

General Assembly, Democracy and Community
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
Sunday, January 27, 2019
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill and Members of the Congregation

Introduction
General Assembly, Democracy and Community

About four centuries ago, give or take a few years, religious dissidents in England got into boats and sailed west, landing on the eastern shores of this continent. They were not free to practice their faith in their homeland, so they migrated. I am not going to pretend that they were enlightened in all things, because they were culturally racist and genocidal, operating under the horrific mandate called the Doctrine of Discovery, and that is a part of history we must not forget.

However, for better or for worse, they were our religious forbears, and actually the forbears of the form of democracy that is practiced in this nation. Our UU congregations live out that heritage in the ways we are organized, how we build community and exercise our faith in the world.

Those migrants created churches based, not on doctrine, but on a covenant for how they would organize their corporate congregations and support each other in community. They called this the “free church” tradition, in that they governed themselves democratically, rather than being subject to the power of popes or bishops in a denominational hierarchy.

One version of such a covenant is taken from that of the First Church of Dedham, Massachusetts, written in the 1600’s, and it reads:

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
Our truth partial and our love uneven,
From our own experience
and from the witness of our faith tradition
We believe
That new light is ever waiting to break
through individual hearts and minds
to illumine the ways of humankind.

That there is mutual strength
in willing cooperation,
and that the bonds of love keep open
the gates of freedom.
Therefore we pledge to walk together in the ways of truth and affection,
as best we know them now
Or may learn them in days to come,
That we and our children may be fulfilled
And that we may speak to the world
With words and actions
Of peace and goodwill.

In that spirit, this congregation comes together in covenant, as owners and stewards – you elect your own leaders to chart the course and make decisions in good faith; through your work in service and financial contributions you operate the congregation as a free-standing corporate entity; and when times get rough, you work through the challenges and the possibilities in a spirit of collaboration and commitment.

Likewise, our denominational body, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, is a democratically organized free association of about a thousand like-spirited congregations. Every congregation sends representatives to our annual General Assembly, making decisions in a democratic process, charting the course, learning and sharing ways we can strengthen this faith tradition. The large insert in your order of service tells about the upcoming General Assembly, to be held this June in Spokane, and invites you to consider whether you would like to represent this congregation as a delegate at that amazing gathering of UUs.

We will now hear from some of the folks who attended the General Assembly last June.

GA – REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE

Reflection from Bunny Hodas

I was born and raised in a UU congregation in Michigan, just outside of Detroit. We did not have the fabulous RE programs that exist here and now, but I had the benefit of parents who were involved both locally and nationally in the vision of UUism. This led to my involvement with UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, about six years ago, which led me to seek out this congregation for fellowship, community and to connect with my UU “people” here in Phoenix. I quickly became involved here because I love the mission, vision, the enthusiasm and commitment of our members and friends to create a beloved community for themselves and the greater world around us.

With this National to local route for me, it made sense to start attending General Assembly, known as “GA” to “UU’s” who love abbreviations and acronyms. This year will be my fifth GA. I was UUCP’s only on-site delegate when I attended my first one four years ago and had only been a member here for four months. I have witnessed a lot of change for the good in the last four years and I’m excited to see this year’s improvements. I see the UUA working seriously on their White Supremacy issues and allowing vulnerability as they strive to become more inclusive in their practices.

At GA there are so many great experiences and learning opportunities to take advantage of. To do governance or worship with a couple thousand people is amazing. It can be frustrating and exhilarating. The speakers and ministers who preach in the large sessions are awesome.

There are breakout sessions and smaller groups for pretty much any area of interest that you may have. I try to split my choices between my areas of personal interest and areas that I know are helpful to UUCP. Two years ago I found myself on a stewardship track that I would have sworn I’d never be doing, but I learned so much and got such great new thoughts and concepts in terms of how I look at stewardship, that I felt it was important to serve in that capacity now, during our transition, even though I don’t have a background in it.

When I volunteered, like all involved, I had no idea of the current events that would lead us to this moment in time, but now I am more committed than ever because this community holds my heart and my vision.

Attending General Assembly is also my opportunity to interact with friends I've made and get the latest info on the UUA and the UUSC and keep tabs on what's of interest nationally and internationally.

Meeting and interacting with UU's from around the country and participating in our evolution is cool and inspiring. I highly recommend GA! And my best piece of advice – plan ahead and PACE YOURSELF!!

Reflection from Joan Gale

We began our journey in Minnesota and Wisconsin visiting my relatives who are Evangelical Christians. They are always welcoming and loving to us, but I know they think of us as heathens because we are involved in Unitarian Universalism. One comment that we did not follow up on was “you know you can live forever...”

When they asked where we were going next, I said the GA for our church, they just looked down and then changed the subject. In spite of those types of comments, I'm always glad to visit them, as they are enjoyable, interesting and as cousins we all want to keep in touch with one another. And this year the evangelical focus provided a striking contrast to our experiences with UU's at the GA.

It had been sunny weather, but we drove into rain and cold when arriving in Kansas City. The people however, were all smiles, warmth and full of joy. It is so exciting to walk into a room where we all have a similar understanding and expectations of our congregations. I could relax! And when I saw other UUCP friends I relaxed even more.

The general sessions were well attended and I spoke with many congregants from across the country. One of the benefits is talking about how each congregation works. People are familiar with UUCP, I would imagine because of Rev. Susan and they were interested in our size and adult programs that we are able to offer. And it was a pleasure to see Rev. Susan on stage – she seems right at home in her new role. I was a voting member, but I found it a tedious process. I heard complaints from others also and I believe they were discussing options to handle it more efficiently.

There were numerous break-out sessions and I couldn't attend all that appealed to me. The session on the ministerial search process left me reassured that we are in the competent hands of Rev. Margret to guide us. And we are fortunate to be able to offer a well-established congregation that is large enough to have involved members willing to help with the transition. The only take-away I learned was to be totally honest about our shortcomings as well as the positives we have to offer.

I also attended a session on Sunday morning services. Currently, many congregations are moving towards a much less formal, activity centered model. And they are exploring varying times of the day and different days.

Although the breakout sessions provide information, the real benefit for me is the sense of being in a larger community where we all have similar but not the same beliefs. There is a security in that knowledge that we are a vital part of this country. That is important these days! I encourage all of you to attend.

Reflection from Carol Peterson

For me, GA 2018 was enlightening from start to finish! Being surrounded by UU siblings dedicated to dismantling all systems of oppression felt incredibly hopeful. Rev. Susan reminded

us that love is our UU foundation and that this is "no time for a casual faith". Brittany Packnett, powerful keynote speaker at the esteemed Ware Lecture, offered us the question: "After every donation, e-mail, word and action ask yourself: did I just uphold supremacy or work to end it?"

I returned home after attending GA feeling "woke"! Since then, I've been thinking and reading more deeply about systems of oppression, and finding ways to put my values into action. GA 2019 in Spokane, June 19-23!

Reflection from Bonnie White

General Assembly offers a rich and broad experience of what it means to be UU. Surrounded by like-minded people, it feels like and is a safe zone to share thoughts and experiences. Being in this broader community feels like home. Ed and I both feel we have a community within UUCP that will be there when we need it as well as an opportunity for us to feel we have a purpose within that community. General Assembly was the first opportunity to realize how extensive this Unitarian Universalist community really is.

Being in a convention center-sized room, filled with people all singing "Blue Boat Home," "Answering the Call of Love," and other songs known so well to all of us here at UUCP gave me goosebumps. When Rev. Susan came to the pulpit on Sunday, threw out her arms and declared, "It is a beautiful day, and it is good to be together again," I had tears in my eyes. I know that our larger community, the UUA, is in good hands.

For me the big takeaway was a new way of looking at my white privileged upbringing and successful life. What is so easy to take for granted as "that's just the way it is" isn't just the way it is for people of color. Every element of my life is affected by this outlook.

Listening to the Ware Lecture by Brittany Packnett was an eye-opener. I can no longer be oblivious to my own thoughts and actions. Is what I am saying coming from a place of privilege? Is what I am doing reflecting my privileged status that has been my comfort zone? Is my upbringing my default position. So change has to be made. Where to start?

I have made a pledge to myself that I will no longer stay silent when something is said that is unkind, prejudicial, or harmful to another person or group of people. Will I be able to always stand up to this commitment? Maybe not. Will I be able, more often than not, to follow my own mandate? I truly hope so. Because if I don't, I am the problem.

Reflection from Bill Snowden

Imagine 2600 people of all ages, races, and sexual identities coming together in one place to share ideas about our denomination and ways to make our churches, cities, states, and planet a better place to live. General Assembly in Kansas City, MO was all that and more for me. When I was in the conference hall I felt like I would be respected, expected to share my opinion, and ready to listen to others. I have never attended a conference where I had this level of belonging, of being appreciated. Outside the convention hall was not so nurturing, but we were encouraged to travel with a buddy and there was a safety team trained to intervene if there were problems from police or others.

There were breakout sessions each day covering topics such as congregational life, leadership, social, climate, and racial justice, history, outreach, pastoral care, religious education and more. Each session covering some aspect of these topics was led by a trained facilitator, who either shared their knowledge about a subject or asked questions and allowed us to share in small groups. I attended a session to add to my spiritual practice: meditation through music and chanting.

As a delegate, I spent most of my time in sessions discussing and voting on amendments to the UUA bylaws, actions of immediate witness and congregational study action issue. I am so thankful to have been a part of this amazing gathering of UU's.

REFLECTION

Democracy and Community

Living in a democratically organized community, learning “to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now or may learn them in days to come,” is a journey of learning. The members of this congregation will not always agree on the best course of action, and the decisions and actions, the occasional disagreements, will sometimes be painful.

It is relatively easy to trust -- or even ignore! -- our elected leaders when resources are abundant, when there are few difficult choices to be made, and when there is time to start contemplating a decision far ahead of when it must be made. That trust is more difficult to achieve, and the conversations become more emotionally charged, when there is scarcity of resources and little planning time, so that it is harder to bring in all voices and invite many to come together on the best course of action.

This UU Congregation of Phoenix is a strong and resilient community of faith, having practiced that challenge to walk together through difficulty at many times in your rich and tumultuous history. Today you undertake another exercise in democracy, as you hold your annual mid-winter congregational meeting, and learn about the financial challenges that face this organization, and the reasons behind the difficult decisions your leadership has made. Everyone is invited to stay for the meeting, whether or not you are a member, to observe and participate in the exercise of democratic process, engaging once more in learning to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now or may learn them in days to come.

As Unitarian Universalists, as members of this congregation, we clasp hands to live in the world, to answer the call of love as best we know how, answering the call of love.

Sources

Wesley, Alice Blair. *Our Covenant: the 2000-01 Minns Lectures*. Chicago, IL: Meadville Lombard Theological School Press.