

April 16, 2017

*(I am writing this letter as a concerned Unitarian Universalist. The beliefs and opinions are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of my employer or the people I serve. I know it is long but if you are interested please do read to the end.)*

UUA Board of Trustees,

I am very intentionally sending you this letter on Easter Sunday. The stories we have told in our congregations and across the world the last few days embrace a literal and/or metaphorical rebirth which provides hope not only to billions of Christians but many, if not most, Unitarian Universalists as well. The last few weeks have been extremely painful for those in leadership throughout Unitarian Universalism including people of color who too often have faced the pain and isolation that white people's intentional and unintentional racism has caused. I am writing to you today because, while I am deeply discouraged and concerned about the actions the UUA Board have taken over the last eight years that have damaged our faith, I believe in the saving and transformative message our theology offers, and that change is always possible.

I want to acknowledge two things at the beginning of this letter. First, I am feeling angry and disillusioned by the actions of the UUA board over several years culminating in the last few weeks. I fear your actions have put the faith I have given my life to in great danger and, while I have done everything I can to make this letter as reasoned and loving as I can, I apologize if my strong emotions get in the way.

Second, it is important that I share the context and identity I am writing from. I identify as a white, cisgender male. I become more aware every day at how that identity clouds my decisions and actions, hopefully more and more unconsciously, despite the years of study, training and spiritual and personal development work I have done. According to our moderator Jim Key I am swimming in the water of white supremacy. A good friend has asked me "do I want to speak or do I want to be heard?" I can only hope for both and that it is possible for someone who, like all of us, has more cultural identities than only my race and gender to be heard.

I served on my first non-profit board of trustees at the age of 23 and have served on many more since. I have also served as the founding Executive Director of the UUMA since 2009. I have attended from one to four in-person UUA board meetings every year since then and several on-line when unable to attend in person. I suspect I have been to more board meetings since 2009 than anyone except UUA senior staff. I have sat in seats similar to yours over the years and I have sat in the seat of an executive who is evaluated by a board. I recently wrote a letter to UUMA members which described the cultural reality of Unitarian Universalism that destroys our leaders - both professional and lay. Today, although I write to you with concerns and critiques that I hope you will consider, I also write to you with deep appreciation for your stepping up to leadership in our faith. You have worked many, many hours and sacrificed time from your families,

friends and professions to give your heart and soul to Unitarian Universalism and I and so many are grateful you have chosen to do so.

This is one of the reasons I have often left so many UUA Board meetings over the years heartbroken and despairing. Those who have served on the UUA Board in the last eight years I have been attending regularly are some of the most dedicated and hard-working people I know. Many of you have been, and are, my ministerial and religious professional colleagues. While virtually all those who have served on the board have been well-meaning and conscientious servants of our faith, most of the hours of conversation, discussion and sometimes acrimony I have observed over the years has rarely led to substantial accomplishment.

Too often there has been a breakage of trust between the volunteer board and paid staff. This is no individuals' fault but, in my opinion, the fault of a deeply flawed governance system that has lost its way in the purpose and output of outstanding board leadership.

Below I list many issues and concerns I have observed over the last eight years that I believe must be reviewed and changed so Unitarian Universalism can more effectively move into the future. The odds are stacked against all liberal religion these days, including Unitarian Universalism. The changing demographics of religious life and the seemingly dwindling financial resources available to us, challenge us to find new ways to respond to our world. At a time when our country and planet is being torn apart by political, environmental, religious and racial tensions and disasters, we must stop spending so much of our time and energy on our internal troubles. There are real battles to be fought, and the most important ones are not with each other.

**Governance Model** - The UUA board opted to use Carver Policy Governance almost ten years ago. I can think of few, if any, other governance models that have a more a more dominant culture lens than the one you selected. John Carver is a southern bred and educated man. While that doesn't necessarily make him a white supremacist, the system of governance he developed is one of the most complicated, mono-culture way of governing I have ever encountered. Especially when it is adopted in a fundamentalist, non-customized way. I have watched the board spend thousands of dollars on consultants, software packages and wasted paid-staff time attempting to make this system work. While the current board leadership deserves much credit for substantially cutting the more than 300 policies originally created down and cutting the size of the board, you are still using a governance model that is not designed for an organization such as the UUA with an elected President who is not hired by the board. I believe a large part of the reason we are in the mess we are today is because of the governance model the board has chosen to operate from.

I could quote chapter and verse of your policies and limitations - I have read all of them - and point to why so many of these are ineffective but let me name just one. In April 2016 the staff reported on End 1.3 - "Congregations and communities are intentionally inclusive, multigenerational and multicultural." In their monitoring report they gave

statistics on their hiring, including acknowledging that all Congregational Staff Life Leads were white. The Board accepted those statistics and that monitoring report without question - in effect affirming the work the staff had done in hiring. When the Board's Financial Secretary Christina Rivera shared the same statistics in her March 27, 2017 blog post and asserted that "they tell us the story of power and white supremacy in UUA" there was no mention of the fact that she and the board had affirmed those same statistics in telling the staff they were meeting the board's expectations. Why did it take the latest hiring decision for the board to become outraged at the hiring practices of the UUA and demand audits and other changes to the system? Something is deeply flawed with your governance model when it has you tell the staff they are meeting expectations one month and then use the very same statistics to accuse them of white supremacy less than one year later.

**Relationship to the UUA President and Staff** - I will first admit to a professional bias. Almost all of the UUA's senior staff are UUMA members and colleagues. But they are more than that. I too am a chief executive of a non-profit who works far too many hours and attempts to do far too much with far too few resources. Our UUMA board has established a policy of staff-to-staff and board-to-board relationships so I work closely with people at all levels of the UUA collaborating on programming, strategic planning and fund-raising. That being said the lack of appreciation and collaboration I have seen between the board and staff the last eight years has deeply troubled me.

It began on the first day of Peter Morales' presidency when a board member, Will Saunders, stood up and read a statement which made it clear that the board, not the President, was in charge. It is important to note that the board had been working with a man of color for eight years in Bill Sinkford and was "welcoming" another President of color with these words. "The president's vision is irrelevant unless it's also the Board's vision" and then went on to lament the invisibility of the board.

Sadly, over the years, the board has proven that the trustee's comments on Peter's first day were true. The board - in part because of the inappropriate governance model they have chosen - has attempted to be more and more visible and to make the President more and more irrelevant, in both vision and power. Examples of this include the forming of the Presidential selection committee which is, in part, an attempt to limit the President's authority and power; and financial decisions that the Board has made without support or knowledge of the President. While the relationship between the administration and board have improved under Jim Key's leadership, the years of the board's refusing to accept monitoring reports and, unconscionably, refusing to collaborate so they would accept them, takes its toll. The recent decision by the board to commit \$5.3 million after less than sixty minutes of discussion, with the Chief Operating Officer unaware and absent from the conversation and the President not being included in consultation is one more time when the board has acted inappropriately and disrespectfully.

The sad reality that the board doesn't seem to understand is that when boards are "governing with excellence" - one of your terms - they *are* invisible. A board's main jobs

are to provide, in partnership with the executive, a clear and articulate mission and vision for the organization; set up systems for evaluation, ensure the financial well-being of the organization and empower and support the paid staff - the people who are doing the real work of the organization - so they have everything they need to shine. The outstanding organizations I know of in both the for-profit and non-profit worlds have “invisible” boards. That is that they are behind the scenes doing what they can so that the front-line employees and executives can effectively lead the organization where it needs to go. These kind of boards don’t waste staff time and energy on useless reports and instead ask staff what they need to perform with excellence and help to raise the money and morale of the organization to ensure they have the support they need.

**Financial Stewardship** - Board Means Policy 3.2.4 states the Board has responsibility to “Act as faithful stewards of the resources of the UUA.” 3.3.8 states that “Trustees will provide leadership for UUA’s Stewardship and Development efforts.” I have not been able to find on the website the schedule you have for monitoring yourself on these policies or your most recent monitoring but I believe you are out of compliance here. I mentioned above the tens, if not hundreds of thousands, of dollars you have spent on Policy Governance. Those expenditures were misguided but your decision in October 2016 was one of the most egregious examples of poor financial stewardship I have ever witnessed.

A small group from Black Lives UU came to the board meeting to review what they had done at the Columbus General Assembly and to report on what they hoped to do in the future. A motion was made to guarantee \$5.3 million to BLUU and agreement was made in less than an hour to do so. I was not present at the meeting and it was not live-streamed. I hope if I was there I would have spoken out as an observer but I’ll never know. I do know this. As soon as I saw it posted on Facebook I thought “we did it again”; we promised money we may not have to a group of people we have broken promises to in the past. An African American colleague told me the process of the decision making was one of the most racist they had ever seen and that if three white people had made a presentation in the same circumstances there is no way the board would have done what it did.

As I learned more about the decision I became even more concerned. BLUU was not an official organization, was loosely affiliated with the UUA and its leaders have been highly critical of the UUA (often with good reason) in the past. I don’t believe UUA senior staff and finance experts were consulted about the decision before it was made. \$5.3 million represented over 25% of the total unrestricted endowment fund at the time. And this decision was made in 60 minutes?

It seems clear that the board believes the most important issue and priority in our faith today is empowering our black siblings to have a more active and effective leadership role. I also believe it’s important. And I also believe it’s important to lower the debt for our religious professionals, and especially ministers, who sacrifice their financial well being to serve our faith; it’s important that all religious professional organizations and formerly affiliated groups such as DRUUM to have enough to do their important work;

it's important that our most innovative ministers and ministries - many of whom are people of color - have enough money and resources so they can a) have enough money to live on and b) have the resources to give their ministries a chance; it's important our seminaries, congregations and UUA staff have enough resources to be strong and healthy in the future; it's important that we find funding for more community organizing, more speaking out against environmental devastation and immigration justice - especially given the insanity we have seen since the election; and it's important that we deepen, strengthen and articulate our theology more powerfully in the world, so we can find new ways to connect with those spiritually hungry people in our communities who don't know about us or don't think we have something to offer them.

We can disagree on priorities. That's fair. What's not fair, and what is failure of your duties as financial stewards of our faith, is to commit \$5.3 million to a group of people after sixty minutes of conversation and no analysis of where or how that money can best serve the future. Perhaps history will tell us that your decision was "bold" and the right one for us to live into the multi-cultural faith we dream of. But it shouldn't have been made so quickly without input from the paid financial experts on staff or any examination of other priorities that needed funding as well.

Your current decision to lift up and embrace the assessment that Unitarian Universalism is a white supremacist organization has also, I believe, put the UUA's financial well-being at risk. The congregations I have served over the years are not as deeply immersed in anti-racism awareness and education that most of you are. Although I haven't served in a congregation for almost eight years, the ministers I serve tell me things haven't changed a whole lot. Most congregational members and generous donors have not sat in multi-day classes and read books and essays on the changing definition of white supremacy over the years as many of our clergy and UUA board members have done. Time will tell, and I hope I am wrong, but I fear your choice to use the language of white supremacy to describe our faith will not increase giving and generosity - in fact quite the opposite. Of course the financial stability and well-being of the UUA should never get in the way of a prophetic message that might scare people away from giving. But I have lived in the south for more than 15 years and those people I know both inside and outside Unitarian Universalism who share a desire to stand on the side of love don't often chose to give to white supremacist organizations, and especially white supremacist religious organizations.

**Conflict of Interest** - My last concern is the Board's apparent unawareness of their conflict of interest policies, responsibilities and the damage that unawareness can cause in their level of trust and fiduciary responsibilities. Your conflict of interest policy states:

*CONFLICT OF INTEREST*

*All officers, employees, and trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and all members of UUA committees shall scrupulously avoid any conflict between their personal, professional, or business interests and the interests of the Association. A "conflict of interest" is any actual or potential situation in which an individual's close*

*relationship to another party would make it difficult for the individual to be unbiased in carrying out his or her obligations to the Association.*

Two events from the last year are especially troubling. The person who made the motion to guarantee \$5.3 million to BLUU in October 2016, Board Secretary Rob Eller-Isaacs, is a close friend, colleague and mentor of mine. He is also the co-minister of the church, Unity Church -Unitarian, that served as BLUU's fiscal agent (per Unity's website) from May 2016 to February 2017. I am not a lawyer but I have served on boards for more than 35 years and been in executive and management roles for more than 40 years. I don't know of a clearer definition of a conflict of interest than making a motion to give \$5.3 million to a group of people that my congregation is a fiscal agent for. I have not seen anything from the board that addresses this fact. And that concerns me deeply.

The second, and more recent, example of a conflict of interest concerns the actions of Christina Rivera, the Board's Financial Secretary. While I do not understand your decision to allow board members to apply for employment from the organization you are responsible for overseeing in the first place, (I would hope that board members would be required to resign their board positions before applying for a job at the UUA) having a board member, especially an officer of the board, speak out in ways that jeopardizes the well-being of the organization is troubling. The action seems to be a violation of your board means policy 3.3.5a which states that "Trustees will not express individual judgements of performance of employees of the President."

I appreciate that Christina's comments have helped create the possibilities of radical changes in the diversity of leadership in the UUA. The need for her to speak out about practices that you as a board affirmed as recently as April 2016 and did nothing to change is troubling. Allowing anyone from the board to apply for a job with the UUA is, in my reading, a violation of your conflict of interest policy. Having someone from the board who did not get the job speak out publicly in ways that may put the financial stability of the organization they oversee is a violation of your conflict of interest policy. And letting the same person become a main spokesperson and creator of the policies and charge to the interim Presidents seems to continue that conflict.

I hope you will consider the four main points I have raised - your governance model, relationship to the President/staff, financial stewardship and conflicts of interest - with an open mind, and "prayerfully stand at the center" as you reflect on what to do next. I suggest a similar attention to auditing yourselves that you are putting in place for the UUA staff. How effective are you at governing with excellence and what do you need outside perspective on to be more effective and to generate more trust in your leadership?

I, like so many, are excited about the possibilities that our interim presidential team brings to our faith. I have offered my pastoral and professional support to them and will do anything I can to ensure their success. And I look forward to the new energy and vision that our next elected President will infuse into our faith as well. But unless some

systemic cultural and structural change occurs in the UUA Board of Trustees I fear we will continue to restrict the passion and creativity of our paid staff and disempower them from leading in authentic and innovative ways.

Our world is hurting and while institutional racism, white privilege and white supremacy are all important issues we must address and pay attention to they are not the only ones. I have struggled, prayed and pondered how and why to write this letter to you over the last few weeks. For most of the last eight years I have tried to remember that the work of the UUA Board is "not my table". I have enough challenges in leading a non-profit which struggles with many of the same issues you and the UUA staff deal with. The reason I have decided to write it is because what we, what you, have been doing isn't working. And I hope and pray you have the courage and willingness to change.

I continue to hold you in my thoughts and prayers as you do the work of leading during very tense and troubling times and ask that you let me know if/how I can be of use. I am sorry that I will not be with you in Boston next week but I'll be attending our Pacific Central UUMA Chapter meeting where I have been scheduled to be for many months. Easter day is a day of new beginnings and anticipation for brighter days ahead. May this Easter day bring the same new beginnings and hope for our faith as well.

Blessings,

Rev. Don Southworth

cc. UUMA Board of Trustees; UUMA Staff, UUA Leadership Council, S. Betancourt, B. Sinkford, L. Spencer, S. Frederick-Gray, A. Miller, J. Pupke, A. Carlson