

## **UPON RECEIPT OF A FITNESS CONCERN:**

### **A Guide for Committee on Ministry Chairs and Conference Staff**

Conference or Association staff is likely to be the first point of contact when an individual raises a concern about a minister's fitness for ministry. These concerns will be referred to a Committee on Ministry (COM) to discern whether a Fitness Review is appropriate; however, there is a limited role for Conference staff and the Committee on Ministry chair at the very earliest stage of this process.

Concerns surface in a variety of ways. Someone may call, send a letter, or write an email expressing their concern about a minister's conduct. This individual does not need to have a direct relationship with the minister or the ministry setting in order to raise the concern, nor do they have to have been directly harmed by the conduct giving rise to the concern. This individual is referred to as the "person raising the question." A formal written letter of concern is not required for the process to begin. There may be a news report of alleged criminal conduct on the part of a minister that has implications for their continued fitness for ministry. Information may otherwise rise to the awareness of Conference or Association Staff, the Committee on Ministry chair, or the Committee on Ministry as a whole. Sometimes, a concern or a complaint may emerge that relates to a Situational Support Consultation or some other conflict of which Conference staff or a Committee on Ministry is already aware. Once a concern is raised, regardless of the way it surfaces, it is the responsibility of the Committee on Ministry to address it in a timely manner.

The first step for Conference staff upon receiving such a concern is to be in contact with the chair of the Committee on Ministry. If the concern comes first to the COM chair, their first step is to be in touch with Conference staff. After consultation, it may be appropriate for Conference staff or the COM chair to be in direct contact with the person who has shared this concern in order to gather more context. If the substance of the concern is unclear, ask for more information. It is also appropriate to ascertain the ways

the person raising the question of fitness has managed this concern to date. Some questions for consideration include:

Where and how did you first learn about this concern/situation?

What is your relationship to the minister? To the ministry setting? To the person most directly affected or harmed by the behavior described?

Have you talked about this concern with others? With whom have you spoken?

Have any steps been taken to address this concern through other channels (formally or informally)?

The purpose of this stage of the process is not to investigate the concern or to interview any individual, or to determine the veracity of the concern, but to assess whether the information provided is sufficient for the Committee on Ministry to make a determination about whether this is a potential fitness concern. As such, there may be very occasional situations in which it is appropriate to speak briefly to the minister who is the subject of the concern regarding its substance.

Once clarifying information is received, the Conference staff person and Committee on Ministry chair explore options and consider a course of action. Some questions to consider:

Is this a concern about misconduct or is it related to other sorts of conflict between the minister and an individual or group?

Is this solely a personnel matter to be addressed by the calling body directly?

Does this relate to some other oversight matter, such as a Situational Support Consultation, that has already taken place?

Are there concurrent legal concerns related to this concern? (If yes, please contact the Conference attorney or the Office of General Counsel.)

Together, Conference staff and the Committee on Ministry chair determine how to present a redacted case to the Committee on Ministry. The redacted case is a brief summary of the concerns raised; it does not include identifying details of the minister or the

ministry setting, to the extent possible. Conference staff and the COM chair may provide additional context to the rest of the Committee on Ministry as they discern whether to initiate a Fitness Review. The Conference staff and the COM chair may make a recommendation for a course of action for the Committee on Ministry, but the COM makes the decision about initiating a Fitness Review.

In order to help the Committee on Ministry discern, it will need to answer the question: if this information is true, does it call into question a minister's fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ? The purpose of a Fitness Review is to help a COM discern both parts of that question – whether the information shared is true, and if so, how that affects the minister's present fitness for ministry. The UCC Ministerial Code and the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers should be used as additional resources to guide the Committee on Ministry in making a decision.

If the Committee on Ministry determines that this is not a fitness matter, the COM Chair notifies the person raising the question about their decision. There may be some additional follow-up after this decision. For example, the COM chair and the Conference staff should direct the person raising the question to the appropriate venue for addressing their concern, such as the calling body's council. Additionally, the COM may request a conversation with the congregational leadership, calling body, and/or the minister to address this concern in other ways, including a Situational Support Consultation, which is a consultation involving the Committee on Ministry designed to address a situation of concern not involving misconduct.

If the Committee on Ministry determines that the concern raised does call into question a minister's fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ, they vote to begin a Fitness Review and follow the established procedures.

In the extremely rare case that the COM Chair and Conference staff jointly decides not to present a redacted case to a Committee on Ministry, they still inform the COM that a concern was raised, that it was self-evidently not credible, and that they can share a redacted case if the committee wishes to know more information.