

Committee on Ministry, Subcommittee D: Discernment and Preparation

Rev. Rachael Pryor, chair



Improving Virtual Ministries

At the time of this report last year, we had just overcome the first “surge” of Covid-19, and the summer was a time of cautious optimism that the worst was over. We adapted quickly to the need for more Zoom-based gatherings, because we already had the experience and technology in place to do this in KO. And just as we were submitting reports, we celebrated two ordinations, for Rev. Michael Vollbrecht and Rev. Kelly Hansen. We learned from each of these services, that there is potential for beauty and spiritual connectedness even by Zoom; and that despite the limitations of online services, there is still room for creativity and joy, and often, for broader inclusivity than in-person meetings allow for.

Of course, we didn’t know that it would be yet another long year (and counting) as we continued to adapt our resources and meeting styles to the necessity of mostly virtual settings. Without our usual opportunity at Annual Meeting to connect with our Members in Discernment over a meal, we’ve instead met with with our candidates one at a time through the year, to offer clarity and encouragement. Our traditional in-person training at Annual Meeting was replaced by a virtual training (jointly with COM-A) in March.

Covid has also turned our attention once more to our models of preparation for ministry, as so many more virtual possibilities emerge. We are just beginning to ask questions about the benefits and formats for Clinical Pastoral Education, as well as the place of this element within our larger approach to ordination pathways; and this work will continue in the coming year. We are especially interested in exploring and strengthening connections with the Pacific School of Religion and Eden Theological Seminary through their growing virtual options; even as we continue a deeply-appreciated relationship with Philips Theological Seminary in Tulsa.

Part of the process for Members in Discernment, and in some cases others seeking authorization in KO, is a ministry readiness assessment (sometimes called a psychological evaluation). We have one resource available in Oklahoma, but our Kansas consultant was no longer offering this service. This prompted us to build a new

relationship with Midwest Ministry Development Services, an organization which also serves several other UCC Conferences. Their Kansas City-based offices provide a variety of support services for all stages of ministry, and some of the services have been made available in a virtual format during Covid. We look forward to continuing to make use of this high-quality professional resource in years to come.

Continuing Collaboration

As noted in the COM-A report, we've continued to see shifting leadership across our Committee on Ministry as a whole, and this has only strengthened our commitment to continuing with a "tri-chair" model which supports flexibility when any one chairperson experiences a need to temporarily or permanently step back from serving with the COM. This team-based approach makes cross-subsection communication and cooperation the rule rather than the exception. Especially as we prepare to welcome a new Conference Minister, our COM tri-chairs will continue to support one another and will hopefully make the transition smoother in this area.

COM chairs were also given the opportunity to participate in the first virtual AM21 (Authorizing Ministry in the 21st Century), a Wider Church conference for middle judicatory staff and COM leaders led by our national office (MESA) which oversees this work. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn more about certain areas of our work and connect with similar leaders throughout the UCC.

One example of our COM subcommittee collaboration has been in regard to Boundary Training, which does affect ministers under the oversight of both COM-A and COM-D. Last year, both subcommittees were part of the ongoing conversation about offering multiple virtual options to fulfill the requirement for those who were due. This year, planning ahead means we will offer our own virtual course through KO, just before Annual Meeting. It will be led by our Consultant for Equity and Inclusion, Julia Gaughan.

We also considered what other types of continuing education we might support for authorized ministers and MIDs, but found that the needs varied widely among settings, especially during Covid. We shared some recommendations of resources available online (including some free workshops); and we focused our efforts on an opportunity for a clergy retreat when it seemed safe enough to risk an in-person gathering. This retreat took place August 29-31.

Closing Reflection

The work of the COM has been a significant source of discernment in my own call, and the opportunity to learn with and from Edith Guffey in this role is one I will treasure all

my days. Edith guides us skillfully to always look to the next horizon of our work; and to balance adherence to the letter of the “law” (or in our case, the Manual on Ministry), with appropriate adaptations to truly capture the spirit of our covenantal polity. Even though our work is mostly with pastors and chaplains, she frequently reminds us that we also have a role, even if indirectly, in supporting the vitality of our congregations. Our Committees on Ministry have grown in capacity and breadth under her leadership. I look forward to another year of serving alongside a dedicated, faithful, and joyful group of colleagues as we welcome the leadership of our next Conference Minister into our work together.

Committee Members

Kayla Bonewell, Church of the Open Arms & Cathedral of Hope, Oklahoma City, OK

Heather Coates, St. John’s UCC, Baldwin City, KS

Phil Hodson, Wichita UCC, Wichita, KS (through June 2021)

Travis Smith McKee, Trinity United Christian Church, Cheney, KS (beginning August 2021)

Rachael Pryor, Wichita UCC, Wichita, KS (chair)

Cody Rine, Midland UCC, Sterling, KS

Aaron Roberts, Colonial Prairie Village, KS

Jan Lange, Registrar

Edith Guffey, Conference Minister, Ex-Officio without vote