



April 6, 2014

To: The person who sent an email to the Starr King School for the Ministry community today, and to the recipients of that email.

From: Helio Fred Garcia, Board Chair, Starr King School for the Ministry

Dear students, colleagues, friends,

I am deeply dismayed to receive a copy of an email sent apparently to the entire Starr King student body, faculty, and staff as well as to news media and other Unitarian Universalist institutions and leaders.

I am dismayed for many reasons:

- That the author did not copy me or the search committee chair on the letter that made accusations about the two of us.
- That at no time during the process leading up to the sending of this email did the author reach out to me.
- That the letter itself is riddled with factual errors and flawed assumptions.
- That the letter claims to be an expose of corruption in the search process, but instead reads as if it is motivated by animosity toward the current president.
- But mostly because along with the letter the author distributed confidential documents from the search process.

Those documents are a compilation of input from dozens of people, who each gave feedback with the expectation that their comments would be private. The distribution of that confidential information is an egregious breach of ethics, integrity, and perhaps also of covenantal relationship. It may also open the school, individuals, and perhaps even the author to legal liability. I have not read the attached documents and do not intend to, since they were not intended for my eyes. I encourage all who may have received them to do the same.

Allow me to take the claims in the email one at a time:

I. Subject line: "Process Corrupted."

My reply: The author throws around the words “corrupt,” “corruption,” and “corrupted” quite freely. Some version of “corrupt” appears five times in the letter. But using the word is not the same as demonstrating corruption.

2. First paragraph: “many serious allegations have been brought forth about how the process of selecting a new president was deeply corrupted.”

My reply: No such allegations have been brought to me. And even in this email, there is an assertion that the search process has been corrupted, but no evidence that the process itself has been corrupted.

Rather, the author takes issue with some of the input that the committee received. But input from administration, students, and faculty is just one of the ways members of the search committee exercised their discernment about the next president. It was within the search committee’s purview to determine what weight to give all of the inputs, including their extensive interviews with the candidates, review of the candidates’ credentials and materials, checking of references, and many other forms of due diligence.

There has been no demonstration, in the email or otherwise, that the search committee conducted itself in anything but a responsible and thoughtful manner.

Assertion and argument are not the same as evidence. There has been no evidence presented that demonstrates that the search committee did not conduct its work appropriately.

3. Second paragraph: “Given the depth of the nature of these alleged ethical violations, we are sharing with you the results of the survey which was supposed to have been taken into consideration by the board of trustees for Starr King.”

My reply: The egregious ethical breach is actually the sharing of the survey. That said, the survey was not in any way supposed to have been taken into consideration by the board of trustees. It was not intended for the board of trustees, it was not reviewed by the board of trustees, and it would not have been proper for the board to have reviewed it. The survey was one of many inputs to the search committee, who combined it with other discernment, to develop their recommendation to the board.

4. Sixth paragraph: “The positive things said by students, faculty and staff about Dr. Ritchie may have been ignored, but the lies told by this administration definitely seem to have been taken into account by the selection committee.”

My reply: Without in any way agreeing with the characterization by the author, there is no evidence, nor even the offering of evidence, that the search committee ignored any of the input.

5. Seventh paragraph: “If you look over the attached CVs, Dr. Ritchie was the candidate was most highly qualified to lead SKSM. The selection committee deliberately skewed their presentation, giving only one candidate to the board for a vote, Rev. McNatt.”

My reply: Without in any way commenting on the relative strength of each CV, I note that CVs are only one input among a great many on whom to recommend for president. There is no evidence offered that the search committee deliberately skewed its presentation.

6. Eighth paragraph: "What the students, faculty and staff were told previously was that in presentation to the board, there would be a ranking of the three candidates, and a vote based on that ranking, not a single selection presented for a vote of yes or no."

My reply: I don't know what students, faculty, or staff were told or by whom. The charge from the board chair to the search committee has been on the SKSM website since November. The charge clearly says: "The search committee will present to the Board of Trustees to recount its work and to make its recommendation(s) for appointment to the position on or before March 31, 2014." This clearly anticipates the possibility of a single recommendation for appointment. It was up to the committee to determine the nature of its recommendation to the board. It chose to present one candidate. This was within its authority per the charge to the committee.

7. Ninth paragraph, part 1: "We suspect that Dr. Ritchie's knowledge of corruption behind closed doors, and her willingness to confront the offenders, led directly to the situation at hand."

My reply: I don't know what this is in reference to. But it seems to be mingling allegations of corruption in the administration with allegations of corruption on the search committee, without evidence. This statement doesn't seem to be about the search committee, which is the ostensible topic of the email.

8. Ninth paragraph, part 2: "The current president has been forced into early retirement by the board of trustees, after a complaint was filed about an inappropriate action toward one student."

My reply: I am stunned by this assertion. It is patently false. There has never been any discussion of forcing the president into retirement. The president and I began discussing a timetable for retirement, entirely at her initiative, well over a year and a half ago. Well over a year ago the president formally notified me of her desire to retire by June, 2014. She formally notified the board in the spring of 2013. Until she did, the board had not discussed her retirement. I am unaware of any complaint filed about an inappropriate action. I assume such a complaint against the president would have come to me. And I wonder about the possible meaning of "early retirement" when the president is retiring after 25 years on the job.

I must say that the cavalier accusation of such magnitude, that is so easy to refute, calls into question both the motive and the appropriateness of the entirety of the authors' email.

9. Tenth paragraph: a reference to "current administration's attempt to ruin Dr. Ritchie's reputation..."

My reply: Without characterizing in any way the letter in question (which I have not read and do not intend to read), that letter was submitted to the search committee with the expectation that it would remain private. It is precisely the publication of that letter by the author of the email that calls reputation into question. It seems odd to publish something that was private and then to say that the private document's author had a motive of affecting reputation.

10. Last paragraph: "We offer these words in the hope that exposing corruption will help eliminate it."

My reply: The author asserts corruption throughout, but shows no evidence that would lead one to conclude that the search committee in any way did not take its duty seriously or did not work within the scope and procedures it was intended to.

My overall reaction to the email:

The search committee has been in place for more than nine months, and its nine members have worked for hundreds of hours, reviewed thousands of documents, met with a range of candidates, sought and received voluminous feedback from many sources, including students, faculty, staff, and many other stakeholders. They met with the candidates. They checked references. They participated in campus visits. They discussed the position, the school, and the candidates exhaustively among themselves. They were assisted in their work by a highly regarded independent search firm.

They were charged with giving their best recommendation to the board, which they did. The board, in turn, voted on their recommendation, and chose to accept it.

The president of the school is not elected by popular vote. The president is nominated by the search committee and appointed by the board of trustees. The trustees, in turn, delegate the nomination process, and all its groundwork, to the search committee.

That process worked, with integrity, with thoughtfulness, and with thoroughness.

There is nothing presented in the email that causes me to conclude that the process didn't work – with one exception. That is the public distribution of confidential committee files. I do not know how the author of the email came into possession of those files. But distributing them constitutes a serious ethical breach. And, as I said above, it may also have other serious consequences.

It is clear that the author of the email takes issue with some of the input that the committee received. And there is significant reference to issues that have nothing to do with the search committee. Rather, there seems to be intense – and somewhat perplexing – animosity toward the current president. That is unfortunate, but unrelated to the search process.

For an email titled "President Search: A Process Corrupted" there is scant accurate discussion of process and not one bit of evidence that the process was corrupt. Just assertion, argument, and animosity.

And now this is all public. I am deeply saddened that it has come to this. And I am acutely aware of the challenges this creates, not just for the new president, but for all of us who care so deeply about the school.

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