

Report to the Board from the Credentialing Taskforce  
FROM: Tamara Payne-Alex  
TO: UUA Board of Trustees  
DATE: March 30, 2010

Dear Gini and Board Members,

Following the Excellence in Ministry Summit (December 2008), the UUA Board of Trustees asked the Ministerial Fellowship Committee to explore the issue of “Ministerial Culture, UU Growth and the Impact of Credentialing Process”.

([www.uua.org/documents/pte/eim/0812\\_02\\_culture\\_growth.pdf](http://www.uua.org/documents/pte/eim/0812_02_culture_growth.pdf)) The Ministerial Fellowship Committee discussed this topic at its March 2009 meeting and created a response to the Board. The Board reviewed the Ministerial Fellowship Committee response at the April 2009 meeting.

At the October 2009 Board of Trustees meeting, the Board voted to “appoint a task force to examine all UUA credentialing processes and to recommend appropriate changes to the Board by April 1, 2011, with a status report including a work plan by June 20, 2010”.

On March 4 & 5, 2010, I convened a meeting with Jackie Shanti (Vice Moderator of the UUA Board), Rev. Barbara Merritt (Chair of the Panel on Theological Education), Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs (Co-Minister, Unity Unitarian, St. Paul, MN), Rev. Christine Robinson (Senior Minister, Albuquerque, NM), Rev. Linda Peebles (Minister of Religious Education, Arlington, VA) and Rev. Harlan Limpert (UUA staff). Participants of the meeting were not acting as representatives from any group or constituency but rather were drawing on their considerable and impressive years of service and leadership to congregations, ministry and Unitarian Universalism. The purpose of this meeting was to determine the appropriate scope of the work for aligning Credentialing Processes with the mission and focus of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Our meeting did not begin with a critique of current credentialing process, a review of previous studies of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, or a debate regarding the feasibility of credentialing for “excellence”. This was an intentional attempt to avoid our imaginings being limited by reactivity to existing issues, personal experiences or by the constraints of our current assumptions regarding credentialing. Instead, the goal was to take a bird’s eye view of Unitarian Universalism, the mission of our Association, and the role that certification of our leaders should play in the life of our faith community.

**The assembled group identified the following assumptions that undergirded our discussion:**

1. Unitarian Universalism is a congregational movement and our ministry must be grounded in a worshipping congregation.
2. While the cultural place of the church and the church demographic is changing, there is a longing for vital, transformative congregational life.
3. Effective professional leadership is a critical component of achieving vital, transformative congregational life.
4. Maintaining a list of recommended leaders dedicated to service to our mission as a faith community is a primary focus of the Association.
5. Those currently doing the work of credentialing on behalf of our Association are doing so with enormous dedication, integrity of service and good intent.
6. The mission of our current credentialing process is not in accord with our current need.
7. We are willing to be bold and imagine how things can be different.

**Participants also discussed meta-issues that affect how our credentialing process interacts with congregations and the larger faith community.**

*“Each member congregation has the exclusive right to call and ordain its own minister or ministers, but the Association has the exclusive right to admit ministers to ministerial fellowship with the Association.”* (UUA Bylaws, Section C-11.1. Ministerial Fellowship)

There is a tension between our congregational polity and the credentialing process. It is our Association which admits aspirants into fellowship; establishing criteria for acceptance and determining who is adequately prepared to serve our congregations. Yet our polity says that a congregation should be able to discern who to call based on the needs and mission of the congregation. At times, this dynamic can create triangulation, distrust and broken relationships between our congregations, ministers and the Association.

All meeting participants agreed that any certification process of leaders must, at a minimum, prioritize the goal of ensuring to the best of our ability that those in trusted positions in our congregations will “do no harm”.

Our credentialing process should:

- acknowledge the tension between Ordination and Fellowship
- offer a transparent and clear formation path and certification criteria for our leaders
- ensure to the best of our ability that those in trusted positions in our congregations will “do no harm”

*“No minister shall be required to subscribe to any particular creed, belief, or interpretation of religion in order to obtain and hold fellowship.”* (UUA Bylaws, Section C-11.1. Ministerial Fellowship)

Unitarian Universalists have not agreed upon theology of call or specified motivation for ministry. Yet, motivation for ministry lived out through the ministries of our leaders will shape and influence the focus and mission of our congregations, especially in the absence of a particular creed or belief. While our credentialing process can not stipulate belief, it can establish expectation regarding the depth of commitment to Unitarian Universalism, the strength of purpose, and clarity of the origin of call.

Spiritual competencies that are critical elements of faith leadership are often embedded in creeds. In the absence of creed, critical spiritual competencies must be explicitly declared as desirable leadership qualities. Such spiritual competencies might include humility, capacity to receive, willingness to forgive, proven track record of service, ability to “sit at the feet of” teachers and mentors, capacity for delayed gratification, ability to inspire, commitment to spiritual practice, sense of humor and joy.

Our credentialing process should

- provide layers of credentialing, at each step or choice point requiring increasingly stringent commitment, strength of purpose, and clarity of call
- name those spiritual competencies that we are willing to declare as most central to our faith leaders’ role in serving vital, transformative congregations

We have an understanding of Unitarian Universalist ministry as a shared ministry between professional ministers, lay leaders and congregations. Understanding that a credentialing path is for *our people*, not just for professional ministry, reinforces our concept of shared ministry.

Our credentialing process should

- seek clarity on what credentialing as a process can and can not do in support of vital, transformative congregational life
- match the realities of ministry and congregational leadership
- weave together lay and professional ministry credentialing to reinforce our understanding of and commitment to shared ministry and model the interdependence of lay and professional ministries
- engage congregations as participants in the certification of lay leaders and professional ministers, re-enforcing congregations' accountability for the recruitment, formation, discernment and quality of leadership and ministry.

### **Summary and Next Steps:**

Our credentialing process should:

- acknowledge the tension between Ordination and Fellowship
- offer a transparent and clear formation path and certification criteria for our leaders
- ensure, to the best of our ability, that those in trusted positions in our congregations will “do no harm”
- provide layers of credentialing, at each step or choice point requiring increasingly stringent commitment, strength of purpose, and clarity of call
- name those spiritual competencies that we are willing to declare as most central to our faith leaders' role in serving vital, transformative congregations
- seek clarity on what credentialing as a process can and can not do in support of vital, transformative congregational life
- match the realities of ministry and congregational leadership
- weave together laity and professional ministry credentialing to reinforce our understanding of and commitment to shared ministry and model the interdependence of lay and professional ministries
- engage congregations as participants in the certification of both lay leaders and professional ministers, re-enforcing congregations' accountability for the recruitment, formation, discernment and quality of leadership and ministry.

Toward the end of our time together, two participants voiced “ big qualms about trying to tackle such a huge project as a credentialing path for all kinds of lay leadership as well as clergy and other church professionals....exciting as it was to talk about.” Five of the seven participants agreed that the priority should be to make adjustments that address concerns for broken and/or disengaged relationships caused by the structure of our current credentialing system.

That said, if the ideas presented here are embraced by the Board as being in alignment with Board stated Ends, it would seem most practical to create a “blueprint” that includes a rough sketch of how the system can be expanded to encompass multiple credentialing paths. This blueprint approach would also help ensure scalability and sustainability of the credentialing processes and begin to set an expectation for engaging congregations and ministers in ways that model mutual accountability, interdependence, and a theology of shared ministry.

I currently see four conversations as Next Steps to move us forward.

1. Explore a more nuanced understanding and definition of “do no harm”.
2. Identify what credentialing as a process can and can not do in support of vital, transformative congregational life.

3. Name those spiritual competencies most central to our faith leaders' role in serving vital, transformative congregations
4. Create a rough sketch of a credentialing process that can be expanded to encompass credentialing paths for clergy, laity, and other church professionals; provide layers of credentialing; and engage congregations as participants.

*The Ministerial Fellowship Committee shall have exclusive jurisdiction over ministerial fellowship except as otherwise provided in these bylaws. It shall make rules governing ministerial fellowship, subject to the approval of the Board of Trustees. (UUA Bylaws, Section 11.2. Ministerial Fellowship Committee).*

When I met with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in December, they were open to and interested in how the Board intended to move forward in the conversation regarding credentialing. I anticipate the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, as well as the Religious Educators Credentialing Committee and other professional groups, becoming increasingly engaged in the discussions once the general direction of our work is set.

I look forward to hearing the Board's response to this update and any suggestions or recommendations for the work ahead.

Best Regards,

Tamara Payne-Alex