

February 12, 2020

Dear members of the LREDA Board of Trustees, members of the Justice and Equity Team, and the Fall Conference Worship Planning Team,

I am writing to share some important concerns about my experience as the Music Director for the LREDA Fall Conference 2019. The mistreatment I endured has taken a toll on me both personally and professionally, in ways I will try to articulate in this letter. However, perhaps my greater concern is for the failures to employ the systems that have been put in place by the UUA and LREDA itself to avoid such situations of conflict, harm and mistrust. My intention in sharing about my experience is to gain a better understanding of the ways my work was harmful to participants in the conference, to name the harm I endured and my own needs for healing, and to call to attention better opportunities to empower people in LREDA leadership to better respond to conflict in real-time.

In May 2019, I was contracted as the Music Director for LREDA's Fall Con 2019. In mid-August, the worship planning team began meeting and collaborating on a bi-weekly basis. At this point, I realized the expectation for a very high output of work (three morning worship services, an evening Vespers service, a musical "closing" for the conference, plus leading a conference choir) on a very small budget (\$750 for music director, \$300 for musicians). It was impressed upon me that bringing the "breadth and diversity of music that All Souls is known for" was a priority, so I called in many favors to various musicians and ensembles that are a part of our regular music programming at the church. Along the way, I shared listening links, videos, artists' websites and affiliate organizations to provide context for each ensemble and what they'd bring to the conference. This was met with great enthusiasm by worship planning team members. As the fall progressed, our team began to meet weekly. There were no worship templates, and so I was tasked with trying to organize the sketches of worship services via Google doc. These worship services were not fully hashed out until about 1-2 weeks before the conference. I was later asked to create power point content for worship slides, which I did. When the topic of conference gifts was raised, after much debate, I suggested that a gift of beautiful Ghanaian cloth might be a lovely gift, and would support the craftworkers associated with the drumming group that was performing for Friday morning worship. On the professional development day before the conference, a concern was raised by board members about the gift of "Kente cloths" (a term I never used when describing it) which led to great scrutiny for my suggestion that this be given as a gift. Many thanks to Jamaine Cripe for the blessing she wrote that ultimately accompanied this gift.

The week of the conference, I also learned that no backline had been secured for the conference, meaning no sound support beyond a podium mic for speaking. This led to calling in another favor, to Marty Atias, who worked three 18-hour days at the conference to provide sound/tech support at a significantly below-market rate. In fact, it was in my communication with Marty on Saturday afternoon of the conference that led to my witnessing the moment in the white caucus session that inspires this letter. That afternoon (11/9), I happened to walk into a caucus group of all white religious educators attending the conference. The speaker on stage, the vice president of LREDA, was speaking *about me* without having ever spoken to me. (In fact, I never would have known this was happening save for the fact that I needed to speak with Marty, who was running tech for the room). She indicated that the worship service I led Friday (with Kristen Arant, Kweku Owusu and members of the Bele Bele Rhythm Collective) was cultural misappropriation and they were deeply sorry that they allowed this music to be performed. I was aghast and shocked- NO ONE had spoken to me about the drummers' performance, yet they were speaking *about my work* and made a determination without a conversation with me about my motivations for inviting them to be part of worship. (Not to mention, a diverse swath of people spoke to me about how beautiful and joyful the worship service was.) It is my continued belief that All Souls and our music program especially has done a good (not perfect, but good) job of making true partnerships and relationships with artists from different cultures: relationships that are mutually beneficial, and where we are in continued learning while also doing our own work, and compensating fairly, for the education, the art, and the labor of teaching a primarily white community about west African drumming culture (among other things with other people/groups). The fact that it was determined that I was a "cultural misappropriator" without seeking understanding about this relationship or the context under which this music was presented (informed performance, with native Africans and non-Africans, some white, some brown, etc. who are all in relationship with one another and with me) still has me deeply shaken. My character and leadership was publicly attacked without a single person from LREDA engaging me in conversation. Perhaps the most difficult piece of this is that all of the choristers from the conference who were supposed to join us in worship the following morning, who are just at the beginning of a trust relationship with me, were essentially told by LREDA leadership not to trust me. When Samaya Oakley heard my audible gasp at her comments in this caucus, she followed me out to the lobby with Linnea Nelson and Eleanor Van Deusen. In our conversation, they indicated that their motivation for making such comments was to "protect the people of color from within their organization who had spoken up," and because, "it had become clear to them that I was not familiar enough with LREDA's 'culture.'" As a woman of color who has been in this work in various churches for over a

decade, this language felt hurtful and condescending. My leadership was then further undermined when I was required to be on a conference call with Linnea and Sunshine Wolfe (who had been on most of the calls with the worship planning team) to further vet my selections for the following Sunday morning worship service, a service that had been set for several weeks prior, to make sure that everything was "still appropriate."

I have worked in a large and complicated church long enough to have received my share of critical feedback. I am saddened to learn that some people of color who attended the conference were offended or upset by what they experienced. But I am more saddened by the disservice of the LREDA leadership and worship planning team by not providing any context or information to conference attendees about the music they were experiencing. I learned (second-hand, sadly) that many were uncomfortable when two native Ghanaians invited them to dance and drum. Active participation is part of West African culture, and Kweku Owusu, a master drummer and cultural ambassador from Ghana, was simply inviting people into an experience of his culture. I heard his (white, drummer, collaborator, and organization's co-founder) wife referred to as Rachel Dolezal. This sort of judgment is so hurtful that I am still unable to discuss this experience with the dancers and drummers who participated in that worship that day. The fact that their community came under such scrutiny was by no fault of their own. Rather, it was the error of those who should've provided better understanding to the conference attendees. I, personally, wish I'd advocated more strongly for this, as well.

Regarding the harm experienced by other people of color at the conference: I'm curious as to why neither the conference chaplains nor the Justice and Equity Team (whose very role is to help mitigate situations such as this) were also not called in to help. And later, I wonder why the President of the UU Association of Music Ministers was contacted before anyone followed up with me. Again, I'm confused as to why I was never involved in any conversation about my work. I understand that when harm is done, emotions are raw, and folks who've experienced harm may not want to talk directly. I only wish I had been given the same consideration before the statements were made at that white caucus session. It's plain disrespect, especially as someone who was hired to complete a job for your organization.

Since the conclusion of the conference, I have received several communications from music and religious education professionals expressing their concern for my treatment, and their confusion about the very broad/vague comments that were shared in both the POC and white caucus sessions. Many wanted to advocate on my behalf for LREDA to make a public apology. Many shared that it was among the most beautiful music they'd ever experienced in worship. Some wanted to share similar stories of mistreatment by

LREDA. Most just wanted clarity. I have asked for their patience while hoping that LREDA would come to acknowledge this need for clarity and apology. However, in our one and only subsequent group conversation (which included members of the LREDA board, worship planning team, and Jules Jaramillo as a moderator/chaplain) I believe we are no closer to a resolution or understanding. No closer to learning how to better handle situations like this in the future. And as of today, there has been no follow up on what was discussed in our last conversation which would lead me to believe we are on the right path.

Leaders, if we all want to live into this better future we dream for Unitarian Universalism, we must do better. While we continue to develop a stronger culture of learning and feedback, we need to remember our grace and patience with our colleagues. Creative work is hard; it is rife with passion, opinions, and many sensitivities. We need to remember that we are *all* colleagues in this work of building a more beloved community. And remember there are many people who *are* putting in the work to do better. They (I) deserve better treatment than what I experienced in November.

Respectfully,
Jen Hayman
Director of Music and Arts
All Souls Church Unitarian