

September 26, 2011

Dear Nancy and UUA Board Members:

Prior to leaving the country for three months of sabbatical, I promised the Nancy Bartlett a reflection on some of the preliminary questions you are asking yourselves about credentialing as you continue a new phase of your review of the credentialing process

Some of you will recall that Ministerial Fellowship Committee in March 2009 requested an outside review of the UUA's credentialing process by the UUA Board because the demands of our routine tasks allow too little time to undertake a comprehensive self-evaluation. We see you continuing conversation as part of a response to that request and we welcome it.

We have tried to be responsive to the recommendations of the Strategic Review of Ministry completed by the Administration, and approved some changes at our September meeting in the structure of the Regional Subcommittees of the MFC. As this letter notes below, we are also open to taking the lead on appointments to the RSCC's, and in finding single-meeting members or subs for the MFC when we have absences or three panels, to assist in relieving some of the burden on the Committee on Committees for appointments.

You asked for some very basic reflections from me on why we have a credentialing process for ministers apart from ordination, and how has it evolved into what it is now. You are also wondering whether credentialing should be a Board function or an Executive function under Policy Governance.

I believe Susan Ritchie's essay sent to you has answered from a historical perspective the question of how ordination and credentialing are different and how credentialing evolved. My own long answer about why the Association credentials ministers the way it does is reprinted below from a post that I sent to Christine Robinson's *i-minister* blog sometime in 2010. It's the text below included in quotation marks. My short answer as to why the Association offers a credentialing program for ministers, and why it is different from the accreditation programs for religious educators and church musicians, is based in economics rather than spirituality. There is a significant labor market for ministers' services that needs to be regulated by a system for entry, discipline and dismissal, so that congregations have these quality control assurances about the ministers available for their call. There is no comparably sized labor market for religious educators and musicians, and congregations are less concerned about a national system of quality control for these professionals because their decisions about these positions are made within a smaller regional or local labor pool of candidates.

Here's my long answer in response to a blog conversation in 2010:

"The comments made thus far make me want to review my own understanding of the reason we have a centralized Ministerial Fellowship Committee system. As I understand it, it's because the representatives of congregations serving on the UUA Board (mostly lay people, with some ministers) decided that congregations needed some system of assurance that the diversity of ministers who might be candidates for their pulpits all meet some agreed-upon basic standards of competence, apart from and independent of the standards created by the seminaries or the ministers association, neither of which are subject to the control of the association of congregations. The pre-merger system that the Universalists had, which involved accreditation of ministers on a regional basis (more like what the much larger UCC uses) was rejected. My presumption is that this rejection happened in part because of a Unitarian penchant for more centralized control, but I also think that the representative of congregations rightly believed that the different geographic regions of the United States and Canada had different kinds and concentrations of congregations and therefore different capacities for doing this kind of in-care and credentialing in a consistent way. From the beginning, we had the premise that our search and settlement system would be an open continental process, without any geographic limitations associated with the region in which you currently live or were credentialed (as is the case with some other congregational polity settlement

systems). The system we created at merger believed that a centralized system for ministerial settlement would work better over time for an association of congregations our size.

So imagine with me a conversation that goes through the logic of the system we currently have. Imagine a group of lay members of search committees being asked to design a UU system for ministerial accreditation from scratch. Let 's assume that they have figured out that a system with most of our current requirements has merit. (This is a big assumption, of course..) For purposes of this essay, let's assume that we agree that a system that requires from candidates an M. Div. or equivalent, a required reading list, a CPE, an internship or its equivalent, and recommendations from suitable lay leaders, teachers, and ministers is one we have agreed on. So after that the conversation might go like this:

"Person A: So who reviews all this to make sure it's in order?

Person B: It would have to either be done by volunteers or a hired staff person. I guess it depends on whether you see the review's purpose as just to check off these requirement on a list? Or would this staff person or a volunteer group have to go through all the documentation to assure that it was in order and had no red flags?

Person C: I wouldn't want it to just be a check list system. The evaluative materials can have a lot of variation in them. They would have to be read through. So can this be done by just one person? How many of these new ministers would we expect to have to handle in a year?

Person A: Well, over time, as our ministry grows, it wouldn't surprise me if we had several hundred ministers in preparation and as maybe sixty or seventy a year who would be ready to have their preparation evaluated.

Person B: It's more work than a staff person could do. We would need a few of them.

Person C: Is this really staff work? Isn't it likely that the staff people hired to oversee a credentialing system would be ministers? I think we'd need to have significant lay involvement in approving credentials if the purpose of this is to assure congregations that the minister that can apply to serve them have a basic standard of competency.

Person A: I guess ideally you would like a blended group of experienced ministers and lay people. So maybe you could have staff members assemble and even summarize the evaluative materials that needed to be read and send them to readers, maybe one lay and one minister? and if they agreed that the person's written material was good to go, they could enter in "fellowship" with the UUA and be recommended to congregations.

Person B: I guess that could work -- but would these two people never actually meet the candidate? I've been on a search committee before, and we read through several thoroughly prepared packets, but the choice we eventually made for who would be our minister was finally influenced by the interviews we held, and not just by the packet. Don't you think that the persons reading over the evaluative materials should also meet the person at least once and talk with them about their preparation? That's more like what really happens in a search.

Person C: That sounds like a good idea to me. But how would you feel about your minister being chosen by a group of only two people on a search committee? If we're going to create interviews I'm not sure the opinions of two people is enough when it comes to whether we "see a minister" in that person. It's hard to get much diversity in a group of two! Maybe the interview should be done a full committee of people, at least six or seven.

Person A: A national committee of people? Sounds expensive! Why couldn't it be done by regional volunteer groups? Maybe you could avoid the interview if the people in a regional volunteer group already knew the candidate?

Person B: That could work in a region that has the occasional ministerial candidate coming out of the congregations in a district. But what about districts that contain one of the seminaries that many UU students attend? What about those with large congregations that might have three or four candidates for ministry emerge over a period of a few years? How do regional volunteer groups work when a candidate for ministry has left the area to attend a seminary or where there are many candidates in a small geographic area? Does each have their own in-care evaluative team? How many volunteers would this need? Who would gather them and to whom would they be accountable?

Person B: A centralized national evaluative group would likely be less expensive than the cost of supporting district based committees. If you go with the premise that an interview is valuable, then a regionally based system would still require face to face meetings and the expenses they incur. I guess the

cost would depend on how big the regions were. I'd be more comfortable with a system where I knew that no matter where a person went to seminary, UU or non-UU, and no matter what size or style of home church they came out of, they all get reviewed by a group of people who have developed common standards and disciplines from this review.

Person C: When would this review and interview happen? Maybe we could have a local checklist system that allows a person who has completed all the requirements to be ordained and begin working? The congregation or agency would evaluate the person after three years and then the person would be interviewed by a national credentialing body that would grant them final fellowship.

Person A: I'm not sure whether I'd want my congregation to be served by someone whose preparation had only been affirmed by a seminary or regional body. That is, unless it was someone we already knew who had a history with our congregation? I'm starting to get the feeling that regional credentialing would somehow need to be matched with a regional settlement system, and I'm not sure that the UUA is large enough for that to work. The regional volunteer demands on lay leaders and ministers are already pretty heavy."

Here ends this imaginary conversation that suggests to me the way that the logic of the current system has evolved. The values that inform it seem to me to be consistency of standards and good stewardship of limited resources and volunteer time."

One last question you wanted me to reflect on: should ministerial credentialing be a governance function of the Board or a "means" function of the staff, responsive to Board ends? The reality of how our credentialing system has functioned, both prior to and after our Policy Governance change, includes management and accountability associated with both the Board and the Administration. I think that the argument for the process of credentialing being a "means" and therefore a staff function is a strong one. The MFC's actual functioning has routinely been strongly supported on the staff side and the members of the MFC fit well into the definition of "volunteer staff" that you find in the Policy Governance literature.

The Board's major role has been in the appointment of these "volunteer staff" members. Because the MFC's role and functions and membership is defined in the by-laws, the Board has also had to be responsible for evaluation or challenges from our "owners" regarding those definitions. The by-laws, however, leave most of the "ways of the MFC", the operational aspects of how the Committee does what it does, including the RSCC process, to the staff side. Most of the MFC's functioning is in the Committee's policies which do not have to be approved by the Board.

My opinion is that *whether* we have a credentialing system is a Board decision reflecting a nested "end" of the UUA, but that it's a toss-up whether the Board or the Staff (i.e. the MFC itself) should recruit the members. As it stands now there is consultation among the professional and volunteer staff with the Committee on Committees, and the staff fills temporary vacancies for single meetings. If we wanted to go a different direction, to lessen the burden on the Committee on Committees, the Board could still approve a slate of appointees that the staff and MFC members had recruited, and have final say.

Thanks for undertaking continuing study of ministerial credentialing. After I return from my sabbatical at Christmas, I am open to being available to you in whatever way might be helpful in your continuing work.

Sincerely,

Wayne Arnason
Chair, Ministerial Fellowship Committee.