

MANUAL ON MINISTRY



A Guide to Authorizing Ministry
in the United Church of Christ



Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization
Local Church Ministries, A Covenanted Ministry
of the United Church of Christ

I will stand at my watchpost to see what the LORD will say. Then the LORD answered and said, “Write the vision; make it plain so a runner may read it. For there is still a vision.”

— *Habakkuk 2:1-3*

2 Ministerial Authorization

ARTICLE 6: ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT

ONGOING SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Because we belong to God, we belong to one another. Because we belong to one another and to God, we are accountable to our covenantal relationships on earth as in heaven. The covenantal relationships between parts of the Body of Christ are characterized by mutuality, transparency, accountability, and a desire to represent Christ together for the glory of God. These characteristics are particularly essential to—and are to be practiced with prayerful intentionality by—those who are authorized to hold ministerial standing and those who are entrusted with authorizing ministers on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

For the covenants of ministerial standing, oversight by a Committee on Ministry on behalf of the Association—with processes of support and accountability—is fundamental to all types of ministerial standing. Oversight serves to strengthen covenantal relationships, to provide relational support for those with ministerial standing as well as their ministry settings, to affirm or assess standing, and to promote ongoing discernment of and suitability for continued ministerial authorization. The underlying goal of all forms of oversight is to support ministerial excellence throughout the United Church of Christ.

Persons with ministerial standing⁷⁹ in the United Church of Christ are obligated to participate in an Association’s processes of support and accountability in order to maintain standing. Associations

All processes of support and accountability require accurate recordkeeping. Depending on the Association or Conference, the responsibility for maintaining ministerial files and updating the UCC Data Hub may rest with Committee on Ministry or Association/Conference Office. Regardless of who holds this responsibility, communication among all judicatory partners and effective file maintenance are necessary. See Section 3 for best practices on ministerial files.

⁷⁹ Especially in Section 2 Article 6, the terms “minister,” “person with standing,” and “person who holds standing” are used interchangeably to indicate all persons with ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ who are obligated to participate in processes of support and accountability.

through their Committees on Ministry are similarly obligated to provide sufficient opportunities for those with ministerial standing to fulfill these requirements. Committees must also maintain accurate committee records and ministerial files of oversight processes and ensure that the UCC Data Hub is updated appropriately.

Processes of support and accountability are the responsibility of Committees on Ministry in the Associations where standing is held. When first granting ministerial standing (through initial authorization or receipt of transferred ministerial standing) a Committee on Ministry communicates its requirements for maintaining standing, and the minister fulfills those requirements as evidenced in the annual Information Review. When the minister serves in a ministry setting that is located outside of their Association of standing, the need for intentional communication about the expectations of ministerial standing and the methods for participating in processes of support and accountability are especially critical.

OVERVIEW OF SUPPORT PROCESSES

The ongoing support of ministry by a Committee on Ministry includes providing (whether directly or indirectly) opportunities for those with standing to grow and to be healthy in their vocations with respect to the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers and the UCC Ministerial Code. In support of those with standing, the Committee on Ministry encourages, hosts, and/or sponsors spaces for persons to reflect regularly on their ministries alongside peers, and to discern their ongoing sense of call in conversation with the Committee.

- **Vocational Support:** Ministry is never done in isolation. Committees on Ministry are key conversation partners in ongoing discernment of call as well as providing support mechanisms for clergy growth. Vocational Support from Committees on Ministry fall into two categories: ongoing and periodic.

“Healthy” is used holistically to include mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, personal, and professional health, along with the wise integration of life and ministry, in order to serve effectively and faithfully on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

- ▼ **Ongoing Peer Support:** Committees on Ministry host or recommend opportunities for ongoing peer support so that those with standing build relationships on a regular basis with their colleagues in ministry. Those with standing are encouraged to seek out and engage in ongoing peer support.
- ▼ **Periodic Vocational Support:** Committees on Ministry designate time every three to five years to meet in person with those who hold standing in order to reflect together on their current ministries and ongoing vocational discernment. Such support is guided by the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers.
- **Situational Support Consultation:** The Committee on Ministry makes itself available as needed for Situational Support Consultation between a person with ministerial standing and the ministry setting to address circumstances or dynamics within the covenantal relationship that need support. Any partner in the covenantal relationship—the person with standing, the Local Church of membership, the ministry setting if separate from the Local Church, or the Committee on Ministry—may request a Situational Support Consultation. Situational Support Consultations are not appropriate when concerns are raised of possible unethical behavior or misconduct on the part of the person who holds standing.

OVERVIEW OF ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESSES

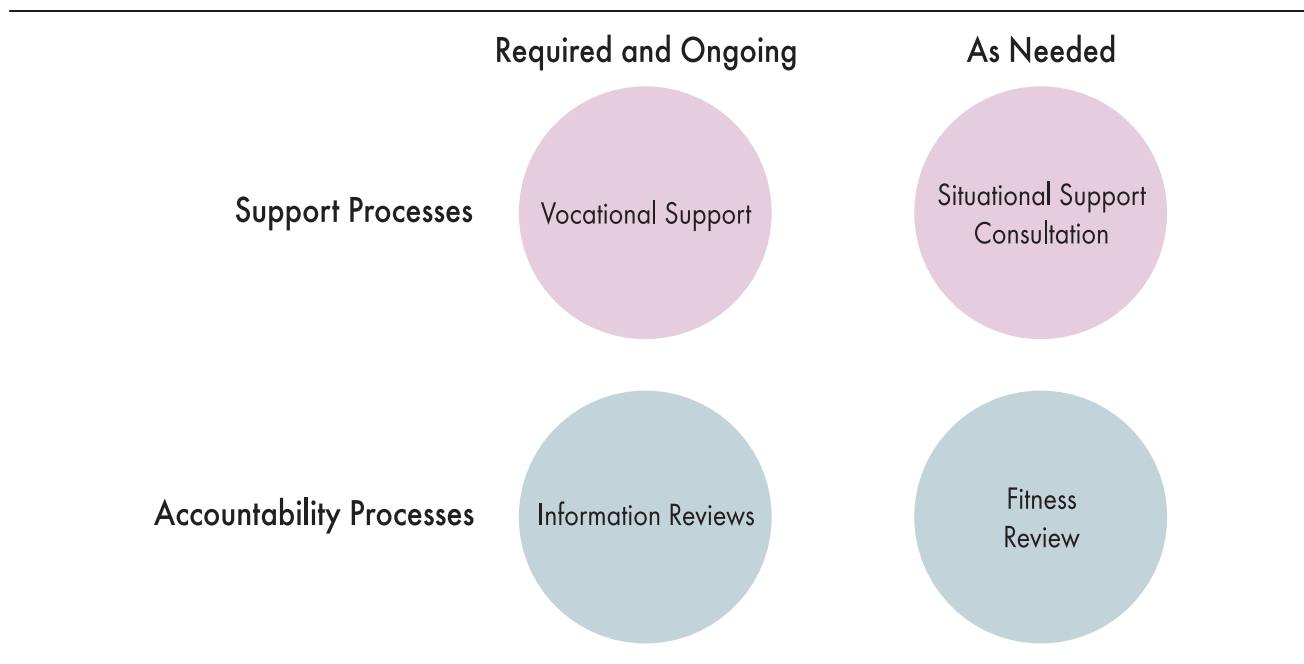
The purpose of accountability processes includes holding those with standing accountable for their conduct and assessing their continued qualification for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. Processes for accountability and their frequency are recommended as follows:

- **Information Reviews** require those with standing to complete annually an Information Review form so that the Committee on Ministry can confirm each person's most up-to-date contact information and ministry setting.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ See Section 3 for a recommended Information Review Form.

(Committees on Ministry, through their Association or Conference administrators, are in turn obligated to keep current each person’s record in the UCC Data Hub.) Space is to be provided in Information Reviews to indicate which peer support, boundary awareness, and continuing education programs were completed in the past year, and the Committee on Ministry is encouraged to take advantage of the submission of Information Reviews to update persons with standing about upcoming opportunities to meet the standing requirements set by the Committee.

- ▼ **Boundary awareness** is required at least once every three to five years, with the Association hosting a diversity of opportunities on a range of boundary topics (sexual, financial, familial, social media, retirement, etc.).
- ▼ **Continuing education** is required annually, with the Committee on Ministry clarifying to those with standing what opportunities qualify as continuing education and whether particular topics must be engaged (e.g. anti-racism training every three to five years).



- **Fitness Reviews:** As needed, an accountability process may be conducted in response to questions regarding unhealthy behavior or misconduct of a person with standing in light of the UCC Ministerial Code. During a Fitness Review, those affected by the minister's conduct have the opportunity to share their stories, the person has the opportunity to share their perspective and to reflect on others' stories, and the Committee on Ministry determines whether the minister continues to have the capacity for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

SUPPORT PROCESS: VOCATIONAL SUPPORT

Vocational Support is designed to reduce isolation, honor the evolving call of the spirit, and provide for an ever-deepening relationship between the Committee on Ministry and those ministers who hold standing in that Association.

Ongoing Peer Support:

The purpose of Ongoing Peer Support is to build relationships on a regular basis among those with standing in an Association. Peer relationships are critical to ministerial health and growth, and regular support helps to prevent the need for Fitness Reviews. Associations may develop, host, or sponsor a variety of activities for Ongoing Peer Support, including but not limited to clergy retreats, communities of practice, Association ministeriums, etc. Ministers may also form or locate additional communities of peer support throughout the year, including but not limited to ecumenical groups, cohorts related to geographic location, and areas of common interest or field of specialized ministry. Ongoing Peer Support opportunities should be available throughout the year and participated in regularly.

Periodic Vocational Support:

The purpose of Periodic Vocational Support is to encourage the vocational development and ongoing discernment of those with standing. This meeting between a Committee on Ministry

and a person with standing, held once every three to five years, also provides an opportunity to strengthen UCC covenantal relationships and to clarify the Association's expectations for ministerial standing. Periodic Vocational Support is not intended to address fitness concerns.

The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers serve as the primary tool for Periodic Vocational Support conversations.⁸¹ Additional questions that may serve to shed light on the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers might include:

- How does the minister view their spiritual and professional development?
- In what types of continuing education has the minister participated and found meaningful?
- Does this person have regular and trusted sources of support and feedback?
- How is the Local Church of membership supporting the minister's continued development?
- Does the minister have a sense of fulfillment in the current ministry setting and in their overall vocation?

Periodic Vocational Support is also a Committee on Ministry's opportunity to update those with standing on any new expectations and/or opportunities for maintaining standing with the Association.

As much as possible, Committees on Ministry should strive to hold in-person meetings for Periodic Vocational Support, while also offering flexibility in the method of meeting with those who hold standing in the Association but do not reside regularly in that Association (such as those in specialized or deployed settings). The precise structure of Periodic Vocational Support meetings may vary by Association, such as in-person meetings between those with standing and their Committees on Ministry, on-site meetings with representatives from a Committee on Ministry at a person's ministry setting, group meetings of several persons

⁸¹ See Section 3 for additional tools, conversation suggestions, and process recommendations.

who hold ministerial standing together with their Committee on Ministry to foster collegial support, and retreats hosted for ministers by the Association and attended as well by Committee on Ministry members.

Periodic Vocational Support may result in one or more outcomes, including:

- affirmation of a person's particular strengths in ministry and recommendations for their continued professional development;
- acknowledgment of a person's vocational struggles and encouragement for specific areas for vocational growth and/or discernment;
- encouragement for continued or improved care of self and personal relationships;
- connection to peer groups and networks;
- referrals for support resources appropriate to address difficult circumstances;
- a program of personal or vocational development that may be carried out in consultation with the Committee on the Ministry;
- referral to a Situational Support Consultation.

SUPPORT PROCESS: SITUATIONAL SUPPORT CONSULTATION

The purpose of a Situational Support Consultation is to address in-depth a particular relationship or situation of concern that has arisen between a person with standing and their ministry setting. This meeting may be requested by any covenantal partner: the person with standing, the ministry setting, or the Committee on Ministry. If concerns are raised of possible unethical behavior or misconduct on the part of the minister, a Situational Support Consultation is not appropriate and a Fitness Review should be considered.

Situational Support Consultations address areas that may impede faithful and effective ministry on the part of any covenanted ministry partner. A Situational Support Consultation should not be used in lieu of or to gather information for a Fitness Review. Fitness Reviews are designed to address violations of the UCC Ministerial Code by a minister with UCC standing. Situational Support Consultations can be referred to Fitness Reviews, and Fitness Reviews can give rise to Situational Support Consultations.

In a Situational Support Consultation, the Committee on Ministry seeks to clarify the specific issues or circumstances that have arisen, and helps to identify ways to promote effective and collaborative ministries in response to these circumstances. The desired outcome is for all covenantal partners involved to agree to a course of action that will be evaluated together at a specified later date.

When a Situational Support Consultation is convened, it is appropriate to include the covenantal partners most directly involved in the situation. Concerns leading to a Situational Support Consultation may vary widely, such as:

- a situation in ministry or life that may be hindering a person's capacity to practice ministry effectively;
- significant changes in life circumstances including deployment, birth or adoption of a child, death in the minister's immediate family, or significant changes in health;
- a concern involving varying expectations of priorities, direction, or effectiveness between covenantal partners;
- a concern involving changes to the terms of a call agreement;
- a concern about relational conflict that has arisen between a minister and their ministry setting, or certain members within that ministry setting;
- other issues or concerns involving the relationships between parties in Three- or Four-Way Covenants.

The Situational Support Consultation allows the Committee on Ministry to address issues in a nurturing, pastoral manner: clarifying the issues, determining the concerns that need to be addressed, and working toward a plan of action with all covenantal partners. If, during the course of the consultation, the Committee becomes aware of information that raises a question about ministerial misconduct, the Committee considers initiating a Fitness Review.

The precise structure of Situational Support Consultations may vary by Association and, more importantly, by the situation at hand. Most often, representatives from the Committee on Ministry meet with those involved to gather information about the situation and clarify the concern. The Committee may meet with the persons involved individually or in a group as the Committee prayerfully discerns the extent to which the identified situation impedes faithful and effective ministry and to explore available options for dealing with the situation. This process may take place over a series of meetings, held in the ministry setting or at the Committee on Ministry's meeting location or in a neutral environment.

Situational Support Consultations may result in several possible outcomes:

- *No further action required.* The concern is explored and the consultation provides sufficient opportunity for reflection by those parties involved and affected. No further action is needed.
- *Mutually agreed-upon plan of action.* The situation is explored and a plan is agreed upon to address or correct the situation, with checkpoints predetermined with the Committee on Ministry to review progress. The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers may be a resource in relationship to both the ministry setting and the person with standing when developing a plan of action or entering a season of discernment.⁸²
- *Advisory statement.* If all parties cannot agree to or follow a mutually agreed-upon plan of action, then the Committee on Ministry prepares an advisory statement about the situation to convey to those involved the Committee's best recommendations. The statement is shared with all involved covenantal members.

⁸² See also *A Sure Foundation: Resources for the Relationship Between Pastors and Congregations*.

- *Season of discernment.* As a result of this process it may become clear that a season of intentional discernment is needed for a ministry setting and/or the minister. A season of discernment may include opportunities for a ministry setting to engage in deeper conversations around its mission and ministry; for congregations especially this discernment may occur in dialogue with Conference or Association staff. A season of discernment may also include administrative leave (determined by the ministry setting as a matter of employment) or a Leave of Absence in dialogue with the Committee on Ministry. Many possible outcomes may result from a season of discernment, including (but not limited to) a recommitment to mutual ministry between the person and the ministry setting, a graceful closure of the mutual ministry, a commitment on the part of the ministry setting to fully address systemic dysfunction, or a graceful transition of the minister out of ministry. The Committee is a conversation partner in the season of discernment, encouraging faithful and effective ministry on the part of the ministry setting and the person with standing.
- *Referral to a Fitness Review.* If concerns regarding misconduct arise, a Situational Support Consultation may be referred to a Fitness Review.

ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS: INFORMATION REVIEW

The purpose of an annual Information Review is to provide current contact and ministry information to Committees on Ministry about each person who holds standing in that Association. The annual Information Review is a basic obligation to maintain ministerial standing, and it is usually accomplished through the use of a form that collects the following:

- the person's current contact information;
- current ministry setting (or confirmation that the person is: between calls but searching; not currently engaged in a

call but active in other ministerial services such as pulpit supply or Conference committee membership; on a Leave of Absence; holding Exempt Standing; etc.);

- Local Church of membership;
- most recent continuing education experience (with documentation as requested);
- most recent boundary awareness training (including documentation).

Persons who hold standing are obligated to participate in Information Reviews annually, and Committees on Ministry are obligated to provide annual communication to those with standing about the Information Reviews and to maintain up-to-date ministerial files and committee records (including ongoing cooperation to ensure regular updates to the UCC Data Hub).

Based on the information collected (or, at times, the lack of information collected), the annual Information Review may result in a variety of outcomes:

- *Standing affirmed.* All basic requirements for continued standing are met. The Committee updates records as appropriate.
- *Changes in ecclesial records.* Standing is affirmed; however, the Committee on Ministry notices significant changes from the previous year. The Committee initiates further communication to verify changes in ministry setting or ecclesial standing. The Committee may notice, for example, that a change in information indicates that ministerial standing should be transferred and it may initiate that process. The Committee files and UCC Data Hub are updated accordingly.
- *More information needed.* The use of the Information Review form by the minister does not clearly demonstrate that the requirements for standing are being met, and the Committee on Ministry contacts the minister for additional information.

The collection of the annual Information Review Form may be an opportunity for the Committee on Ministry to pray over the forms for the ministers and ministry represented on behalf of the Association.

- *Standing suspended or removed.* The requirements for standing are not being met for two or more consecutive years. The Committee on Ministry invites conversation and clarification with the minister regarding reasons why the requirements have not been met; a process of support or accountability may be appropriate at this time. Should the person refuse to participate or communicate, the Committee may vote to remove standing.

The annual Information Review may provide an opportunity for the Committee on Ministry to recognize significant ordination anniversaries, as well as an opportunity to communicate any changes in standing requirements or upcoming opportunities for fellowship and/or vocational support.

In the event that an Information Review (or lack thereof) reveals that the requirements of ministerial standing are not being met, the Committee on Ministry takes the following steps:

1. Committee on Ministry contacts the person with standing to indicate that the requirements for standing are not being met and/or that necessary documentation has not been submitted. The requirements for standing are emphasized, and opportunities to meet those requirements are highlighted. A grace period of six months is communicated clearly, during which time the minister is encouraged to meet the requirements they have missed. The Committee on Ministry documents its communication as well as the response of the minister.
2. If the individual continues not to participate in the requirements of ministerial standing, the Committee on Ministry chair and/or a Conference or Association staff member should reach out to the person to inquire about and respond to any pastoral needs that may affect the person's ability to participate in requirements of standing. Depending on the circumstance, the minister and the Committee on Ministry may discern that Leave of Absence or Exempt Standing is appropriate.

3. If, after the six-month grace period, the person has not fulfilled the requirements of standing and has not engaged the Committee on Ministry to make a plan for meeting those requirements, the person is considered to no longer be upholding their obligation to the covenants of ministerial standing. At this time the Committee may vote to suspend ministerial standing. The Committee clearly communicates its decision to the minister, warning of the potential for termination of standing and outlining options for meeting the requirements of ministerial standing (or recommending Leave of Absence or Exempt Standing, if appropriate). This communication is best sent by certified mail. The person's ministry setting and Local Church of membership are notified of the suspension, and the UCC Data Hub is updated. The person's Ministerial Profile is recalled, if in circulation. If the person complies with the requirements of standing within six months of this suspension to the Committee's satisfaction, the person will not be required to report this suspension on their Ministerial Profile in the future. These actions should be accompanied by an ongoing effort to address any pastoral needs of the person, which may affect the Committee's discernment about the person's capacity to meet the requirements of ministerial standing. Documentation of suspension and of renewed compliance with standing requirements are added to the Ministerial File.
4. If, six months after the conclusion of the grace period (one year after the Committee's first indication to the person that the requirements of ministerial standing have not been met), the person has not fulfilled the requirements of ministerial standing or re-engaged the Committee, the Committee on Ministry terminates ministerial standing (with bias) and communicates their decision to the minister, to the ministry setting, and to the person's Local Church of membership. The UCC Data Hub is updated to indicate the termination.

Suspension: if ministerial standing is suspended and the minister is not currently engaged in a Three or Four-Way Covenant, it is expected that they will refrain from all ministry-related activities, including service on a Conference-wide committee or pulpit supply.

5. If the person seeks to have their ministerial standing reinstated, they must return to the Committee on Ministry that terminated their standing. Even if later reinstated, all terminations of standing must be reported on subsequent ministerial profiles.

ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS: FITNESS REVIEW

“Fitness” is used holistically to describe the demonstration of integrity and ethics throughout a person’s personal and professional behavior.

A Committee on Ministry may conduct a Fitness Review on:

- *persons with Ordained Ministerial Standing, including those on a Leave of Absence or with Exempt Standing;*
- *persons who hold Lay Ministerial Standing;*
- *persons with Ordained Ministerial Partner Standing serving in UCC contexts;*
- *persons with Dual Standing.*

Conference Ministers are subject to a slightly different Fitness Review process; see Section 3. Concerns about a Conference Minister’s behavior and/or fitness for ministry should be directed to the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ.

A Fitness Review is a serious proceeding that involves a reassessment of a person’s overall fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. For this reason, it is important that a Fitness Review be thorough so that a Committee on Ministry can be fully informed in its discernment and decision in response to an identified concern. Such careful thoroughness is intended to ensure faithfulness and integrity in the deliberation of persons’ ministerial standing, and effective representation of the United Church of Christ through those to whom it grants ministerial standing. In matters of Fitness Reviews, the Committee acts in and on behalf of the entire United Church of Christ.

The process of a Fitness Review balances appropriate confidentiality with transparency. Confidentiality requires that the Committee on Ministry share information only with those who need to know at the time they need to know, and that some details of a Fitness Review are not shared broadly. Confidentiality does not guarantee anonymity for those involved in the Fitness Review. For the sake of transparency and accountability in covenant, all parties in the Fitness Review process—the minister in question, the ministry setting, the one(s) who raised the concern, the Committee on Ministry, the Response Team members, and Association/Conference staff—are expected to act within the scope of the Fitness Review process according to their roles and responsibilities.⁸³ Transparency also requires that the Committee on Ministry shares information about Fitness Review outcomes with its Association (for example, through reports to the Association Annual Meeting), with other Associations

⁸³ See Section 3 for resources on the Fitness Review process and the roles of various judicatory partners.

through the ministerial file if ministerial standing is transferred for the person at a later date (only after the Fitness Review with any related obligations has reached its conclusion), and through the UCC Data Hub. Above all, confidentiality and transparency are necessary to convey the Committee on Ministry's sense of responsibility to a process that is thorough and fair so that its outcomes are trusted.

Before initiating a Fitness Review, a Committee on Ministry should ensure that the Fitness Review process is not used to address concerns unrelated to a person's fitness for ministerial standing.

The following roles and responsibilities related to a Fitness Review should be clearly identified and followed:

- The recommended role of a **Conference/Association staff member** is that of coordinating—and assigning, as needed—the various roles within a Fitness Review process and encouraging timeliness in the process.
- The **person raising a concern** is encouraged to participate in the Fitness Review process appropriately. The person raising a concern is invited to be interviewed by the Response Team. Refusal to do so, while it may impede the gathering of information, does not affect the Committee's responsibility to fully investigate the concern raised. If circumstances arise where there is no clearly identified person raising a concern, the Committee on Ministry can still proceed with a Fitness Review, gathering information as appropriate. A written complaint is not required to initiate a Fitness Review. Aside from the person who originally raises the concern, additional persons with information related to the concerns may be interviewed by the Response Team.
- The person whose ongoing fitness for ministerial standing is under review—identified as the **minister in question**—is obligated to participate in the oversight processes of the

Organizational structures for Committee on Ministry vary throughout the United Church of Christ. Many Conferences utilize Unified Fitness Review Committees that adjudicate on behalf of each of the Association Committees on Ministry within their Conference. See section 3 for resources on Unified Fitness Review Committees.

For the purposes of oversight processes, the terms "minister" and "minister in question" are used to indicate all those who hold any form of ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ.

United Church of Christ with the Committee on Ministry. Failure to participate in the Fitness Review process (such as the failure to sign or abide by the confidentiality notice, or the refusal to be interviewed by the Response Team or the Committee on Ministry) is a failure to participate in the covenantal relationships of ministerial standing as required by the UCC Ministerial Code and is grounds for termination of standing at the conclusion of the Fitness Review.

- The **Committee on Ministry**, on behalf of the Association, is the body that receives a fitness concern, receives and discerns over the report of the Response Team, meets with the minister in question as well as the person raising the concern, determines the appropriate outcome of the Fitness Review, monitors programs of growth (if appropriate), and determines ministerial standing in light of the Fitness Review outcome.
- The **Conference or Association staff member** works with the Committee on Ministry to identify, train, and support a pool of **Response Team** members—persons not currently serving on the Committee on Ministry—who can ably serve in two roles:
 - ▼ an **Interview Team**, usually composed of two or three persons who interview those with information related to the concern, gather documentation related to the concern (such as letters, emails, receipts, photographs, etc.), draft interview summaries for review by those interviewed, and share interview summaries and documentation with the Committee on Ministry;
 - ▼ **Process Guides**, serving as information liaisons from the Committee on Ministry to the person raising the concern, to the minister in question, and to the ministry setting where the minister in question serves (with one Process Guide assigned to each person/party). Process Guides provide information about the Fitness Review

Response Teams are cohorts of persons outside of the Committee on Ministry who are trained to observe and report while reserving judgment.

process as appropriate and answer questions; they may also refer persons/parties to additional resources.

- Although not obligated to do so, the Committee on Ministry may identify spiritual support for the minister in question and the person raising the concern. Those providing spiritual support are not involved in the Fitness Review process; they do not advocate to or meet with the Committee on Ministry on behalf of persons affected by the Fitness Review. Their role is to provide pastoral care and spiritual guidance if such support is not already in place for the minister in question and person raising a concern.
- Although not obligated to do so, the Committee on Ministry may identify a cultural consultant to inform the Committee's understanding and discernment. A cultural consultant is a person who helps to observe differences in cultural norms when those attributes are not already present within the Committee on Ministry. A cultural consultant might take a teaching role to help the Committee consider a person's context—whether the minister in question or the person raising the concern—in order to relieve that person from the work of teaching the Committee.

Once a Fitness Review is underway, the person raising a concern and the minister in question are informed of the process that will be followed. Their pastoral care by persons unrelated to the process is encouraged by the Committee.

If a person chooses to resign standing in order to avoid a Fitness Review process, the process must be suspended. Ministerial standing cannot be reinstated without resuming the incomplete Fitness Review.

1. Information Surfaces

Concerns about the ministerial ethics, behavior, and/or ongoing capacity to adhere to the UCC Ministerial Code of a person with

If needed, Committees are encouraged to obtain additional information in order to review the redacted case and/or conduct the Fitness Review, seeking information from secular authorities, cultural consultants, ecumenical judicatory staff, or other sources as necessary. Legal representation of the minister in question, person raising the concern, or other persons interviewed is not permitted in the Fitness Review process.

The initiation of any Fitness Review must be reported in a timely manner to the UCC National Setting. Ministerial Profiles cannot be validated or circulated during the adjudication of a Fitness Review, and ministerial standing cannot be transferred during this time. The National Setting updates Fitness Review information in the UCC Data Hub about the minister in question.

Circumstances in which a Committee on Ministry needs to transfer the adjudication of a Fitness Review include: when multiple Committee members must recuse themselves from the process, and when a Committee member, Conference Minister, or supervising Associate Conference Minister is the subject of the Fitness Review. Unified Fitness Review Committees also need to transfer Fitness Review adjudication in these circumstances. The National Setting supports Committees in such transfers.

standing should be taken seriously and not dismissed without careful consideration and response. While a question about ministerial behavior may surface as the result of a formal complaint, this is not always so. Concerns may be raised and information received through other means, such as social media or news reports or a documented conversation with Conference staff, and the person who raises the concern might or might not have a direct relationship with the minister in question or the ministry setting. Deliberate follow-through enables the Committee to responsibly address the faithfulness and effectiveness of all ministers in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

Once a concern is received, the Committee on Ministry chair and an Association or Conference staff person determine whether the information provided is sufficient for the full Committee to decide whether the concern is most appropriately addressed through a Fitness Review or referred to another ecclesial process. This initial assessment is not an investigation or assessment of the concern but rather a clarification of the information and a determination of appropriate next steps. If the concern relates to ministerial fitness, the Committee chair and Association or Conference staff person create a redacted case to take to the Committee.⁸⁴

2. Committee on Ministry Makes Initial Decision(s)

The whole Committee on Ministry receives the redacted case, prayerfully considering whether the identified concern is a matter related to the UCC Ministerial Code and asking: “If this concern is found to be true, does it call into question the person’s fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ?” If *Yes*, the Committee votes to initiate a Fitness Review. If *No*, the Committee determines whether a Situational Support Consultation is appropriate. Once the Committee determines *Yes* or *No*, the identity of the minister about whom the concern was

⁸⁴ Redacted case: A brief summary of the concern that has been raised, excluding (to the extent possible) any identifying details of the person, the ministry setting, or those affected, so that the Committee on Ministry can consider the concern without bias for or against those involved.

raised is revealed to the Committee. This identification allows for Committee on Ministry members to recuse themselves from the Fitness Review if appropriate⁸⁵ and/or for the Committee to transfer adjudication of the Fitness Review as needed. If another Association, Conference, or Unified Fitness Review Committee will conduct the Fitness Review, the Committee on Ministry votes at this time to transfer the process to, and to accept the outcome from, that other body, agreeing not to pursue its own investigation.

In some instances, a Committee on Ministry may choose to suspend the ministerial standing of the person under review, pending the outcome of the Fitness Review. This decision is based on the need of the United Church of Christ (as assessed by the Committee on Ministry) not to have the person in representative servant leadership during the course of the Fitness Review. Separate from the Committee on Ministry's decision, in some instances a ministry setting or employer may choose to put the minister in question on administrative leave until the outcome of the Fitness Review is reached. Administrative leave (or employment termination) is a decision of the ministry setting or employer, not the decision of a Committee on Ministry. (Administrative leave should not be confused with Leave of Absence, which is a type of ministerial standing.)

3. Committee on Ministry Prepares Fitness Review

The Committee on Ministry (or other adjudicating body) reviews the Fitness Review process, including appeals; summarizes the concern by framing it within the UCC Ministerial Code; and recuses any members with conflicts of interest. The Committee identifies Response Team members from within the pool of trained volunteers to serve as Process Guides and Interview Team. The Committee creates an initial list of questions to be asked by the Interview Team and an initial list of persons to be interviewed. The Committee chair and/or Association staff person reviews the

⁸⁵ See the recommended conflict of interest policy in the Committees on Ministry Orientation Booklet in Section 3.

Fitness Review process with the Response Team and provides the Response Team with documentation related to the concern.

The Committee on Ministry chair or Association staff member, in conversation with the assigned Process Guide, contacts the minister in question as soon as possible following the Committee's vote to initiate the Fitness Review. They inform the minister of the Fitness Review process, share the summarized concern, introduce the Process Guide, inquire about the minister's systems for spiritual support, have the minister sign the confidentiality notice,⁸⁶ and answer any questions about the process.

The Committee chair, Association or Conference staff member, and/or Process Guide speaks with the person who raised the concern in order to inform them of the Fitness Review process, to clarify the confidential nature of the process, to have the person sign the confidentiality notice, and to answer any questions about the process.

The Committee chair, Association or Conference staff member, and/or assigned Process Guide contacts the ministry setting's leadership to notify them of the Fitness Review and to request a meeting with the governing body. At the meeting, the summarized concern is shared, the Fitness Review process is explained, and the leadership is supported in determining whether and how the rest of the ministry setting will be notified of the Fitness Review. If the Local Church of membership is different than the ministry setting, the leadership of the Local Church is also informed at this time. The Association or Conference staff member notifies the National Setting's Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) Team of the initiated Fitness Review. If the minister in question holds ecclesiastical endorsement, then the UCC Endorsement Office is informed directly once a Fitness Review is initiated.

4. Information Gathering

The Interview Team gathers relevant information about the concern, meeting with the person raising the concern, persons

⁸⁶ See Section 3 for Fitness Review Confidentiality Notice.

from the ministry setting as needed, others whose names emerge in the interview process who may have relevant information, any additional persons identified by the Committee on Ministry, and finally with the minister in question.⁸⁷ The Interview Team makes a detailed summary of each interview, which is shared with the respective interviewee for their clarifications and signature. Public records and other documentation that confirms information from the interviews may also be gathered by the Interview Team.

The minister in question is last to be interviewed and has the opportunity to review (but not retain copies of) the interview summaries in order to respond to the identified concerns.⁸⁸ The Interview Team makes a detailed summary of the interview and shares it with the minister in question for their clarifications and signature. Occasionally during the course of a Fitness Review, patterns of behavior or specific actions contrary to the UCC Ministerial Code surface that may or may not directly relate to the original concern. The Interview Team includes this new information into its process, and the Committee on Ministry considers the information in its discernment and decision-making.

5. Committee on Ministry Deliberation

The Committee on Ministry receives the collected information from the Response Team and considers it prayerfully alongside the UCC Ministerial Code. The Committee meets with the Response Team to clarify details of the interviews as needed and to thank them for their work.

The Committee on Ministry prepares for, schedules, and hosts a deliberation meeting during which both the minister in question and the person raising the concern have a separate opportunity to share their perspectives with the Committee and to address questions. If either party declines to participate in the process,

⁸⁷ Best practices for Interview Teams can be found in Section 3.

⁸⁸ If, in the Interview Team's work, the minister in question or other interviewee identifies previously un-interviewed persons who may have relevant first-hand information, the Interview Team may schedule additional interviews.

the Committee includes this information in their deliberation and continues to move forward in determining the outcome. The Committee prayerfully considers all information. Questions for reflection include: Were the specific concerns found to have merit? Is the minister in question currently fit to hold ministerial standing in and to serve on behalf of the United Church of Christ? What is the rationale for this decision? Based on the Committee's deliberations, what outcome is discerned to be appropriate?

The Committee on Ministry makes its decision regarding the fitness of the minister to continue serving in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ and the capacity of the minister to adhere to the UCC Ministerial Code. Fitness Review outcomes are reported to the National Setting's Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) Team and noted in the ministerial file.

6. Outcomes

Outcomes of a Fitness Review include:

- *Affirmation of Standing.* The minister's current fitness for ministry is affirmed. This is an appropriate outcome when the specific concerns were unfounded or unsupported by the information available to the Committee, or when the identified concern is not a fitness matter.
- *Admonishment.* The concern is found to have validity and acknowledged by the minister as a mistake; the Committee on Ministry likewise determines that the behavior is not habitual. There is evidence that the minister in question has already made acts of repentance and has taken steps to demonstrate their responsibility for the behavior in question, including measures to avoid similar mistakes in the future. A program of growth is not required, the admonishment is not reported on the UCC Ministerial Profile, and the person's ministerial standing is reaffirmed.

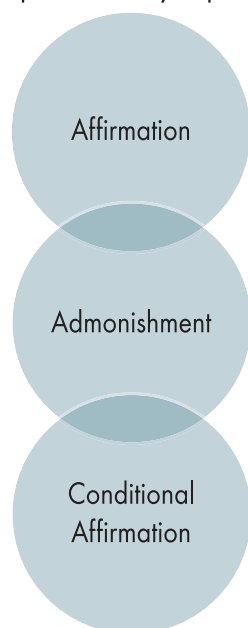
A program of growth should include specific, realistic, and measureable goals that address the identified concern(s). Such goals consist of clear expectations for actions to be taken or ceased, as well as clear expectations for outcomes of those actions, all of which must take place prior to the review and potential reaffirmation of standing. Programs of growth should also include a timeline for review. If a program of growth is not completed to the satisfaction of a Committee on Ministry or according to the timeline, new benchmarks may be set and the reaffirmation of standing may be delayed or termination of standing may be considered. See Section 3 for sample programs of growth.

- *Conditional Affirmation of Standing with Program of Growth.* The concern is found to be true, affecting overall demonstration of one or more aspects of the UCC Ministerial Code. The Committee determines that the person may continue in their ministry but that constructive growth and healing must be undertaken at the same time, to be reassessed by the Committee at a future date. Using the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers alongside the UCC Ministerial Code, the Committee creates a program of growth to address specific concerns. Conditional affirmation must be reported on the person's UCC Ministerial Profile until the program of growth is completed to the satisfaction of the Committee on Ministry. Those with conditional affirmation and a program of growth may circulate a UCC Ministerial Profile with disclosure of a current program of growth, and may transfer standing, including the transfer of the program of growth after clear communication between the sending and receiving Associations' Committees on Ministry. Following the successful completion of a program of growth, the Committee reviews and may reaffirm the minister's standing. Once standing has been reaffirmed, conditional affirmation no longer is required to be disclosed on the Ministerial Profile.
- *Censure with Program of Growth.* The concern is found to have validity, affecting overall demonstration of one or more aspects of the UCC Ministerial Code. The Committee determines that the person may continue in ministry but that the actions were severe enough or habitual enough to warrant a permanent record on their UCC Ministerial Profile. In addition, using the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers alongside the UCC Ministerial Code, the Committee creates a program of growth to address specific concerns raised in the Fitness Review. A censure does not permit the person to circulate

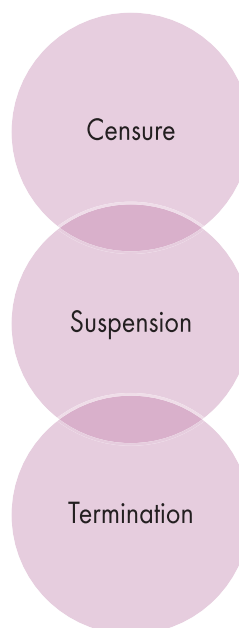
a ministerial profile until the Committee is satisfied with the completion of the program of growth. Censure must be reported on a UCC Ministerial Profile in perpetuity. Following the completion of a program of growth, the Committee reviews and may reaffirm the person's standing or may determine that further action is required.

- *Suspension of Standing with Program of Growth.* The concern is found to have validity, and the Committee determines that the minister is not currently fit for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. A program of growth is created and agreed upon, with reassessment by the Committee at a future date. For the duration of the suspension, the minister may not represent themselves as serving in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ, and the minister may not circulate a UCC Ministerial Profile. Suspension must be reported on the UCC Ministerial Profile in perpetuity. Following the completion of a program of growth, the Committee may reaffirm standing, continue suspension with a revised program of growth, or terminate standing, as determined by the Committee on Ministry's reassessment of the minister's fitness to maintain ministerial standing.
- *Termination.* The concern is found to have validity, and the Committee on Ministry determines that the person is not currently and is unlikely to become fit for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. Standing is terminated, and the person may no longer represent themselves as a minister of the United Church of Christ. If reinstatement of standing is sought at a later date, the person must return to the Committee on Ministry in the Association where standing was terminated, at which time the Fitness Review and its outcome are factors in a Committee's reconsideration of ministerial standing.

Outcomes not permanently reported



Outcomes permanently reported on the UCC Ministerial Profile



7. Alternate Conclusions to a Fitness Review

In addition to the above decisions, there are two other ways in which a Fitness Review might conclude:

- *Referral to a Situational Support Consultation.* The minister's current fitness for ministry is affirmed, and the concern is referred to a Situational Support Consultation. This outcome is appropriate when, after examining the gathered information, the Committee on Ministry finds that the concern does not call into question a minister's capacity to adhere to the UCC Ministerial Code but identifies a concern that can be addressed more appropriately through a Situational Support Consultation.
- *Resignation of Standing.* At any time in a Fitness Review, the minister in question may resign their ministerial standing, at which point the Fitness Review process cannot finish. The resignation is received by the Committee on Ministry, and it is recorded in the UCC Data Hub (with

A person who has resigned their ministerial standing or had their standing terminated by a Committee on Ministry cannot represent themselves as a minister of the United Church of Christ.

After the determination of an outcome by a Committee on Ministry, the minister and those who are affected by the behavior of a minister may desire to engage together in relational (but not ecclesial) processes that seek reconciliation and restoration. Such processes are the choice of those parties and not to be construed or represented as ecclesial actions of the Committee on Ministry on behalf of its Association. These processes should not interfere with the Committee on Ministry's work in a Fitness Review and—if engaged by some or all parties—are to be held only after an outcome is determined. See Section 3 for suggested resources related to restorative processes.

bias), noting the incomplete Fitness Review. Prior to any consideration of reinstatement of standing at a later date, the incomplete Fitness Review must be addressed to the Association where the person resigned standing. Reinstatement of standing requires the completion of the Fitness Review process.

8. Decision Communicated

The Committee on Ministry conveys its decision first to the minister in question, preferably in person by a representative of the Committee. The representative provides information as needed about the decision, any program of growth, and appeal process; this same information is provided to the minister in question in writing for their signature. When a program of growth is required, a copy of the growth plan is provided and a signature is required from the minister in question. The refusal of the minister to sign these documents is considered a refusal to participate in the covenantal relationships of ministerial standing, and the Committee may choose to terminate standing based on this refusal.

The Committee on Ministry then conveys the outcome of the Fitness Review to all covenantal partners, including the ministry setting (with which a copy of the growth plan is shared, if there is one), the Local Church of membership, the person raising the concern, the Association, the Conference, and the National Setting. The appropriate release of Fitness Review information is not hindered by the refusal of a minister under review to sign documents, as the process and documentation are the property of the United Church of Christ. The documentation of the Fitness Review itself is held in a packet within the ministerial file, with a summary report attached to the packet.

9. Programs of Growth

When a Committee on Ministry discerns that a program of growth is an appropriate part of a Fitness Review outcome, the Committee

considers: What changes need to be demonstrated by the person to the Committee before they can be reaffirmed to ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ? Are there specific actions that need to be taken by the person to right wrongs (such as written or verbal apologies, repayment of financial debt, etc.)? What timeline is anticipated for assessing the program of growth? What tools, resources, or contacts will enable the minister to achieve the growth necessary to faithfully and effectively minister in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ?

The program of growth should have specific goals that facilitate the person's self-knowledge and help the minister understand the conditions that gave rise to misconduct. A comprehensive program of growth takes into account the vulnerability of the minister as well as the harm done to others, providing opportunities as appropriate for a minister to take responsibility for their actions and to develop preventative strategies against similar actions in the future. Effective programs of growth are holistic and hopeful, believing that persons can rededicate themselves to effective ministry alongside healthy life and relationship choices. Psychological assessment is typically included in programs of growth, as well as therapeutic work and/or spiritual direction. Costs for such services are typically borne by the minister.

10. Fitness Review Appeals⁸⁹

An appeal may be requested by the minister in question within thirty days of the Committee on Ministry informing the minister of the Fitness Review outcome. Appeals may be based only on the Committee on Ministry's faithfulness in executing the Fitness Review process; outcomes are not appealable. The Fitness Review is the only ecclesial process of Committees on Ministry that may be appealed.

If the request for an appeal is granted, following its bylaws and the UCC Manual on Ministry, an Association holds a meeting

⁸⁹ Section 3 includes recommendations for a Fitness Review Appeal Process and Media Guidelines during a Fitness Review.

of its appeal body, giving opportunity for both the minister under review and the Committee to address the procedures used in (and purported failures of) the Fitness Review process. The purpose of the meeting of the appeal body is not to re-examine the information but to determine whether the process used by the Committee was consistent with the Fitness Review process adopted by the Association. If the process was consistent, the appeal is denied. If the process was not consistent, the appeal is sustained, and the appeal body directs the Committee on Ministry to review and reenact as appropriate the action or step in the Fitness Review process that has been found to be inconsistent, following the adopted process of the Association. Information obtained by reviewing or completing the identified actions or steps may impact the discernment and final outcome decided by the Committee.

11. Reinstatement of Standing

Following a resignation or termination of ministerial standing, a person may seek reinstatement of standing through the Committee on Ministry of the Association where standing ended. If the Committee on Ministry chooses to consider the request, it convenes for a time of discernment and considers the following:

- the circumstances of the resignation or termination of standing;
- whether and how the person exhibits the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers as well as a capacity to adhere to the UCC Ministerial Code;
- the perspective of those who may have been harmed by the person's behavior;
- the degree to which responsibility for previous actions is acknowledged;
- any other relevant information.

If a person resigned ministerial standing in the midst of a Fitness Review or prior to the completion of a program of growth, those processes must be completed before the reinstatement of standing can be considered by the Committee on Ministry. If standing is reinstated, the person must fully disclose the previous termination or resignation of standing on the UCC Ministerial Profile in perpetuity.

Fitness Reviews happen infrequently in the life of the Church and are difficult, stress-producing experiences for all involved. Regardless of the outcome, a host of pastoral work remains to be done upon its conclusion for those affected by the minister's behaviors and by the process of a Fitness Review, including but not limited to the minister who was reviewed, the Local Church of membership, the person raising the concern, and the ministry setting. The Committee on Ministry should work collaboratively with the Association and Conference to determine the appropriateness and availability of any ongoing support.⁹⁰

A Fitness Review also has a considerable impact on those involved in conducting it, including members of the Committee on Ministry, the Response Team, and Association staff. Some Associations and Conferences find it helpful to provide an opportunity for these parties to gather with a facilitator to debrief and reflect on the impact of the Fitness Review following its conclusion.

⁹⁰ See Section 3 for resources for those affected by clergy sexual misconduct.