
MEMORANDUM

TO: UU Ministers and Congregations & People Preparing for UU Ministry

FROM: Rev. David Pettee, Ministerial Credentialing Director
UUA Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group

RE: Congregational Sponsorship of Students and Others Preparing for Fellowship as UU Ministers

All persons preparing for fellowship as Unitarian Universalist ministers, whether pursuing parish ministry, ministry of religious education or community-based ministry, are required to obtain sponsorship by a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Because your congregation may be asked for sponsorship by a person intending to seek UU fellowship, this memo has been prepared so you will understand the policies, procedures and intentions which comprise this requirement.

As with any new and policy, we have not been able to anticipate every concern. In the pages that follow, however, we will try to answer the most frequently asked questions about congregational sponsorship. For instance...

What is the purpose of this requirement?

The purpose of this requirement is to ensure familiarity on the part of new ministers with UU congregational life, and encourage congregations to take a responsible role in the recruitment, preparation and assessment of our future ministers. Our congregations, our ministries and our religious movement all stand to gain if we can work together creatively to identify and support potential leaders.

When does sponsorship occur?

A person should request sponsorship from their congregation when they have been granted Candidate Status by the Regional Sub-Committee on Candidacy (RSCC), and not before. We think it best for the RSCC to make the first official decision regarding a person's fitness for ministry since they will have input from a number of different sources.

Who should decide who is or isn't sponsored?

In most instances, sponsorship will be decided by a vote of the congregation or its representative body, such as the Board of Trustees. If your congregation has a minister, he or she may have a recommendation, but it is not the minister's role to make the final decision.

Is some kind of documentation required?

Documentation of congregational sponsorship should be provided using the appropriate form in the *Information for Candidates* booklet which is mailed to all students and transfer candidates. It can also be obtained from the Ministerial Credentialing Office at the UUA. A person must have congregational sponsorship before they are considered for an appointment to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Sponsorship forms call for the signature of the president or chair of the congregation's governing board.

What are we saying when we sponsor someone?

At the most basic level, congregational sponsorship indicates confidence in the person's potential and suitability for UU ministry. The MFC and the Ministerial Credentialing Office will regard sponsorship as evidence that the person seeking fellowship is actively committed to the Purposes and Principles of the UUA and the institutions which uphold them. By sponsoring someone, you are not indicating that the person is presently ready for ministry; you are saying that with further education he or she has a good chance of developing the traits necessary for successful ministry. The final decision to grant fellowship to a candidate is made by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee after careful consideration of written materials, evaluations and a personal interview.

What are the other requirements for UU ministry?

The general qualifications, as stated by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, are these:

All applicants must be college graduates or have had an equivalent education; must have a strong motivation and good potential for our ministry; and must have a balanced and healthy personality, a capacity for self-understanding, a concern for others, intellectual ability and the kind of ministerial leadership ability expected by our societies. The committee will further require that the applicant be well informed on the history and development of Unitarian Universalism, familiar with the Bylaws of the UUA and fully committed to the purposes and objectives of the Association. An applicant for the ministry shall also have a Master of Divinity degree or its equivalent from a theological school approved by the Committee or have had an equivalent educational experience. In examining every applicant's qualifications, the Committee may consider any evidence which it deems relevant to assessing them and may reject any application.

The basic requirements for UU ministry are:

1. Successful interview with the RSCC
2. Sponsorship by a UU Congregation
3. Master of Divinity degree or it's equivalent;
4. Career assessment program at a career center approved by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (a list of approved centers is towards the end of this packet;)
5. Approved internship;
6. Basic unit of Clinical Pastoral Education;
7. Completion of the Reading List
8. Interview with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee

Doesn't this requirement have the potential for creating an uncomfortable situation in the congregation if we're not enthusiastic about sponsoring a particular candidate, especially if they're a long-term member, big contributor, etc.?

Yes; this is an important concern which needs to be dealt with carefully. It is especially important, however, not to back away from the challenge of providing the person with honest feedback. Chances are, if you have severe reservations about a person's potential for ministry, he or she will not be well-served in the long run if falsely encouraged.

The time to express your reservations about a potential candidate is prior to their RSCC interview. This can be done confidentially by contacting the chair of the appropriate regional sub-committee. We are not recommending that you risk serious conflict in your congregation over the matter of sponsorship. In expressing reservations to a candidate, try to stress that you are concerned for their well-being and success in employing their unique gifts, which might not necessarily be for ministry. If you come to an impasse or don't know what to do, please call the Ministerial Credentialing Director in the UUA Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group.

In what ways might we support a ministerial candidate?

Depending on their interests, resources, and the needs of the candidate, congregations will choose to support the people they sponsor in a variety of ways. Nothing in particular is required.

One of the major concerns for theological school students is their high level of debt; financial assistance can sometimes make the critical difference between staying in school and dropping out. A congregation and student may want to work together to raise money in any number of ways, including special fund-raisers and help with locating grant money or with direct backing from generous parishioners. People who are looking for opportunities to donate money tend to believe that contributing to the education of our future leaders is a good and worthwhile investment.

Please consider the possibility of contributing to the cost of the career assessment program. It is important for persons aspiring to the ministry to do this as early as possible in their preparation. Congregational support and encouragement to do career assessment will benefit the individual and our ministry as a whole. The cost of the program can be considerable.

Valuable support can be offered in less tangible ways as well. Candidates may benefit from opportunities to preach or lead other forms of worship. They may need experience working with committees and the financial aspects of running a church. They might be asked to be leaders in the religious education program, or organize a social action project.

Candidates could be encouraged (and supported financially) to participate in UUA district and continental events. A particularly worthwhile opportunity, especially for people who are relatively new to UUism and/or concerns of the larger association, is attendance at the UUA General Assembly. Consider the sponsoree for delegate status from your congregation.

In many instances, a church will be asked for sponsorship by a person who is away at school or simply moved away for other reasons. If the person is reasonably well known within the congregation, it is certainly appropriate to consider sponsorship. You may want to recognize her aspirations through, for example, newsletter articles, announcements, and invitations to participate in congregational activities when she is in the area. You could invite him to write a newsletter article sharing with the congregation some of the excitement of his journey.

If your congregation has a minister, his or her relationship with students or ministerial candidates in your congregation is an important one. He or she may be a mentor, role model, teacher and spiritual guide of considerable influence. The minister may also have mixed feelings about the candidate or the role that person is playing within the congregation. In any case, it is important to be sensitive to the possibilities and pitfalls inherent in the relationship and include the minister when developing policies regarding congregational response to ministerial aspirants.

Who's supposed to be providing all this support?

Again, congregations will respond to this opportunity in a variety of ways. Some will be able to offer little support at all and will simply deal with requests for sponsorship at the board level on a case by case basis. If this is apt to be the scenario in your congregation, it is still important to have a

policy in place which will guide your response to possible inquiries. For example: Who decides on sponsorship? What criteria are important? Will you want to interview the candidate? What happens if someone tries to block sponsorship? What if the board and the minister disagree? Some simple guidelines ahead of time could serve you well in the future.

If there is more interest and energy within your congregation for working with ministerial candidates, the board might, for example, recruit a sub-committee to develop policies, explore possibilities, and relate to candidates and their needs for support.

There's a UU theological school nearby and we're liable to be deluged by requests for sponsorship. What should we do, especially when we don't know the person very well?

If your congregation is near a theological school attended by many UU students, it will be particularly important to develop your policies regarding sponsorship as soon as possible. Chances are, you already have certain understandings about how to welcome, integrate and support ministerial students and value their presence. Your challenge may simply be to become more intentional about your relationship with them.

If a person you don't know well asks for sponsorship, it's perfectly acceptable to expect that person to become involved in the life of the congregation for a period of time before considering sponsorship. You may also want to ask for a reference from a UU minister or other mutually acceptable person who knows him or her.

All candidates coming before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee are expected to have been actively involved with a UU congregation for at least two years before consideration for fellowship. For people who decide to be UU's during theological school or for ministers who want to transfer from another denomination, this requirement may seem like a difficult obstacle. Though this may be true, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee firmly believes that people aspiring to professional leadership positions in our association need to have grounding in, and understanding of, UU congregational life. Congregational sponsorship may not guarantee this understanding, but it is meant to encourage, facilitate and underscore its importance.

Is sponsorship like having a ministerial intern?

Congregational sponsorship and ministerial internships are very different. A ministerial intern has contracted with the congregation and the minister for supervision as a learner for an agreed upon length of time. The intern is acting in a professional ministerial capacity, even though ministerial credentials have not yet been granted. Interns are evaluated and held accountable in a structured way that is not appropriate for someone the church sponsors. A sponsored candidate in your congregation who is not an intern will participate as a layperson, not a minister. If your congregation has an intern or field education student, it will be important for both minister and congregation to be clear about the distinction so the intern's position of authority is not jeopardized or confused.

Does a person need to be a member for congregational sponsorship?

While it is important for a candidate to indicate their institutional commitment by membership in a UU congregation *somewhere*, it is not necessary for them to be members of the sponsoring congregation. It would be important to consider this issue on an individual basis.

This seems like a big responsibility. What's in it for us?

What's in it for congregations is feeling good about the role you've played in promoting responsible, well-prepared leaders for our religious communities and Unitarian Universalism in general.

Our initial experience with congregational sponsorship does not indicate that it will be a burdensome requirement. In fact, both congregations and candidates have expressed pride and enthusiasm about the opportunity to claim one another.

Those of us who work with people preparing for UU ministry *thank you* for your help!

For more information about sponsorship or a person requesting sponsorship contact the Ministerial Credentialing Office at the UUA phone number is (617) 948-6403.

STATEMENT OF CONGREGATIONAL SPONSORSHIP

One of the requirements for Fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister is sponsorship by a UU congregation. The purpose of this requirement is to ensure familiarity on the part of our UU ministers with UU congregational life, and encourage congregations to take a responsible role in the recruitment, preparation and assessment of our future ministers.

Sponsorship of a Candidate indicates confidence in the person's potential and suitability for UU ministry. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee and the UUA Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group will regard congregational sponsorship as evidence that the person seeking fellowship is actively committed to Unitarian Universalism and the institutions which uphold our faith tradition.

In most instances, sponsorship of a Candidate will be determined by vote of the congregation or its representative body.

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With the above in mind, we, the _____
(name of Congregation)

are pleased to sponsor _____
(name of Candidate)

as a Candidate for fellowship in the UU ministry.

Signed _____
(congregation president or board chair)

Please type name _____

* * * * *

PLEASE PRINT:

Name of Candidate _____

Name of Congregation _____

Address of Congregation _____

THANK YOU