

What Would 3,500 Unitarian Universalists Do?

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

16 June 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

Who has attended a previous Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly? According to [UU World](#), this year, “[Almost 3,500] people were in Louisville, Kentucky for GA, including 232 youth. They represented 611 congregations in 50 U.S. states and one Canadian province.” Given the size of our congregation’s membership, we are allocated *four* voting delegates to General Assembly, and for the first time in a long time **we sent a full envoy of delegates to GA:** myself, my wife Magin, Carl Kruhm (our incoming President of the UUCF Board of Trustees), and Mary Bowman-Kruhm. And at least this year at GA being a voting delegate really mattered.

This was an election year for the UUA moderator, who is known as the “Chief Governance Officer.” The moderator is the chair of the UUA Board, leads the plenary (business) sessions at General Assembly, and is highest volunteer position in the UUA. And **the choice for the new moderator — an incredibly vital and influential position — was decided by only 40 votes:** Jim Key, 945. Tamara Payne-Alex, 905. Four of those votes were cast by the your UUCF delegates.

I’ve asked our delegates each to share for just 2-3 minutes or so about their experience at GA — about what resonated with them the most and/or what they are bringing back that they plan to incorporate into their own lives or here at UUCF. After each of these three reports, you can remain seated as we sing a verse of the song “When Your Heart in a Holy Place.” I chose this hymn because there is something deeply moving about what happens when you gather 3,500 Unitarian Universalists in one place. Admittedly, it can also get a little cantankerous from time to time. But it’s the closest most of us will ever get for the foreseeable future to experiencing what it would be like to be part of a UU megachurch.

[You can listen to these three reports at

http://www.frederickuu.org/sermons_audio/mp3_files/general_assembly_2013.mp3]

When I think back to what it feels like to spend five days with more than 3,000 UUs, the image that comes to mind is trying to drink from a firehose. I don't mean that image necessarily in a negative way. In the middle of scorching summer heat, a blasting firehose — or broken fire hydrant — could be a most welcome and joyous sight: an invitation to laugh and play, dance and sing amongst friends, old and new. And parts of GA are like that.

A broken fire hydrant is also an embarrassment of riches: so much more water jetting out than can be fully appreciated in any one moment — most of it washing forever away down the drain. And that returns me to my original imagine of drinking from a fire hose. If you are really parched, you will like be able to quench your thirst a little from a firehose, but it is also a lot coming at you at once and can be intimidating to handle, to say the least.

And GA is like that too: from Wednesday afternoon through Sunday evening, there are almost constant events — many of them happening at the same time — from 7:00 a.m. in the morning through almost midnight. From day one, you can't even begin to try and do it all. But when 3,500 UUs get together, there's always something interesting going on.

You heard earlier from Mary, Carl Kruhm, and Magin about their experience at GA. And I hope that some of you will also consider attending General Assembly sometime in the future when the timing and location is convenient. GA happens at different places each year, so some years are easier to attend than others. Last year was in Phoenix, and this year's was in Louisville. Next year, GA will be Providence, Rhode Island from June 25-29. Other upcoming locations include Portland, Columbus, and Kansas City. In talking with folks about future locations, however, I heard more than one person say that they were at least as excited about Portland as Providence because although Providence is lovely and closer, Portland offers an opportunity to add in a short vacation in the Pacific Northwest.

And that's ok. There's nothing wrong with working in a little tourism on the side. Although I didn't have time to make it this year to Churchill Downs or to the Louisville Slugger Museum, Magin and I did have a chance to eat at a restaurant called Proof on Main that I would recommend to you if you are ever through Louisville. As a southern boy, I've eaten a lot of Cheese Grits in my life, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that the cheese grits at this restaurant was a religious experience — made with cream, olive oil, lemon, garlic scrapings. You

never know when you are going to run into that First Source of UUism: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder.”

But beyond sublime culinary experiences, the larger point is what happens when 3,500 UUs get together is that the energy is contagious. The tagline of GA is “A Meeting of Congregations,” and with the addition of one new UU congregation this past year, there are now **1,024 UU congregations**, and GA is a chance to learn from their members, ministers, and representatives. You leave with renewed hope, renewed energy, and renewed resolve. **You leave with new insights, new ideas, and new connections with kindred spirits.** As I saw one person post on Twitter about GA: “I’m here to learn, & be with people who give a damn.” You leave with much a much stronger sense that we here in a Frederick are part of a much larger movement of Unitarian Universalism.

And I should add at this point that I’m not just talking about adults. I mentioned earlier that those 3,500 UUs in Louisville included 232 youth. And there are many special activities for both the Youth Caucus and the Young Adult Caucus at General Assembly. And both this year and last year, I was regularly impressed by the how articulate, passionate, and informed the young people were at GA. I’ve been equally impressed by our young people hear at UUCF, and **I would love to see us work toward bring not only more adults to GA, but also more of our young people. I would love to see our youth and young adults here in Frederick learning from and making connections with young UUs from all over the country.**

Now some of you keeping close track may be thinking, “Wait. If GA is 5 days (Wednesday- Sunday), why was Carl away 8 days: from Monday to Monday?” The answer is that ministers are invited to arrive a few days before GA was what are called “Ministry Days.” We have the usual conference line up of receptions, speakers, and workshops. But we also attend to the business of the Professional Organization known as the “Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association,” and to take a fairly serious turn for a moment, I think it is important to share with you publicly that there was a good and important change this year in Louisville to the ministerial ethics guidelines. After much study, discussion, and debate, **a long and complicated section of 182 words meant to prevent clergy sexual misconduct was shortened to a clear and concise 21 words, which read, “I will not engage in sexual contact, sexualized behavior, or a sexual**

relationship with any person I serve as a minister.”

I am taking the time to name this change from the pulpit because it is precisely a lack of transparency about “what ministers do,” how they spend their time, and what ethical guidelines regulate their behavior that has contributed to abuses in the past. And as some of you longtime UUs know, Unitarian Universalism — just like every other organization of human beings of which I am aware — has had problems of sexual misconduct (including clergy sexual misconduct) in the past. And one small step toward preventing reoccurrence is being transparent about ethical guidelines.

Returning our focus back to General Assembly and what happened once everyone else came to Louisville to join the ministers and others that had arrived early for pre-GA events, it is also fascinating to see the ways in which what happens when 3,500 UUs get together is in many ways like a macrocosm of our congregational dynamics here at UUCF. On Friday, for example, during the afternoon workshops, the UU Christians were gathered in one room for an open Communion service. And immediately next door the UU Pagans were gathered to celebrate Summer Solstice. (Of course, UUism gets complicated because I’m sure there was more than one person that wished they could attend both those services.) But sometimes the problem is the opposite dynamic. Saturday’s “Service of the Living Tradition” worship was led by an African-American UU music minister and included Gospel music, and emotional, spirit-filled choruses such as “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me.” Mere hours later, Sunday morning’s worship was much more rational, intellectual, and grounded in the science of our 13.7 billion year-old universe story. Some people loved both services. Other people loved one and hated the other. So just like us here at UUCF, **we’re all trying to figure out how to best live together in right relationship under this big tent of Unitarian Universalism.**

So for some of you, if the timing is right, perhaps we can say, “Next year in Providence!” The GA theme next summer will be “Love Reaches Out.” (For more information, visit <http://www.uua.org/ga/>.) But I also recognize that there will likely never been more than fraction of almost any UU congregation that is able to attend General Assembly in any given year. So perhaps the most interesting question isn’t what could 3,500 do once a year (whether in

Louisville, or Providence, or Portland), but what would 150 or 200 UUs do in and around Frederick, Maryland both once a week and each day in our daily lives?

To echo some questions from one of the [workshops](#) I attended, each Unitarian Universalist is invited to look within, and ask:

- What is my *passion*?
- What are *gifts* was I *born with*?
- What are *talents* have I developed?
- What would I be willing to *teach* at least one other person?
- How valuable do I want my involvement with this congregation to be?
- How valuable an experience do I plan for this experience to be?
- What am I willing to *risk* as a member of this congregation? (*Knowing that anything of value comes with a cost.*)

Each year at GA, becoming more connected to the larger UU movement reenergizes me. But more importantly, each week all of you reminds me that we are not alone. We're on this journey together. And having been your minister for not quite one full year, I can't wait to see what a few hundred Unitarian Universalists can continue to do right here in this time and place.

In a few moments, I will invite us to rise in body or spirit and sing together hymn number 1028, "Fire of Commitment." As we sing, I invite you to continue to continue reflect about what you feel called to accomplish both as part of this congregation and as part of the larger UU movement:

- What is your *passion*?
- How valuable do you want your involvement with this congregation to be?
- What are you willing to *risk* as a member of this congregation? (*Knowing that anything of value comes with a cost.*)

When you hear those words "Fire of Commitment," what people, places, or issues burn within you? What sparks are kindling within you that joined together in community might become a blaze?

Many Highlights from General Assembly 2013 are available free online at

<http://uua.org/ga/2013>