

March 25, 2020

To our valued AUUMM members:

For many of us, this has been the most trying week of our careers. The sudden restructuring to the way of the world in the wake of COVID-19 has landed a shock to the systems of both the arts and ministry. Indeed, we are stretched too thin reimagining the entirety of our training, experience, and intuition as music ministry professionals to fit within the two-dimensional confines of a Zoom conference. We cannot congregate with our congregations. We cannot be in ensemble with our ensembles. We have lost work. We are weary. We are unsure. We are at home.

And yet, we are called forward.

The mission of the Association for Unitarian Universalist Music Ministries (AUUMM) is to provide **ADVOCACY • EDUCATION • and INSPIRATION** to you, its members, and we - the AUUMM Board of Trustees - have been in compassionate conversation about how to support the work you do and help you in your times of need. While we cannot provide solutions to the hurdles of virtual music ministry in this strange time, we *can* continue what we have always set out to do: advocate for our members. And we know that there are members who need advocacy now, even in the face of all this change. So, knowing that everything has shifted in recent weeks - and understanding that the future of this advocacy work is dependent on how life returns to normal or adopts a new normal—we would like to update you on the AUUMM’s conversations in recent months with other professional Unitarian Universalist (UU) organizations.

THE LREDA STORY (November 2019)

Over the past few months we have supported one of our members, Jennifer Hayman, Director of Music and Arts at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington DC, when she was mistreated as music director for the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) Fall Conference in November of 2019. You can read her full account here, but in short, Jen came to us deeply harmed by her interaction when a gathered white caucus used their public platform to mistakenly call out Jen’s musical ministry as culturally appropriative. We know Jen worked in a consistent relationship with the West African musicians and dancers who were in the ensemble that she invited to perform for a morning worship. The West African collective invited folks at the worship service to participate in their tradition through drumming and dancing. This act was incorrectly labeled “cultural appropriation” by a planned white caucus and had the added impact of erasing Jen’s lived experience and lived expertise as a woman of color who had developed a relationship with these musical presenters.

Clearly, this is an example of white supremacy culture, and there is much work to be done around building a common interdisciplinary understanding of what is and is not cultural appropriation.

LREDA issued a public apology to Jen and to the AUUMM in their March 2020 newsletter.

THE GA STORY (current)

Over the past seven months we have engaged in a series of negotiations around support and fair employment practices for musicians who participate in General Assembly (GA), most notably, for GA 2020 in Providence. Frustrated with a long history of unjust and unprofessional treatment, we severed our ties with GA once in August 2019, then reinstated support after the GA Planning Committee (GAPC) promised not only discussion but also identifiable, actionable steps toward creating a better experience for music professionals. However, as of this writing they are—once again—not partnering with us in right relationship.

In addition to our request that the UUA hires a GA Production Manager to oversee all the organizational and technical aspects involved with producing an event of GA's magnitude, we have made requests to have a fairly compensated GA Music Coordinator, GA Band Leader, GA Choir Director, and GA Accompanist. Most importantly, both organizations agreed that the AUUMM would be involved with the discussions of these hirings and contract negotiations. Despite agreements made with the GAPC, and with the AUUMM actively identifying musical support for the upcoming GA, it has come to our attention that a GA Music Coordinator was hired without any discussion with the AUUMM—a deliberation that we agreed would take place. Additionally, there has been no conversation with the AUUMM on the role of the GA Production Manager, an urgently important role of communication and leadership we agreed would be a key part of GA 2020. Due to the failure of the GAPC to act quickly on these tasks in a way the AUUMM accounts as fair and just, due to their lack of open information about the processes they were using, and given the timeline in question (now, less than 4 months), we are once again removing our institutional support from GA 2020.

We do this not as an act of contrarianism or mercurial temperament, but after deep, long-considered discussions and concern for the treatment of our AUUMM musicians after hearing story after story of improper professional conduct on behalf of the GAPC that extends back in time for at least eight years. We are keenly disappointed that, having offered the GAPC institutional support after stepping back from collaboration earlier in the year, we have found their communication to be nonexistent and their actions counter to the words of agreement we received.

We believe that the GAPC is out of right relations with the AUUMM.

AUUMM is invested in repairing this relationship given the long-range planning of GA 2021, and we once again articulate our hope that conversations with the GAPC and the UUA will resume after GA 2020.

IN SUMMARY

We are writing this letter for two reasons:

(1) The role of the AUUMM is to provide transparency and accountability of other professional UU organizations, and ourselves, to you, our member base. We work to provide you with information so you may understand what's happening inter-organizationally and make informed decisions about your own professional choices.

(2) We cannot guarantee that your personal involvement with LREDA and GA as music ministry professionals will be safe and fulfilling. If you choose to participate in GA this year, that is your own prerogative. We simply cannot offer advice or institutional resources at this time to support you. We also invite you into conversation with any of us on the Board, should you be asked to participate in GA 2020 and are not sure how that decision will interface with these negotiations.

We also recognize that, due to the ever-changing impacts of COVID-19, the state of GA and the AUUMM's ability to help with it both remain in flux. Nevertheless, the outlined situation exists.

Stay safe, stay well, and please know that you can reach out to us with any questions or concerns. We're listening.

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