Report from UU General Assembly 2007: Part 1

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The Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, held each year during the summer, offers a unique opportunity for UUs from around the world to take part in important UUA debates and resolutions, share fellowship with one another, bring back ideas to their congregations, develop their leadership skills, renew their connections to their faith and deepen their commitment to improving the world around them. It’s also an excuse to eat, drink and relax in new surroundings with like-minded folks.

GA2007’s theme was “Choices That Matter”, and featured a lengthy process (Open Space Technology) for choosing a broad vision statement that will guide UUA’s priorities for the next five years. Attention was also paid to issues such as denominational growth and the critical importance of moral values in a pluralistic society.

Location: This year’s GA took place from Wednesday, June 20 to Sunday, June 24 in beautiful Portland, Oregon. The weather was mostly cool and sunny and the superb transportation system was free! Bibliophiles know that Portland is the home of Powell’s vast bookstore, which I visited late Sunday before leaving on the redeye flight.

UUF people at GA: Four people attended from our congregation, including Paul Avery, incoming President Al Tweedy and our Ministers LoraKim Joyner and Meredith Garmon. (It’s worth noting that our all-time best showing occurred when 10 people from UUF, not including the minister, attended GA2006 in St. Louis.) This was my third consecutive GA and Al’s second. I am writing this initial report because Al is taking a two month bus trip on his way back to Gainesville. At least he’s not hitching rides.

Al also attended UU University, an intense leadership training workshop inaugurated in 2006 that is held just before GA (thanks to Shelby Havens for raising funds to offset the additional costs of this workshop). I ran into Louise Ulrich, our Interim Minister during 2005 – 2006. She departs soon to Edinburg, Scotland for yet another interim ministry.

My mobility was unfortunately limited by the aftereffects of a sprained ankle, and I was not able to attend the Wednesday afternoon Florida Ingathering (where we meet our Florida UU friends) and the colorful evening gala procession. However, Al carried the UUF banner proudly.

GA2007 facts and impressions: This year there were 5,697 attendees from 643 congregations (60% of all UUA congregations and 2.5% of UUA membership), a figure second only to that of the massive 2003 event held in Boston, the Mother Ship of Unitarian Universalism. About 40% (2,428) of these were delegates empowered by their congregations to vote during plenary sessions, where the business of the UUA is conducted and where resolutions are debated and voted on. Al and I were delegates this year.

My (highly subjective) impression was that attendees seemed to be spread further apart in their hotels this year. This made it challenging to find large concentrations of UUs to hang with, particularly since they tended to blend into the population of this rather liberal city. I used my own rule of thumb, honed by keen observation at previous GAs, to “follow the gray hair and Birkenstocks”. Works every time.
Although I will describe GA events in next month’s installment, let me be clear: it is utterly impossible for an individual, no matter how diligent, peripatetic and sleep deprived, to capture anything more than a narrow slice of the rich bazaar that is GA. There were literally dozens of activities going on at any one time, totaling, by my count, 312 gatherings, plenaries, musical sessions, planning meetings, workshops, lectures and worship services over the five day period. The Exhibition Hall had dozens of booths of UUA-affiliated organizations as well as vendors with interesting things to buy. Books are my ruination; as in the previous two years, I came home lugging a suitcase crammed with books.

**More GA2007 information:** The GA website is [www.uua.org/ga](http://www.uua.org/ga), which includes links to the GA2007 coverage, including pdf files of the printed program, an “official” blog and summaries of some of the sessions. Streaming video is available free on the website for about 30 of the larger sessions. Video and audio media were also available for many of the other sessions, but unfortunately had to be ordered by July 25. I will provide more GA2007 links later from my website [www.phys.ufl.edu/~avery/uu/ga2007](http://www.phys.ufl.edu/~avery/uu/ga2007) as well as electronic transcriptions of 28 handwritten pages of notes.

**Next month:** Part 2 of this report will cover a few GA2007 activities, as well as some ideas that can benefit our congregation.