

June 11, 2007

Dear UUA Board of Trustees Member:

On your agenda at your upcoming meeting, you will be receiving a report from the Panel on Theological Education (POTE) that includes recommendations for grants in support of theological education for the year ahead. The Panel's report will be responsive to motions that you passed requesting that the Panel present a timeline for developing recommendations that would make the funding of ministerial formation, development and excellence their highest priority. As Trustees of one of the theological schools that has received significant funding from the panel, we are writing to you with a request regarding your action on the panel's report.

Each of us has had an opportunity to speak with some of you regarding the larger context for your request to the Panel, and the problems that we all recognize are facing us in ministerial formation, development, and excellence. In addition, our Trustees and staff have also spoken to the President of the Association and the Chair of the Panel. We now have a better understanding of your motion and your goals than we did before as a result of these helpful conversations.

As Trustees of Starr King School we strongly support the study that you have asked the Panel to undertake and look forward to being among the stakeholders in their study. We recognize that both the Panel members and many UUA Board members are convinced that the time is right to look at new options for UUA supporting ministerial formation and excellence that may involve re-allocating funds previously given to support the theological schools.

As we send you this letter, we have not seen the report and recommendations that the Panel is preparing for you. We only have seen a letter from the Chair of the Panel that indicated a component of the Panel's initial response to your motion would be to volunteer to fund this year of study from the Panel's funds by immediately reducing next year's grants to Meadville Lombard and to Starr King School by ten per cent, amounting to a \$25,000 cut in funding for each school. Both schools were also warned to expect larger cuts, leading to the elimination of general operating support over three years. Our letter is necessarily responsive therefore to this letter from the Chair of the Panel.

We wish to express our concern that the Panel presumes that the outcome of this study will be an elimination of all basic operating support for the two historic UU theological schools. We hope that this is not necessarily your presumption as a UUA Trustee, and that as this year of study proceeds, you will be open to learning more about the ways that Starr King has been and will continue to be responsive to your and our goals for encouraging ministerial excellence and accountability to congregations.

We also hope that you will decide not to accept a recommendation from the Panel that would reduce funding to Starr King School for the FY 07-08, which begins July 1. The amount of money involved here (\$25,000) is not large, but it is difficult to replace for an institution of our size at this late stage in our planning for the upcoming fiscal year. We request that you as Trustees ask your staff and the Panel to fund next year's study through other sources from within the UUA's budget or from other of the Panel's funds.

Obviously, this is only the beginning of a conversation between our Board and yours regarding the future of UU theological education, its direction and how it is funded. The most important decisions that you will make as this conversation proceeds will be further into the future. We too are looking more to the future than to the immediate needs associated with our 07-08 Budget. We are just beginning an 18 month intensive study process to help us re-vision how to more effectively serve UU ministerial students in residential and non-residential programs. We are trustees accountable to our owners. We see those owners as imbedded in and inspired by their experience in Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Our "owners" include our current 87 students, almost all of whom come to us from formative experiences in UU congregations. They include the 90 students, most of them UUs in non-UU schools, who depended this year on the on-line courses we provided them in UU history, UU polity, UU theology and more. They include our donors – committed individuals, UU congregations, and their congregational leaders – who make theological formation for religious leadership a priority for their UU giving.

Our "owners" also include our 302 graduates in fellowship with the Association, almost all in current or former service to our congregations. They also include the larger community that surrounds us and that is served by the religious leaders that we train. This larger community is sorely in need of ministers who have received a theological education to counter oppression in all its forms wherever they find it.

We know that you as a Board are similarly focused on your accountability to congregations and on how our Association can be a community that counters oppression. We and you have more in common in our diagnosis of problems, and in our vision for the future than perhaps we realize. We hope that the study you have asked the Panel to coordinate will strengthen the capacity of all of us together to assure a future of vital and thriving UU congregations, led by ministers and lay leaders who have the benefit of an excellent theological education that deeply grounds them in UU values and commitments. We look forward to the Panel's study to help us all work together on our common foundational goals and vision.

Best wishes to you in your future deliberations,

Rev. Thomas Disrud, Chair of the Board of Trustees
Starr King School for the Ministry