

Report from Unity Church-Unitarian's Ministerial Search Team (MST)

August 26, 2022

This is a final report from the Ministerial Search Team (MST), summarizing its work during 2021-2022 in search of a senior settled minister to replace the Revs. Janne and Rob Eller-Isaacs. It is essentially a record of actions taken, substantive areas of discussion, and major accomplishments. Several attachments provide additional detail. The report does not include interpretation of events or recommendations to the Board of Trustees (BOT).

While our search did not result in a call, much of what we accomplished and learned may prove useful to the Board of Trustees and to the next MST.

GETTING STARTED

Initial meetings, structures, and process

The MST was drawn from a broad pool of Unity members who indicated interest by formally applying. The Board of Trustees narrowed that very large group to a list of 20 who represented various demographics and were engaged in different areas of church life. A congregational vote chose five from that list, and the Board selected the remaining four. Due to the pandemic postponing the retirement of the Eller-Isaacs for a full year, the MST's selection was postponed as well. One result was that the team was formed in March 2021, a couple months before the end of the church year. This was helpful in light of our having a one-year interim, rather than the typical two.

Members of the team were: Mary Baremore, Pauline Eichten, Morgan France-Ramirez, Betsy Hearn (co-chair), Dan Huelster, Lia Rivamonte, Jake Rueter, Avi Viswanathan (co-chair) and Marg Walker. As a group, we reflected the diversity of Unity Church by gender, sexual orientation, race, and age. We also represented both long-time and newer members, and single and married members. Most of us either had raised or were currently raising our children in the church.

Our opening retreat (March 5-6, 2021) was led by Rev. Jen Crow, Senior Minister at First Universalist Church in Minneapolis. As our Ministerial Transitions coach, Rev. Crow's role was to facilitate the retreat, review the congregational record when it was developed in the fall, and support the MST's work throughout the search process. The coach role also entailed being a liaison to the UUA Transitions Office, and supporting Unity's Board of Trustees and its Transitions Team.

The major accomplishments of the retreat were to get to know each other, to begin drafting a covenant, to preview the array of roles and tasks necessary for our work, and to volunteer to fulfill those roles. The UUA Settlement Handbook was the source of detailed information and essential guidance during the retreat and throughout the search process.

The MST put several structures in place during our initial weeks together. Among the first was the selection of the online project management tool *Asana*, which enabled us to communicate between meetings, and to work efficiently and collaboratively on all shared tasks. We also created meeting rituals, including a team covenant that we read at the opening of each meeting, along with the values and mission of Unity Church ([Attachment 1](#)). We established budget categories, procedures, and confidentiality protections (see [Attachment 2](#) for final accounting); created member profiles and videos to post on the church's website, where we also set up an email address; established procedures for documents retention; and created a general work plan including dates for pre-candidating weekends and the candidating week, still nearly a year away. We established a pattern of meeting for two hours every other week. This changed in August 2021 to meeting weekly for three hours, with few exceptions.

Just a note about the constraints which, perhaps uniquely, shaped our work. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic demanded adaptability, often requiring us to meet remotely and to create Plan B scenarios for meetings and interviews. Emotional factors were more intense than anticipated, including the news of Rob Eller-Isaacs' illness, the generalized grief and uncertainty of COVID, and the pandemic-amplified desire to help the church move forward into a new era. The one-year interim pressurized the already overwhelming amount of work to be accomplished within the UUA's tight timeline. Finally, the need for confidentiality created the condition for us to operate in virtual isolation. We had minimal interface with the Board, the ET, our interim minister, our UUA coach, or the UUA Transitions Office. Sometimes we identified the need for input, but simply had no time, nor established relationships on which to base a request.

Antiracism and Multiculturalism

Unity's commitment to antiracism and multiculturalism was reflected in how the MST conceived of and carried out our work. We believed this to be foundational. Unity's Ends Statements include commitments to create a multicultural spiritual home, to create an ever-widening circle of belonging, to collectively advance justice and equity for all, and to create brave space for racial healing and dismantling dominant culture. Members of the MST had served on the Anti-Racism Leadership Team, Beloved Community Staff Team, Antiracism Literacy Partners, and other initiatives. Several of us had been engaging with the newly developed Double Helix Model of Faith Formation and Antiracist Multicultural Work. One

member is a qualified administrator of the IDI and has provided those services for Unity in an external consultant role. We included in our team covenant a commitment to “seek equity, justice, and inclusion throughout the search process, mindful of our own personal, cultural, and social biases and assumptions so that, to the best of our ability, they are not a barrier to a fair and fruitful outcome.”

As our work together began, members of the team who had not recently taken the Intercultural Development Inventory completed that assessment tool and debriefed with a coach. As a group we participated in an IDI group debrief with a qualified administrator (not the MST member). During our check-ins for each meeting over the next several months, we took turns reporting on new insights or progress on our Individual Development Plans. This practice kept us mindful of our own areas for personal growth and transformation, alongside those of our church.

Team Dynamics, a local firm engaged in 2019 to help Unity develop greater cross-cultural competence, assisted us in several ways. We arranged for their input on congregational survey questions, listening sessions and focus group questions and processes, and for coaching sessions with the team. We attended the Team Dynamics presentation for all Unity Church members on faith formation and multiculturalism. Most (perhaps all) of us had also participated in Team Dynamics’ seven-part Equity and Justice series attended by nearly 200 people in the fall of 2020. As a team, we purchased and read portions of Team Dynamics’ newly published book “Hiring Revolution: a Guide to Disrupt Racism and Sexism in Hiring,” and worked with Alfonso Wenker to “name, notice, and navigate” bias at all stages of the hiring process.

In light of all of this, we wondered whether the UUA’s required workshop on diversity, “Beyond Categorical Thinking,” would contribute meaningfully to our work. We found that it did not. Our perception, and those of some members of the Board and congregation who participated, was that the workshop as implemented was shallow and not at all challenging. It had been a time-consuming and complex process to fill out the application and make arrangements, not to mention attend. Especially given all the other work we had to do, the unsatisfactory experience was especially frustrating.

Website Review

As part of the preparation for search, the settlement handbook recommends asking outsiders to look at the congregation’s website to identify what the website might express, intentionally and unintentionally, to prospective ministers. Per the handbook, much of this work happens in the first six months of the search process and even before the search committee is formed. At the time, Martha Tilton, Unity’s communications director, was in the middle of revamping the website, work that was not completed until June 2021. At that time, the MST asked three people to view Unity’s website through the eyes of a searching minister and share their

feedback: Rev. Dr. Kathy Hurt, the interim minister; Rev. Melissa Carvill Ziemer, Director of Ministries for Collegial Care at the UU Ministers Association; and Julica Hermann de la Fuente, Director of Liberation and Transformation Ministries at the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis.

The MST reviewed the feedback and identified several areas that we believed were priorities for addressing. These included opening up a text-heavy site with more pictures and videos; clarifying how children are welcomed in church life; the need to flesh out the staff page to better introduce staff members and their role; information on the Executive Team (ET) and how it functions; more information on the church's accessibility and efforts to improve it; and directions to the church that addressed multiple ways of traveling. Our recommendations were reviewed by the ET and many were sent on to Martha Tilton.

The updating of the site was ongoing. For example, in the fall of 2021, Martha Tilton was contacted about the minimal information on the site about the BOT. She responded that she relied on teams to manage the content on their pages. She forwarded the email to the BOT chair. As a result, the trustees supplied short bios and pictures for the site.

There was also the need to create a special section on the congregation's website specific to the search, including information about the MST, the survey results when available, a calendar overview of the timing of the search, etc. Communications from the MST about the search were posted there as well as information about the candidate, once identified.

CONGREGATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Congregational Survey (September 2021)

Planning for the congregational survey began over the summer. We reviewed the sample survey provided in the Settlement Handbook as well as the survey used by Unity's prior MST in 1999. To avoid asking congregants to complete two surveys, we conferred with the Board and agreed that our survey would replace the annual BOT survey assessing progress on the Ends. Bill Etter and Laura Park reviewed the 35-question survey for clarity and reliability.

We did not know what to expect in terms of congregational response, given the long-term separation from the church building during the pandemic. Parish Hall tabling, newsletter columns, and other announcements helped us spread the word. The survey's main purpose was to help us understand what congregants were looking for in the next settled minister. But we also were aware that the very act of filling it out would be a way to re-engage with deep

thinking about the future as many began to return in person to church events and imagine a life post pandemic. We were gratified that 371 people participated in the online survey during the two weeks it was open.

A summary of key findings ([Attachment 3](#)) was made available in print form to congregants, including a QR code that could be used to view all results online. The full survey results ([Attachment 4](#)) also were posted on the church's website. The MST used the findings to answer many of the questions on the Congregational Record, and they became a frequent and useful reference as we navigated next steps in interviewing and discernment.

Listening Sessions (September-October, 2021)

Planning for Listening Sessions (what the UUA refers to as "cottage meetings") began in early summer. Because these involved people coming together to dialogue about the church's future, and given ongoing restrictions and concerns for health and safety, we offered a variety of in-person and online options. In total, 239 people participated.

We conducted 21 Listening Sessions, 12 in person and nine via Zoom. Eleven Listening Sessions were open to all, and 10 others were offered to focus groups within the church. These included groups whose work is most directly related to ministry and the ministerial role: Worship Associates, Teaching Associates, Congregational Care, Religious Education, Community Outreach, and former Board Chairs. Others were affinity groups of LGBTQ and BIPOC members. Following these sessions, we conducted Listening Sessions with the youth of the church, and with five staff groups: ET, program staff, facilities, religious education, and administration/development. A planned session with music staff was canceled for health reasons. Sessions followed the same general format, but questions for focus groups were tailored to their areas of interest and expertise.

Conducting the Listening Sessions took a lot of person power over just a few weeks. One or two MST members facilitated each session (depending on its size). We recruited 12 "co-pilots" from the congregation, people skilled in facilitation whose primary role was to take notes and assist with other matters as needed. We created a facilitator and co-pilot training document and hosted a Zoom session for co-pilots so they could participate as congregants while also helping to field test our process. The volume and complexity of these sessions required a great deal of logistical and technical support from staff members, and they were exceptional.

As we planned for these gatherings, we were mindful of the tender and tentative time we were going through in the wake of our prolonged pandemic isolation. To get our finger on this pulse, we posed this in-gathering question in our Listening Sessions: "The building was closed, but church was open. What mattered to you most during this time of separation?" Their answers

were profound and illuminating, and we believed they deserved special attention for this ministerial search. We prepared a summary ([Attachment 5](#)) and included it in the Documents Packet so that it would be available to searching ministers. We also prepared a summary of findings from the staff Listening Sessions ([Attachment 6](#)). Our column for the February *CommUnity* newsletter ([Attachment 7](#)) highlighted what we learned about the staff's pandemic experiences, and offered special thanks for their hard work and devotion.

The Listening Sessions generated a large amount of data. MST facilitators entered data into a detailed spreadsheet in Google Docs ([Attachment 8](#)). This became the basis of a fall retreat (Friday night and Saturday) to review and synthesize the information. We engaged facilitator Carole Burton of Radiance Resources to lead us in this process.

Together with the survey results, themes from the Listening Sessions helped us formulate the four priorities that guided us in the search:

- spiritual leadership
- antiracism/social justice work
- pastoral care
- organizational agility/strategic vision

CONGREGATIONAL RECORD AND DOCUMENTS PACKET (October-December 2021)

The Congregational Record is the extensive document an MST produces to provide the UUA and searching ministers with information about the searching church. Prescribed sections include history and operations; mission, Ends, and values; congregational life; governing structure and leadership; finances, budgeting and stewardship; facilities and staffing; skills and traits sought in the new minister; and duties, responsibilities, and expectations the congregation has for a minister. These and many other sections constituted the job description for the senior settled minister; no separate job description was required or expected by the UUA.

The 52 questions presented a daunting scope of information to be assembled and written. They could not be answered in full without the information gained through the Listening Sessions and congregational survey, which meant the schedule for completing them was very tight. MST members divided the questions among ourselves, sought background information as needed, and wrote essay responses. We posted and responded to each others' drafts via Google Docs, and spent many hours of meeting time coming to agreement on the elements that involved value judgments and interpretation.

The entire draft document was reviewed by Jen Crow, Rev. David Pyle, and Unity's Interim Minister Rev. Dr. Kathy Hurt in late November. Comments from our reviewers challenged us to do a better job of telling the story of Unity Church and necessitated expanded content. After an intensive weekend of writing and editing, the final document was submitted to the UUA on December 1. It was posted on the UUA website, where it was accessible only to UUA ministers in search. Some of the content was fuel for our *commUnity* newsletter columns in the ensuing months. We considered when and how to make the entire 69-page document – cumbersome and detailed – available to the congregation. Ultimately, it was posted on the church website just prior to Candidating Week in May. The Congregational Record is on file with the UUA Transitions Office and at Unity.

The Documents Packet is a set of supplementary documents to be submitted to the UUA by the end of November. Required documents included the proposed contract (crafted by the Negotiations Team), church policies and by-laws, staff job descriptions, annual reports, and sample orders of service, newsletters, email blasts, and more. Barbara Hubbard and Martha Tilton provided significant assistance in assembling many of the requested documents. We also included about a dozen optional documents, for a total of 119 documents in the packet. This packet also is on file with the UUA's Transitions Office and at Unity.

Assembling the Documents Packet happened simultaneously with writing the Congregational Record and conducting and analyzing data from the congregational survey and the Listening Sessions. It was a very busy fall.

APPLICATIONS AND DECISION MAKING (Jan–Mar 21)

Team roles

At this point in the search we shifted from a position of frequent and public communications with the congregation to one that was more confidential in nature. We suspended our Parish Hall tabling between Sunday services, but continued to write monthly columns for *CommUnity*. Messaging about our need to maintain discretion had begun weeks earlier, including at November's annual meeting, a separate email to the congregation, and other communications. Because our work now involved screening applicants, interviewing, and making selections, the specifics about who was applying remained, and will remain, confidential. Throughout the search, we continued to weigh the competing values of transparency and confidentiality.

At this juncture we formed three sub-teams: applicant/pre-candidate screening and interview design; interview facilitation and discernment/decision making; and pre-candidating weekend

logistics. Each sub-team worked on their tasks in between our weekly meetings, then brought decision items to the full team for discussion.

Substantive Areas of Discussion

As we dove more deeply into this phase of work, we became aware of gaps in our information and sought counsel from others. Kathy Hurt attended one of our meetings to discuss the implications of the ET structure and Policy Governance on the search process, plans for contracting with an assistant minister, and considerations for the applicant screening process. Laura Park, Managing Director of Unity Consulting, provided an in-service on Policy Governance, how it works at Unity and elsewhere in the UUA, and recent national conversations naming that while policy governance is not inherently a tool of white supremacy, its implementation must be carefully tailored so that it does not perpetuate oppressive culture. Team Dynamics' Alfonso Wenker guided us in a discussion of potential biases and "hidden criteria" to be watchful about when interviewing and checking references.

We also learned more about the Executive Team. It is a distinguishing feature of Unity Church, requiring our called minister to be a collaborative team member as distinct from a sole executive. The listening session we held with Barbara Hubbard and KP Hong was extremely informative about how the ET functions, and what qualities of character and approach are necessary to make it work. Appreciative and mindful of ET members' deep knowledge and the close working relationship they would have with the called minister, we struggled to define their role in our next steps. Ultimately, we invited their participation in a portion of each pre-candidating weekend. They wrote and asked their own questions for approximately an hour of the five-hour interview, and joined us for the lunch that followed. Barbara also hosted a building tour for each pre-candidate. We did not provide the ET with our full interview protocol or the pre-candidates' ministerial records. We did not invite their participation in any post-interview discussion of the pre-candidates, but asked that they provide written responses to reflection questions that we posed. In taking this approach, we were trying to balance our need for their input with the need to have decision making remain in the sole purview of the team.

Also during this period, we realized we wanted to know more about the national UUA picture. We had been told there were three ministers in settled search for every congregation searching (totaling 63 and 21, respectively). But among the things we didn't know were what trends the UUA was seeing in the profiles of searching ministers, issues being debated on the national scene, the reputation of Unity among potential applicants, what professional development resources the UUA could provide to a new minister, or lessons the UUA had learned about differences in the ministerial role when serving small versus large churches. We had limited knowledge of the many affinity groups that might have influenced the careers of our applicants,

nor of the denominational leadership roles we might look for on their resumes. One of our members learned from Janne Eller-Isaacs about the UUA's Dreaming Big Program, which identified and equipped ministers for leadership in large churches. A product of that program was a list of Core Competencies for Ministers of Large Congregations. We used this as one tool to assess our pre-candidates, formatting the list of eleven competencies to include a rating scale ([Attachment 9](#)).

We learned later that Rev. David Pyle and Christine Purcell, perhaps among others, might have provided information and helpful counsel on some of the more complex and thorny issues. We did consult with Jen Crow a few times, but because of time pressures and sometimes lack of awareness, the team did not take full advantage of UUA resource people.

During this period the team began to consider several foundational questions ([Attachment 10](#)). We hoped to probe them before reviewing applications, so that our thinking would be based on our own and the congregation's expressed desires, rather than be influenced by the particular ministers applying to Unity. The questions we discussed were:

- What do we mean by good preaching? How do we define it beyond personal preference? What are the elements of spiritual leadership that go beyond good preaching? How ready is the congregation to adapt to changes in worship that may have meaning for a wider spectrum of beliefs/cultures?
- What kind of leadership are we looking for in antiracism and social justice work?
- Which of our four priorities must be in the called minister's portfolio (spiritual leadership, organizational agility/strategic vision, pastoral care, antiracism/social justice work), and which could be fulfilled by an associate minister?

Additional foundational questions we did not find time to discuss were:

- Given that we are a "flagship" church within the UUA, what value do we place on denominational engagement and/or leadership by our settled minister?
- What process will we use to make our decisions?

And finally, in hindsight we realize that the meaning and tradition of the vote to call a settled minister should have been more fully explained and explored with the congregation; not only the sacredness of the call, and how it differs from a hire, but also the role of the MST in selecting a candidate, and the responsibility of voting congregation members for the ultimate decision.

Application review

On January 2, 2022 we received applications from ten ministers. They had indicated their interest through the UUA's Application Portal, where they had had the chance to learn about us through our Congregational Record. On that same secure website, we now had access to their Ministerial Records.

In a December meeting with Christine Purcell, Transitions Program Manager at the UUA, we were told that spending 15-30 minutes with each Ministerial Record should give us the information we needed to determine whether to invite them for a Zoom interview. Kathy Hurt counseled differently, and we agreed with her approach. Every MST member read materials on every applicant, with one of us agreeing to do research as deeply as possible in order to be the "sponsor" of subsequent discussion on that applicant. We read their Ministerial Records, listened to sermons, looked at their personal and church websites, and checked out their social media presence. We each spent at least two hours researching each applicant, often much more. Since we needed to keep pace with the UUA timeline, this work was accomplished in eight days.

To prepare for our group discernment, we used three tools. First, we developed an Applicant Screening Tool based on our four priority criteria, with sub points corresponding to sections of the Ministerial Record ([Attachment 11](#)). For example, for our criteria of Spiritual Leadership we included places to jot notes on how each applicant had described their ministerial presence, leadership style, theology, personal definition of ministry, and so on – questions they had answered in their Ministerial Record. We ranked each element along a continuum of degree of qualification, from one to seven. And for each section we made notes on what stood out, and what questions we still had. This tool helped us focus on our priorities rather than get lost in the morass of documentation, to come up with a numeric ranking that was suggestive rather than determinative, and to surface questions for the next steps in the process.

Second, we individually summarized our thinking about an applicant by writing answers to four reflection questions ([Attachment 12](#)):

1. Can this person meet our congregation's worship needs now, and guide our spiritual development into the future?
2. Do they have the willingness and skill to operate within our Policy Governance system, and in accordance with our value on shared leadership at the ET and congregational level? Will our staff thrive under this person's leadership?
3. Have they demonstrated through their actions a robust commitment to anti-racism/anti-oppression and social justice work?

4. What is this person's unique "value-add" that can meet us where we are, and inspire us on the path toward fulfilling our highest aspirations?

Finally, we independently ranked the applicants in terms of whom we favored most to least. These three tools provided some structure for our two-part discussion on a Sunday and Monday night. We discussed the applicants one by one, and reached a decision on whom to invite for one-hour Zoom interviews scheduled for the following week. The meeting left us feeling, individually and as a group, uneasy with a bit of rawness and rancor from the discernment process. This underscored the need for the team to attend more to our group process and we added some reflection and deeper spiritual rituals to our meetings. These additions were beneficial to the team's work and progress.

Zoom Interviews

The Zoom interviews consisted of a set of six standard questions with possible follow-ups, along with two questions tailored to each applicant ([Attachment 13](#)). The interviews were about an hour in length, including 15 minutes for the applicant to ask us questions. We held a mock interview with Kathy Hurt to practice our roles and receive her feedback on the questions and the process itself. We had scheduled six interviews, but one applicant canceled so we interviewed five. All MST members were present for all interviews, and we each had responsibility for the same question and its follow-ups in each interview. We created a note-taking form for use during the interviews ([Attachment 14](#)), and ranked the various factors at the interview's conclusion.

Two days following our final Zoom interview, we met to discuss each person and come to a decision on which of them to invite for a pre-candidating weekend. These dates and neutral pulpits had been arranged weeks earlier, along with an alternate plan in case changes in COVID conditions forced us to pivot. We also had made substantial progress on the scheduling of the weekend, interview questions, and off-site arrangements needed to preserve confidentiality. Now we completed the process by matching our pre-candidate choices with the dates and pulpits that had been previously arranged.

We selected three pre-candidates, remarkably different from one another. After contacting all our interviewees with our decision, one of the pre-candidates withdrew without explanation and we were left with two pre-candidates.

We conducted reference checks via phone call, with one MST member serving as lead and a second participating on the call.

Pre-candidating Weekends

The pre-candidating weekends were held in February, two weeks apart. They began on Friday afternoon with a tour of Unity's building, hosted by Barbara Hubbard and scheduled to avoid undue contact with staff or parishioners. The team and pre-candidate then gathered for a mostly social dinner at one of our homes. We had all taken COVID tests in anticipation, and the first pre-candidating weekend was also the first time in nearly eleven months of working together that the team had the chance to see each other's faces maskless and to break bread together.

The Saturday interview (9:00 – 2:00) was held off site. (The interview protocol is [Attachment 15](#).) As stated earlier, the Executive Team joined us for a portion of this time. The interview was followed by two more events that were designed to include the pre-candidate's spouse and child(ren): a driving tour of the cities, and an evening meal at a different MST member's home. We adjourned mid-evening so the pre-candidate could be well rested and prepared for Sunday morning. All team members attended the Sunday worship service(s) at the guest pulpits (Minnetonka and White Bear Lake). The final lunch, held at yet a third team member's home, was a chance to wrap up any final issues or questions. These meals at members' homes were mostly catered, and had been arranged to avoid possible COVID restrictions on restaurant dining, as well as to preserve our pre-candidates' anonymity. While extra work for us, we found these meals to be a personal and meaningful way to extend hospitality.

Substantive Areas of Discussion

It was on the very afternoon that we bid farewell to our second pre-candidate that we learned of Rob Eller-Isaacs' serious illness. We were cleaning up the kitchen and gathering our belongings when we all received a text message from the ET asking that we attend a Zoom call with them and the Trustees later that night to discuss something that might have a bearing on the search. It was, of course, emotionally charged news at an emotionally charged time. The following Wednesday we met with Kathy Hurt in one of our homes to process the news. We discussed the option of suspending the search. How would this new development affect the team's ability to focus on the transition? How would it affect the congregation's readiness to envision the future and welcome a new spiritual leader? We decided that the vital questions we were posing through the search were themselves a part of the Eller-Isaacs' legacy, and in that spirit we would continue to move forward. We immediately put out a special communication to the congregation to that effect.

Of course the most substantive discussion during this time revolved around the two pre-candidates themselves. We began the process of discernment several days after the meeting with Rev. Hurt. When it became clear that our assessments of the candidates varied

substantially, we discussed our options. Should we enter into the UUA's "second offer" process, an abbreviated continuation of the search that would allow us to look at additional candidates? Should we again consider a subject that one of us raised weeks earlier, that of researching and soliciting a candidate outside of the normal UUA process? We felt it was too late in the game to accomplish either, and continued with our intense discussions.

We held our final meeting the night before we were to announce our decision to the UUA. One of the questions that still eluded us was how to define consensus. We had been urged to reach a minimum threshold of "everyone can enthusiastically support." By this point, we realized that was not possible. Would it be better to conclude that the search had not resulted in a match?

After extended discussion and two votes, seven of the nine members of the team supported the selected candidate. The two members not in support indicated that, despite their opposition, they would stand aside and provide assistance to the extent they felt able.

Following the selection, we were urged by Kathy Hurt, in consultation with Keith Kron of the Transitions Office, to keep the team's divided vote confidential. The team agreed that, if asked about consensus, we would simply respond that "the team reached the decision" and would encourage church members to learn as much as they could about the candidate and, when she came for the week, to get to know her themselves. All of us held to this pledge for the duration of her candidacy.

We then embarked on an intense period of planning, arranging events, writing communications to the congregation, coordinating logistics with the candidate, and hosting Q&A meetings for the congregation. While each team member contributed to these efforts, the split decision meant that some experienced significant internal conflict, while others engaged excitedly in the buildup. During this interval we met one time each with Kathy Hurt and Jen Crow to address the feelings caused by our division and attempt to re-build team cohesion.

CANDIDATING WEEK and CONGREGATIONAL VOTE (May 15-22)

Early in our planning we established protocols for receiving and responding to communication from congregants, tracking "tough questions" the team received and sharing our responses, and tracking feedback received during candidating week. This preparation assured that the full team and the candidate were aware of any concerns when they arose.

Candidating week began with a Saturday night dinner with MST, Board, ET and spouses. The next morning the candidate preached at both services, met with Tower Club/COA grads, and in the afternoon attended a reception with current and former MST members, listening session co-pilots, and spouses. The week's schedule included meetings the candidate arranged with staff groups, the ET, and community ministers. The MST scheduled and hosted meetings with the congregational care team, members working on antiracism/anti-oppression initiatives, the Beloved Community Staff Team, music program participants, worship associates, and former board chairs. We arranged special meetings with BIPOC, LGBTQ and elders groups. A dinner brought the Board and ET together mid-week. We hosted open invitation Q&A sessions via Zoom and in person on Wellspring Wednesday. On Saturday we hosted a picnic with a special invitation to RE families. The following day, the candidate again preached both services, after which she went to lunch off site with one of the team members.

The Congregational Meeting had 471 people registered, with approximately 170 on Zoom and the others in the sanctuary. Because of the large turn-out and the need to register upon entry, the meeting's start time of 1:00 was delayed about a half an hour. At the start of the meeting, four members of the Team addressed the congregation to advocate for the candidate. Meeting participants could offer comments through the Zoom chat function, or at microphones set up in the sanctuary. Many did, both in favor of and opposed to the call. As the meeting grew lengthy, and with people still lined up to speak at the microphones, the question was called two times. The second succeeded, and the vote on the motion to call the candidate as our next settled minister was taken at around 4:15. Unity's by-laws required that voters be in the sanctuary or present on Zoom in order to vote. At the time the vote was taken, 440 people remained. Ballots were collected by MST members and counted in the DeCramer Room. A board member assisted with the tabulation. The final tally was 63.4% in favor of the call. Unity's by-laws require 75%; therefore, the call was not successful.

CONCLUSION

No one on the MST expected this outcome. Team members each have their own interpretation of events and assumptions about why the vote turned out the way it did. Within the congregation, some of the candidate's supporters are heartbroken, some conflicted, some angry. Some others who were satisfied with the outcome are nevertheless dismayed by the difficult meeting. Irrespective of their votes, many congregants have expressed confusion and concern, both about the process and what its aftermath may portend. The trauma, especially for the candidate, but also for the church and even the UUA, is real.

In the immediate aftermath, Unity has begun to offer facilitated conversations in the form of listening circles. These are an opportunity to begin reflecting on the congregational meeting and vote, the divisions that have become apparent, and what lies ahead for our church. At this writing, the work of those circles is ongoing.

On June 21, 2022 the Board announced it had hired Unity's next interim minister, Rev. Kathleen Rolenz. Her experience includes ministering to congregations and staff through what can be identified as congregational trauma. Rev. Karen Gustafson will also join Unity as interim minister of pastoral care. Both will begin in mid-August. With their guidance, we hope to navigate the aftermath of a divided vote and the challenges ahead.