

Report of the Basic Questions about Credentialing Task Force

Susan Ritchie (convener) and Sarah Lammert (designee of Harlan Limpert)

History of the Task Force

In the fall of 2011, the Committee on Committees, well burdened by the tremendous number of appointments it makes to credentialing bodies, began to wonder out loud if there were not some way of protecting the Association's interests in ministerial credentialing other than having trustees hand make appointments, pasted together from countless hours of reference phone calls, sweat and tears. In October of 2011, the Committee brought to the UUA Board a proposed process for looking at this question further.

In order to begin a process for defining the Association's interest in the ends and not the means of ministerial credentialing, the Committee on Committees asked the board to do the very difficult, which was reflect upon but refrain from actually answering the following questions:

1. Does ministerial credentialing/fellowshipping belong to the Association?
2. What is the Association's interest in a centralized process?
3. Who are the stakeholders?
4. If credentialing does belong to the Association, what is the appropriate board role?
5. Should some appointments be delegated to the administration or some other body?

It was deemed desirable to have some assistance in first; connecting the board with whatever information it felt it needed to move towards answering these questions, to provide the board with that information in January, to help refine the questions and scope of the conversation, with the aim of leading to actual action at the April 2012 board meeting. Such action ideally to consist of a clear understanding of the how it is that the board best owns any Associational responsibility for ministerial credentialing. And of course, in our governance environment, it would be helpful made incarnate in the form of new policy.

So the Basic Questions about Credentialing Task Force was duly formed to provide the assistance outlined above, consisting of Susan Ritchie as convener and Harlan Limpert or his designee, who became Sarah Lammert. And, having received the necessary blessing of an awkward acronym (BQACTF), the force began its work.

The immediate charge to BQACTF from the October board meeting was to seek answers to some specific questions and, to seek responses to some questions from key

stakeholders (identified then as the UUMA, the DPA, UU Identity Theological Schools, current theological students, and recently fellowshiped ministers).

The Findings

Summaries of these interviews with stakeholders, including the questions asked of them, and their responses, are attached at the bottom of this report. Two specific questions the board asked for research on included how other religious bodies with congregational polity perform ministerial credentialing, and how non-religious professions handle credentialing.

We looked into the credentialing process for both the United Church of Christ and the Metropolitan Community Church. With some differences in language, both traditions have a credentialing system that is virtually identical to our own, in that the bulk of credentialing work is done at the level of the association, but congregational support of individual candidates is required in the form of sponsorship or its equivalent. The one significant difference between our system and theirs is that the first wave of credentialing review (the equivalent of our Regional Subcommittees on Candidacy) in both the UCC and MCC stressed a supportive, “in-care” relationship with students over gate keeping functions.

Most non-religious professions adopted their current approach to credentialing in the mid nineteenth century, when the proliferation of specialized formal education meant that most people were now prepared for their vocations by schools, rather than through less formal apprenticeships. This led to some concern that the schools may or may not be in close enough touch with the requirements of the practice of the profession, rather than the mere academic study of it. Hence credentialing bodies were formed of actual practitioners, a practice which continues today, and is somewhat reflected in ministerial credentialing processes. Of course one vast difference is the state’s interest in the licensure of non-religious professionals.

Medicine was the first profession to travel this route, yet even today we see this same basic model expanding outwards to an increasing variety of vocations not always previously considered “professional.” The very definitions of “professional” and “credentialing” being rather circular: a vocation becomes a profession when a need for credentialing is established, usually by demonstrating that a high degree of specialized knowledge is required for successful practice, and that less than successful practice can result in real harm. Although the literature on professionalization also makes it clear that the function of credentialing processes is also to establish clear jurisdictions and their related monopolies.

The processes used in medicine and law tend to establish the template for other professions in credentialing. Typically there is process for being initially credentialing that is both rigorous and automatic, in that it requires providing documentation of

educational and practical experiences, and of course, the passing of a massive test. Until very recently both professions handled matters of ethical compromise or character issues only through disciplinary action after problems had been made apparent. Medicine in particular now is seeing a change in process, with more extensive and more personal background checks happening up front. Medicine is also witnessing the interesting phenomenon of a growing number of private, for profit credentialing bodies, some of which help physicians with the certification process, others which offer their own forms of certification and precertification.

Observations and Recommendations

While it is extremely difficult to give a single characterization to our interviews and investigations, we would like to hold up the following:

All agree that the Association has an interest in credentialing: the answer is yes.

Widespread confusion about the difference between “mere” professional credentialing and ministerial fellowshipping contributes to a lack of clarity about the precise nature of the Association’s interest.¹

There is no difference of opinion as to whether the congregations are and should be connected to credentialing through the association. It is, however, widely observed that the congregations do not experience or understand credentialing in direct ways.

There is no any evidence of a compelling reason that the Association’s interest in credentialing, when carefully defined, is either best protected through the board making appointments to credentialing bodies.

There is no evidence that the Association’s interests in credentialing could not be protected by the board through policy.

Interview Results:

Ted Fetter, DPA President

1. Who are the stakeholders?

¹ For a description of the difference, see Susan’s history of credentialing, available in the October 2011 board packet.

- Ministers are the clearest stakeholders. They are almost like a guild. Sees lots of dangers with guilds – need to make sure they are using their status and authority to benefit of organizations. 99% of the time the ministers do keep this focus.
- Congregations are mostly silent or unaware stakeholders. Less so when in transition or when there is an ethics concern – at this point they become appreciative of their stakeholder status.

2. Is credentialing an expression of congregational identity or is it a service?

- For the most part it is a service, but it represents a great deal more than that.
- There are an extraordinary number of hoops and requirements. I believe in the process enough to believe that they are valuable.
- When dealing with poor conduct, it is a matter of principles. While it remains a service, it has to reflect our values.

3. How can we measure the impact of a failed ministry?

- It is very, very difficult to be clear about definitions. Failed for whom? An individual or the association as a whole? The hard work is establishing reasonable categories. Which comes first: measuring effective ministry or measuring failed ministry?

4. What is the cost of credentialing? Are there other models for assuring the congregational grounding of credentialing?

- I'm not too concerned about congregational grounding. We need a central authority to establish what it means to be a UU minister. I really want to downplay congregations ordaining John Doe just because we want to. It should never happen.
- I trust and call on a need for a central office to set and enforce standards.
- In terms of the cost, lay people should be aware of the cost. But I'm not calling for or rooting for an alternative model that would increase congregational participation in credentialing.

Don Southworth, Executive Director of the UUMA

1. Who are the stakeholders?

- Congregations
- Ministers
- Organizations (UUA, UUA Trustees, UUMA, Seminaries)
- Our grandchildren – future generations

2. Is credentialing an expression of congregational identity or is it a service?

- Both. Just because congregations don't actually do it, it doesn't mean they aren't charging another body to do this.
- Credentialing is an expression of our values. Some congregations don't see it that way because of the way we've set up the system. Not so sure they should be more related to it.
- An analogy is the UUA Board of Trustees is to represent the congregations in the Association, but very few congregations have any consciousness of a connection.

3. How can we measure the impact of a failed ministry?

- First, what do we mean by a failed ministry? This is a loaded word.
- This needs to be looked at from a whole system approach including the role of the minister, the role of the congregation.
- There are ministries that don't last long that are successful (shook up the system).

4. What is the cost of credentialing? Are there other models for assuring the congregational grounding of credentialing?

- Not sure of the cost. The cost is almost entirely born by the person who wants credentialing.
- There are other models of recruiting, identifying and supporting people with high potential, as well as model of credentialing chaplains, etc.
- We should remember community ministers and not just parish ministers. Fundamentally the question is who and how many people get to represent themselves as UU ministers?

UU Theological School Faculty & Administrators (various & collective)

1. Who are the stakeholders?

- UU Identity Schools
- Congregations
- Persons preparing for ministry
- UUA
- UU movement as a whole, and in the future (as opposed to its more limited incarnation in our current institutions)

2. Is credentialing an expression of congregational identity or is it a service?

- Question is confusing—isn't it both? They aren't in any way exclusive of each other. Do you perhaps mean Associational identity? All services reflect a notion of identity and also construct identities.
- Fellowshiping is much more than only a professional credential. It implies a connection to UU identity and a responsibility to it. This doesn't make it an expression of congregational identity, but in our system congregations have to have a say in what that UU identity looks like especially in a minister.

3. How can we measure the impact of a failed ministry?

Don't think you can. Effects are tangible and intangible. Hard to know what is meant, exactly, by a failed ministry. Must think too about the personal costs to persons who train for years to find that they can't be successful in it or sustain it.

4. What is the cost of credentialing? Are there other models for assuring the congregational grounding of credentialing?

- Enormous, I'm sure, including the large costs born by students themselves. Other models than an MFC system? Of course one can imagine those, must have lay people involved to be true to spirit of congregationalism. As long as the Association does it, it is grounded in the congregations as an Association of congregations. Concerned about non-experts in academic subjects testing students in these areas. Isn't there a way the schools could help test content of knowledge in more appropriate and professional ways?

Current Theological Students and Recently Fellowshiped Ministers (various)

1. Who are the stakeholders?

- Congregations, although they don't seem to know it. Congregations can be supportive and excited by individuals they know moving through the process, but they don't have a clue about what credentialing is, how it works. Not sure why they don't seem to see it or care about it. Don't or can't distinguishing fellowshiping and ordination.
- Ministers
- Students and Seminaries

2. Is credentialing an expression of congregational identity or is it a service?

- It is necessary for the protection of congregations, but that doesn't make it an identity

- .It is a service congregations can't perform on their own thereby given to the association of congregations, which is the identity body for things that fall into this category of too big for lone congregations

3. How can we measure the impact of a failed ministry?

- Look to the lack of health in the congregations left behind, and how long it persists
- In terms of future resistance to professional leadership
- Lack of numerical and spiritual growth in our congregations

4. What is the cost of credentialing? Are there other models for assuring the congregational grounding of credentialing?

- To both students and association-must be large
- Other models than what? The MFC? Easily to imagine other models, must always be a part of the UUA though—definitely can't be some body outside of the congregations presenting people to the congregations—very contrary to our identity
- One cost of credentialing is the over focus on it impairs theological education as students focus too much on getting through the MFC rather than meet other educational and formation needs