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Letter from the Director of Contextual Ministry

Dear Lay Committee,

Thank you so much for your willingness to work with our students. Your involvement is central to the success of our program. Together, we are changing lives and shaping the future of Unitarian Universalist Ministry.

This handbook is meant to be a resource for you as you work with our students. I hope that it will provide the tools that you need, and answer many of the questions that you may have. And I hope that it serves as a bridge for further connection and conversation as we work together to support our students. Please contact me if you have questions or need support.

Thank you for your service.

Blessings,

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Meadville Lombard Master of Divinity Degree Program

Meadville Lombard offers a unique model for theological education, designed to prepare ministers for our theologically diverse, multicultural, multiracial world. Built into this model is a web of support where students learn the theory and practice of religious leadership and border crossing with and from academics, clergy, community leaders, and each other. Our educational model is based on insights from Engaged Buddhism, Native American traditions, and feminist theory is encapsulated in a maxim by Paul Fitzgerald, “We are more likely to act ourselves into new ways of thinking than think ourselves into new ways of acting.” This model and this maxim help us to inspire leaders who will have the skills to cross borders and change lives in order to change the world.

The M.Div Program is anchored by three Signature Courses: Community Studies, Congregational Studies, and Leadership Studies. These seminars are infused with field-based experiences from the first semester of study and throughout the educational experience. This approach allows students to learn first-hand – and in a variety of contexts – the multiple aspects of ministry as can be experienced in community settings and congregations of all sizes and diversity.

Each student is assigned to a Teaching Pastor who is sometimes a mentor or coach, sometimes a confidant, and most frequently a translator of Unitarian Universalist values-in-action. Teaching Pastors carve out supportive spaces wherein seminarians can grapple with issues in the intersection of theology, pastoral care, social justice and congregational ministry. In addition, each student engages with a congregation-based Lay Committee to add a valuable range of perspectives to the congregational experience.

Establishing a Congregational Lay Committee

The Congregational Lay Committee plays a critical role in the formation of the student minister during their development as a minister. It is the role of the Committee to provide support, feedback and guidance about the lay perspective of the congregation: what it is, what it does, and how it relates to the clergy (role, functions, expectations, personal and professional identity) while helping to oversee the learning experience of the student in the congregation.

Who is the Congregational Lay Committee?

The Lay Committee is made up of 5-7 individuals that are lay persons and possibly ministers other than the congregational minister (Teaching Pastor). The Teaching Pastor is not a member of the Lay Committee. The Teaching Pastor and the student minister collaborate to constitute the Lay Committee. The Committee is comprised of members that represent a broad cross-section of the congregation.

Each member of the committee should be able to:

- Demonstrate involvement in the ministry and life of the congregation;
- Demonstrate knowledge about the church and its mission;
- Be committed to work with the student to develop their potential as a minister;
- Provide support, care, encouragement and honest dialogue with the student;
- Handle sensitive information in a confidential manner;
- Help prepare the congregation for the student’s arrival, entry and departure;
- Enable the student to reflect upon his or her experiences and;
- Meet at least monthly with the student.
Role of the Committee Chair
The Committee Chair has two primary responsibilities on the Lay Committee:
1. to work with the student to coordinate the convening of meetings, their facilitation and to expedite evaluations
2. to foster support and enthusiasm for the Lay Committee and the student minister in the congregation.

General Guidelines for Lay Committee Member
- The student is in the congregation to learn. The student will contribute to the needs and programs of the congregation while learning the nuts and bolts of ministry.
- Constructive feedback helps the student to grow so speak the truth in love!
- Take time to see the student as a person.
- Be realistic and remember that becoming a minister is a process.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Contribute fully to the experience. When present give your undivided attention.
- Help to establish appropriate structure: place, agenda, and participation.
- Value one another’s time: arrive and depart meetings in a timely manner and come prepared for meetings.

Potential Problems with Lay Committees
Several challenges that are typically associated with lay committees tend to be centered around the following themes:
- Time - The committee meets too infrequently, so that trust and continuity never have a chance to develop;
- Leadership - The committee chair is ineffective as a group leader and/or is unclear about how to proceed;
- Goals - The committee is unclear about its work and tends to micro manage the student e.g. They focus on a sermon evaluation or a single task;
- Commitment - The committee senses a lack of support of its work from the student or the minister;
- Coordination - The student and the committee chair do not seem to be on the same page e.g. they do not prepare the agenda in advance.

Possible Activities for Lay Committees and Students
While the student and the Chair should use the student’s learning goals as a guide some of the following activity suggestions can occur during a lay committee meeting:

Beginning tasks – Get Acquainted
- Share one another’s spiritual odysseys, that is, the story of becoming Unitarian Universalist, what attracted you and what has kept you; what brought you to the church?
- Review the goals/ objectives of the student and discuss how to review them.
- Review the evaluation instrument and when and how evaluations will be completed and submitted.
Pastoral Ministry

- Members recall a time when they were the recipients of good pastoral care (or bad pastoral care) and share their thoughts with the student;
- Everyone reads an article on death and loss that will be discussed at the next meeting;
- Members attend a training on pastoral care that the student gives for the Pastoral Care Committee. They come to the next meeting prepared to discuss the experience and give their feedback.

Preaching

- An audiotape of the student’s sermon is distributed, heard and then discussed at the next meeting.
- Members attend worship where the student is preaching and come prepared to share their feedback at the next meeting.

Life Span Education

- Two or more members attend a class led by the student. They provide feedback at the next meeting.

Problem Solving

- The student prepares verbatims for the lay committee and they serve as the focus for discussion.

Sample Case Study for Lay Committees

The following case study illustrates a lay committee meeting where feedback is provided on the student’s meeting facilitation. This case study may be used as a point of discussion because it contains strengths and weaknesses, both of the student and lay committees, and illustrates some appropriate and inappropriate feedback. The Committee Chair, student and Lay Committee may use this case study to discuss lay committee meetings, feedback and boundary issues.

“The Meeting”

Janelle is serving as the ministerial intern at a 250 member urban church. She is into her second month there and she has met with the Lay Committee twice prior to this particular meeting. There have been several social activities which have provided her with opportunities to get to know several of the committee members. At their first and second meeting they share their spiritual odysseys as a way to get to know one another. Janelle has contacted the chair of the committee prior to the meeting to suggest that she would like to get some feedback on her meeting and group facilitation from the congregational meeting. All of the members were present and felt it would be a good opportunity to provide feedback to Janelle.

Janelle and the committee chair model shared leadership and opened the meeting with a chalice lighting, a reading and prayer. They welcomed the committee members present. The Committee Chair had already sent out the agenda that included discussion and feedback on Janelle’s facilitation of the congregational meeting.

Based on Janelle’s and the Chairs evaluation instrument they invited the members to address the following areas: ability to keep agenda on track, efforts to include all participants, summarizing comments, transitions, deflecting conflict and opening and closing.
Some of the comments she received are as follows:

Mercedes: Your facilitation was good. It was obvious that you attempted very hard to include everyone by checking in with those who had not spoken.

Sarah: You utilized silences well and you asked for 30 seconds of silence when two members made inappropriate outbursts.

James: You began with a covenant and when it was necessary you reminded participants of the covenant to which we had all agreed.

Zulaika: You kept the agenda moving and you did not allow the long winded members to bog things down. You did not hesitate to ask someone that was being long winded to summarize his statement so that things could move on.

Ariana: The other night at the potluck you made a statement about the war being a crime against humanity. You really need to be more sensitive and remember that we have several military families in the congregation. As a student minister you cannot afford to alienate anyone and especially a big donor like General Catchum.

Discussion continued about Janelle’s facilitation and all points were discussed openly and honestly. After Janelle’s meeting had been discussed to everyone’s satisfaction, Zulaika brought up an issue that had been on her mind and of concern for a number of months. The Chair of the Pastoral Care Committee, Arnold, was a particularly gifted and skillful listener. His training as a clinical licensed social worker made him exceptional at what he did. However, of late, Zulaika felt he was visiting a particular member at inappropriate times and members were beginning to talk. The member was a young attractive widow with money. Zulaika felt that Janelle should speak to Arnold about this. Janelle feels uncomfortable about the request and after the meeting asks the Committee Chair what she would suggest.

Questions for Discussion:
1. Identify some of the positive features about Janelle’s relationship to the Lay Committee.
2. What is your impression regarding the feedback Janelle received about her meeting facilitation?
3. What are some of the issues/problems that are raised in the last paragraph by Zulaika? Do you have any suggestions about how Zulaika’s concerns should be handled?
4. What if any other concerns might be issues the Committee may need to address?

Feedback Process
A review of the comments the student received clearly demonstrate how helpful the feedback process can be. Your feedback will help the student eventually become an effective minister. So do not be hesitant to offer loving and compassionate feedback. Review the example above from time to time if need be.

Learning Service Agreement
The Learning Service Agreement, due October 1, is designed to be the plan of action by which the student, Congregational Lay Committee, Teaching Pastor, and faculty articulate their vision and expectations for the outcomes of the learning process. It is a holistic statement of goals and objectives.
that defines the entire experience. It makes explicit what is to be learned and how, what skills are to be developed and how they are to be measured, and how progress and/or expected outcomes are to be assessed and evaluated.

Because it is an educational tool, the Learning/Service Agreement is fluid in its design. It is a framework within which the student, Congregational Lay Committee, Teaching Pastor, and faculty can establish some basic criteria for the site and participation for all the partners involved. Yet within the framework there is room for negotiation, adjustment and change as is deemed appropriate and necessary by the partners involved.

Goals of the Agreement
- The relationship shall primarily be one of learning for the student in order to facilitate the student’s development and professional identity.
- Both the Teaching Congregation and student are expected to learn and grow as a result of their relationship.

Elements of the Agreement
The Learning/Service Agreement includes, but is not limited to, several essential elements:
- learning goals of the student;
- process (objectives) by which those goals will be achieved;
- basis for assessment and evaluation of the student’s progress.

A goal is a quantitative statement of an end result to be accomplished. It is meaningful, understandable, actionable, measurable, and attainable. For example, in the area of site discernment a goal might be: “to gain an understanding of how congregational/organizational agency work is carried out.”

The Learning/Service Agreement contains clear statements of goals for learning and ministerial formation, for the acquisition and appropriation of knowledge and skills, for personal growth and spiritual development, and for reflection and integration.

An objective is often defined as a strategy that is developed to accomplish a goal. Well-written objectives are observable and measurable and give direction to the “how to” of achieving a goal.

For example, objectives for the above goal in the area of discernment might be:
- To observe different staff meetings.
- To attend Board of Directors meetings.
- Read minutes of Board meetings and know the mission statement and what projects are currently underway.

A plan for implementation of the goals is then developed. It is possible that more than one goal will be identified in each area.

General Guidelines for Writing the Learning/Service Agreement
- The process of developing a Learning/Service Agreement moves from the general to the specific. That is, goals are developed from the areas identified in the covenant in which the student will work, objectives formulated, and then a plan created.
• Goals and objectives should be consistent with the level of leadership which is also identified through the Learning/Service Agreement.

• Evaluate the usefulness of an objective for a goal by asking questions such as: is it meaningful? Understandable? Actionable? Measurable? Attainable? If answers to these questions are not forthcoming, either the objective needs more work or the goal needs to be redefined.

• The Learning/Service Agreement should attend to challenges raised by faculty evaluations, Career Assessment, and the Regional Sub-Committee on Candidacy.

• The Learning/Service Agreement is a resource for interaction between the student, Teaching Pastor and faculty. It is the role of these partners to discuss, negotiate, and give approval.

• The Learning/Service Agreement should be signed and dated by the student, the Teaching Pastor and posted by the student to LiveText.

• The Learning/Service Agreement is an organic document that can be revised in consultation with the Teaching Pastor.

Learning/Service Agreement Forms are included in the *UUA Internship Manual*, and can be found in the Appendix.

**Evaluation and Assessment**
An important part of the student’s learning is the feedback they receive from others. In your role as Congregational Lay Committee, we ask that you evaluate the student. We expect that you will use your monthly meetings with the student to go over issues and concerns as they arise. We also hope that you will encourage the congregation to provide direct feedback to a student when they notice issues and concerns. The first time an issue is raised should not be in the evaluation. Final Meadville evaluation will be due at the end of each year, using the UUA’s evaluation form which is in the *UUA Internship Manual*, and included in the appendix of this handbook. The student and faculty will alert you to the current due dates.

**UUMA Guidelines**
One of the many important roles of the Lay Committee is to become familiar with the UU Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry. These Guidelines are located at the following link and should be reviewed with the student:
Support
For questions about the role and work of the Congregational Lay Committee, student evaluation and assessment, contact:

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Glossary of Meadville Terms

**Affiliated Faculty** – Faculty with multi-year teaching responsibilities and renewable contracts.

**Contextual Ministry** – Contextual ministry aka field education is a practical learning approach to ministry in which seminarian’s/participants are exposed to varied aspects of learning in approved/structured contexts that integrate praxis and theory – experiential learning and classroom or site environment. Contextual ministry provides an opportunity for reflection on the theology of practice of ministry during the participants’ ministerial formation.

**Dialogue Triads** – Three-person student groups enrolled in Signature Courses that process and synthesize weekly assignments about their learning sites.

**Discernment** – Listening to the sacred for clarity about a question or issue.

**Focused Initiative** – A participant-observer research and action project that moves the congregation closer to the inclusive ideals inherent in progressive liberal religion in general, and specifically within Unitarian Universalism.

**Formation** – Developing the skills and temperament for ministry.

**Intensive Courses** – Courses where research and writing occur throughout the semester and in-person class time is concentrated within a week or a weekend.

**Jaminars** – Weekly faculty-generated teaching podcast for students

**Learning Community** – A community of people who covenant to learn with and from each other.

**Learning Convocations (January and August)** – Residential portion of the Signature Courses wherein students engage with the “big ideas” and challenges of ministry and Signature Course content.

**Low Residency** – Students have low residency in Chicago, but full residency in the world. Students come to Chicago four times a year, and connect with students and faculty throughout the year, to share and explore what they’re leaning in their local context

**Podcasts** – Digital audio or video files that can be downloaded and used on portable devices. Signature Course faculty use podcasts for the weekly Jaminars responses.

**Populi** – The web-based Student and classroom management software where class assignments, feedback and formational evaluations are uploaded and archived for historical purposes

**Rotation** – A practical field experience that is paired with a traditional classroom course for the purpose of deeper learning.

**Signature Courses** – The anchor of the M.Div program. These three multicredit courses (Community Studies, Congregational Studies, and Leadership Studies) provide students the opportunity to integrate their academic learning with fieldwork in community and congregational settings.
Teaching Pastor – An experienced minister assigned to students at the beginning of their matriculation who remains with the student until completion. The pastor serves as a mentor, coach and supervisor who helps the student grapple with ministerial formation through theological reflections.

Teaching Team – Group of Full-time and Affiliated faculty who bring their expertise together to co-teach our signature courses.
Appendix

Helpful Links

- UUA Internship Manual
- Internship Evaluation Form