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To Young Religious Unitarian Universalists and their Allies and Supporters,

We are writing to you today about a difficult decision the Youth Office has recently had to make concerning Con Con, the Continental Conference of YRUU. After careful consideration over the course of several years, together with attempts to address concerns in many different ways, the Youth Office has decided that we will no longer provide logistical, staff, or financial support for Con Con. The Administration of the UUA fully supports us in this decision. This means that unless a UUA District/Region or congregation decides to take full responsibility for planning and implementing the conference, there will be no Con Con in 2005, or for the foreseeable future.

We recognize that this is a huge decision that comes at a very difficult time. In this letter is a detailed explanation of our rationale both for why the decision had to be made, as well as why we feel it was appropriate for the Youth Office to make that decision. We hope you will read it with an open mind, and trust that this is not a decision that we have made lightly, nor that this was a decision we even wanted to have to make. Ultimately, we feel that it was not only the right decision, but urgently necessary. Also, at the end of this letter, we discuss some possibilities for the future.

We also recognize the racial implication of four White Adults making this decision for a multiracial youth movement: We struggled with this issue for some time. In the end, we decided that what we have done has been to identify (as described in this letter) **one of the most expensive, time-consuming, unaccountable, racist, classist, unsafe, and unnecessary institutions in all of continental YRUU and UU youth ministry**, and to stop supporting it. We have done this without putting the burden of identifying it and working to reform/eliminate it on the communities who have been marginalized by our past support of it. We consider this a case of "stepping up" as anti-oppressive allies who are in a position to make positive change, and not of "stepping on" as oppressors.

What Con Con Has Done Well

Con Con has a long history, stretching back decades to a time long before YRUU even existed. It was considered an important enough institution that the YRUU by-laws, written at a time when there were no other continental gathering of UU Youth, provide for an annual conference of continental YRUU. Every member of the Youth Office has attended and enjoyed at least one Con Con as a youth before s/he was on staff, so we have all experienced first-hand Con Con's positive aspects. Con Con has provided a place for those youth who are able to attend to come build a continental community, to share ideas and stories from their YRUU communities back home, to learn new and deeper ways of worship, to trade skills through workshops, and to rejuvenate their souls in what YRUU does best – the *doing* of UUism.

Concerns

Unfortunately, those positive aspects are far overshadowed by the major problems Con Con has had. Some of these problems are more recent, some of them are long term but were ignored or never addressed, and some of them have only become apparent as we examined Con Con more closely through an anti-oppressive lens. The following concerns led to the final decision to end the Youth Office's support for Con Con:

Financial

Historically, Con Con's finances were once run through the YRUU checking account, which is independent of the UUA's financial structure. In the 1990's, the Youth Office realized that the checking account couldn't afford to front thousands of dollars for a site deposit and wait for months to offset that cost with income, so the account was moved over to UUA accounts which could support the temporary debt.

Unfortunately, for at least the past five years or so, Con Con has been **running a consistent debt**, averaging between \$2000-\$4000 over budget each year. This has been due in part to rising site and airfare costs, but mostly due to declining attendance and income. Con Con 2004, which was very actively advertised and promoted, ended about \$3700 over budget.

Although the UUA has not technically subsidized Con Con with funding (that is, budgeted specific money to support the event), there are **many 'hidden' costs** associated with Con Con. Since Con Con has immediately preceded or followed Youth Council every year, Youth Council has often paid for the travel of Con Con staff members and participants who were also on Youth Council. In addition, travel for Youth Office staff members (between three and four full-time staff who attend the entire conference), both to the pre-site meeting and to the event itself, has been paid for from the Youth Office's own travel budget, not from the Con Con budget.

There are also several financial concerns relating directly to **staff time**. In researching this issue, we calculated the number of staff-hours that we spent supporting Con Con, both before and during the event. It works out to approximately **three full months worth of one staff member's time**; given an average salary, benefits, and payroll taxes paid by the UUA, it has cost the UUA about \$10,000 to provide staff time to support Con Con.

By incorporating the fee paid by youth to attend Con Con, the consistent deficit, the hidden costs, and the staff time, the **average cost** of one youth to attend Con Con can be calculated to have been **about \$800-\$900**, not including travel. The registrant has paid about half of that, the other half essentially has been subsidized by the UUA.

Staff time

In addition to the financial concerns about staff time, there are also major concerns about the total finite staff time we in the Youth Office have to do our jobs. Following the spring 2003 announcement about the loss of the third YPS position, the Youth Office knew that some things would have to be taken off of the its collective 'plate'.

The Spring 2003 Youth Office had a meeting to evaluate how we spend our staff time, and evaluated our programming by factoring in (a) the amount of staff time each program takes to support, (b) the

number of youth and adult advisors who benefit from it, (c) the degree to which the benefits cascade out to district/regional and local youth programs, and (d) how well it supports traditionally marginalized communities. It became apparent even then that Con Con took tons of time to plan, benefited fewer than 100 youth, most of whom are from relatively privileged backgrounds, and who have no clearly-defined lines of accountability back to their district/region or congregation. In other words, Con Con has been an extremely poor and inefficient investment of Youth Office time in supporting UU youth programming across the continent, on all levels.

Priorities

Over the past few years, as we have been considering how we spend our time, and as our staff has been reduced significantly, we have also received mandates from Youth Council / Steering Committee, the UUA Board of Trustees, and other constituencies to spend our staff time in specific ways, *in addition to* all of the other YRUU and UU youth programming we already support.

Some of the new work mandated by the **YRUU Youth Council and Steering Committee** that we have begun to focus on in just the past two years, and which will take considerable Youth Office staff time, includes:

- Support of the joint Youth and Young Adult Anti-Racism Design/Transformation Teams
- Support of the new Anti-Racism Trainer-Organizer Program, which necessitates not only the development of guidelines and a code of ethics for joint Youth and Young Adult events, but also significant fundraising in order to sustain the program
- Implementation of the work and decisions of the 2003 YRUU Long-Range Planning meeting
- Facilitation of increased communication between district/regional youth committees
- Implementation of Youth Council 2004 resolutions calling for increased support/resource development for: BGLTQQ-identified youth, Education Reform and Multiculturalism, Transitional Age-Range Programming, the Paper Campaign, and a reading panel for a UUA Youth Trustee

The **UUA Board of Trustees**, the other governing body to whom we're accountable, directs us (in general) to spend our time supporting youth in congregations. As such, the Youth Office already does things like:

- Providing print and online resources, including Synapse, which local youth groups and district/regional youth committee can use
- Providing training at the district/regional level which youth can bring back to their congregations
- Supporting social justice and anti-oppression work which youth in congregations can get educated about and involved in, and which we hope will one day create a culture of justice at all levels of youth programming
- Supporting Youth Caucus at General Assembly, which gives youth (whether or not they are delegates) an opportunity to help in the decision-making of the entire Association
- Supporting the continental YRUU governance, which ideally has lines of accountability back through districts/regions back to congregations

Lastly, as some of you may have heard, the Board of Trustees together with the UUA Administration is calling for the organization of the upcoming Convocation on Ministry to/with Youth, which will examine the way in which the UUA as a whole delivers services to UU youth, both those who identify as YRUUers and those who don't. We expect this project will take up considerable amounts of our staff time in the next year or two.

Unfortunately, Con Con is one of the few things the Youth Office has traditionally done which has *no* formal structures of accountability to congregational, or even district/regional youth programming. Essentially, the only people who feel the benefits of Con Con are the fewer than 100 youth who attend annually. We can no longer justify spending so much time and money supporting so few youth when there is so much amazing work we could be doing with that time, which would reach so many more youth, and in a more just and impactful way.

Community Issues

In addition to the more practical issues listed above, the Youth Office has also had major concerns about the culture of Con Con and community at Con Con itself for a few years now. We have observed a persistent and often unchallenged **culture of privilege and entitlement** at the conference: many attendees don't seem to feel any sense of obligation towards supporting the forming of healthy community in the YRUU model. Some youth have been interested only in 'hanging out', and showing a **lack of respect** for physical space, conference and site staff, adult advisors, other youth participants, and Con Con programming. **Anti-racism programming** has been particularly under-attended, which has been a major concern for us, especially as Youth of Color still feel marginalized at YRUU conferences.

This culture may be the result of the **prohibitively high cost of the conference**, which has effectively limited attendance to those who are economically privileged enough to be able to afford the registration and travel, as well as any time off from summer jobs, etc. In fact, at Con Con 2004, over half of the attendees were able to attend because their travel had been paid for, either by being on staff, or by being members of Youth Council (some of those may not have been able to attend had their other leadership positions not covered these costs). There *are* small scholarships available to Con Con, but not nearly enough to make the body of people attending particularly diverse in terms of class. It *is* true that attending General Assembly Youth Caucus is more expensive overall than attending Con Con, but there is also a wider Youth Office scholarship base (over \$7000 for this year's GA) as well as much better congregational support of youth attending GA.

There are also more serious issues of **personal safety**. There have been instances of irresponsible sexual behavior at Con Con. Attendees have engaged in reckless physical behavior, including **substance abuse**, in violation of the community covenant. The lack of support for anti-racism programming among White Attendees has led to **Youth of Color feeling unsafe** and unable to trust the White Youth at the conference. **Serious issues of racism, classism, sexism**, and other oppressions are brought up by some members of the community, yet denied or ignored by others. We also theorize that for every instance like these that we've heard about, there are likely many more that we haven't heard about, possibly some even more severe.

It is true that situations like this have occurred at other conferences as well, but they seem to be **more consistent and more flagrant** at Con Con than at General Assembly (where the Youth Office is not directly responsible for youth behavior) and at the YRUU Social Justice Conference. Better planning and staffing doesn't seem to help; Con Con 2004 in particular was well-advertised, well-planned, and had an excellent staff which set a positive tone for the conference and managed emerging issues very well. Despite that fact, these issues of safety and community at Con Con 2004 were as difficult and as

painful as ever. The problem seems to be with the 'Con Con culture' itself; this decision should not be seen as reflecting badly on the 2004 staff.

There has been a **significant decline in attendance** at Con Con in recent years, perhaps due to all of the aforementioned community issues, in addition to the prohibitive cost. Committed **adult advisor attendance** has become almost nonexistent; most of the adults who attend are coaxed/recruited by the Youth Office within a few weeks of the event. Having very little experienced advisor presence at Con Con amplifies all the community health issues mentioned above.

Issues around low attendance among participants and advisors have continued despite a concerted effort by the Youth Office and Steering Committee for the past two years to encourage staff applications and attendance in general. A further concern is that prominent youth and advisors who are very committed to YRUU **have specifically spoken out against Con Con**, and have refused to attend even when we have encouraged them to do so. Most of them have cited unhealthy community and racism/classism as concerns. This indicates to us that **Con Con has failed to provide the safe, positive community that is its stated mission.**

Other, Better Options!

What is both interesting and fortunate is that Con Con is not the only option for those who want to spend a week with other UU youth from across the continent. Many UUA districts sponsor or host **intergenerational Summer Institutes** (SUUSI, SWUUSI, OMSI, etc.) which have strong youth programs; in Canada there is the CanUUDle conference. There are also many **independent UU camps** across the continent with a Youth Week (Star Island, DeBenneville Pines, The Mountain, Unicamp, Unistar, Unirondack, Murray Grove). Each of these do what Con Con does – **possibly better than Con Con** – because they have more consistent staffing and happen at the same site each year. None of these require Youth Office support (whether staff time or funding), freeing us up to serve more youth, in more accountable ways.

Why the Youth Office? Why now?

We are aware that even though these issues have been topics of concerns for several years, this might very well look like a very sudden, top-down decision. We are also aware that we are four White people, none of whom are younger youth, making this decision. We truly wish that this decision could have come another way, and tried more than once to give YRUU's governing leadership the opportunity to address the issues raised.

After the aforementioned prioritizing meeting (early 2003) following the announcement of the loss of the third YPS, the Youth Office **initiated a conversation about Con Con at Youth Council 2003**, which resulted in the formation of a working group which was charged with revisioning how Con Con could be handled less by the Youth Office and more by the youth who were invested in it. Unfortunately, despite some encouragement by the Youth Office, that working group never came up with anything to address the issue, other than to encourage better staff and better attendance. We also sent a **letter of concerns to this year's YRUU Steering Committee** early this fall. In it we stated that we hoped the YRUU community would invest itself in an intentional conversation about how to address these serious issues, and offering support to help decide how and whether Con Con can be changed to better fulfill its mission. Again, no action was taken to address the concerns raised.

Because we felt like it would be irresponsible to host another Con Con given our realizations about its unhealthy and unsafe state, because we had given reasonable opportunities for Youth Council and Steering Committee to act and no action was taken, and because the deadline for securing this year's Con Con contract was quickly approaching, we felt as though we had no other option left but to withdraw our support from Con Con.

So What About The Future?

As we mentioned above, youth who want a Con Con-like event have many options among **existing camps** in the summertime. The YRUU Steering Committee could even choose one of those conferences each year to designate as the “Con Con” for the year, and encourage youth from across the continent to go. Also, if Steering Committee wished, a system could be set up in which **UU districts/regions, or even congregations**, could apply to host a week-long continental UU youth camp in the summer, and Steering Committee could select the hosting district each year from among the applicants. The critical thing is that for liability reasons, there would **need to be a formal UU institution** supporting and taking ultimate responsibility for the event.

Though we are likely still too understaffed to implement them, the Youth Office has discussed other possibilities of **a future open-registration conference** for UU Youth that could justify staff time and expense/subsidy. One possibility we discussed was a **continental training**, in which youth could attend one of the Chrysalis program trainings in the morning, another in the afternoon, and then do worship, social events, and other community building at mealtimes and in the evenings. Such a conference would be more accountable, useful, and – if billed as a training – would get **better congregational, advisor, and administration support**. This would not be possible this year, but possibly in the future when the Youth Office is back up to a full staff.

Conclusion

Once again, we are deeply sorry and wish this decision could have been made some other way, but hope that you will hear these concerns, and agree that training, resource development, social justice and anti-racism/anti-oppression work, all the while supporting youth in congregations must become a higher priority for us as UUA staff, rather than investing so much in supporting a problematic conference like Con Con. We know this will be a difficult time for some, but we look forward to big improvements to our service to UU youth everywhere. We also hope that even if you disagree about our authority to make this decision, you will at least understand, and hopefully support, the decision itself.

In faith,

The Youth Office

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