

UUA Trustees' Response to New Orleans Area Congregations

29 March 2013 Draft Introduction for discussion at April Board Meeting

In January of 2012 UUA Trustees worked on Katrina restoration projects at the three greater New Orleans congregations and consulted with their leadership. We heard their heart-rending stories and their aspirations. We learned that there was much healing left to be accomplished and how they felt that the UUA had not fulfilled their commitments. We pledged to "look into the matter" and get back to them.

The best thing we can do at this time is to acknowledge their concern, review the facts as we know them, compliment them on their dogged determination and advise them of policy changes we plan in order to avoid similar problems in the future.

To prepare this draft I had lengthy and informative discussions with Kay Montgomery and Rev. Meg Riley who was a UUA representative in New Orleans. More importantly, I collaborated with our own Trustee, Rev. Erik Carlson, who was on the ground there for ten full months, working closely with the congregations in their restoration efforts. One clear picture that emerges is that the intervening seven years have caused substantially different recollections of statements and events to develop. That should be no surprise, especially since many comments repeated today are hearsay and not comments from original disaster victims or participants in the early relief efforts.

We need to politely and sincerely let our congregations in New Orleans know that we accept and honor their feelings, that we cannot undo the past, and that we have taken steps to assure that past mistakes will not be repeated in the future. At the same time we need to remind them and ourselves that all those involved in the UUA relief efforts were selfless, extremely dedicated and hardworking individuals that acted in what they thought at the time was the appropriate way to bring the greatest benefit to the most people.

A key element in this situation is the division of the \$3,360,074 relief fund that resulted from the joint UUA-UUSC appeal. Acting alone, Rev. Wm. Sinkford and Dr. Charles Clements, President of UUSC, decided to allot \$1,038,918 (roughly 1/3) to support congregations and \$2,321,156 (roughly 2/3) to community relief efforts. This division was apparently endorsed by some in the community who recognized full well the tremendous devastation and loss of life that had taken place in the greater New Orleans area. However, those present in actual meetings at the time state that congregational leaders did not approve the idea and most likely that they were never asked. Today, it appears that the decision was made without consulting with local institutions and without gaining widespread congregational support. Perhaps most importantly it appears to have been made without a supporting policy in existence.

In reviewing the information that Kay Montgomery has so thoughtfully provided to us, we can see that the three congregations received substantial additional funds from donor congregations after the UUA-UUSC appeal. In addition, they received extensive and lengthy assistance from UUA professional staff and volunteers. Some local leaders we

spoke with fully acknowledged all that had been done for the congregations; but, still felt the UUA had not kept its promise.

We heard at least one person tell us that a UUA representative said they “would be fully restored.” At this point, the phrase may be more urban myth than fact, but it does reflect a residual feeling of uncompensated loss. Some doubt that such a statement was ever made, at least by any UUA representative with authority to speak for the UUA. But, it is the feeling, not the fact that counts.

We also need to recognize that UU entities raised an additional \$1 million or so to continue the restoration efforts after the UUA funds were exhausted. And, we need to take cognizance of the fact that no accounting of the relief fund expenditures was ever made to donors or others from the UUA. The GNOUU congregations do have a record of all proceeds and expenditures from the two campaigns but it is unclear if this information has ever been made public.

Bearing in mind our conversations in New Orleans, the information provided by staff and our desire to help the congregations achieve a greater sense of healing and true connection to the wider UUA community, we propose the following draft statement that is forwarded by members of the CWG for your consideration. We know it is the responsibility of the UUA Secretary to prepare and send communications on behalf of the Board. This draft is not in any way intended to usurp or bypass our normal way of doing things but rather to help ameliorate what has already been a long process.

In Faith and Gratitude,
UUA Board of Trustees Communications Working Group