

**Ministerial Fellowship Committee**  
**September 2009 Meeting**  
**Boston, Massachusetts**

The Unitarian Universalist Association Ministerial Fellowship Committee met in Boston, Massachusetts from September 23<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup>. Currently the Committee consists of 13 individuals (7 ministers and 6 lay persons) an additional 3 staff members and 2 support staff. For this meeting five new individuals were added to the committee: Candidate Liaisons Catherine Senghas and Emily Melcher, Trustee Liaisons David Friedman and Jose Ballester, and MFC Coordinator Marion Bell. Rev Greg Stewart resigned from membership due to health concerns and was temporarily replaced by the Rev. Ellen Brandenburg.

Rev. Debra Haffner, committee member and director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing, provided an informative presentation on Sexual Ethics. In the business portion of the meeting, several key issues were discussed and some statistics were shared. It was reported that there were some concerns by individuals about changes in ministry, especially on credentialing. It was reported that the Rev. Tracy Robinson-Harris, in her capacity as a consultant to the UUA, is continuing to take complaints about ministerial misconduct. We reviewed the “Whistle-blower” policy without comment at the present time. We were updated on the changes to the Community Ministry website where individuals can obtain further information. Of some concern it was reported that many of the Career Assessment Centers are closing since most denominations just require psychological profiles. Further it was reported that changes in Regional Sub-Committees on Credentialing (RSCC) may necessitate that interviews be at the start of internships. Lastly it was reported that grants available for evaluative process are running-out early.

As to the state of individuals preparing for ministry there are currently 402 Aspirants and candidates plus an additional 32 individuals. Of Persons of color – racial/ethnic identity – self identification there are 50 individuals.

In addition to individuals submitting forms for renewals and various waivers the core of the committee’s work was to evaluate individuals who have applied for Fellowship in Unitarian Universalist Ministry. It needs to be stressed that we are not attempting to determine if the applicant is a minister, just whether they have the qualities to be in Fellowship. The process for professional UU

Ministry requires the use of traditional ministerial skills, such as pastoral counseling, worship and preaching, religious education, social witness and advocacy, and institutional leadership. Have as its central purpose service to persons or the transformation of society. In addition, the minister must be a member of, and maintain active involvement in, a UUA member society.

A minister who does not serve in a UU related institution will be required to demonstrate continued interest in retaining that status by giving evidence of active involvement in denominational district, local society, and collegial activities.

As part of the application, the candidate must agree in writing to be bound by the rules, policies and procedures of the MFC. In examining each candidate's qualifications, the Committee may consider any evidence which it deems relevant to assess the candidate and may reject any application. Upon the recommendation of Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group, persons who are unsuitable for Ministerial Fellowship will by vote of the Executive Committee be ineligible to receive financial aid or to appear before the full Committee.

All candidates for ministry are required to undergo a background check before being permitted to interview with the Committee. Candidates are responsible for paying for the background check from an agency approved by the MFC and have the reports sent directly to the Committee. All reports will become property of the UUA. The MFC reserves the right to contact references, supervisors, and other individuals from any source to clarify information supplied in the candidate's packet or to obtain further information about the candidate's suitability for ministry.

No applicant shall receive Ministerial Fellowship without being interviewed at least once by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

Following the interview the candidate will be informed by the Committee of its decision. Candidates receiving either a Category I or a Category II for Preliminary Fellowship shall be required to satisfy all contingencies within three years of the Committee's decision. Failure to do so will result in nullifying the original decision.

During this session 20 individuals (10 women and 10 men) were granted one of five categories as described below

**Category I**

Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry with no contingencies other than satisfactory completion of degree, internship, and Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). During this session there were **13** individuals granted this category.

**Category II**

Qualified for Unitarian Universalist ministry provided specific contingencies are met satisfactorily. During this session there were **2** individuals granted this category.

**Category III**

Encouraging progress for Unitarian Universalist ministry, but with issues to be addressed, (i.e., academic, personal, institutional understanding, etc.) so that the MFC requires a return visit. If specific work has been outlined, it must be completed before a return visit. During this session there were **4** individuals granted this category

**Category IV**

Considerable doubt as to whether the candidate meets the general qualifications for Unitarian Universalist ministry. During this session there was **1** individual granted this category.

**Category V**

The MFC sees no potential for the candidate in Unitarian Universalist ministry, and discourages the candidate from further preparation. During this session there were **0** individuals granted this category.

**Observations & Commentary** (Narrative by Rev. José Ballester)

In the movie *Men In Black* the head of the agency in addressing the recruits that have failed makes the statement, "Congratulations, you are everything we have come to expect after years of government training." While these observations are not that dire or cynical they are critical. It needs to be stated that the RSCC process appears to be working as there were no Category Vs issued and the vast majority were Category Is.

On a positive note I was heartened to see that so many of the candidates were young adults. They bring a perspective that speaks to an emerging ministry. When a young adult member of the MFC finished evaluating a young adult candidate, the committee member openly and joyfully wept, stating that she finally found a pastor that would understand her needs. My initial uncertainty

as to the skills and abilities of these young adult candidates, due to their age, was dispelled by interaction with them and my realization that I had been 33 years old when I first appeared before the MFC. I joyfully welcome my new colleagues and hope they will shake us all to the core.

However I did note some disturbing trends among several of the candidates. I suspect there exists some cheat sheet (*Cliff Notes*; Q source) of what to tell the MFC. There was a similarity of answers that occurred too often to be happenstance. While this may be attributed to a variety of legitimate reasons I fear the possibility that candidates may be presenting a profile that is presumed to be the MFC's ideal, while sacrificing some authenticity. Of course I could be in error and see patterns that do not exist; only time will tell.

One area that raised concerns for me was when candidates were queried as to their approach to social justice. Too many candidates stated that they would research the issue, and then preach on the subject in the hope of eliciting some reaction from the listeners. There did not seem to be a drive for activism or community organizing even by those who were considering community ministry or how had preached so eloquently on a social justice topic.

Several candidates either spoke or wrote unashamedly about some trauma in their lives, often some form of physical or sexual abuse. Curiously when candidates spoke or wrote about economic hardships or working class backgrounds it appeared to be with a sense of shame or guilt. I worry that classism may be so ingrained in our UU culture that it begins to rob empathy from our ministers in their formative years.

The Rev. Dr. Bill Jones informs us that there is no hierarchy of oppression and yet it seems that in our approach to social justice, we Unitarian Universalists, too often address one oppression over another. The message we are seemingly giving to our ministerial candidates is that there exists a cause de jour and the candidate had better be very familiar with that particular cause, even to the level of not being familiar with other oppressions in our society. The work of the Journey Towards Wholeness Transformation Committee embraces multiple oppressions, including racism, ableism, sexism, cultural bias and economic injustice. Candidates should at the very least be familiar with the breadth if not the depth of social justice initiatives.

Finally, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee at times has to deal with discipline of a minister who has committed some infraction. The process can

involve the MFC, the UUA Ministry and Professional Leadership (MPL) Staff Group and the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA). Curiously these three groups: a Board appointed Committee; an administration staff group; a voluntary membership organization have a complex and seemingly labyrinthine relationship on various levels, none more so than when discipline for ministerial conduct, or conduct unbecoming is involved. Yet none of these bodies has the power to ordain or defrock. At worse they can remove fellowship, deny use of resources or expel from membership in the organization. The individual remains an ordained minister, even a Unitarian Universalist who is an ordained minister; free to serve any congregation who will have them and perform whatever rituals, rights or ceremonies commonly accorded an ordained clergy. Perhaps we need to explore the relationships of these groups as well as that with the various theological schools and the member congregations of the UUA (the only ones with the power to ordain under congregational polity.)

*Jose Ballester*