

MFC Liaison Observations

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The best advice I was given when I went before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in 2011 was to be curious. Having curiosity serves several purposes.

First, it diminishes crippling fear—self-focused worry about performance and the future—replacing it with a lighter-hearted interest in others and the present moment. Rather than possible catastrophic thinking, “Oh no, I can’t possibly know all the answers,” curiosity makes space for asking, “Hmm, I wonder why she asked *that* question in *that* way?” This second attitude makes room for shaping a real answer born out of the moment rather than out of panic.

Second, curiosity opens the heart so the whole experience of taking time out of your daily routine, spending precious resources, traveling to Boston, waiting for your appointment, interacting with the chaplain, preaching, sitting before the panel, waiting again, and finally being told how you come across as a minister, becomes less about you and more about being fully alive and part of the world.

After serving as a liaison/observer to a full round of MFC interviews, I became even more convinced this little piece of advice to be curious is extremely potent to this critical gateway from candidate to preliminary fellowship. It also serves as a guiding star for every aspect of ministry to come.

How you frame preparing for and participating in an MFC interview can further your pathway to a rich ministry. Both parish and community ministries can be lonely at times just as preparing for the MFC can feel lonely. You are fitting in all the required reading and study in a bus life while your family and friends carry on without you.

All the candidates who had found ways to create support for themselves, in-person and on-line, walked into the interview room not alone but with a mighty cloud of witnesses holding them up. All the candidates who arranged for a trial run, a mock MFC interview, came with increased confidence and self-awareness. All the candidates who sought a balance between preparation and self-care were the ones most fully present for their interview.

There cannot be a single, simple perfect way for our Unitarian Universalist Association to assess all who aspire to be ministers. All forms of measurements and metrics looking for competency, knowledge, emotional intelligence and that elusive “ministerial authority” will be inadequate in some way. Yet I can report with full conviction this MFC interview process is thoughtful, loving and contains great integrity. It actually does allow each person to present themselves as a minister. It does provide a window into strengths and weaknesses.

This committee adheres to rituals to ensure they are alert, informed and open-hearted. They indeed practice what they seek. Between each interview they take a break, clear their heads, review materials, pray for the next in-coming candidate, and have a time of silence. The committee constantly reviews its own process, tweaks it, and bemoans any of it that may be cumbersome just because it is impossible to have ideal reading lists, sets of questions, interview lengths, cities for meeting, or unlimited budgets. Working within the confines of being human, they nurture an evolving system that is the very best it can be.

The work is treated as sacred and each interview is seen as holy. This committee is rooting for you and wants the best; it is not a cliché. They discuss the sermon you preach, interview answers, and demeanor with great care. But as with all ministry, they are pledged to speak the truth with love. Sometimes these truths can be difficult for a candidate to hear and absorb. Here, the attitude of curiosity helps the most.

- Every single person in your MFC committee has read your packet fully. Before the interview the committee discusses any red flags or issues they want clarified. Be very familiar with your own packet. Read it looking for recurring issues and patterns. Ask someone you trust to read it with fresh eyes, looking for the same. The committee will ask about issues they find. This is your opportunity to explain any situations, own up to problems (if necessary) then describe how you've improved, or sought help, or made changes. You do not need to be without flaws. You do need to be self-aware and actively addressing any significant issues.
- The committee does use a rubric to ensure they are asking questions from each of the competency areas. Yes, do all the reading. To consolidate your thoughts, you might consider writing for yourself a one or two sentence response to each reading. It also helps to have similar one or two sentences theological thoughts to each area of competency. These help make your ideas concise and laser clear.
- Many of the sermons my group heard were not preaching a passionate message but were more like autobiographical essays. The committee has read your essays and do not need a recap. Of course you can reference yourself or tell a story for your experiences but the aim is to preach a moving, engaging, saving message of Unitarian Universalism.
- Humor is welcome in the sermon and interview if genuine and not a habit to distract or dismiss.
- Practice the basic art of interviewing, of offering brief, concise answers. Practice answering to your best ability while being ready to admit when you don't know. If you don't know, where would you go to find out?
- Keep your chalice lighting short while heartfelt and authentic to the situation.
- This MFC interview is a professional interview. Consider what you wear. Some candidates arrived in clothes that were too informal or distracting.
- Look for the joy in interacting with this group who deeply values our UU tradition and wants to ensure its health and longevity. The joy is there in spades.
- If you get a final number and evaluation that is disheartening, the committee is aware of how difficult it is to hear this news. Take a deep breath and pause. Give yourself time to glimpse the potential for personal learning and growth to eventually come out of this immediate moment of grief and disappointment. Your long-term response to their evaluation is what matters most. It is true, candidates who have gotten 3's and 4's have used that information to work, return, pass and go on to become terrific UU ministers.
- Trust the interview process. Trust the collective wisdom of the committee. Trust your own unique value and authenticity.

May your preparations and interview be transformative and joyful. We are all rooting for you and wishing the best.

Blessings,
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 Tulsa, OK
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