

Religious Education Credentialing Committee
Fall Meeting
October 23-26, 2007
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Credentialed Observer's Report

I am writing this report as the fifth Credentialed Observer for the UUA's Religious Education Credentialing Committee. I was asked to serve in this role, having been awarded Credentialed Religious Educator (CRE) status during the Fall 2005 meeting.

I begin this report by commending the members of the RECC for having an Observer. Creating this position shows not just a willingness, but also a desire to hear constructive criticism as to the integrity and efficiency of their proceedings. One of the unintended benefits of the Observer's presence is an oral review by the Committee Chair on the first day of how the committee functions, logistically and philosophically. It never hurts for members of a committee of this import to hear how and why they exist each time they meet.

In preparing for my role, I read over the reports written by the previous Observers. Now, as I compose my own report, I find myself wanting to reiterate many of their well-thought-out comments. And in fact, never one to re-invent the wheel, I'll do just that throughout this summary report, putting their quotes in italics.

Observer Responsibilities

According to the list of responsibilities sent to me beforehand by the RE Credentialing Director, Beth Williams, the Observer's responsibilities include:

- receive all the candidates' packets and read before the meeting
- actively participate in full committee meetings and sub-committee meetings
- attend candidate interviews and all discussions regarding the interviews
- ask questions (or not) during the interviews
- participate in straw votes on a candidate's status but not in the final vote,
- present the committee with both a short oral report of my observations at the end of the meeting and a written report within a couple of weeks.

My Observations

The Committee

"I observed a committee process and attended personal interactions of extraordinary respect, integrity and devotion to right relations in all its many faces. The members of this group share fully and listen deeply, encourage differing points of view and value the wisdom of making decisions based on consideration of a variety of perspectives. The need for task accomplishment was consistently and intentionally balanced with the need for processing all considerations voiced by those at the table." (Layne Richard-Hammock)

The RECC is an extremely well run committee. I will give credit for much of that to the effective leadership of Committee Chair, Liz Jones. Liz's familiarity with LREDA, the history of the Credentialing process, and the structure of the UUA gives her the context necessary to lead this committee through its initial evolutionary stages.

Credit also goes to the staff assigned to the committee. Beth and A'ashia did an excellent job preparing and organizing the necessary materials.

"The RECC is an engaged group of people. Everyone came thoroughly prepared, and they continued to use their "free time" in the evenings for further study. A topic of concern raised one day would result in the presentation of a draft of a new document the next morning. But while the proceedings continued at a steady pace, they were not rushed, and some decisions were put off for a future meeting." (Gaia Brown)

Committee members were respectful in tone and action and no one person ever dominated the discussion. As a result, conflict was kept at a low stress level and was resolved without incident. Although official decisions were reached by a vote, members almost always worked by consensus.

"As the days went on, tension was often broken with humor, but never in relation to a participant in the program. Present or absent, known to members or not, participants were always treated with the utmost respect." (Betsy Darr)

When there was extra time before one of the candidate interviews, the chair recommended that the committee not spend that time discussing that candidate as that "did not seem equitable" since a certain time is allotted for each person. I was impressed with her commitment to keeping the process a level playing field on all accounts.

"Not surprisingly, what most of us know about this Committee, even those of us who have met with them during the credentialing process, is the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The work of this Committee certainly includes reviewing materials submitted by candidates for credentialing and meeting with these candidates, but the majority of the time this Committee met was devoted to issues of policy, reviewing and revising requirements, and other "behind-the-scenes" business." (Thomas Pistole)

Like Thomas, I was amazed at the amount of behind the scenes work is required to keep this program running. While I was aware of the constant modifications to the credentialing requirements and reading list, I was not aware of all the rationales that go into those changes and how carefully every change is considered. I was pleased to see acknowledgement by committee members that constant revisions (no matter how good they are) can be viewed as less than positive by the candidates trying to make sense of changing rules and requirements in their process.

AR/AO

“ . . . the committee integrated anti-oppression training right into its meeting, and now at each meeting the daily process observer lets the committee know how well it did in using an anti-oppression lens (and the marks were consistently good).” (Gaia Brown)

I was impressed with the manner in which the committee recognized oppression as a factor for religious educators and for candidates with physical disabilities and different learning styles. Obviously, the observation made my Layne Hammond-Richards a year earlier (“ . . . all learners do not process the written word at the same level of efficiency and the reality is, the program plan has lots of words. . . .”) and then reiterated by CO, Thomas Pistole, last March was taken seriously. Using this lens made them more sensitive to the barriers to professional advancement often experienced by these groups.

The committee’s commitment to deepening their understanding of AR/AO issues included their agreement to build into their agenda a discussion around a piece of literature or other resource focusing on an AR/AO topic. For this meeting, they read *Waist High in the World* by Nancy Mairs. The comments shared demonstrated a realistic sensitivity to oppression in our society and the need to remember oppression comes in many colors and configurations and that there is no one-size-fits-all way to address it.

The Interview Process

I have to admit, I was most intrigued by this process having just been through it a year ago. My experience was positive and I wanted to see if that was the norm and what kinds of things went on “backstage” in evaluating the candidates.

I am here to state that the process is good. It is transparent. It is well reasoned. It is respectful of the candidates.

The greatest intensity was given to planning for the interviews, endeavoring to make them as smooth and non-threatening as possible for the candidates, while thorough enough for a good decision. (Betsy Darr) Each candidate’s portfolio is reviewed by every member on the committee, with one member serving in the role of “reader.” The reader leads a short discussion about the candidate’s portfolio, after which the committee creates a list of interview questions primarily designed to help the candidate explain a noted weakness in his/her portfolio.

It was comforting to hear how much compassion the members have for the candidates. If, in the end, they could not give a fully positive answer to a candidate, they were prepared by having given deep consideration to the ramifications.

“When evaluating after an interview, I noted how they enjoyed the candidate’s good points and “celebrated a good professional”, while being frank and unwavering about weaknesses.” (Betsy Darr)

Because the RE Credentialing Director, Beth Williams, is the personal connection between the candidates and the committee, I concur with the decision that Beth will no longer ask questions during the interview.

As part of the interviews I observed, the committee recognized that the criteria for evaluating a candidate for the Masters status may not be clear to the candidates. A great deal of discussion was given to this issue, with one committee member spending his evening drafting up a document for possible use as an evaluative tool. Perhaps the REC Director could address portfolio inadequacies / criteria for competency before candidates get to the interview stage.

Thanks

It was a real privilege to serve as the Credentialed Observer. As I told the committee in my oral report, "I came into the meeting wanting to find some critical shortcomings so I could feel I made a difference with my critique; instead, I found a committee that could serve as the poster child for right relations, efficiency, transparency, and a commitment to the future of liberal religious education." I thank every member of the committee for the warm welcome I received.