

What I Learned About Membership at My First GA

Linda Law

Everybody is searching for sanctuary: “a place of order and tranquility, a retreat from the disharmony of the world.” ~Writer, artist, and teacher, Laura Cerwinske

Are We Creating That Sanctuary?

- This religious community is based not on a shared creed, but on a shared covenant (7 Principles). What we do, not just what we believe, is this religion.
- People want to be connected, to be inspired, to grow spiritually, to be themselves, to be encouraged to think for themselves, and to support the work of this movement.

First Impressions (the First 7 Minutes)

- People entering our door are in some sort of transition. They're curious.
- First impressions are critically important
 - Finding the building
 - Locating the correct door to enter
 - Being greeted immediately, and warmly
 - The minister should be at the front door with the Greeters (Alex agrees to do this as much as possible in the future)
 - Having their children, if any, acknowledged and escorted to RE if appropriate
 - Being approached by congregational members during coffee time
 - Congregational members should invite visitors to sit with them in the service

The Feel of the Place

- Everybody is seeking an atmosphere that is
 - Friendly
 - Warm
 - Peaceful & quiet
 - Not chaotic & frantic

The Service

- Religious services need to have these elements:
 - Joyful vibe
 - Celebratory Music of all kinds
 - Inspiring words
 - Inclusive tone: visitors must not feel like they've dropped in on somebody else's Family Reunion
 - Always use full names including people and places such as The Mountain UU Camp in Highlands, NC (not just The Mountain)
 - Never use acronyms or abbreviations (RE, DRE, HUULAs, UUA, SUUSI, etc.) = very exclusionary language!

Lee Stevens

(text not available)

The Future of Unitarian Universalism

Riley Stevens

The Unitarians and Universalists had a long history of Social Actions that continued after our merger, most notably with our involvement with the Civil Rights movement. Despite that history, UUism is losing ground to the more orthodox, fundamental proselytizing religions. So how does UU convey itself to future generations as a viable religion? We don't sell certainty or creed or dogma. How *can* we convey our liberal ideals and our diffuse, individualized concept of our religion?

This was my first GA meeting and like everyone else, I came back with something to chew on. I'm going to touch on one small part of Galen Guengerich's talk about the future of the faith, specifically how his concept of God fits within a UU framework. I'm at best agnostic and most often called an atheist by those who witness to me, so I was surprised to be drawn to his comments.

Galen Guengerich is the minister of All Souls Church in NYC. He sees worship as a contemplation of the mysteries of God. I was almost asleep when he started defining this God, looking at what is forever and what is ephemeral. If we think about what is permanent, we think about rocks and concrete. Yet the reality is that those objects are fleeting and eventually return to rubble. The atoms don't disappear; they remain forever in some form. We have a name for that collection of atoms – we call it the Universe. Similarly, when our very finite lives end, our existence, our ideas, our relationships don't disappear. There is a domain for all of these human experiences. If we give a name to these collective experiences and memories, perhaps it is God. God is our sense that all of these experiences matter.

God is also our name for the future possibilities, and the concept that the future is possible at all. Fate. But free thinkers like us believe that we must have choice. Guengerich says that choice enters the picture through *us*. We are the human form of the divine, the face of God, the hands of God. God isn't a puppet master. God depends on us to act. God is not a being, but exists as a concept that ties the future and the past and becomes our sense of right. This idea doesn't require us to believe something miraculous about God. It requires us to believe something miraculous about ourselves.

We bear the burden of the past. We are the hope of the future. We create the God we can believe in.

Beyond our individual experience of Spirituality, beyond the philosophical concepts of theology, we define our religion, the comprehensive vision of the right, the set of beliefs and practices that guide our lives and relationship with the world. UUs don't do dogma, and we can't stand creed, but a big part of our UU religion is a commitment to building a more just society. For UU and the UUFC to remain significant and grow as a liberal religion in America, the UUA, our congregation and each member will need to bring action in support our religious convictions. We need to become the face and hands of God.

Three hours won't fit into 2 minutes, and this is a pitiful excerpt of a huge topic. If this concept was vague, it's in the telling and not the tale. I'll make the recording of his presentation available in the library once I learn how. Check it out - you'll find a pile of thought provoking ideas.

Governance at GA

Cindy Lee

I chose to go to sessions that related to shared ministry, which we here at UUFC strive to do. The session on how to establish a lay pastoral care system was inspiring. The First UU Church of Richmond, VA, presented how they put together their program. The program consists two parts: a first responders type team and the Lay Pastoral Care team. The first responders are the casserole brigade who are there for the emergencies. The Lay Pastoral Care team is the long-term response. Both teams receive a weekend of training and the Lay Pastoral Care members have one year of experience before being formally commissioned by the congregation. Each LPC team member commits to 7 hours a month and 2 to 3 hours are for training and debriefing. For example, the Alzheimer's Association came in to give training on the spiritual needs of people suffering from dementia. The minister is heavily involved in all aspects. Rev. Jean Pupke said it is important for the minister to make regular contact with everyone being cared for, otherwise the person might think they are dying if the minister suddenly shows up for a visit. The identities of the congregants that are receiving LPC visits are kept confidential. About half of those requesting or recommended for pastoral care are suffering from disease or long-term injuries while half are simply isolated from the community through mental illness, dementia, or they simply can no longer drive. Members of the LPC team spoke of their very moving experiences with congregants. One spoke of a woman who lost her cherished husband who simply cried throughout their first meeting but after a few meetings began to envision the next phase of her life and what she could do. Others spoke of sharing hymns with stroke victims or simply listening to a recording of a recent sermon together. One team member said that the training taught her how to do deep listening, that it is important not to take up bandwidth for your own concerns. I was inspired by the session and believe that we can create a similar shared ministry of pastoral care here.

A couple of the sessions on governance were also inspiring. Gini Courter, the UUA Moderator, led one and she has such a great sense of humor that most of the time we were all chuckling. But she imparted a lot of wisdom. One pearl was that participating in governance is one of the key ministry efforts of the lay members of the community, which I have to say caught me by surprise. You mean going to Board meetings is part of ministry? But Gini made a convincing argument and I felt comforted by that perspective. Another nugget was that we must build the skills to be in community. For example, she asked how many congregations require training in how to be in covenant or non-violent communication before someone can sign the membership book? We are people of a promise not of a creed. Gini also said that transparency is a wonderful policy for a board to have but empowerment and input are more important to community health than transparency. And there was much more that I am not going to get into now. Some other time. But I felt inspired to bring some of those ideas to life at UUFC.

I learned much more than this. I was struck by the enthusiasm I heard for our faith and the wide open horizons we have before us for the future. I came away reinvigorated for another year of governance with you all.

The last sessions that I want to share with you are ones on Campus Ministry and Young Adult Ministry. From the campus ministry session led by a chaplain from San Diego with service to UC-San Diego and San Diego State Universities and another from UNC Chapel Hill. Two points I want to share are 1) don't expect a big group. Given that UUs are such a small group anyway with about 160,000 adult members nationally, you should expect that one-tenth of 1% of the undergraduate population will be UU. UNC-Chapel Hill has a range of 9 to 20 who come to the meetings while San Diego State has about 6 on a regular basis and UC-San Diego has as few as 1 or 2 at some meetings. The key is presence—to show up on a regular basis. The second point was made by Alice King of San Diego: "They may not be ours but ours are going away somewhere else and we hope they will be cared for." The session on Young Adult Ministry was also inspiring. One presenter spoke of their long-distance

ministry for young adults in the congregation who have gone away to school or to jobs somewhere else. The congregation sends Valentine cards to them to let them know they have not been forgotten. Another talked about how the congregation discussed building a “crying room” for the young people with infants until someone spoke up and said why not a “clearing your throat room” for all the older people. They compromised by placing rocking chairs and quilts with toys in different places throughout the sanctuary to let people know that babies were welcome.

Volunteering for General Assembly

Kathy Crain

I was a volunteer for the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) General Assembly in Charlotte last month. I did it because most adventures that I take, I do on the cheap. While in Charlotte, I stayed at a campground and took the train in to the convention center. The General Assembly is definitely a reputable convention with a price tag to match. Registration discounts are given to ministers; scholarships are available as needed and requested. Giving 24 hours of volunteer time to the UUA allowed me free access to the General Assembly for 5 days. If you are interested in doing this, just search the UUA web page a couple of months in advance and complete the application of interest.

I was given this T-shirt when I arrived at GA. Explicit instructions were given to wear this shirt only during my volunteer shifts, so my co-volunteers and I would change repeatedly during breaks when we would venture out into the convention center. I was assigned to work the registration desk to help distribute the materials to the 3500 folks who had pre-registered, and to point to the room where on-site registration could happen across the hall. At 1:00 on Wednesday, when General Assembly began, my co-workers and I looked at the eager crowd of hundreds in a coiled line waiting for us to begin distribution. Getting the required badge and giving the required instructions to each participant was organized chaos that afternoon, and my coworkers and I became very familiar with each other's armpits and elbows as we shared the filing system.

I felt like I was the UUA during this time. My co-volunteers and I were told that the first interaction with General Assembly for most attendees would be with us. I was the UUA. I had a UUA groupie experience as I thought that the pretty blonde woman who requested her registration materials from me was the infamous Karen Armstrong, even though she told me that her name was Kaaren Anderson... and, since Cindy and Lee were right there at that time, I gave them my impression as well and they shared their enthusiasm for Ms. Armstrong's books with Ms. Anderson. Two days later, Cindy told me of my error. But Ms. Anderson *is* an esteemed UU minister and gave a very very good sermon to us Sunday morning where she referred to Karen Armstrong's Ware Lecture the previous evening. She complimented Ms. Armstrong well.

I also had a kiss on the cheek from an appreciative lead musician as he pulled me across the registration desk after I helped him to find an important lost black notebook. It was hard to not remember that when I watched him conduct a stunning performance of music during the Service of the Living Tradition.

I am the UUA. I made new friends with my co-volunteers... one was from the Knoxville, TN, fellowship and shared how her fellowship has strengthened since the shooting that infamous Sunday morning 3 years ago this month. My co-volunteers and I would reflect on programs that we were able to attend, and we discussed our fellowships and our programs. And we were all invited to a lovely and intimate volunteer appreciation party in the UUA planning suite of a close-by hotel. I am the UUA.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "It is one of the beautiful compensations of this life that no one can sincerely try to help another without helping himself." I volunteered to meet a budget, and what I received for my free attendance was priceless.

The Welcoming Congregation

Carol Ward

"The Welcoming Congregation" doesn't just mean that people are friendly and helpful to everyone, saying "Hi" and "Hello" and "How are you?" We hope we are that way always, but we are more than that. "The Welcoming Congregation" is actually the name earned by UUFC after our completion of a year of intensive monthly meetings, movies, and programs. Our congregation voted to apply for and accept that designation in September 2005, under the leadership of our former minister Cynthia Prescott. Kathy Crain and I helped to schedule and hold those meetings for UUFC and the community. We were the first official UU congregation in South Carolina to get this title, but now we gladly share that rating with Charleston, Columbia, Greenville, and Spartanburg. Our state can be proud that there are at least 5 religious homes for *inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people*. That is what it means to be a "Welcoming Congregation."

It wasn't an easy designation to earn and I discovered at General Assembly that we probably need to do some refresher courses on "Welcoming Congregation," at least every five years to introduce the new members and visitors to these policies and to remind the long-term members about how important it is to keep these credentials up to date. When we were at General Assembly in Charlotte, we celebrated the actions of the state of New York that voted to proclaim the New York Marriage Equality Vote. The UUA President Peter Morales said: "I enthusiastically applaud the actions of the New York Legislature and the leadership of Gov. Andrew Cuomo in establishing marriage equality in that state. With this action, New York has demonstrated its commitment to the American ideal that all citizens are entitled to equal protections and rights under the law. . . . With this decision, our country takes another step on the long journey toward justice for all. . . . Unitarian Universalists are committed to standing on the side of love until the freedom to marry is the right of all Americans."

Our vision goes beyond the Welcoming Congregation Program. By taking this first step, we hope to explore more issues than those presented here---like sexism, racism, ableism, to name just a few. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation will act as a catalyst to learning more about ourselves and to ending exclusion. Only when we are truly open to the wealth of diversity in our world will the inherent worth and dignity of every person be affirmed with a large voice.

It is about time for UUFC to re-establish our credentials as a Welcoming Congregation. Alex Holt has agreed to help us with this procedure, but even the UUA hasn't a full curriculum for this program. We will need to work with the UUA Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns to renew our qualifications. I welcome that challenge and I hope that I can find some allies from this congregation to help in this process in the future.

Reflection on GA 2011

Sandra Sanderson

This was my sixth GA, although I have not attended one in many years. A lot of things in Charlotte were just as I expected based on my previous GAs. I looked forward to events such as the banner parade at the Opening Session, The Ware Lecture and The Service of the Living Tradition. That service is always a high point as we honor our clergy – those freshly minted by seminaries, those receiving their official status as “fully fellowshipped”, the retirees and those who have died during the past year. Singing *Rank by Rank* with 3,000-4,000 other voices, as the ministers process, is a real high for me. I also enjoyed seeing folks who I hadn't crossed paths with in many years, basically since the time I served on the District Extension Committee. I was constantly amazed at how much they had all aged. Go figure. It was a real kick to share the GA experience with so many friends from my own congregation. And I had a grand time being with Joni and Les Grady who left UUFC a year ago.

I was UUFC's third delegate along with newbies Cindy and Carol. We all did our duty, attending all the Plenary sessions – hearing all the reports (UUA Finances are better this year and the Service Committee is extremely proud of the social justice work they performed on our behalf and we learned that future UU ministerial students will be spending time abroad to do social justice work while gaining a wider perspective). We listened to lots of comments and debate over Bylaws changes. I am here to report that GA delegates voted overwhelmingly to accept the name change of our district from the Thomas Jefferson District to our new, “politically-correct” name, Southeast District. Slightly more contentious was the debate over plans to overhaul the makeup of our unwieldy 26-member UUA Board of Trustees to a slimmed down Board of just 14 members. The proposal, endorsed by the current board, called for a complete dismantling of a system of representation by 19 geographical districts trustees. Instead the new Board will be composed entirely of At-Large Trustees. The nominating committee is charged with developing a slate of candidates with inclusivity and diversity as watchwords.

And while there were a couple more Bylaws amendments adopted with little fanfare, the last Bylaws amendment brought many to the Pro and Con microphones. In the end, the Assembly voted to suspend Actions of Immediate Witness at next year's GA in keeping with efforts to minimize business sessions and free up attendees to participate in the special programming associated with a one-of-a-kind “Justice GA” in Phoenix. On Friday we adopted a Statement of Conscience that has been in the works since 2008, entitled “Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice.” Lastly we adopted 3 of the 4 Actions of Immediate Witness which delegates passionate about Social Justice Issues crafted on-site in what are called “Mini-Assembly” meetings.

I attended a number of workshops, concentrating on Stewardship, Mission and Finance topics.

General Assemblies, along with District and Cluster events are wonderful opportunities to have one's UU horizons expanded – we here in Clemson are *not* alone. Like all the others who have spoken this morning, I came home from Charlotte with my batteries recharged for the exciting year ahead of us here in Clemson.

One last unsolicited piece of advice – when out of town on a Sunday, make the effort to attend another UU congregation. I have always found it a joy to experience another congregation.

GA Reflection 2011

Martha Alexander

I think of General Assembly as summer camp for grown ups. It is a once in a life time opportunity and I have been fortunate to have had that opportunity three times. Each time has had an event with special meaning for me. In 1984 at Ohio State University, I was a delegate representing UU of Las Vegas as their newly elected president. The special opportunity was singing in the choir. In 2002 in Quebec, I was a delegate representing UUFC. The most meaningful occurrence for me was carrying our banner, but before the banner parade got underway a man had a heart attack and a minister began singing "Spirit of Life" which we all sang for between 30 minutes to an hour until EMS got him stabilized and transported. He lived to go home to Colorado. At this 2011 GA in Charlotte, the most memorable event was the first time ever service at GA honoring those who serve in the military. Several UU military chaplains spoke along with Rev. Sinkford who has a son in military service and Rev. Jan Christian who wrote *Leave No Brother Behind, A Sister's War Memoir* about her brother who died in Viet Nam. The basic meaning through out this service was that while we may not approve of war, we honor those who serve in our armed forces.

However, it was all a very special time for me. I attended many workshops and especially loved the services with all 4,000+ of us with the four big screens so that no matter where I sat I could see everything that was going on, on the stage and even on the floor. Music is always a highlight for me. Amazing musicians played piano, organ, strings, and horns. Imagine the joy of singing with over 4,000 Unitarian Universalists!