

Report from UU General Assembly 2007: Part 3

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This is the third part of GA2007 coverage. This and other material can be found online at www.phys.ufl.edu/~avery/uu/ga2007/. Will I ever get this series completed?

I am devoting this part of my report to workshops I attended on young adults, including not only middle school and high school students, but also the 18 – 35 so-called “Gap” years where congregations have trouble attracting and retaining members. These workshops provided many insights that we at UUFG should pay attention to if we want to provide a welcoming environment for youth and young adults, as well as young families.

Young Adult Resources: Several resources were discussed briefly as places where young adults can make connections, form new communities and deepen their UU experience. I will provide a longer list in the online version of this article.

- Young Adult Campus Ministry (www25.uua.org/ya-cm) is the official UUA-sponsored young adult organization. The website hosts many activities and resources.
- FUUSE is an online UU young adult resource at www.fuuse.com with 2800 members, according to the website. I don’t quite get how it all works, but there are forums, a web broadcast station, a place to buy stuff and various community activities.
- The Church of the Younger Fellowship (CYF, uucyf.org) provides resources to young adults not connected to particular churches (similar to CLF).

GAP years 18–35: Session #3006, “Transforming the GAP into a Growth Engine via UU Campus Centers” was led by people from the Channing-Murray Foundation in Champaign-Urbana. They introduced the idea of regional campus centers for promoting campus growth as well as other ideas for retaining graduating high school seniors. I found the regional campus center concept intriguing, but it appears to be designed for areas with high densities of colleges and universities.

Youth Groups: I was highly impressed with two other sessions. The first, “Nuts and Bolts of Healthy Youth Groups” (#2018), offered important insights for why young adults seek out Youth Group (meet different friends & peers, forge deeper connections, engage in meaningful activities, find a safe environment, acquire leadership skills, etc.). The moderators also offered insights about six activities that they claim define a healthy YG: Worship, Learning, Leadership, Community Building, Social Action and Youth-Adult Relations. They also identified six YG killers: unqualified advisors, lack of planning, unbalanced activities, an unwelcoming atmosphere, lack of church support, and poor communication. Of paramount importance to healthy youth groups is the presence of appropriate, trained YG advisors and leaders. Counselors can be unfit or just not appropriate for a number of reasons and it is important for a church to step in and make changes when necessary. These and many other insights are discussed at length in a workshop summary that can be found by typing the Session title into Google.

Supporting Youth Adults: Session #2072, “Supporting and Sustaining Young Adult Members” (sponsored by UUA staff), offered additional insights for integrating young

adults into the life of a congregation. For example, one church forced its 25 YAs to join committees and gave blanket permission to have them transform the work of the committees (a strong example of empowerment). This worked out very well and 5 YAs ended up on the worship committee. Others stressed the importance of not pigeon-holing YAs in youth-oriented activities, since young people out of college often have highly useful skills, e.g., event planning, accounting, elementary education, publishing, web development, elementary particle physics, etc. Since many adults are sometimes uncomfortable reaching out to young adults, it is important to establish strategies that intentionally welcome them. Successful approaches include everything from establishing a YA professional position (something for us to think about) to having a young person act as a greeter outside the church before service (don't smirk, I have been pleasantly surprised by how I react when someone greets me warmly as I walk in the door of a church I have not attended before).

UU Web Resources: Session #3055, "Using the Web to Nurture the Spirit", highlighted how innovative uses of the web can benefit UU congregations and attract younger members. Many ideas were discussed, but here are a few. UU World's website at www.uuworld.org is attracting attention from online writers and news organizations (through linking, for example). Beliefnet.com's website has a Belief O' Matic test that allows you to measure where you fall on the theological spectrum. There is even a First Unitarian Universalist Church of Second Life (www.fuucsl.org) which appears on the Second Life virtual world.

Blogs: In the same session, UU World editor Chris Walton described the rapidly growing presence of UU blogs. Blogs provide a way for ordinary UUs to provide commentary informed by their UU ideals and provide fascinating reading. Walton writes a blog under the name "Philocrites" and has collected a large number of UU blogs at www.philocrites.com/archives/003616.html. I highly recommend his site and hope that thinkers among us can take advantage of this powerful communication method.