

Sample Media Guide for Fitness Reviews

Fitness reviews are part of the ecclesiastical oversight of the United Church of Christ. There may be times when others request information about our oversight procedures and/or our reviews of a particular minister's behavior. While decisions and deliberations of specific fitness reviews are confidential, our process is not intended to be secretive.

Whether you are a Committee on Ministry chair, its spokesperson, a lay leader in a congregation, a conference staff person, or someone else directly involved in a minister's fitness review, we strongly recommend against a "no comment" approach, and encourage you to use this sample media guide as a tool to shape your comments.

1. Thank the person for contacting you.
2. Tell the person contacting you that you will need to get back to them shortly and offer the timeframe in which the person's call or email will be returned.
3. With respect to criminal allegations, ask the reporter if (s)he would share with you some information the reporter already knows about the matter, including when and where any arrest was made or the suit was filed, which law enforcement agency or court is handling the case, whether anyone in the case is being held in jail, and the exact charges or allegations involved. (You may already know this information, but this helps you to learn how much is known by the media.)
4. Be in touch with your conference staff, who can gather key people, including pastoral staff of the church, congregation attorney (if any), a key lay leader such as the board moderator or consistory chairperson, an appropriate person from any specific program or ministry if there is one named in the concerns (e.g. the director of a day care center). Additionally, your conference minister or associate conference minister will be able to provide advice and support, and they may connect you with the conference attorney, members of the MESA Ministry Team, and/or the Office of General Counsel as necessary.
5. Designate a spokesperson. Make sure that the rest of the key people understand that only the spokesperson should speak to the media unless that spokesperson calls upon a second person for clarity. If appropriate, let church members know this information as well.

6. The spokesperson should learn enough of the facts of the situation to be able to speak knowledgeably, however the spokesperson and key people are not investigating the incident. That is the purview of the Committee on Ministry and/or legal authorities.
7. When preparing a statement for the media, include the following:
 - a. The full, proper name of the congregation and its affiliation with the United Church of Christ;
 - b. Your name, title, and position in the congregation or conference;
 - c. The correct name and title of any minister or staff member involved in the situation;
 - d. The date when that person assumed his or her position (year and month);
 - e. An affirmation of the importance and responsiveness of our ecclesial processes, e.g. “The United Church of Christ takes these matters very seriously, and it has established policies and practices for addressing them. We are following those policies and practices in this case. Our prayers are extended to all who are affected by these matters.”

This basic message can be supplemented with relevant facts from this particular situation. These facts may include some or all of the following talking points:

- The United Church of Christ takes the ethical and moral integrity of those authorized to minister and serve in its name very seriously. This is reflected in part in our Codes of Ethics for Ordained, Licensed and Commissioned Ministers.
- The UCC has Committees on Ministry that offer support and nurture to their authorized ministers, recommend or require continuing education and boundary awareness training, and act in response to concerns of ethical or moral misconduct.
- Through a Fitness Review, Committees on Ministry have authority to withdraw ecclesiastical authorization in the form of ordination, licensing or commissioning of ministers, or to exercise other appropriate disciplinary oversight of our ministers.
- Committees on Ministry do not have the authority to make legal determinations of guilt or innocence. When appropriate, Committees on

Ministry do report incidents of criminal behavior to the relevant authorities.

- The decision to employ or terminate employment of clergy is a decision made solely by the church or other ministry that hires the clergy; Committees on Ministry do not make employment decisions.
- Conference staff assist Committees on Ministry in their work of oversight and authorization. This includes our Conference Minister, Rev. _____.
- [if appropriate] With respect to _____ (the minister in question), the Committee on Ministry has followed its process and determined that _____ is not currently fit to minister in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.
- [If appropriate] Mr./Ms./Rev. _____ has the right to appeal the decision of the Committee, but has yet to do so.
- Mr./Ms./Rev. _____'s employment status at _____ will be decided by _____ (employer/church), following its own procedures.
- The United Church of Christ does not hold ecclesiastical oversight for lay members of congregations.
- The United Church of Christ holds all who have been affected by this matter in its prayers.
- The UCC will respect the confidential nature of the ecclesiastical proceedings and determinations that have been made in this matter.

DO NOT identify or confirm the name of any complainant, any witness, or nature of the alleged ethical lapse at this time; in this regard you can remind those making inquiry that the proceedings are not yet complete, and therefore it would be inappropriate to comment further at this time.

These talking points, when familiarized, will help the spokesperson share a consistent and accurate message with all of the media, and this document underscores the importance for why the same individual should respond to all press inquiries.