

Snapshots from the UUA General Assembly

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Text Reading: From “Prophetic Congregations in the 21st Century,” by Rev. Meg Riley, in **A People So Bold**.

What relevance could the ancient word prophetic still hold for Unitarian Universalists? The term mostly bewilders us, conjuring images of wild-eyed, ranting men with long white beards holding signs proclaiming “the end is near,” foretelling apocalyptic vengeance courtesy of God the Father. Certainly Unitarian Universalism has grown past that image...

Prophetic UU congregations are grounded in centuries-old theologies, which teach that we have the power and responsibility to co-create what is holy. They are communities where we and others are deeply valued and mutually known. Prophetic congregations refuse to accept brokenness as a final answer, but work from realistic hope, choosing life, choosing to be a blessing...

Once a year, the Unitarian Universalist Association, about 1100 congregations, gathers to dream big. At the annual General Assembly (GA), over 6000 people come together to act on behalf of the whole. While most of our congregation will never witness this event, what happens there affects our church, as our movement in faith and ethics takes shape over time. This morning I'd like to give you the flavor of the eclectic smorgasbord that is GA, and Anastassia will speak more deeply into a single dish. We are describing with an eye to the prophetic, that is, the co-creating, connecting, and visionary work that is the UUA at its best. We don't mean to suggest the work is done, or the ideal is always maintained--far from it. Yet we *are* celebrating a movement which, for many centuries now, has been actively progressive, and often at the radical edge of cultural change.

When I went to GA for the first time six years ago, I had in mind the large gatherings of other denominations. So when I asked someone in advance what GA is like, the answer surprised me. “Disney World for church geeks,” she told me. There is an atmosphere which is celebratory...a kind of tribal excitement, a sense of being out to play. In contrast, the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterians are a lot more subdued and business-like when they gather! UUs actually go on vacation to General Assembly, with their families, and they have fun.

There are lots of people, an abundance of worship, action, and cultural events. It's very big, and somewhat overwhelming in this UU universe. As most All Souls D.C. folks will tell you, it's also not the demographic of our congregation, and that can feel like a shock. The vast majority who attend are Euro-American white, with a large percentage over 65. While there are usually at least 500 very alternative-looking youth, they are in their own UU sub-universe much of the time. Because of

this general homogeneity, there is quite intentional practice to put forward leadership and perspectives of people of color and less-represented identities, and a daily process to look for and name instances where this practice falls short. Because of the self-selection of church geeks and professionals, folks who go are quite passionate about this Disney World. They are committed and engaged, following the twists and turns of each day through multiple political dramas unfolding. It's intense, and tiring, and kind of exhilarating once you come through.

Here are some tidbits from the smorgasbord of the last few days, looking for the prophetic, and you can see and hear much more online, at www.uua.org. Our annual Public Witness at GA was this time 1500 UUs marching in *Standing On the Side of Love* t-shirts in the Twin Cities LGBTQ Pride Parade. The Study/Action issue approved for the next four years will be "Immigration as a Moral Issue." A Statement of Conscience was passed on the complex issue of peacemaking, after much debate on language. Winona LaDuke, well-known Native American leader, gave the annual Ware Lecture, on environmental justice and green action. And yesterday, after tremendous debate and two mini-assemblies called to craft a compromise position, the majority of delegates voted to go with what will be called a "Justice General Assembly" in Phoenix in 2012. This will be in partnership with local Latino leaders who have issued an invitation to organize, and with the bare minimum GA business required by the bylaws. For the first time ever, this GA will focus almost entirely on learning and action for immigrant rights.

One annual worship opportunity, called the Service of the Living Tradition, honors religious professionals. Rev. Paige Getty, from the Columbia, MD church was asked to preach, an honor unusual for someone nearer the beginning of her ministry than the end. To close, I offer words from her sermon on the beloved children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

We have big plans, you and I—plans to transform the world. If we are to succeed, we must transform the world one life at a time. As our relationships grow in strength and in depth, so does our commitment to one another—a commitment that multiplies with each real connection we make. Real transformation takes patience, and dedication, and courage—courage for each of us to break out of our comfortable spiritual zone, whatever that is for us. And so I dare you to figure out what is truly meaningful to you and where are the barriers that separate you from others... to take the risk of really getting to know one another...Love one another into being real.