time, because relationship-building is essential to this work. We are committed to giving this work the time it needs.

Recruitment Challenges

Each of our panels must include a Ph.D. psychologist certified in interpreting results of psychological assessments such as the MMPI-2. We currently have two such people on the MFC, and have been working with the Appointments Committee to secure a third. Ideally we'd like to have four psychologists on the committee to allow people to take breaks. This has proven more difficult than we imagined.

We are also having ongoing challenges recruiting lay members of the committee.

Some (Really Wonderful, Exciting) Numbers

In our three meetings in the 2025-26 church year, we interviewed a total of 41 candidates. Of these:

- 24 were granted preliminary fellowship with no more to do than completion of their degree, CPE or internship.
- 12 were assigned contingencies beyond completion of requirements but not asked to return to see the MFC.
- 5 were assigned contingencies that included returning to the MFC.
- No candidates were discontinued from candidacy.

We interviewed 6 candidates from Starr King School for the Ministry and 11 from Meadville/Lombard Theological School.

We do not require demographic information, but allow our candidates to self-identify things that are important to who they are. Of the 41 candidates who came before the MFC this year:

- 7 self-identified as BIPOC
- 25 as LGBTQI+
- 9 as nonbinary/genderqueer/trans/genderfluid/gender non-conforming
- 22 as female
- 10 as male
- 12 as neurodivergent, and
- 8 as disabled.