

UU Medford Delegate Report on General Assembly 2017

Dear members of the UU Church of Medford Community,

It was our honor to serve you this year as delegates to the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. We offer this report to keep all of you informed about the ways our Unitarian Universalist values are lived out by the UUA, and perhaps to inspire some of you to serve as delegates in the future. We begin with a brief list of major decisions, then turn to a more detailed report on our experience in New Orleans.

Highlights

- We elected Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray to a six-year term as president of the Unitarian Universalist Association.
- We wrestled in creative ways with the question of how Unitarian Universalism is shaped and distorted by patterns of white supremacy in the larger culture.
- We approved a new Statement of Conscience on “Escalating Economic Inequality.”
- We received a booklength report from the Commission on Appraisal entitled *Class Action: The Struggle with Class in Unitarian Universalism*.
- We amended the UU Second Source to read “words and deeds of prophetic people,” rather than “prophetic men and women.”
- We authorized a study commission to explore adding an Eighth UU Principle, “to affirm and promote Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” This commission might explore other changes to the Principles and Sources.
- The UUA Board reaffirmed its commitment to raise \$5 million for the work of Black Lives of UU, building on the board’s initial grant of \$300,000 to that organization.
- We experimented with new models of collaborative leadership, following the lead of interim co-presidents Sofia Betancourt, Bill Sinkford, and Leon Spencer.

- Our own Rev. Marta Valentin was one of a panel of speakers in the UU Ministers' Association's annual Berry Street Essay.

Overview

Several important agenda items for this General Assembly were set more than a year ago, and these were an important part of our GA experience. This was the year we were to elect a new president of the Unitarian Universalist Association for a single six-year term. (Previously, presidents were elected to four-year terms, with the possibility of one re-election.) Susan Frederick-Gray, currently the minister of the UU church in Phoenix, emerged as the winner in a very graciously conducted three-way race that illustrated the wonders of the instant-runoff ballot. This was also the year we were to vote on the final text of a Statement of Conscience on “Escalating Inequality,” concluding a three-year study period and ushering in a year of action at both the congregational and associational levels. And this was the year the Commission on Appraisal would issue its report on class dynamics within Unitarian Universalism. The Commission on Appraisal is sort of an in-house think tank that addresses the internal dynamics of Unitarian Universalism, and we found it especially propitious that this General Assembly was prepared to address issues of class and economic injustice both within Unitarian Universalism and in the broader society.

The Current Conversation on White Supremacy

All these things took place as planned, and we have a good bit to say about them, but most of the delegates' time and attention focused instead on events that took place in the past year and the challenge of responding to those events. To recap very quickly: In October the UUA Board of Trustees made a \$5.3 million commitment (\$300,000 in immediate funding, plus fundraising support for the remaining \$5 million) to Black Lives of UU, a new empowerment organization led by Black UUs, most of them young, who have been deeply involved in the broader Movement for Black Lives. In November Donald Trump was elected president of the United States with a strong majority of the white vote, calling into serious question the commitment of white Americans to any of the values that Unitarian Universalists have historically professed. In March UUA President Peter Morales attended the Finding Our Way Home gathering of UU religious professionals who are people of color, at which he was asked some tough questions about hiring practices in the UUA. It became widely known that only two of the eleven members of the UUA leadership council were people of color, and that the UUA's

top leadership was overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly ordained, and predominantly male, despite the fact that two thirds of UU ministers and even higher percentages of other religious professionals are not male. After one participant, UUA board member, religious educator, and church administrator Christina Rivera, who identifies as Latina, revealed that she had been passed over for a staff position in favor of a straight, white, ordained man, President Morales issued a widely-criticized response—and then abruptly resigned the presidency, just months before his term was to expire. The UUA’s chief operating officer and the staff member who had made the criticized hire, both white men, also resigned. The UUA board, under the leadership of moderator Jim Key, then appointed three copresidents, Leon Spencer, Sofia Betancourt, and Bill Sinkford, all of whom identify as Black and one of whom also identifies as Latina. Soon thereafter Jim Key himself resigned due to the aggressive recurrence of his cancer; he died on June 2. And after that, it became known that the three individuals who had voluntarily resigned their positions collectively received \$500,000 in severance pay.

Needless to say, all of these events had a huge effect on General Assembly! None of the people who had been expected to play the central leadership roles at GA, with the exception of the three presidential candidates, were still in place when it actually began. That’s a big deal, because managing five thousand opinionated, enthusiastic and rebellious Unitarian Universalists is no easy matter! Fortunately, all of the people who were abruptly pushed onto center stage did a marvelous job under difficult circumstances. The three copresidents modeled a graceful sharing of leadership, and made it clear from the outset that, first, we would do our very best to unravel the many ways in which the larger culture of white supremacy has distorted Unitarian Universalism and, second, we would strive to do this difficult work in a Universalist spirit, with no one, regardless of their identity or opinion, left behind.

New Models of Leadership

The sheer fact of a copresidency inspired many other people to try out new models of shared leadership. Vice moderator Denise Rimes, to whom fell the responsibility for presiding at all the business sessions (and interpreting both Robert’s Rules of Order and our own complicated rules), invited three other board members—Gregory Boyd, Kathy Burek, and Elandria Williams—to join her as a “tri-mod.” With each new business item, a new moderator rotated in—and each of them did

just as well as the seasoned moderators we've seen at previous GAs. By "just as well," we mean both that they often interpreted the rules with correctness, clarity, and grace, *and* that when they misinterpreted the rules or made other mistakes, they stayed calm and apologized as soon as they understood the mistake. Our own Rev. Marta Valentin participated in another impressive display of shared leadership. When copresident Sofia Betancourt, who had been scheduled to give the annual "Berry Street Essay" to the UU Ministers' Association, had to withdraw from that task, a quintet of other ministers, Marta among them, offered a mosaic of thoughtful reflections on their experiences as ministers of color.

Amendments to the Principles and Sources

Another unusual feature of this General Assembly is that we were asked to consider three distinct changes to the UU Principles and Sources. It has been thirty years since these were formulated in essentially their present form, and twenty since the last significant revision (when the sixth source, earth based traditions, was added). The UUA bylaws actually mandate that bylaw article II, which includes the principles and sources, must be reviewed every fifteen years, and at this GA the board announced that it would be creating a commission to perform such a review. Thus, *everything* in the Principles and Sources is up for discussion in the coming year. The three votes on specific changes emerged through a different process, but they will doubtless influence the work of the commission.

The proposed change that may be most familiar to you, because both Dan McKanan and Lisa Bouley have preached sermons about it, was to the First Principle: we were asked to consider changing the word "person" to "being" in the phrase "inherent worth and dignity of every person." The intent was to commit ourselves to the inherent worth not only of human beings, and not only of interdependent ecosystems (as suggested in the seventh principle), but also to that of individual non-human creatures. We know that some of you strongly supported this change and that some of you were strongly opposed. Personally, we were both very conflicted. We think we know what it means to support the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, but aren't sure that we (either as UUs or people generally) are always very good at doing so. Does that mean we need to keep the First Principle as is until we "get it right"? We aren't at all sure we know what it means to support the inherent worth and dignity of creatures as diverse as gorillas and lettuces and viruses, but think that adding this to our principles might be a fruitful way to find out. Had the assembly voted it in, moreover, the result would

simply have been a year-long study process and a second vote before the principles would actually change. What could be wrong with studying it, we wondered—on the other hand, taking the first step might give the whole thing an aura of inevitability. As things played out, the delegates spent only fifteen minutes discussing this question, and—alas—Dan’s Harvard responsibilities meant that we were not present for that debate. Voices in opposition were strong, with arguments centering on the dangers of equating the dignity of nonhuman creatures with the dignity of people of color and of persons with disabilities. It was tabled until the next day, then—when we were present—tabled indefinitely. We voted against the tabling, mostly because we wanted to hear more from our fellow delegates, which may have been unfair since we missed the earlier debate.

The next change to the principles and sources that we had to consider was much simpler. As you may recall, our second source is “words and deeds of prophetic women and men.” Trans and nonbinary UUs brought forward a proposal to change this wording to “words and deeds of prophetic people.” Pretty much everyone agreed that this language would be more inclusive; Tammy observed that it also invites us to attend to the words and deeds of prophetic children. The delegates approved it overwhelmingly. We then took a second vote to bypass the yearlong study process and make the change instantly. This required an 80% majority, which we easily attained.

The third change was at least as complex as the first, and it came to us in a different way. In response to the events of the last year, many Unitarian Universalists have come to believe that we need an Eighth Principle to make our anti-racist commitments crystal clear and central to our identity. Because this conviction emerged organically over the past year, advocates of the Eighth Principle did not have time to put this on the official agenda of GA, but they were able to present it as a “responsive resolution.” This is a resolution that “responds” to something that has happened at GA, and requests that the UUA take some specific course of action. Since we had spent much of GA talking about how to strengthen our anti-racist commitments, it seemed logical to bring this forward in this way. The responsive resolution asked the board “to appoint a study commission to discuss adding an 8th principle that may be as stated below:

‘We the member congregations of the Unitarian
Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote
Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by building a

diverse, multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.’”

Now, responsive resolutions are the very last thing that comes before GA, and this one was the last of three responsive resolutions. By the time debate began, we were already past the time when we were supposed to install President Frederick-Gray and sing our last songs. So, after one person had spoken in favor and one person against, someone moved to change the rules to make it possible to cut off debate immediately, and after that passed, someone moved to cut off debate. We found this troubling. We weren't sure about the implications of adding one specific justice commitment to our principles without explicitly naming others, such as countering patriarchy or capitalism. On the other hand, we were very aware that General Assemblies have been making anti-racist statements ever since the UUA was founded, and yet Unitarian Universalism remains disproportionately white—so perhaps it is time to move our anti-racist commitments closer to the center of our identity. We also knew that one member of our congregation had expressed reservations about the Eighth Principle. And we felt that allowing opponents a chance to express their concerns would be a better way of honoring the goal of bringing everyone along as we transform our culture. Moreover, Tammy had stepped out to pick up Oriana from camp, anticipating a much longer discussion of the resolution. For all these reasons, Dan voted against the motions to end debate, but then voted in favor of the responsive resolution itself. This will create space for more conversation over the next year, as the Board's commission undertakes its comprehensive review of the Principles and Sources.

Other Responsive Resolutions

The other two responsive resolutions are also worth noting. Earlier in the GA, we had learned that songwriter Jason Shelton had changed the words of the song “Standing on the Side of Love” to “Answering the Call of Love” in response to concerns from persons with disabilities and mobility challenges. The resolution called on the UUA to make a similar change to the “Standing on the Side of Love” justice campaign. The debate was lively, with several people testifying to the ways they personally felt excluded, and others worrying that we might be on a slippery slope toward eliminating all metaphors. In this particular case, Tammy and Dan felt that the change would also eliminate the troubling image of one side versus

another. For both this reason and because we supported disability inclusion, we voted in favor of the resolution, which passed easily.

The other resolution called on the UUA to take action in response to the newly passed Statement of Conscience. We found this odd, since the social witness process already calls for a year of action following the passage of an SOC. But we voted in favor, just for the sake of the reinforcement, and so did most of the delegates.

Statement of Conscience

The Assembly overwhelmingly passed the Statement of Conscience on “Escalating Economic Inequality,” in a substantially revised form. We strongly encourage everyone to read this statement (https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/cswalert_ga2017saturday.pdf), and think about how we as individuals might respond to the recommendations for individual actions, and how we as a congregation might respond to the recommendations for congregational action. Since the statement has been in development for the past three years, we know that some of you have followed the process to some extent—though in our capacity as repeat delegates we could have done a better job of facilitating conversations. Prior to GA, one of you expressed general support for the statement and one said that it was not nearly strong enough and should be referred for another year of study. The latter was also the view of UUs for a Just Economic Community, an organization that initially pushed for the statement but felt that the Commission on Social Witness was not truly responsive to their suggestions for making the statement as strong as possible. Both Tammy and Dan participated actively in the “mini-assembly” designated for drafting amendments to the statement, and it was clear that almost everyone who attended that gathering was eager for a stronger and more specific statement. Amendments were proposed, for example, that specifically identified capitalism and white supremacy as contributing factors to economic inequality, that called for wages that “honor the work of hands as well as minds,” and that called for dismantling the system that pushes people into the military in order to meet their economic needs. Luckily, the Commission on Social Witness chose to incorporate virtually all of the amendments that were strongly supported in the mini-assembly into the document presented for a vote. These included the items just mentioned, the second of which reflected Tammy and Dan’s own participation in the conversation. All of these changes, we believe, brought the statement much closer to the vision preferred by

UUJEC, and by ourselves. The Commission chose not to incorporate a few amendments that would have made the document an explicitly anti-capitalist statement. We supported these amendments, but since they were not universally supported at the mini-assembly we agreed with the Commission's decision to place them at the top of a list of amendments that could be brought up for debate in the plenary assembly. Under ordinary circumstances, we certainly would have had time for an open debate on whether the UUA as a whole wants to go on record as opposing capitalism. Unfortunately, even the best of intentions sometimes go astray, and an odd set of confusions about our rules prevented us from considering any amendments whatsoever. When the statement came to a vote, Tammy and Dan voted in favor, and it passed overwhelmingly. It has a lot of good stuff in it, and there is nothing to prevent our congregation from going even further than it suggests, if we so choose.

Commission on Appraisal Report on Class in Unitarian Universalism

The Commission on Appraisal's report on class dynamics *within* Unitarian Universalism did not call for any specific vote. It is a book length study that provides a lot of great information about the ways Unitarian Universalism has been dominated by people from the highly-educated, professional class, and it calls for more open conversations among people with different class identities and backgrounds. The commissioners are also admirably frank in acknowledging a difference of opinion that runs parallel to the debate over anti-capitalist language in the Statement of Conscience. Some of them believed that the problem they needed to overcome was class itself, i.e., the division of people into different economic groups that is inherent in capitalism. Others believed that the problem was merely "classism," or prejudice and misunderstanding between people of different classes. We agree that this is indeed an important difference of opinion within Unitarian Universalism: some UUs would like to see a classless society and some think this is a utopian fantasy. The commissioners argue, quite persuasively, that this difference of opinion should not prevent us from working to make our congregations more hospitable to people of all classes, especially the poor and working class people who currently are very poorly represented in most UU congregations. We agree, though we would have preferred a report that came out solidly against class itself, and in favor of alternatives to capitalist economics. We also felt that the report did not go nearly far enough in its specific recommendations for change. It put a lot of emphasis on the need for cross-class friendships and the importance of not shaming the rich, but did not identify any

changes that might make our congregations genuinely friendly to, for example, people without college educations. It talked a lot about the burden of educational debt on ministers with master's degrees, but did not acknowledge that the national debt crisis falls hardest on students who do not graduate from college, especially those who attend for-profit colleges. Some of those people are also UUs, and we need to think about ways our churches might provide a real helping hand to them. As far as we are aware, the UUA does not ask questions about class in selecting volunteer and paid leadership for our movement, and we think it should!

Indeed, we paid close attention to class language throughout General Assembly. We very rarely heard mention of poverty as a pressing social issue, and even more rarely heard speakers who self-identified as poor or working-class. (A few self-identified as having been poor or working class in childhood, but even that was mostly restricted to sessions primarily about class.) In one plenary conversation that introduced itself as offering an "intersectional approach" dealing with race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, none of the speakers said anything about their class identity. One big exception to this was the outstanding Ware Lecture given by lawyer-activist Bryan Stevenson, who talked about his work fighting for justice for Black Southerners caught in the system of mass incarceration. He mentioned poverty in almost every sentence of his speech. But this only underscored how much trouble UUs have talking about class: Stevenson is not a UU, and his talk was not about Unitarian Universalism.

Our Congregation's Role in the Class Conversation

As it happens, many people perceive our congregation as one of the most class-diverse in Unitarian Universalism. We have no idea if this is literally true: neither we nor anyone else (as far as we know) keeps records of the economic or educational circumstances of our members. But it is clear that here at UU Medford we have people with high-paid professional jobs and people who are unemployed; people who live in their own houses and people who live in public housing; people who are college professors and people who haven't gone to college. All of these people offer important leadership; all of them share their stories in our fabulous lay-led services; all are generous in accepting and encourage the spiritual growth of one another, as our third principle specifies. From what we hear from other congregations, this is not always true in Unitarian Universalism. So we wonder: might our congregation have some gifts to offer Unitarian Universalism in its process of transformation?

This brings us back to a point that we made at the time we were appointed as delegates: we do not need to represent UU Medford at every General Assembly! Though Dan's job means that we will likely *attend* every General Assembly, we would like nothing more than to have the opportunity to support others in coming as our official delegates. Because so many churches choose delegates based on their ability to pay their own way, General Assembly is even more biased toward the wealthy and professional classes than the rest of Unitarian Universalism. This injustice was noted in the presidential forum, and Susan Frederick-Gray specifically promised that she would work to make GA an every-other year event, with stronger regional assemblies in the off years. That won't happen instantly, but when it does it would make it possible for us to save our money to support delegates in the GA years. The regional assemblies might also be a good place for us to share our distinctive UU Medford story about including class diversity.

Respectfully Submitted,

Dan & Tammy McKanan