

BEST PRACTICES FOR UNIFIED FITNESS REVIEW COMMITTEES

A Unified Fitness Review Committee is composed of members from several Associations in a Conference whose function is to handle Fitness Reviews on behalf of several Associations' Committees on Ministry (COM). The Unified Fitness Review Committee's responsibility begins from the time a participating COM votes that a raised concern is a question of fitness, continues through the final disposition of the Fitness Review, and includes the implementation and monitoring of any program of growth that may result from a disciplinary outcome. While there are a variety of methods for implementing a Unified Fitness Review Committee, this document articulates some of the best practices across the United Church of Christ.

Rationale for Having a Unified Fitness Review Committee

The process of discerning fitness for ministry is often difficult. Even when done well, it is inevitably time-consuming. Having a Unified Fitness Review Committee creates the opportunity for Associations to identify the most equipped individuals within the Conference who offer concentrated focus and expertise in this process, and provides confidence that a capable group of trained and respected volunteers are always prepared to respond to a concern. It also diminishes the overall workload of each Association's Committee on Ministry, allowing them to focus their energies on supporting Members in Discernment, individuals with standing, and Local Churches within their Association. A Unified Fitness Review Committee also reduces the likelihood of conflicts of interest, particularly in smaller Associations.

When a Conference creates a Unified Fitness Review Committee, all participating Associations commit to adjudicating all of their Fitness Reviews through that committee, and to accept the decision of the Unified Fitness Review Committee without further investigation.

Composition of the Committee

Conferences take one of two approaches to developing a Unified Fitness Review Committee: forming a standing committee, or maintaining a "pool" of potential committee members. Both approaches include regular training on the Fitness Review process for all members. Regardless of which approach is taken, the Unified Fitness Review Committee should be composed of individuals who have recent experience serving on a Committee on Ministry. Unified Fitness Review Committee members may be current COM representatives or individuals who have served in the past five years. It is recommended that Unified Fitness Review Committee members serve for 3-year terms that are renewable once (for a total of six years).

Conferences with a **standing committee** have 1-2 representatives from each participating Association, plus 3 at-large representatives from throughout the Conference. These at-large representatives may be nominated by the Board of Directors and/or the Conference nominating committee. The standing committee serves as the body that adjudicates all Fitness Reviews on

behalf of the participating Associations' Committees on Ministry. Response Team members for Fitness Reviews are individuals who are not a part of the standing committee and do not adjudicate the review, but have experience in interviewing witnesses and interpreting the process of a Fitness Review to various individuals.

Conferences that take a **“pool” approach** have 4 representatives from each participating Association who are trained and ready to serve on a Unified Fitness Review Committee as needed. When there is a fitness concern, Conference staff and the Unified Fitness Review Committee chair select a representative sample number of members from the pool (typically 1 from each Association, and 2-3 at-large representatives) to serve on the adjudication team for the Fitness Review. Selection from the pool reflects clergy/laity balance, racial/ethnic/gender diversity, experience with the question of fitness being raised, lack of conflict of interest, availability, and other factors that may be relevant. Response Team members are selected from the remaining members of the pool and do not adjudicate the Fitness Review. Unified Fitness Review Committee members who have served on the adjudication team in one Fitness Review may serve as Response Team members in other Fitness Reviews, and vice versa.

A pool approach is most appropriate when multiple Fitness Reviews require a committee's attention, or when there is a strong desire for a Conference to increase its overall competency in the Fitness Review process by having many people trained and knowledgeable about the process.

Staffing the Committee

The Unified Fitness Review Committee is staffed by either the Conference Minister or an Associate Conference Minister. In some Conferences, staff responsibility for the Unified Fitness Review Committee shifts between staff, depending on the Association where the individual under review holds standing. In other Conferences, one particular Conference staff person staffs all Fitness Reviews as part of their portfolio. The role of the staff person is to be attentive to the process itself, ensuring the Unified Fitness Review Committee acts in accordance with the Manual on Ministry and any additional Conference policies related to Fitness Reviews. In some cases, the Conference staff person also serves as the Process Guide or information liaison for the ministry setting. The Conference staff person's role is to explain and interpret the process of the Fitness Review and to advocate for the faithful implementation of that process. The Conference Minister or Associate Conference Minister has voice but no vote on the Unified Fitness Review Committee.

Relationship with the Committee on Ministry

In matters of fitness, a Unified Fitness Review Committee has the same authority as an Association Committee on Ministry. When a Conference develops a Unified Fitness Review Committee, all participating Associations covenant to:

- send all Fitness Review matters to the Unified Fitness Review Committee; and

- accept the decisions of the committee without further investigation. This includes the initial outcome, the program of growth, and any final outcome of the review following a program of growth.

Unified Fitness Review Committees are sometimes considered a subcommittee of a Committee on Ministry.

Fitness Reviews: The Initial Concern

When a concern about a minister's fitness for ministry is brought to an Association Committee on Ministry, the COM determines (through a redacted case) whether the concern, if found to be true, does in fact raise a question about the minister's continued fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ. If so, they vote to begin a Fitness Review and refer the matter to the Unified Fitness Review Committee. By participating in the Unified Fitness Review Committee process, the Committee on Ministry has already agreed that they will accept the decision of the Unified Fitness Review Committee without further investigation or additional vote by the COM.

The Unified Fitness Review Committee handles the rest of the Fitness Review process, interviewing people with relevant information, meeting with the person who raised the concern and the Minister in Question, adjudicating the Fitness Review, developing and monitoring a program of growth if necessary, and adjudicating the final outcome of the Fitness Review following that program of growth.

Programs of Growth

Fitness Reviews may result in disciplinary outcomes that require a program of growth. The program of growth is developed and monitored by the Unified Fitness Review Committee. This committee also re-examines, reaffirms or terminates standing following programs of growth, and shares those outcomes with the relevant Association Committee on Ministry.

Appeals of Fitness Reviews

When a Conference has a Unified Fitness Review Committee, the individual who was the subject of the Fitness Review may appeal the process within 30 days of the Unified Fitness Review Committee's decision, submitted in writing to the Association Board of Directors or Executive Committee where the individual has standing. Only the individual whose fitness was reviewed may seek an appeal on the process of the review, and appeals may only be brought based on the Unified Fitness Review Committee's faithfulness in executing the Fitness Review process; outcomes are not appealable. The appeal body follows their established procedures for the appeal. If the process followed by the Unified Fitness Review Committee was consistent, the appeal is denied. If the process was not consistent, the appeal is sustained, and the appeal body directs the Unified Fitness Review Committee to reconsider its action following the adopted process, policies, and procedures of the Association. The decision of the appeal body is final.