



May 19, 2014

To: The Starr King School for the Ministry Community

From: Helio Fred Garcia, Chair, Board of Trustees

Re: Update

Dear Friends,

On the eve of Starr King's commencement, I am happy to report that we have much to celebrate. Meeting this afternoon, the Starr King Board of Trustees acted on the awarding of degrees to our certificate, M.A.S.C. and M.Div. candidates.

All candidates recommended to the board by the faculty have been confirmed for participation in commencement. In keeping with standard practice, a few degrees have been approved with some conditional requirements that need to be met before the degree can be finalized and the official diploma awarded. In most cases, those conditional requirements are that their final semester of work be satisfactorily completed, their grades verified and/or additional units of work completed.

For a very small number of our graduates, the conditions relate to efforts still underway in connection with the reasons the board delayed its vote. More on this below.

I warmly congratulate our graduates and welcome the opportunity to celebrate with them this evening, along with family, friends, faculty and staff who are gathering to honor them at the graduate's banquet. Tomorrow evening, May 20, our commencement ceremonies will be held at the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, at 7 p.m. We rejoice in our graduates' accomplishments, and look forward to seeing them continue the Starr King tradition of providing strong religious leadership into the future.

Update on Recent Concerns

The Board recognizes that many in the Starr King community are hurt, confused, and disappointed by recent events. We are all responsible for nurturing and sustaining a safe, constructive, and caring learning environment, and the Board is committed to doing our part to help restore a culture of trust, inclusion, understanding, accountability, and appreciation at Starr King.

We are pleased that we were able to confer degrees in time for commencement, and we apologize for the uncertainties and concerns that the board's delay may have caused. As

many of you know, the Board delayed its vote on the certificate and degree candidates, given its concern when it met on May 1 and 2 that trustees did not yet know enough to exercise our fiduciary responsibility effectively in conferring degrees, given the breaches of confidentiality that occurred at the conclusion of the presidential search process. We had hoped that by now we would have clarity about what happened and who may have been involved.

That clarity has not yet been reached, so the Board has decided to conduct a more formal inquiry to be led by people who are not presently directly involved in any of the recent activities at the school.

To that end, the Board enacted a resolution that noted, among other things,

“..the Board will continue its efforts to attempt to identify the cause(s) of the breach of confidential information that occurred during the final stages of the search for the new president. The Board has begun this process and has made progress.

... It is further resolved that an ad hoc committee of the Board be appointed to complete the efforts of the Board to identify the cause(s) of the breach of confidential information and to prepare a report to the full Board containing proposed conclusions and factual bases for the conclusions. This ad hoc committee shall transmit the report within 60 days of its formation. The Board of Trustees will hold a special meeting within thirty days of receipt of the report. The Board will thereafter within 30 days, issue a letter of results to the community and constituents of the School.

It is further resolved that the ad hoc committee of the Board shall consist of a minimum of three and not more than five individuals to be recommended by the Board chair and ratified by the Board. “

We are presently working on the composition of the ad hoc committee. We expect that it will include at least one board member who has not been involved or implicated in any of the recent events or allegations. We hope that it will be chaired by a prominent Unitarian Universalist leader who is familiar with the school but who has not been actively involved in any of the recent events or allegations. And it will also include other members of our wider community who also have not been actively involved in recent events or allegations.

It is our hope that this committee, as an arms-length body without entanglements in recent events, can take a clear-eyed look at all parties — the board, the search committee, students, faculty, staff, and others — and make a determination of facts and recommendations for board consideration.

We commit to sharing the ad hoc committee's findings and recommendations, both with the community and with the credentialing institutions to which we relate.

Why We Need to Continue These Efforts

As much as we would all like to put the troubling events of the past few weeks behind, we are not yet able to do so in good conscience.

The enormity of the harm caused by the Strapped Student email cannot be overstated.

In previous correspondence I have spoken of the harm caused to the reputations of many of those involved: the candidates for president, the search committee, our president and our dean. The Board recognizes the real harm done when an anonymous writer makes unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and wrongdoing. It has had an impact on donors, potential applicants for admission, and others on whose support the school depends.

But I want to focus on the critical element of all of this that may have been understated in my prior communications: the most serious harm was not caused exclusively, or even primarily, by the actual content of that email, however hurtful and damaging it may have been.

Rather, the most significant harm came from the transmission of the attachment: confidential information that was submitted in trust by dozens of individuals to the search committee. And by the scope of its distribution. I imagine that much of that harm was unintended. But it is tangible, nonetheless.

One likely unintended consequence of that distribution is that the intended recipients of the email included many who place a significant emphasis on the preservation of confidential information – such as the UUA, UUMA, and Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Their focus was not so much on the content of the letter but on the fact of the violation of standards of confidentiality and breach of professional responsibility. These institutions have reached out to me and made it very clear that they are watching events at Starr King closely.

Even as students, faculty, staff, and Board have spent the last seven weeks in turmoil, we need also to recognize that those credentialing institutions are now wary of our graduates. As a leader of one of those credentialing bodies said to me yesterday, they will need “some significant assurance that no SKSM degree is going to someone who broke trust with their community and with professional guidelines.”

In other words, the Strapped Student email has the potential to put the entire graduating class and future graduates under a cloud. It is this harm that the Board has been trying to prevent.

Conferral of Degrees

In the last several weeks the Board has worked with a number of resources to determine what happened and who may have committed misconduct. This inquiry is not restricted to

students. It includes faculty, staff, board members, and any who may have violated standards of professional conduct or covenantal relationship.

Our immediate deadline was commencement. When the Board met on May 1 and 2 it was concerned that it did not yet know enough to confer degrees. We had hoped that the continuing investigation would provide the clarity we needed to exercise our fiduciary responsibility effectively in conferring degrees. We have not learned all that we would have wanted. But we did not want to wait further and put our candidates for graduation at further risk.

The Board met today and voted to confer degrees. Because it could not with certainty confer degrees unconditionally on all students, a few of the degrees were conferred with conditions pending the outcome of a more formal phase of the investigation. To be clear, the conditional conferral does not suggest that the board has concluded that those students have engaged in improper conduct. Rather, we have concluded that we do not yet have sufficient information to be able to grant the degrees unconditionally.

Commencement

We are please that we were able to confer degrees in time for commencement, and we apologize for the uncertainties and concerns that our delay and our inquiry may have caused. We look forward to celebrating our graduates' accomplishments, and to seeing them continue the tradition of providing strong religious leadership into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Fred", enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Helio Fred Garcia
Chair, Board of Trustees
Starr King School for the Ministry