

General Assembly 2009 Report to UU Visalia “Standing on the Side of Love”

Review, Summary, & Excerpts from the 2009 UUA General Assembly
held in Salt Lake City, June, 2009
by Harold and Janet Wood

It is hard to summarize 4 ½ days of events, with over 3,000 people attending. We began as participants in the Banner Parade, along with hundreds of other congregations. We ended with a rousing Sunday evening worship service where we installed the newly elected President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In between we had major “plenary” events to vote on the business of the Association, time spent browsing exhibits and talking informally with other UUs, attending worship services not just once, but often several times a day, with lots of wonderful singing, and attendance to 8 hours of “UU University.” We attended the Ware Lecture, presented by Associate Professor of Politics and African American Studies, Melissa Harris-Lacewell addressing issues of faith and reason; and attended many individual workshops on a variety of topics. The Assembly raised \$29,000 for Utah Pride Center, helping homeless LGBT youth. We conducted a March for immigrant rights in downtown Salt Lake City that got a lot of media coverage. By any measure, it was a huge success.

We both received a great deal of personal enrichment from attending this General Assembly, but what I want to focus on today are the things which I think most directly support or give insights to our Fellowship. So, I’ll focus first on what we learned in the Plenary sessions, illustrating “democracy in action,” then UU University, then the various workshops that Janet and I attended. But I encourage you to go online and look at the summaries and even videos of many of the features of the General Assembly that are available on the UUA website:

<http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2009/>

Democracy in magnificent action

On the ballot during the plenary was a proposed revision to Article II of the UUA Bylaws, aka the changes to the Principles and Purposes. This entailed possible revision of our Seven Principles and our Six Sources, which we print on our order of service, our flyers and wallet cards, and distribute widely in numerous publications. If this had passed, it would have gone on to next year’s general Assembly for further discussion and to be voted upon. But due to the parliamentary procedure written into the UUA bylaws back in 1961, these provisions could not be amended or revised by the delegates, at either this GA or next year’s GA. It was an up-or-down vote.

I personally took the same position that both of the candidates for UUA president had – the language wasn’t perfect, but it was mostly an advance forward and by updating our Principles and Purposes every 15 years, we keep them from getting stale. In the proposal we considered, the Seven Principles themselves were not changed, but there was language surrounding them that made changes. For example, to avoid accusations of evangelism, the introduction of the proposed changes said we would no longer “affirm and promote” the Principles, but “support and uphold.” This one change got a lot of discussion by people on both sides. (I like how two microphones were set up in the Great Hall, one “Pro” and the other “Con,” and the moderator calls on people

alternating between the two microphones.) Some felt it was a great loss to not be able to “promote” the Principles in a world that greatly needs them, while others thought a softer approach was more in keeping with the UU spirit. (The jury is still out on that one!)

There was also revised language on our six Sources, new language regarding inclusion, and a modification of the paragraph on Freedom of Belief. These last two items had a lot of support, but many expressed concern about the way the revised “sources” language was written.

By an extraordinarily close vote of 573 in favor to 586 opposed the delegates rejected the amendment, primarily because they felt they did not have a chance to revise and modify portions of them like they did with our statements on social justice. This meant that officially any changes were essentially “dead in the water” for another 15 years. However, the GA later approved what are called “responsive resolutions” to ask the Board of Trustees to keep dialogue open on the issue, because there were many things people liked about the proposals and didn’t want to lose. My sense was that the majority of delegates hoped that the bylaw provisions prohibiting discussion and revision on the GA floor would be changed first, then the Principles and Purposes could come back for further consideration, rather than having to be decided on an “all or nothing” approach. The delegates also passed a Responsive Resolution that would place an amendment to Article II on next year's ballot, replacing the current non-discrimination clause (Section C - 2.3) with the Inclusion clause offered by the Commission on Appraisal in their proposed changes to Article II. More specifically:

The current Non-Discrimination clause reads:

"The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member congregations and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, language, citizenship status, economic status, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed."

The proposed change, the Inclusion clause, reads:

"Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have traditionally created barriers for persons and groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories. We pledge to do all we can to replace such barriers with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect. We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons and commit to structuring congregational and associational life in ways that empower and enhance everyone's participation."

Note well: The delegates also passed a responsive resolution that committed the delegates themselves to act on the Inclusion Clause and to report at the next General Assembly on the actions their congregations take. This was a surprise to some of us – although UU’s cannot impose their beliefs on others, by democratic vote they voted to require themselves as delegates to go back to their congregations to do certain things like this. You’ll be hearing later from us about some of those tasks, which primarily relate to social justice issues.

Statement of Conscience on Peacemaking and Actions of Immediate Witness

After a very lively debate, the delegates sent the draft Statement of Conscience on Peacemaking back to the Commission on Social Witness for another year of study and review. People liked much of it, but there were many amendments being proposed, and concern about the final language. Of special concern was whether it would properly recognize and respect our members and others who serve in the military. Then, the plenaries discussed, amended, and ultimately adopted six Actions of Immediate Witness. These covered the following:

1. Oppose Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity-Based Violence in Iraq
2. A Call for a Commission of Inquiry on U.S.-Sponsored Torture
3. Support Bolivian UUs Struggling for Justice and Human Rights
4. Support of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (this included a floor amendment stating that we have not been in "right relations" with Native Americans on this issue, but we recognized that some Indian tribes have endorsed the Act.)
5. U.S. Ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)
6. Advocate Pending Legislation Toward Clean, Honest, and Fair Elections in the United States

UU University

In previous years, UU University was offered for an additional fee for two days prior to General Assembly itself. This year, they included 9 hours of "track programming" focused on major learning topics. We had six topics to choose from: Stewardship; Working with multi-generational congregations; Creating multi-cultural communities; Governance; Social Justice; and Theology for a Secular Age. We considered all these sessions, but in reviewing the preliminary materials, it became clear that most of these were focused on large congregations, addressing concerns and issues that we simply lack in our small size fellowship. For example, a big topic of discussion today among UU congregations is having congregational boards adopt what is called "policy governance," however, as was later confirmed for us, this is not something relevant to a congregation our size.

Theology for a Secular Age

So, we both attended the UU University session on "Theology for a Secular Age" which was presented by Rev. Galen Guengerich, the senior minister at All Souls Church in New York City.

Strictly speaking, theology is speech about God, he said, but more generally, "theology is the process of using language to describe certain kinds of experience."

"Theology steps back from a certain kind of experience, religious experience," he said, "and asks what makes it possible, and why is it transformative, or why is it destructive?"

The goal for the workshop was to describe an uniquely UU approach to theology, one which rejects doctrine, and embraces science, but finds a third way between these extremes.

"Many people in our era believe that religion is what is wrong with the world," he said. Referring to fundamentalist religions, he added, "Religion is a lot of what's wrong with the world." His goal is the find a "third way between competing fundamentalisms of the left and the right," that is, between doctrinaire atheism on the one hand, and fundamentalist religions on the other hand.

"Most people today, whether they are atheist or fundamentalist or somewhere in between, think about religion in somewhat the same way," he said. Most fundamentalists and most atheists agree about what religion is, while they disagree about whether religion is useful.

To outline a "third way" between atheism and fundamentalism, Guengrich proposed to address seven essential religious questions. In this first session of his workshop, he addressed four of those questions. He stated those four questions as follows: "How do we know what we most truly know? What is the nature of existence and how do we [human beings] fit into the picture? What in the world is divine, if anything? What is the uniquely human challenge?"

While many Americans believe in a personal God, Guengrich said he did not. He said that he approaches the idea of God from a completely different perspective, embracing the ideas of process theology and the findings of science, while not rejecting the idea of the divine in total.

He asserted that the idea of God is necessary to explain two kinds of human experience. "Where do experiences go when their physical substrate no longer exists?" he said. "We need a word for the collection of all experiences in the universe," and he calls this collection of experiences by the name "God." Secondly, he said that the idea of God is necessary to answer the question, "Where do possibilities come from?" According to Guengrich, God is the transcendent source of future human possibilities.

"For most people who say they don't believe in God, these two things aren't a problem," said Guengrich. "The real problem is the idea of the personal God." He said that his idea of God is one that "children of the Enlightenment" can believe in.

He committed himself to using methods of evidence and reason (rather than revelation) to establish facts about the observable world, and put forward a theology (which he attributed to Alfred North Whitehead) in which God participates in the world through us, rather than acting directly on the world in a supernatural fashion.

Religious Experience

The second day of UU University began with a 45-minute worship service featuring the University of Utah Singers. In his homily, "In Search of the Sublime," Guengrich set up the first of the day's topics: religious experience. He associated the particular experience he examined—the sublime—with feelings of awe and admiration, and described how it arises in both religious and secular settings. His initial example (a secular choir performing a Mozart mass at Carnegie Hall) captured the religious ambiguity of the sublime. He also described it as a reaction to vast natural vistas. An experience of the sublime impresses upon us (in a positive way) the necessity of yielding to realities bigger than ourselves.

Before addressing the purpose of faith and the role of religion, Guengerich revisited a question he had been asked the previous day: Why use the word God at all? "I believe that the word God, and the symbol of the supernatural power and infallible source of revelation that it represents, is the single most powerful force in this struggle between fundamentalism and pluralism," he

argued. "And I am simply unwilling to let the fundamentalists have monopoly access to a symbol of that kind. If we cede to them the word *God* and basically say to them, 'God is what *you* say God is; we simply think your definition is wrong,' we have ceded the battle as far as I'm concerned."

In response to those who come to us with wounds that the word *God* aggravates, he proposed that the goal should be to help heal those wounds, and not to simply avoid or deny those wounds by not saying "God."

Faith and Religion

If religion, and religious beliefs and practices, are not simply given to us by divine revelation, how are we to choose and evaluate them? Guengerich proposed using the standard defined by William James: that they be judged by their effects—for good or ill—on their practitioners' actions, and ultimately by the effects those actions have on the world. From Whitehead he adopted the idea that transformation is the proper goal of religion: "to make yourself a better person and the world a better place."

Guengerich defines faith differently than both fundamentalists of either the Left or the Right, as a commitment to action rather than a set of beliefs about facts. "Faith is a commitment to live as if certain things are true, and thereby help to make them so," he said. "Faith is a commitment to live as if life is a wondrous mystery, as if life is good, as if love is divine, as if we are responsible for the well-being of those around us. ...Faith is a leap of the moral imagination that connects the world as it is to the world as it might become."

Religion is the way of living necessary to sustain faith. It includes stories, symbols, songs, rituals, and spiritual practices. Referring to a branch of science called contemplative neuroscience and the book *The Mindful Brain*, by Daniel Siegel, Guengerich explained the necessity of religion like this: "Our brains cannot be changed merely by adding new information or knowledge. What is required is new behaviors, a new way of living."

Guengerich asserts that "You can be spiritual by yourself, but you can only be religious within a community of faith." Common worship is an important way that a religious community comes together to invoke its fundamental religious experiences and recall the commitments that make up its faith.

For him, the fundamental UU religious experience is *gratitude*, which he said should be "the defining element of our faith," comparable to *submission* in Islam or *love* in Christianity. He called for a discipline of *gratitude* that regularly recalls attention to "our utter dependence."

Ethics

The discipline of gratitude can support an ethic of gratitude, that leads to a sense of duty and responsibility. More precisely, "The ethic of gratitude demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return. It is our duty to foster the kind of environment we want to take in and thereby become."

He listed three areas where the ethic of gratitude leads to concerns different from traditional religious codes:

- disadvantaged peoples (such as the victims of racism, sexism, and homophobia);

- the treatment of the plants and animals that sustain us; and
- care of the environment.

Guengerich closed his presentation with the metaphor of the *quantum leap*, which is the smallest change possible for an electron. Even vast physical changes are accumulations of these minimal changes. In the same way, the changes we are capable of bringing about may seem small, but vast social changes can only be made of these small quantum leaps.

Workshops

The Mystical Humanism of Kenneth Patton

We attended a variety of workshops. One was a fascinating worship service put on jointly by the UU Mystics in Community and the UU Humanists, celebrating the mystical humanism of Rev. Kenneth Patton, who was an *avante garde* UU minister in the 40s through the 60s in our movement. Fascinating that two groups seemingly at polar opposites theologically could celebrate together! That is what is so beautiful about Unitarian Universalism!

Using the Web Effectively

Harold attended part of a workshop on Building Effective Websites, and learned some things which I hope to use on improving our website and online presence. At several workshops, people felt that some social networking sites like ning.com and the older Yahoo groups were useful. But we were cautioned that traditional email listservs are no longer considered very useful for outreach. Why? Because timing is very important in our outreach - Americans change their religious affiliation before they reach age 24, so it is often harder for older people to discover us. Young people have replaced email with participation on social networking websites like Facebook, Myspace, and customized sites using Web 2.0 services such as Ning.com. The latter allows us to create our very own social networking site, with much more visual content than a mailing list, but more privacy than Facebook, so I think that is something we should consider.

Adult & Children's Religious Education – Tapestry of Faith

Janet attended a very informative workshop on a Religious education for UU's of all ages called **Tapestry of Faith**. Tapestry of Faith is a series of programs and resources for all ages that nurture Unitarian Universalist identity, spiritual growth, a transforming faith, and vital communities of justice and love. The UUA is continuing to develop these resources out of a broad series of conversations and denomination-wide focus groups that articulated a future direction for Unitarian Universalist religious growth and learning. These programs offer a variety of resources that all available online which eliminates the expense of each participant having to purchase a book.

The goals of this program are:

- Ethical development
- Spiritual development
- Faith development
- Strengthening Unitarian Universalist identity

Tapestry of Faith offers religious education programs for all ages from kindergarten to adult. Since we do not have regular attendance at our services of children, and because time is short I will only speak briefly about the adult programs.

Adult Education Programs

Surveys and needs assessments conducted over the last five years have revealed a high degree of interest in UU congregations for programs focusing on seven area for adult education. These are:

- ethics and living one's values
- knowledge about Unitarian Universalism
- spiritual growth
- stewardship and leadership
- social action
- world religions
- life issues

A significant concern for today's adults is time. Career, family, and volunteer commitments leave many adults with little free time, making it difficult to participate in traditional multi-session evening programs. Therefore, Tapestry of Faith adult programs have been and will continue to be developed with flexibility in mind: sessions may be run as one-hour workshops before or after a worship service, and most will not depend on consistent, long term commitment.

4 adult education Programs are available now online:

<http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/>

Spirit of Life which uses the stanzas of a favorite UU hymn to reflect upon our values and relationships among ourselves and with the natural world.

Principled commitment – which was developed in response to Unitarian Universalist adults' desire to build strong relationships and our congregations' desire to meet that need;

Spirit in Practice provides avenues for deepening spirituality and affirming spiritual growth in the congregation and focuses on Personal and communal spiritual practices.

Harvest the Power provides leadership skill development that goes hand-in-hand with faith development. This program helps lay leaders grow in spirit as they grow as leaders. Congregations can adapt the materials for longer programs as desired, but a key goal is to keep these programs as accessible as possible to a broad range of Unitarian Universalist adults, deepening both their personal faith and UU commitment.

Workshops for Small Congregations

Most of the workshops Harold attended were part of a series put on for the benefit of Small Congregations. They covered issues like growth, dealing with change, conflict, and leadership.

Small congregations are defined as any congregation with less than 150 members. Small congregations are 50% to 75% of UUA. Many of them suffer from an inferiority complex. So part of the intent of the workshops were to uphold and value the contributions that we make.

Even the family size congregation, like ours, - under 50 - have valuable contributions to our overall UU movement: the sense of family is wonderful, and worship is always fun even if not professional.

Challenges: RE can be hard to keep up; it can be hard for newcomers to feel welcome, newcomers can't hide...

We have to be deliberate to respond to these challenges. But we should also value the gifts that we have.

Our gifts:

- Backbone of UUA
- Endurance
- Often Multi-generational
- Involvement in the community can be very visible where the larger community is also small
- A wonderful sense of intimacy
- A spiritual home for people that simply wouldn't exist if we weren't here.
- If we have a Minister, he can be appreciated in the community because he is appreciated bc as a UU he could "speak to many gods." When some inter-faith events are held.

But we were informed that: "Small churches should NOT try to be a full service church. Just do a few things well."

There is now a New UUA website to help us:

<http://www.UUA.org/smallcongregations>

Sample Resources: Drive Time Essays 3 – a new CD - focus is on small congregations - download mp3

Connecting with Other Small Congregations

Connecting with other small congregations is most useful, so the UUA is developing systems to help us network better with each other. And in these workshops I attended, I made sure to join the small group discussions with other congregations which had less than 50 members. I met some very interesting people who had some useful insights for us. Just a few of the people I met:

1. President of the UU congregation in St. John Virgin Islands Linda Sorensen - they have a visiting minister program because they are a tourist destination. One ad in UU World gave them access to many visiting UU ministers – many of whom will return year after year, and develop a friendship. So, for no cost to the Fellowship other than providing housing and a car for a week, the congregation gains a wonderful resource, not only providing pulpit supply, but even occasional informal telephone or email advice. Could we do the same for Sequoia and Yosemite? After all, we are also a worldwide tourist destination here in Visalia with our proximity to Sequoia National Park!

2. Open Circle UU in Boulder CO - Meri Gibb - is deliberately multi-cultural and growing as a result – split off from another UU congregation that lacked interest in doing that.

3. White Stone UU church in Virginia - built a church building first before finding a minister with merely 40 members - on foreclosed land that needed cleanup. They were the only congregation I met who did it this way – most reported they were more successful by getting a minister first, then later their own land to build their own church.

4. Another was an “emerging congregation” meaning they have just been forming as a new congregation where none existed before. They found that meant that they have lots of energy. Suggest we try info from UUA.org website, pretending that we are “new” even though we are not. E.g. They were able to widely advertise their first public worship service with community.

5. Sacred Journey Fellowship in Garland, Texas, in a suburb of Dallas, said they grew quickly after nearly dying out because they became a Earth Centered congregation instead of traditional Protestant service like most of the other UU congregations in their large suburban area. They said it works because everyone wants to and gets to lead rituals - (after being trained through a rather formal program.) They have classes in Herbology, Paganism 101, Tarot, Incense 101, Runes, Introduction to Gaelic, and Excellence in Ritual.

6. Gaia Fellowship in Kansas City is another an Earth-centered congregation – but they had a dark side to this approach. A member complained that it is unacceptable to use words *homily* or *sermon* in their Fellowship. Rituals vary every Sunday, and include a story, but never a sermon or a homily. Some members miss this. Ritualists require a year-long training. They had a Big explosion 8 yrs ago; still feeling the effects. Big problem is there is no pastoral care - a Caring Committee just celebrates birthdays, not those in need like those in the hospital. Meanwhile, the ritualists are burning out yet they don't want a minister because of past negative experiences. They are so anti-minister that they don't get the benefit of some new spiritual insights. It was suggested by workshop leaders that they try to start a chaplaincy program instead, due to their unique situation.

7. Green Valley UU congregation in Arizona – community & the congregation is mostly retired. They first hired a part-time retired Presbyterian minister - that was a mistake. They have gone through a series of temporary ministers, many retired ones that came in from Tucson for 2 or 3 years, but now feel they are finally on track by calling their own UU minister.

8. UU Congregation of Glens Falls, in upstate NY – just recently hired a full-time minister and are growing nicely. They started out as basically a family-sized humanist discussion group – they didn't even have an order of service like we do! And they had a lot of suspicion about ministers, and a strong resistance to changing any of their old traditions. But they hired a UU minister anyway and are now very happy and growing – though not without growing pains. 4 yrs ago still only 60 members or so. Now have 100 members and 50 friends and new people every Sunday. The presenter noted it was hard to break 70 members. They did it with a visioning retreat and formally adopting an “8th principle of non-violence,” and sponsored a “peace center” that worked more on advocating for peace in their community than in the global arena. They found that having a focus and an identity in a conservative area really helped. Most importantly, they learned that just having an ongoing lecture series on Sundays was not working. Lectures

are OK, but not during Sunday worship services. It was only when they added spirituality with a regular minister that they grew.

9. Another small fellowship shared as a Worship idea:

- One worship service a month was in the format of a Chalice Circle, using the Evensong materials. There are two main volumes in the Evensong series, with 8 sessions each, plus a family version. We have used these sporadically in the past, but they were recommended by several to use in a regular way.

Workshop on Leadership vs. Management

Here's my notes:

Leaders have a long range view and innovates while manager accepts status quo.

3 Leadership styles:

Authoritarian - autocratic

Participative - democratic

Delegative - laissez faire

Personality may make some leaders tend to one of these more than the others, but A good leader uses all 3 styles.

3 types of leader styles:

Goal oriented

Process oriented

Relationship Oriented

Congregations get so comfortable doing what they have always done, they often don't realize the environment around them has changed – just like General Motors. The world changed around them, and they didn't change to go along with it.

For congregations, a typical example of this may be that their congregation's neighborhood is no longer white and middle class. Or the area has grown and they have not kept pace.

Stagnancy is not good. Sometimes a crisis is good - it helps you change to become more relevant

Workshop on Dealing with Change

System Thinking

Systems tend to always like status quo or equilibrium. even if accept change at first, they tend to go back to the status quo.

Change my necessity often brings dis-equilibrium, and anxiety.

If 2 people are fighting, entire congregation fights.
1 person change effects others.

If people are anxious, emotional reactions set in. Some want quick solution, others say delay. When people are anxious with each other, then those 2 tend to make a mistake by bringing in a 3rd person, asking them to solve “the problem” instead of dealing with it respectfully with each other. Sometimes people talk about others behind their back rather than talking directly with the person they are concerned about. Anxiety is normal and we want to blame others. Or ignore it.

Anxious people think in black and white. And focus on problems instead of focusing on positive

Roller Coaster of change

Excitement -> then disorientation and anxiety > then distancing from others > then finally decision to stick with it -> then valid info and finding new structure --. And stabilizing into a new status quo.

Recommended books on these topics:

The Power of Spirit by Harrison Owen.

Memories Hope and Conversations By Mark Lau Branson

Workshop on Handling Conflict

Understanding how change *always* generates conflicts, we can work to develop specific written Covenants to help us work together in a more collaborative fashion. One of the workshop presenters said that while we do not have a creed, and don't want to spend too much time on legalistic things like bylaws, we always deal with change and conflict, which means that congregations do need to work on developing formal written “covenants” which are statements about how we work together.

Adopt a culture of covenant of right Relationships.

Some ways to deal with change / conflict are:

Establish Listening groups

Appoint a vibe person at meetings

Be less reactive to conflict:

- leaders should not be anxious in response to congregational anxiety
- which means being aware of your own anxiety

Have Town Halls to deal with rumors, get input, and to be transparent

Have Check-ins with everyone when topics are hot:

**** *Speak to each other not about each other* ****

- Have a conflict resolution policy and email policy
- Purposefully talk to people who disagree with you, instead of just those

you agree with

- Board has a covenant

- Remember - Absence of conflict is not healthy, because it is simply submerged

Separate issues from people. When initiating a change, anticipate negative reactions and deal with them openly and with transparency.

Typical conflicts arise from:

Personalities

Old vs. new

Crisis

Identity crisis

Fear

Holding a grudge

Feeling not listened to

Feeling Devalued

Lack of clear expectations

Change

Growth

What are some deep spiritual values we can tap in to, in order to deal with conflict?

Principle 1

Covenant of right relations

Sacred wound, deal with it and let it go.

Example: A church that had a big struggle over a building project that failed when their construction contractor went bankrupt. So, they had a “funeral” for their failed project. That way the whole community was able to come together – instead of blaming and infighting, there was healing over their loss.

Use conflict as a way to spiritual growth.

Ask yourself: What is the spiritual growth opportunity of the conflict?

Turns out that conflict is GOOD – they often given great spiritual growth opportunities!

Conclusion

There are going to be a lot of important topics and democratic governance issues for the UUA at next year's General Assembly. So put the dates on your calendars now! That's June 23-27, 2010 in Minneapolis, MN!