

Unified Fitness Review Committee Proposal
Connecticut Conference, UCC
5/29/14

A Brief Review of United Church of Christ Oversight Proceedings

- UCC clergy hold their authorization for ministry in the Association where their local church membership is held. Association Committees on Ministry (COMS) oversee the authorization for ministry.
- The Manual on Ministry (MOM) of the United Church of Christ outlines four proceedings available to COMs for oversight of authorized ministers (see Section 8, pages 4 and 9). Two of these, “Periodic Support Consultations” and “Situational Support Consultations”, provide nurture and support to pastors. They are a “. . . deliberate and intentional effort to identify, build up, and strengthen those God has called into authorized ministries in the church.”
- Two other proceedings, “Information Reviews” and “Fitness Reviews” are ecclesiastical reviews. As such, they are used to “. . . ensure that those engaged in ministry embody faithful witness to, and extension of, the ministry of God in Jesus Christ” – and are accountable for the ministry they carry out on behalf of the church.
 - An Information Review “. . . verifies that all authorized ministers continue to meet the basic standards required for authorization.”
 - A Fitness Review, the focus of this proposal, is initiated in order “. . . to determine whether an authorized minister continues to be fit for the ministry for which he or she is authorized.” It is undertaken by an Association Committee on Ministry after a concern has been brought.
 - It is then determined by the COM that the pastor has standing in the Association, and that if the concern had merit, whether it would call into question the minister’s fitness for ministry.
 - A Fitness Review is meant to guarantee that concerns about a pastor’s ministry are taken “. . . seriously and considered in depth, and that decisions and resulting actions rendered are just, fair, merciful and compassionate for all concerned.”

Scriptural Basis for a UFRC

- Numbers 11: 16-17: *“The LORD said to Moses: ‘Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you, so that you will not have to carry it alone.’”*
- Matthew 18:15-17: *“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

Proposal Summary and Rationales

- The fifteen Associations of the Connecticut Conference, UCC will delegate Fitness Reviews to a Unified Fitness Review Committee. The UFRC will be a Committee formed by the Associations of the Connecticut Conference, staffed by an Associate Conference Minister.
- A Fitness Review requires trained and experienced volunteers and a time commitment estimated at more than 400 hours of staff and volunteer time combined, including 60 hours of staff time. The UFRC would allow volunteers to be drawn from a larger pool and would allow better training and utilization of staff than can be achieved by each Association conducting Fitness Reviews.
- Consistent compliance with recognized policies and procedures is of critical importance in Fitness Reviews. Maintaining fifteen distinct sets of official policies and procedures (i.e., within the separate Associations) is more than challenging, unreliable, and for purposes of this proposal, unnecessary.
- A UFRC would identify the best volunteers who would then offer concentrated focus and expertise. It would reduce the overall workload of each COM, which is important because COMs now face an increasing work load due to the new Member in Discernment process.
- As the number of members in each Association has declined, the likelihood of conflicts of interest (between those being reviewed and those tasked with doing the Review) has increased. By establishing a UFRC that is populated by volunteers from many Associations, we sharply reduce the likelihood of that.
- A UFRC would take responsibility for the ongoing training of those conducting reviews, and assure that a capable group of authorized volunteers would stand prepared to respond to a concern.
- A UFRC would make more effective use of staff time. Regional Ministers would thus be required to be familiar with only one set of procedures. The amount of the staff time each Fitness Review requires makes this a very important consideration.
- The UCC Nationwide General Council, Don Clark, recommends a unified approach to Fitness Reviews.

Process and Polity

- Each Association's COM would retain the authority to initiate a Fitness Review. Thus, in accordance with the procedure outlined in the Manual on Ministry, when a concern is registered, it would come before that Association's COM. This preliminary discernment, while preserving the anonymity of the parties involved, would answer the two threshold questions:
 - Does the person about whom concerns have been raised have standing?
 - If so, do these concerns – if true – call into question this person's fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ?
- Upon voting to initiate a Fitness Review of an authorized minister, the COM would then refer the Fitness Review to the UFRC, and include an explicit statement that the outcome rendered by them will be received and accepted as that of the COM. This statement would also be directed to the respondent in the case.
- The Regional Conference Minister from that region would manage and staff the Fitness Review.
- The Conference Minister, and/or Conference staff designee would be kept informed of the status of the Fitness Review, and would be the contact person for accessing expert or legal advice. S/he

would insure budgetary and training support for the work of the UFRC, and would serve as spokesperson for the Connecticut Conference and would provide advice to spokespersons for the Local Church and other affected bodies.

- The UFRC would be charged to move the Fitness Review through the information gathering, support, deliberative and outcome phases of the process as outlined in the Manual on Ministry, to perform any additional tasks agreed upon by the Associations, and to inform the COM where the review originated of its progress and decisions.
- If a program of growth is prescribed, it would be determined, implemented and monitored by the UFRC, which would provide informational updates to the COM chairperson (or designee) of the progress and outcomes of a program of growth.
- An Association, through its COM, would continue to retain primary authority and responsibility for those who are authorized for ministry and have been called to a setting in that Association. These responsibilities include, but are not limited to:
 - Information Reviews
 - Periodic Support Consultations
 - Situational Support Consultations
 - Formation of Members in Discernment & Authorization of Ministers
 - Ordination of Those Approved and Called
 - Installation of Authorized Ministers
 - Exit Interviews with Pastors/Congregational Leaders
 - Participation in Farewell Service Liturgies

Composition of the UFRC

- Each participating Association would appoint one member.
- An additional five members would be appointed by the Conference Board of Directors, in consultation with staff.
- In making its choices, both the Associations and the Conference Board would consider the balance of gender, clergy, lay Committee members, as well as the skills and experience needed for effective service on the UFRC, while being mindful of guidance provided by the Bylaws of the Conference with regard to diversity of nominees.
- The UFRC will be staffed by an Associate or Regional Conference Minister.
- Committee members will have fulfilled a term on a Committee on Ministry during some portion of the six years before their appointment to the UFRC. This increases the likelihood that they will bring to the Committee appropriate knowledge and expertise.
- The term of service for each member would be three years. The full executive body of the Association, and/or the Conference Board of Directors, may choose to renew a member of the UFRC for up to two more terms of service, after confirming the member's willingness to continue to serve.
- Initially there would be a staggered term of service established. A portion of the first class will hold one year, two year and three year terms. All those serving may renew their membership for two full three year terms.

- It is required that a nominee have experience on a COM within the last six years. Beyond that, the following qualifications are recommended:
 - Ability to address difficult and important issues in a faithful, discerning manner
 - Patience, prayer, preparation and stamina
 - Passionate commitment to Christ's church
 - Grounding in a discerning relationship with God
 - Familiarity or training in Fitness Review process and complexities
 - Ability to work cooperatively and collaboratively with others
 - Ability to apply deep listening skills – both with interviewees and fellow committee members
 - Attentiveness to details
 - Positive attitude
 - Capacity to approach the task with openness, rather than a pre-determined agenda
 - A sense of integrity, and respect for others
 - Ability to hold confidentiality
 - Capacity to participate in a group and to come to consensus
 - Active supporter of the church, Conference, and Association
 - Recognition for wisdom, integrity, openness, and ability to be fair and impartial
 - Trust and respect within and by the Association
 - Willingness and ability to make this responsibility a priority when called upon
 - Ability to think and to discern outside one's 'comfort zone', acknowledging that issues of clergy or church ethical issues may contain conflicting sensibilities about what comprises faithful action.
 - Willingness to serve for at least 3 years

In addition, experience and/or education in Counseling, Social work, Conflict management, Pastoral care, and Law would be desirable.

Principle Responsibilities of UFRC Members

- To act in cooperation with other UFRC members, in accordance with the current UCC Manual on Ministry, and with the procedures identified in the charter document, along with any additional procedures adopted by the UFRC itself.
- To respond promptly, when called upon by the COM of a participating Association, to conduct a Fitness Review by moving through the information gathering, support, deliberative and outcome phases of the process.
- To inform the originating COM of its progress and decisions.
- To implement and monitor any program of growth that the UFRC assigns, and provide informational updates to the COM chairperson (or designee) of the progress and outcomes of a program of growth.
- To honor confidentiality within the definition of the fitness review process.
- To receive training from time to time to enhance appropriate skills.

- To provide training from time to time to the full executive body of each participating Association, so that they will be prepared in the case of an appeal of a Fitness Review decision.
- To share mutual responsibility, to participate, to ask questions and share opinions about the important issues before the committee.
- To support the clergy and local churches in preserving and extending covenantal relationships.

Proposed Operating Procedures

- The UFRC would organize itself to carry out the Fitness Review. Its organization may vary depending on the situation. It would also be free to consult with whomever it chooses, recognizing the necessity of maintaining strict confidentiality.
- When a Fitness Review is referred to the UFRC, the appropriate Conference staff person would consult with the UFRC to identify who will serve as the interview team for that particular Fitness Review. Once the interview phase is completed, those serving on the interview team will fully participate (i.e., have voice and vote) in the deliberations of that particular Fitness Review. Should the outcome of the vote include a growth plan, the interview team will participate with the other members of the UFRC in developing it.
- When a Fitness Review is referred to the UFRC, it would identify one person to serve as Chaplain and provide pastoral support to the UFRC itself for the duration of that case. The Chaplain may not be a member of the interview team for that particular case.
- The UFRC would inform the COM where the Fitness Review originated of its progress and decisions.
- If the UFRC prescribes a program of growth, they would monitor and adjudicate it as well as provide informational updates to the COM chairperson (or designee) of its progress and outcomes.
- The UFRC would meet at least annually for training, support and evaluation, and would (in cooperation with Conference staff) be responsible for scheduling these activities.

Adoption and Initial Organization and Roles

- Adoption of this proposal, and proposed Association by-law revisions, by no fewer than six Associations will create the Unified Fitness Review Committee.
- Any Association not voting in the affirmative would not be represented on the UFRC. The Conference would continue to provide staff support and response team support to non-participating Associations, and this would be done through the UFRC.
- The UFRC would be identified as a “Committee formed by the Associations of the Connecticut Conference.”
- When all nominees are identified, the Conference Minister or his/her designee would convene the first meeting of the UFRC. At that first meeting, among other things, the UFRC would elect a Chair and begin to self-organize. It would identify and at least provisionally fill other roles (e.g. chaplain), and do whatever is appropriate to prepare to serve when called upon.
- The goal is to implement this model by Fall 2014. Terms would begin at the conclusion of the Conference Annual Meeting. The first year of the terms for the charter members will begin when the UFRC is constituted.

Suggested Association By-laws Revision

- When a concern is brought against an authorized minister with standing in an Association (except the Conference Minister, Associate Conf. Ministers and Regional Ministers), it is the Association Committee on Ministry that is responsible for determining whether the concern raises the question of ministerial fitness in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. Upon voting in the affirmative to initiate a Fitness Review for an authorized minister, the Committee on Ministry will refer such review to the Unified Fitness Review Committee.
- The UFRC will follow the process for conducting a Fitness Review as described in the current Manual on Ministry of the UCC. The UFRC will also follow any additional processes agreed upon by all of the participating Associations, so long as those processes do not conflict with the Manual on Ministry.
- The Association's Committee on Ministry will accept the outcome of the UFRC as its own, and report the same to the appropriate settings of the United Church of Christ.
- If an oversight decision of the UFRC is appealed, the full executive body of the appropriate Association shall be convened as a Board of Appeal. The grounds for appeal of oversight decisions shall be limited to questions of process. The appeal will determine whether the approved process of the Committee on Ministry and UFRC were adhered to. The outcomes of an appeal are as follows:
 - Affirmation that the process used was consistent with the UFRC's process and with the Association's COM's process – in which case the decision of the UFRC stands.
 - Recognition that the process used was not consistent, in which case the full executive body of the Association will refer the case back to the UFRC and the Association's COM to be completed pursuant to the adopted process.
- The full executive body of each participating Association will appoint one member to the Unified Fitness Review Committee. The appointee must have been a member of an Association's Committee on Ministry within the last 6 years. The term of service for each member will be three years. The Association may choose to renew the appointee for up to two more terms of service. Attention to the importance of balancing gender, clergy, lay and the needed skills and experience on the UFRC shall be considered in making or renewing its appointments.
- Any member of an Association board or committee, or participant in an Association oversight action, who has a financial, personal, or official interest in, or conflict or appearance of a conflict with any matter pending, of such nature that it prevents or may prevent that member from acting in an impartial manner, will offer to voluntarily excuse him/herself and refrain from discussion of, participation in and/or voting in the activity where the conflict or appearance of a conflict exists. If there is a conflict either real or perceived and the individual does not voluntarily excuse him/herself, the Association board or committee may, by a super majority vote of two thirds of the members then present and voting, require involuntary recusal.