

UUMA Proposed Guidelines Revisions FAQs

Preface

If our faith is to have any hope of helping heal this world, we need to begin by healing our own community. Our covenant can be a means of perpetuating systems of oppression among ourselves and in our ministries, or it can create space for the flourishing of love and trust and boundless creativity. As colleagues and members of the UUMA, we long for the latter. Our ethics must begin with love and justice, compassion and solidarity. We can differ on strategy, and should have robust discussions of how to respond to pain and minimize trauma. AND, our theology calls us toward love--always, toward love.

Since the UUMA Board and the Guidelines Committees released our proposal, we've had many conversations and responses. We wanted to answer some of the main questions and issues raised as well as correct some misinformation which has caused confusion.

First and foremost, the language we propose is the result of speaking with dozens of people, some with broad understanding of our ministry and some who have been hurt and/or frustrated by our current system. We honor the stories shared with us. We heard so many stories of when and how our current process doesn't work -- when people want healing, not punishment, and can't get it. When ministers with less social power were ignored by those with more. When ministers spoke up, but the process took years -- and the one who hurt them just quit the body. We heard cases of careers damaged, of talented staff abused, of congregations harmed -- and of the esteem of ministry deeply damaged. We wept with you, raged with you, and designed a system that, with practice and improvement, may respond better. We heard you and we see you.

Second, we as a body must think about why the ministers are in covenant at all.

What is the role of the UUMA in holding ourselves and one another accountable to our standards of practice, especially to our clear need to stop perpetuating systems of oppression such as white supremacy and heteropatriarchy? The Guidelines Ethics and Accountability Committees have spent a year listening to stories filled with pain from colleagues with less power who had no ability to hold their colleagues accountable and who had no support from their professional organization to do so. In the past, our Association has upheld the right of ministers to keep their misdeeds secret. That has allowed powerful ministers to prey on those with less power in the system.

The tradition of “Thou shalt not speak ill of another colleague” (“I will not speak scornfully or in derogation of any colleague in public. In any private conversation concerning a colleague, I will speak responsibly and temperately. I will not solicit or encourage negative comments about a colleague or their ministry.”) has kept ministers from naming the damage that has been done to them and to others. The expectation that one must first speak directly to the colleague who has done harm has gagged ministers of color and women and anyone with less systemic power, preventing them from bringing complaints forward because they could not confront a powerful colleague, or because doing so resulted only in further abuse.

These are the circumstances under which our teams were asked to add and revise language in our Guidelines and develop a new system of accountability. We humbly acknowledge that our proposal will need continual review and revision. At the same time, we must begin in some way to change our system from one that supports the perpetuation of harm to one that confronts abuses of power.

In order to heal our community and thus heal our world, we, the members of the UUMA must hold each other accountable. The question is, how we do that effectively? For a generation or more, we have said we hold each other accountable, but we have done so unevenly at best. It is another kind of injury to say that we have standards of ethics but fail to uphold them consistently. Our proposal is a way to do that better – if there are tweaks, corrections, or counter-proposals that would improve our proposal, we wish to learn. Engaging in at least a year of study would enable us to receive your input, which we welcome.

Proposed Guidelines Revisions
Frequently Asked Questions

1. What happens if we vote yes to a year of study? Or vote no?

A yes vote will indicate the proposal is "affirmed for a year of study in local chapters in year one. During the year, study and conversation happens. If needed, the committees will propose a revised change, incorporating amendments, in April of year two (2020). The members will vote on such changes in June of year two (in Providence). If a substantial amendment is proposed on the floor at this meeting, THEN another year of study is required, and a vote in 2021 (Milwaukee). (Note that the committee itself decides what's substantial). But if the proposal is adopted in 2020, or the amendment returns to the original language, then no additional year is needed.

A no vote ends this effort. The Accountability and Ethics Guidelines Committees would then draft a second proposal for revisions, to be presented the following year, for a year of study.

2. What will a year of study look like?

Each committee (both Ethics and Accountability, the two subgroups of the Guidelines Committee) will release a study experience/guide. These videos, essays, discussion questions, and processes will help members grow in their understanding; since this will be helpful for ministry in general, the UUMA Exec. will make this work eligible for Continuing Education credit. You can use these materials for discussion at chapters and clusters.

Each committee, as part of this experience, will provide an easy way to submit questions, notes, and proposed amendments or alternative processes. If you think we can accomplish the goals of strengthening our ministry and articulating and upholding the integrity of our covenant in different ways, we want to hear your ideas.

In April of 2020, each committee will release revised recommendations, based on your feedback. As part of this revised proposal, each committee may include alternatives for discussion and a “straw vote” at Ministry Days 2020.

If there is strong agreement on some or all of the recommendations we release in April 2020, a vote to accept those recommendations could take place in June 2020. (A substantial change, made from the floor in June 2020 to the proposal we make in April 2020, will require another year of study until 2021).

3. Has this proposal been reviewed by lawyers, experts, UUA staff...etc?

Throughout the committee work, we have consulted with colleagues and specialists from outside organizations as well as UUA and UUMA leadership (past and present) to understand the current issues, history and best practices in ethics and accountability. Our proposal as presented included legal review. Note that we have sought to maintain an adjudication process of conflict that offers UUMA member-to-member focus as a primary approach, with legal and insurance issues reserved for egregious and criminal misconduct.

It is common in other denominations for the covenant-keeping process to prohibit members from using outside counsel to frustrate the goals of accountability and healing.

While we have not expressly prohibited legal action, we have said that such action may result in a referral to the body who can deal with that. We have far too many examples of colleagues using threats of, or actual legal action, to prevent healing and justice.

4. What happens if I am accused of something by an unstable/retaliating staff member/colleague/congregant?

We hope the new process will work better. In a colleague-to-colleague situation, a Right Relations Guide may help the one who experiences harm identify the ways that trauma and/or other factors affect their experience, and guide them to healthy responses. A process of mediation is available. If accused of wrong-doing by other staff or lay people, those concerns would go to the Common Ethics Panel and/or MFC and/or regional staff, as they do now. There remains a process of discernment and justice-seeking, and ministers continue to have rights to appeal to others. What is removed is the right for a minister to just ignore a concern expressed by another UUMA member.

5. Why do we need Right Relations Guides (RRG), and will Good Officers still be part of the UUMA?

Good Officers have been an important and valuable peer resource in the UUMA community and the roles/responsibilities and training have had significant change over past decades. We see the RRG as having a distinct and alternate role, requiring specific training in restorative justice, counter oppression and trauma informed practices that can support just and equitable reconciliation and a growth mindset as we shift our learning culture and accountability structures. The RRG's will be ministers in full fellowship.

We know that other moving pieces, including how Right Relations Guides are selected and trained and the evolving relationship with the UUA and other professional groups will need to be more clear before many members are ready to vote. Considerable institutional and financial resources will be required to train and support RRG's.

We note that paragraph 13 of the Accountability proposal requires annual study and review. We must move from "getting it right" to "continuing to learn" and future updates, corrections, and remedies will be more regular.

6. What is this Common Ethics Panel? Isn't addressing ministerial misconduct the MFC's responsibility? Why complicate it with UUMA procedures?

The Common Ethics Panel would address misconduct of any UU religious professionals, including but not limited to ministers. It is not the Guidelines Committee which has proposed the Common Ethics Panel, but the UUMA Board. They wish to merge the UUMA's accountability process with the UUA's into a common body. The UUA and MFC were receptive to exploring this possibility, which has since grown to include representation from all UU Professional Groups as well as all UU credentialing bodies in the process of exploring and working toward this goal. If the MFC/UUA/UUMA decided not to do a Common Ethics Panel, our proposal would be re-written to send such cases to the MFC. But a common body makes some sense – in particular, it prohibits the “venue shopping” that allows those out of covenant to avoid accountability.

8. Is misconduct really such a problem these days? Our guidelines were already revised to address sex in the parish, and I don't know anyone who has filed a complaint against a minister.

The tradition of “Thou shalt not speak ill of another colleague” has kept ministers from naming the damage that has been done to them and to others. In our interviews we saw clear patterns of disrupted collegial trust as clergy with less power were trained to keep quiet. The expectation that one must first speak directly to the colleague who has done harm has gagged ministers of color and women and anyone with less systemic power, preventing them from bringing complaints forward because they could not confront a powerful colleague, or because doing so resulted only in further abuse.

Violations of our ethical guidelines happen constantly; they are regularly unresolved by direct communication, and the current process of Good Officers and the Committee on Ethics and Collegiality is not effective in dealing with these violations. Our new process allows everything from a clarifying conversation, to a variety of healing and reconciliation strategies, to a formal referral for misconduct.

Please know that our committee interviewed dozens of people harmed by the failure of some of our colleagues to keep our covenant, and often re-harmed by the failure of more of us to take their experience seriously.

9. I'm concerned that if I put my foot in my mouth, or do not use just the right form of communication, that I will be shunned, publicly humiliated or punished.

These proposals feel punitive and extreme. Why would I want to abide by these new rules?

The guidelines we have proposed do not view accountability as a system of punishment, but as a way to continually return to covenant with one another. We recognize that, as Martin Buber taught, we are a “promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing” people. We want mechanisms that can help us make that real among our colleagues and within our association. We want to transform the culture around mistakes from one of infraction and punishment to one of restoration of covenant. We want to ground our covenant in love.

We affirm the need to continually learn and grow as our theological tradition calls us to do - and we are aware that as understanding and consciousness changes, so, too, do our rules, norms and practices. We see this as work of integrity and faithfulness. And while we appreciate the need for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, for every minister whose divergent conscience was protected by the commitment to freedom, there have been more who claimed that spirit of freedom as justification for their abuses and misconduct. We seek to engage explicit forms of accountability in relationship, with facilitated conversations and clear boundaries whenever possible.

10. It seems that most collegial conflict can be resolved by simply engaging in good-faith communication. If someone has a problem with me, they need to come to me directly, don't they? Who needs all this bureaucracy?

As the Commission on Institutional Change wrote, “Informal structures rely on social relationships and thus tend to privilege people from the dominant culture in a community or organization. In the interest of not being ‘bureaucratic,’ we leave structures informal because ‘we all know and trust one another.’” A concern for differences in power and access to social capital must be accounted for; a system of ethics that does not account for power is ahistorical and replicates systems of oppression.

This can be particularly difficult in a congregation where one minister supervises another. The power imbalances inherent in these situations require someone else to be involved. The congregation is rarely equipped to handle challenges within the staffing hierarchy. Our proposal does not require collaborative leadership, but does require accountability to one another, including not bullying staff we work with. That can be accomplished under a variety of governance models.

11. Doesn't this process just create triangles by bringing in extra voices not directly affected?

There is a difference between "healthy triangles" and "unhealthy triangles." Healthy triangles can support healing and reconciliation. On the other hand, when ministers misconduct, "keeping things in-house," and not informing congregational leaders when our ethical standards have been violated, creates secrets. Secrets are deadly. And social isolation for trauma-survivors is also deadly.

Our proposal works hard to have a clear analysis of power. Ethical systems without a power analysis perpetuate existing systems of hierarchies. We must attend, in our application of principles, to the context of each situation.

12. Are we voting on requiring membership in the UUMA to retain ministerial fellowship?

No. We are being asked to vote to accept the proposed Guidelines Revisions for a year of study. The statement from the Guidelines Accountability Committee recommending that membership in the UUMA be required to maintain fellowship is in their Executive Summary, not in the proposed revisions to the Guidelines themselves. Further, the UUMA does not have the power to require membership to maintain fellowship. The powers to stipulate what is necessary for ministerial fellowship is held by the UUA. To be clear, the business before us is to vote whether to accept the proposed revisions to the Guidelines for a year of study.

14. Isn't the notion of "harm" subjective? Does this proposal weaponize people's perceptions?

Of course, what constitutes "harm" is somewhat subjective. We ask that our colleagues listen to the voices of those who have experienced harm to improve our understanding. Recognize that a variety of approaches to dealing with the harm done is built into our proposal. We know that harms are not equal, and not all call for the same response. Our proposal calls for us to keep learning, and for the RRG's not just to respond, but to give the Board and Exec. Team directions for continuing education so we can get better at being responsive, promoting healing, and stopping harm.

15. Will this proposal silence prophetic voices and prevent honest sharing of differences? Don't we have a tradition of freedom and prophecy?

The freedom of ministers and others to speak the truth in love is central to our tradition, and should not be diminished. And: the “in love” part is important. It is a free and responsible search that we are called to, and responsibility for the well-being of our colleagues ought not be ignored. This is a polarity to be managed, not a problem to be solved, and so we have proposed that we have an annual review of the cases brought to the RRG’s, and continue to learn so that we get the balance as right as we can. But temperance, compassion, and humility in our speech, especially when there are differences in power and social location, would serve us well.

16. Shouldn’t participation in healing and accountability be voluntary? If I’m forced to participate, because my fellowship is on the line, will the result be genuine? Don’t most ministers participate willingly anyway?

Of course, we would prefer for participation in reconciliation to be voluntary. But when abuses of ministerial power or violations of our ethical standards happen (abuses which do not rise to the level of misconduct yet harm our colleagues and our ministry), depending only on voluntary participation is not working. Colleagues with more power sometimes exempt themselves; yet, colleagues with less power do feel compelled to participate. That’s not acceptable.

Of course, a system of direct communication, willingly entered by both parties who seek healing, will work when everyone operates with humility, good faith, and a desire to reconcile and grow. It is not these cases that accountability systems are really for. They are for when that doesn’t happen. Then what? What remedy do those harmed have? When a formal complaint to the MFC isn’t the remedy, but they do need behavior to change so that they, too, can fully participate in our ministry, what do we do then? This is the question we have wrestled with. Solutions, other than ours, which can answer that question, would be welcome for discussion.

17. I’m thinking about other ways to address these harms and problems with the current system. What are the key questions that I should ask?

A. What are the MFC and other bodies willing to do, and consider, within their areas of authority? What scope of authority does the UUMA want the MFC and others to have, and what scope of authority for maintaining the integrity of our covenant is our responsibility?

B. What do you do if colleague A asks to speak to colleague B about a harm and colleague B refuses? This happens often. No alternative can be seriously considered that does not have an answer for this question.

C. If a minister acts in ways contrary to our ethical standards, but not misconduct according to the MFC, does that harm our ministry as a whole? If so, what is the remedy?

For our committees, and we believe, for the UUMA Board and Executive Team, for the dozens of survivors of ministerial misconduct, abuse, and harm that we interviewed and the thousands we did not, the answer is clear: we have a responsibility to each other for the ethical exercise of our vocation, and as a body of ministers, to articulate and promote accountability for that exercise is our duty.

We hope that you will affirm the need for a year of study, so that we can honor our covenant and make real our love for one another.