UNIT EIGHT:
THE CARE & FEEDING OF YOUR COMMITTEE
Cultural Gifts and Challenges

As the United Church of Christ continues to move toward its goal of becoming more accessible to all, Committees on the Ministry will have increasing opportunities to encounter candidates from cultures and ethnicities, as well as sexual orientation, and varying forms of disabilities, which may be very different from those represented on the committee itself. It is important to keep in mind that these differences can lead to experiences of enrichment and greater understanding if approached prayerfully and respectfully.

Here are some suggestions:

a) If at all possible make sure your committee represents the full diversity of your Association and Conference.

b) Take advantage of opportunities to visit and share in worship and fellowship with congregations whose primary ethnicity and/or culture is different from your own. This is especially important when a minister or a congregation comes before the committee seeking to become a pastor or a UCC congregation.

c) If language is a barrier, make sure someone is on hand to assist with translation.

d) Be aware that many new immigrant pastors are caught between two worlds – the world of their “home” culture in the country of origin and the world of this new community and culture. This leads to a great deal of stress. Pastors need understanding and support when dealing with such issues.

e) Get to know the culture of the pastor and/or congregation. What values do they hold? What is the role of the pastor within that community? What are considered to be ethical norms and patterns? What are the challenges and joys of ministry within that community?

f) Make sure to address issues of boundary training and expectations of UCC pastors from a culturally specific perspective.
g) Educate yourselves about the physical or mental challenges of candidates. Take time to examine your own reactions.

h) Have the discussion about sexual orientation BEFORE you have a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender candidate. Make sure to consult LGBT persons as part of the education process.

1. How does the composition of your committee reflect your Association and Conference?

2. What potential gifts does each of the above persons or cultures offer to the church?

3. In what specific ways might your committee educate itself about diversity?

“Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves...”

Abraham had an advantage when his unexpected guests arrived; he was resting in the entrance to his tent, and he saw them coming from afar. However, it is likely that the story would have been no different had he been out with the flocks: the demands of hospitality always took precedence over everything else.... water, a little bread, a rest in the shade, a tender calf lovingly prepared.

Abraham’s hospitality is described in great detail: he bows to the guests; calls for water to wash their feet; offers bread; asks Sarah to knead the choice flour and make cakes; kills and prepares a calf; and serves it with curds and milk. Then Abraham stands a bit apart, watching as his unknown guests enjoy a sumptuous meal.
It is only after all the requirements of hospitality are fulfilled that the visitors (also identified in the text as “the Lord”) disclose the true purpose of their visit.

**Questions:**

1. How does your committee offer hospitality to the “stranger?”

2. How can you be open to receive a surprise gift from those to whom you offer hospitality?

3. What are the risks of offering hospitality? What are the benefits?

**Development for Committees on the Ministry**

The fact that you are reviewing this material is an indication that you are already pursuing education to help develop your skills as a Committee on the Ministry. The profound responsibility committee members have for the standing of individuals and churches almost naturally results in a desire for ongoing development. There are some basic training elements which are not included in this kit which are recommended for all. While this can be very time consuming, it may also reduce some part of the burden of the work.

First, it is important to experience the **boundary workshops** that you offer (or require) for the authorized ministers of your Association. Once considered primarily a tool to prevent clergy sexual abuse, boundary workshops have become much more. They provide an opportunity for the Association to share and understand its own expectations for ministers. And, they are an introduction to an on-going conversation about the ethics and “best practices” of ministry. Hopefully, clergy and other ministers in your Association also have regular opportunities to meet together for mutual support and accountability. If not, a boundary workshop is a good opportunity to launch a regular, ongoing clergy support network.

It is best for committee members to attend a workshop offered for ministers. But if that is not possible, most Associations have access to “A Sacred Trust: Boundaries for Clergy and Spiritual Teachers”, a video series with worksheets and exercises from the **FaithTrust Institute**. These four videos (20 to 25 minutes each) can be used in meetings, or perhaps the series can be loaned out to individuals. The sessions are quite entertaining and engaging. This training is often critical for lay members of the committee who, despite extensive experience in
congregations, may not have been exposed to basic issues of clergy ethics and maintaining appropriate relationships within the church.

Perhaps the most difficult and serious matter a Committee on the Ministry will encounter is a Fitness Review. Members are rarely well prepared for the emotional and organizational challenges they will face at this important time. Parish Life and Leadership provides a two-day **Fitness Review Training** for an entire Conference and its committee members, response team members and staff. It may be challenging to arrange for so many to be present at one time. However, the program evaluations completed by committee members after these events are likely to make comments like:

- “The most important training we could have.”
- “Wish I could have had it sooner.”
- “We need more practice with this!”
- “I didn’t want to come but now I am so glad I did.”

It’s also a training that helps with much more of the committee’s work, since “Fitness for Ministry” is a basic question for discernment. Conference staff can contact Parish Life and Leadership to arrange for this training for your area.

Development may be helpful in understanding **congregational dynamics** and **response to conflict**. Part of a committee’s role may be to assist local congregations and their pastors work through conflict situations. It is important to understand the committee’s role and limits in this work, and when other consultant services may be advisable. The **Lombard Mennonite Peace Center**, well known for its work and education on conflict transformation in churches, offers a basic “Healthy Congregations” course which is appropriate for local church lay leadership and can provide a basic understanding for the committee as well. An Association or Conference might consider sponsoring this or a similar program locally, not only for committee members but for all its churches. This will provide a groundwork which will help church leadership learn the early warning signs of conflict. Your committee members will become more adept at responding to and developing a common understanding of the role of the committee.

Another essential element for the committee’s work is a thorough understanding of the cultural and institutional structures of racism and other forms of bias. The responsibility of recognizing and removing personal biases about the practice of ministry belongs to each member.
Likewise, the committee as a whole needs to recognize the insidious effects of cultural bias on its own work and on the life and leadership of its churches. **Anti-racism training** and **diversity training** are available from a number of consultants. Many UCC affiliated Conference and Association staff can assist in finding this training.

Any members of the committee who lack basic education in UCC History and Polity will want to arrange to take coursework with either through a seminary or in a local education program. It will not only enrich their understanding, it will become a tool to help assess the denominational understanding of candidates for authorized ministry. In situations where taking a course impractical, a basic reading list can be followed. Recommended readings are included in the supplemental materials in this toolkit.

The PLL Bulletin is a monthly publication which presents timely information, important issues, questions, and upcoming events which are important to the work of Committees on the Ministry. It is distributed in electronic format to Conference and Association staff members, who will pass it on to the Committees on the Ministry with which they work. Committee members should ensure that they review the Bulletin regularly for news which affects their work, as well as development of their perspectives and knowledge. The committee as a whole may wish to briefly review the most recent contents at their meetings.

And finally, being an informed member of the United Church of Christ and broader ecumenical community will be helpful. Read **United Church News** and the Conference newsletter. Consider a subscription to a publication like **The Christian Century** or catch up on religion news online, through your Conference’s resource center, or local library.

1. In which of the above trainings have you taken part?
2. Share some ways your committee engages in regular development.
3. What is missing? How might you fill in the gap?
4. How might the above trainings assist you with your work and ministry as a committee member?
Self Care Resources and Exercises

Taking Care of Yourselves

The work and ministry of the Committee on the Ministry can be rewarding, but it can also be difficult and draining. This is especially so when the committee has had to make difficult decisions or has conducted a fitness review. Such times can leave committee members feeling discouraged and even disillusioned.

During and following such experiences, it is important that the committee set aside time for renewal, debriefing and nurture. Committees have done a variety of things to foster such renewal. Here are a few suggestions:

a) Make sure that worship and Bible study are an important part of each meeting. Use the Bible study material provided with this resource as a place to begin.

b) Set aside time for retreat. Ask a Conference staff member who was not involved in the work of your committee to lead this or use a spiritual director from your area.

c) Engage the services of a pastoral counselor or other professional to assist your committee to debrief following particularly painful or complicated decisions.

d) Engage yourselves in a fun activity. Go out for a meal, go on a picnic… or do something together that enables the committee members to laugh and enjoy one another’s company.

You may also choose to use one or more of the reflections and exercises outlined in the following pages. Whatever you do, do it intentionally, prayerfully and remembering that your renewal as individuals and as a committee is essential to your ability to perform this ministry faithfully and competently. Again, the church relies on you for this ministry of oversight.
Exercising with *Laments*

**Opening Reflection**

You might choose to begin this time by listening to a classic piece of music of the blues or folk genres. Some suggestions are: Billie Holiday’s “Stormy Weather”; or James Taylor’s “Shower the People.” Open yourself to the melodic undertones and sink into the music.

**Application**

There are times when our work as members of a Committee on the Ministry can leave us wanting to sing the blues. During those times, we are in good company! There is powerful testimony in the Bible that our ancestors in the faith sought opportunities to express such emotions to God in prayer. In the book of Psalms, we find a whole range of human emotions from thanksgiving and exultant praise to the very depths of despair, outrage and a desire for vengeance. It’s all there – thank God!

This may be a time when you want to allow yourselves to read and pray with some of the Psalms known as *Laments*. These are the “bluesy” psalms, the ones that give voice to the questions of where God is when people are getting hurt or when nothing seems to be going right or when we are tired or disillusioned or drained.

**Suggested Activities**

Perhaps you might use some of these Psalms in your private or corporate devotions. Here are a few to consider:

### Personal Laments

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This exercise is particularly helpful for Committees that have experienced a painful or difficult time, such as the period following a fitness review.
a) Another possibility is to write your own psalm of lament. Think about your recent experience as a committee and get in touch with feelings that a situation evoked within you. After a period of silent reflection and prayer, write down your feelings and compose a lament. Some of you may wish to share these with one another as you feel comfortable.

b) Of course, a lament doesn't have to be expressed with words. Some may wish to use music, dance or art to express lament. You could create a collage of lament as a committee. This might be done while listening to music or as you talk through your feelings and experience.

c) Laments might then be incorporated into a time of worship and prayer.