

Report from UU General Assembly 2007: Part 2

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In Part 1 of this report (which appeared in the August 2007 Millhopper and can be found at www.phys.ufl.edu/~avery/uu/ga2007), I offered my basic impressions as well as some facts and figures about GA (homepage www.uua.org/ga). My plan was to summarize some of the sessions in more detail in this (September) issue and put notes and other material online at the above address.

All well and good, but imagine my surprise and delight to open the August issue and see several GA-related pieces! Whether one should attribute this good result to serendipity (the gods smiling upon us) or undeserved dumb luck (my strong suspicion), I leave to the philosophers. Reverend Garmon wrote movingly and at length about GA resolutions and discussions about core UU values and their impact on our congregation. His comments deserve multiple readings. Al Tweedy shared his joy of communing with 6,000 like-minded souls and his impressions of UU University, which finished its second year. Jack Kulas provided valuable information about several key GA events and how to view them in video (thank you, Jack!). So let me share a few more thoughts on GA2007.

Growth: This year's GA had a strong focus on growth, which was addressed in several plenary sessions and workshops. Some facts: UUA membership in 2004 stood approximately at 218,000 members, a number that is moderately lower than that of the 1960s (though most other mainline denominations have fared worse) even as the U.S. population increased by 50%. Frequent mention was made of a new growth initiative called "Now is the Time" (www.uua.org/giving/nowis/) and the need to end congregational isolation by applying our covenant of relationship to churches, specifically of making UU congregations more effective by working with one another and with non-UU congregations to attain common goals. Videos on five "breakthrough" congregations that were shown in plenary and followed up in separate workshops demonstrated how committed congregations make a difference in the lives of their members and their communities, factors that incidentally lead to growth.

An excellent presentation on growth with concrete ideas was given by Terasa Cooley in session #3036, "Why Liberal Churches Are Growing". Her talk, which can be found at www.mbdoua.org/resources-services/downloads/, should be required reading by the UUFG leadership. She pointed out that a small minority of UU congregations account for most denominational growth. Also, the fastest growing liberal and conservative churches either in (1) growing surrounding communities, (2) newer congregations or (3) areas with higher than average racial diversity. Her message is "don't be part of a stable landscape".

Interfaith dialog: Session #4010 sponsored by the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) presented interesting ideas for promoting interfaith dialog, including interfaith dinners and discussions where ordinary people from different faith traditions sit down and talk respectfully with one another in friendly surroundings. Several people commented on how these get-togethers, which can be done informally in people's homes, enrich the participants and lead over time to deeper levels of trust between con-

gregations. It seems to me that such an approach would complement and enhance UUFG's relationship with our nearby faith institutions and expand our ability to be effective in our community. How can we do this?

Most memorable session: GA memories are highly personal, but the most moving session for me was #4049, "The Pentagon Papers Then and Now: UUs Confronting Government Secrecy". This session, featuring Daniel Ellsberg, former Senator Mike Gravel and then-UUA president Robert West, laid bare the story behind the Pentagon Papers and the proud role UUA and our Beacon Press played by publishing the papers in the face of fierce government attempts to suppress them. This was an absolutely riveting session that demonstrated for those who saw it the critical importance of free speech and a free press for maintaining our freedoms. How these lessons from 1972 apply to recent events was driven home by several panel members. I have never been prouder of being a UU than when I left that session.

Next month: Part 3 of this series (will it ever end?) will cover several sessions I attended on young adults as well as UUFG participation in GA2008, which will be in Ft. Lauderdale, a mere 300 miles away. Several congregations sent 30 or more participants to GA2007 (51 from a church 500 miles away!). Is 2008 our year?