

"February 12: "Catch the GA Wave."

Every June, thousands of UUs from around the globe gather for renewal, business, and just plain fun at General Assembly (GA). In this sharing service you'll hear from UUFCC members about how GA programs inspire their commitment to personal growth, growing our faith, building community, and taking action for social justice. Come and catch the wave of energy, growth, and vitality! In a special sharing learn about the birth of a new neighbor congregation, the UUFBC (UU Fellowship of Blair County).

Our goal is not to get the whole congregation to go to GA, so much as to have an increased understanding and appreciation for their and our connection to all other UU's."

Acknowledgement of the Native Peoples of the Centre Region

Laura Brown

WELCOME to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County. Today's service is a celebration of our association with UUs around the globe. Today we will attempt to bring the vibes and vitality that we feel at General Assembly to this stage. General Assembly is the annual gathering of UUs for business, for renewal, for learning, for awakening, for just plain fun. The gathering is held in a different city each year. GA junkies are presenting this service to you with the hope that you will want to learn more and, just maybe join us in St. Louis this June for GA 2006.

The 44th Annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association began just after 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 23, 2006 in the Arena of the Fort Worth Convention Center. About four thousand Unitarian Universalists streamed into the large, bowl-shaped arena for the opening celebration and the first items on the business agenda of this General Assembly. Promptly at 7:30 p.m., the Rev. Bill Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), and Gini Courter, moderator of the UUA, walked onstage to welcome everyone to General Assembly.

"This is the 44th meeting of the congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association," said Courter. "We will worship together, learn together, sing together.... Being with all these four thousand Unitarian Universalists is an inspiring experience."

"We come together as a people of long tradition and as a people of deep faith," said Rev. Sinkford. "This religious community can mean even more in our lives, and can mean even more to the lives of the community in which our congregations minister. We have faith that the universe can bend towards justice."

"It is always good to be among the faithful," Rev. Sinkford concluded, to applause.

The chalice was lit and, as happens at the start of every General Assembly, we took time to acknowledge the native people on whose land we stand.

Here we are on Waupelani Drive, in the Nittany Valley.... Waupelani, Nittany... names associated with the people native to our region who have been destroyed or driven away. It seems especially fitting that we begin today's GA service experience by acknowledging the native people on whose land we stand.

Please look out the window to the mountains, listen the Native American Wood Flute, and as we begin our worship experience here today, imagine this valley when it was the land of the Lenape...

Chalice Lighting

Members of Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Blair County: Ellen Black, Lisa Purcell and Cathy Spayde

“What lights my fire in coming to UU Fellowship: the warmth and welcoming atmosphere created by the people who have become my friends”

“Acceptance and understanding that each human soul holds the truth and wisdom of love”

“Growing up in a Catholic tradition, I often began to feel a rift between what was being taught in church and what I knew in my heart to be true and good. Attending this fellowship I am free of that dissonance and I can become more spiritually aware.”

“A sense of obligation to help others and encourage tolerance”

“To find a way to worship divinity within and without our human souls – a way that excludes no one” “To find people who might believe that all life is holy without exceptions” “To meet people who might believe as I do, or at least understand why I think the way I do about spirituality”

“The open mindedness of the fellowship” “Being able to share my ideas with others” “The kindness of the fellowship”

These words are the sparks in the flame that have inspired each of us to begin our small yet growing fellowship in Blair County.

Our fellowship began in 2000 when a small group of people asked a liberal minded Brethren Minister to provide guidance in becoming a spiritual community.

The group moved from a handful of people meeting at the Arts Center Lounge of Penn State Altoona, to a home church group called the Altoona Interfaith Fellowship.

Lisa and I joined in 2003 when we learned they were moving to Unitarian Universalism as their chosen faith. At that time the fellowship was meeting at the conference room of a local social services agency and was still led by Reverend Dottie Steele. In 2004 financial concerns prompted a change of approach by the steering committee. As a result, Reverend Steele terminated her role as leader and guide. The fellowship moved to a lay lead format. This was a scary time since we did not really know if we would continue to exist.

In August 2004, our fellowship completed a strategic visioning process that included the desire to formally affiliate with the UUA. That process made it possible for us to express a shared vision of our future. We each made the commitment to move toward that future by taking responsibility for small actions. It was very exciting to experience a shared desire to grow and become more than what we had been – especially in this time of fear that we might not continue at all. We had about 15 regular members at that time.

In January 2005, our fellowship moved to the chapel at Penn State Altoona. More than one member has spoken of the feeling of this chapel as sacred. We have grown to about 30 steady members. The connection with Jennifer DeCoste, Director of the Office of Institutional Equity

and Diversity at the campus has been pivotal in our ability to use the chapel and to do outreach with students.

We meet the 1st and 3rd Sundays of every month. 10:30am is coffee & snack time. We have our service from 11am to noon. We have an email newsletter called "Between Sundays" and we are involved in a number of community service activities such as trail clean-ups, habitat for humanity, and gathering needed items for local shelters and human service agencies.

We have met with Mark Hayes on two occasions to talk about our goals, and to learn how our fellowships can be of help to one another. Our group has also met with the Reverend Dr. Richard Speck, *District Executive of the Joseph Priestley District of the Unitarian Universalist Association*.

We have a vision statement that I would like to share.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Blair County shall devote its resources to embracing persons of every age, race, sexual orientation, ethnic and religious background and economic means. We shall devote ourselves to spiritual growth inspired by spiritual teachings and wisdom of the world's religions and a vision for God's love that calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. We shall endeavor to build a world community where justice, equity, and compassion for all create and uphold life, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

There is a feeling of excitement and encouragement as we make connections to this amazing fellowship. We hope to develop a relationship of mutual support in the years ahead. Thank you for this opportunity to share a little about who we are.

Where Can You...

Betsy & Chuck Berry

When I first heard about General Assembly, I expected a large convention, composed mainly of workshops, how-to sessions and seminars – like the annual conference of a professional organization. Indeed, the "Sessions and Seminars" portion could be viewed as the core of GA. It's valuable, and I loved it.

But I didn't expect so much **more**... So many chances for spiritual renewal. So many chances to actually *try* new things. So much inspiration.

Betsy: For example, in Long Beach I was truly inspired by Holly Near's performance. I love her song from the UU Hymnal, "We are a Gentle Angry People," but I didn't know she was such an impressive speaker. And in Fort Worth, I was energized by Robert Hardies – so much more than a typical sermon!

Chuck: I agree! But I also love being able to show non-UU friends the Holly Near streaming video ... **any time**, on their **own** computer. And next Sunday after the Service, we can all see the videotape of the Robert Hardies' Sermon ... take a look at the beige insert in your program. And we can borrow this and many others from our UUFCC Library and watch them at home.

Betsy: The workshops were fantastic. Last year, I attended 15, but had to miss 384 others. For example, during the 11:30 slot on Saturday morning I had to choose among 27 topics, including:

- Spiritual Practice for UUs
- Lethal Injustice on America's Death Row
- The Lure of Buddhism
- Planning Successful Capital Campaigns
- Story Telling with Josh Searle-White
- Jim Hightower on Challenging Corporate Economic Dominance
- Strengthening Congregations Through International Partnership
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Woman's Bible
- Becoming an Effective Environmental Advocate

Chuck: Yes, but I have borrowed tapes of many of these from the Library – I listen to them while I walk on the exercise bike. (*The tapes make that wretched contraption bearable ... though I've forgotten exactly what it's called!*)

Also, many of the books & videos in our Library came from GA. And they make a dandy Visual Display.

Betsy: One of the best things I've ever done was to learn a UU-Friendly Meditation technique at GA in 2004.

Chuck: Yes, but now we have our own Meditation Group here at the Fellowship. This is just one of the many ideas GA attendees have brought back to State College and adopted.

Betsy: I loved being part of a Small Group Ministry that met daily to share the stress and joy of GA.

Chuck: Yes, I plan to be in one this year in St. Louis also. That will be a nice complement to our Small Groups here at the Fellowship.

Betsy: So, are you saying that people don't really have to go to GA at all?

Chuck: I guess that's right ... and it's wonderful that those who can't attend in person can get so much benefit. But a couple of anecdotes will give our audience a glimpse of what makes the **Full GA Experience** worthwhile.

Betsy:

At a Sunday Service here last year, Wendy Snetsinger shared her thoughts about growing up Jewish.

She told us about her trip to Israel.

She described her feelings when she realized that, for the first time in her life, she was not a minority.

That is how I felt at GA.

As a lifelong UU, I have been, like Wendy, in a religious minority all my life.

But at GA, looking out at an astounding diversity of color, sexual orientation, age and beliefs, I felt a sense of belonging and a connection with the whole denomination. Despite our apparent differences, I felt I shared important values with every person there.

Chuck:

As I've said, I **love** the workshops, both in person at GA and later on the torture machine in the basement. But perhaps my Favorite Memory from my two GAs so far is from one of the **business meetings!** They call them "Plenary Sessions"...I'm not sure why, but I've mastered this new term.

Laura mentioned "Gini Courter." Gini herself will be **right here** on March 19th and you'll **love** her! She runs the GA business meetings. (That's why we have her photo here, overseeing our proceedings today.)

One day during Plenary, Gini was trying to steer 2000 delegates through some obscure corner of Robert's Rules of Order. (Many of us cats are difficult to herd when we're confused.) Imagine Gini having parliamentary trouble in front of all these people!

And up to the Floor Mic walked a Youth, with multi-colored pastel hair. I knew this speaker was one of the leaders of the Youth Group; he was often near the front when the Youth presented something. But this time he came by himself.

He said to Gini, "I think I can handle this for you."

Gini hesitated for *three long seconds* while 2000 delegates held their breath. She said, "I'm intrigued by your idea..."

Sure enough, Gini left the podium and went to the front of the stage to confer with this Youth. Perhaps he **did** tell her something useful; in any case, she wrapped up the discussion in a few minutes and the meeting went on.

And I sat dazed by Gini's poise and presence of mind, and the tremendous respect she showed her fellow UU. Even more impressive was realizing that our UU faith, and the GA atmosphere, empowered this youth to speak before thousands.

And as I say, this was in the Plenary Session, the **business meeting!** Imagine the impressive and inspiring things that happen during award-winning sermons, multi-media performances, and speeches by some of the world's leaders!

And imagine the meaningful experiences you can have during quiet times with other UUs attending GA. In fact, it has been a treat for me to spend time there with others from **this** Fellowship . . . it's funny to have to travel all the way to California or Texas to get time with my local buddies, but we don't seem to get around to it when we're home.

Michelle features in several of my best GA memories . . .

From Transylvania to Pennsylvania: The Thread that Connects Us

Michelle Leebens-Mack

Just as we have come together in this fellowship, **others, like us,**
are **gathering** in UU societies and congregations on this day,
at **this** time,
up and down this eastern seaboard.

Just as we have come together **today**
in this **building,**
others, like us,
have **gathered** for centuries.

Some believe that Unitarian Universalism is a new faith.
We are...**uniting** Unitarians and Universalists in 1961.

We are also a very **old liberal faith** with roots going back beyond Transylvania in the 1500s,
Roots that taught **religious tolerance...**
Roots that taught us to have **questioning minds.**

We are a faith **called a living tradition.**
We are the **branches** to a great spiritual movement
that promotes a free and **responsible** search
for **truth and meaning.**

Much of UU history is rooted in **deep individualism.**
Bonded by the covenant of our principles,
we **agree** that we are all on **personal journeys**
of **spiritual growth.**

We come together
to **support** one another in this growth,
to **encourage** each other in our **quest**
for truth and understanding.

Each June UU's gather for GA.
We gather from around the **globe.**
We gather in **faith**
To celebrate
and to grow.
We gather to affirm and promote
EACHOTHER.

These are not simply **business meetings,**
This gathering is not just a **spiritual recognition** of **ministers called to fellowship,**
This is not solely a **conference of workshops,**
where we **learn** new things...

General Assembly is all of these things...and **more!**

Four years ago I attended my first GA.

I was invited to go to Boston as a delegate representing this fellowship.

There we **celebrated** with UU's from all over the globe.

We **rejoiced** as Fellowships just like ours back in 1950

and like our neighbors in Altoona

strode across the stage to be **welcomed** into our greater fellowship of UU's.

We recognized and embraced churches from Alaska to New Zealand

And today, more UU's are gathering from Hong Kong to Argentina.

I have been a part of UU fellowships in **TX, TN, and NY** before coming here to State College.

For me, attending a General Assembly has become like "**old home week.**"

I have dinner with a friend from **Syracuse.**

I go touring with an old friend from **Nashville.**

I eat a packed lunch between meetings with a friend from a UU leadership conference, **Unilead.**

I cheer a young lady that I mentored as she **calls** a question during Plenary.

And each morning, for four days,

I **build new** friendships with UU's from fellowships from all over through our Small Groups!

You have come here today for a **reason.**

There is **some thing** that you get from gathering together with other people,

Something that you don't get from sitting alone, meditating.

I believe that all of us come together in this **sacred** place seeking **connection.**

Baptist minister, HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK *said, "A person entirely tied up in him or herself becomes a very small package."*

The same is true of congregations. 1

When we gather as congregations at General Assembly, we **become** linked to the whole of community.

We come together at GA

because we **need** the presence of other people

in seeking to deepen our own lives.

We become active participants in the **covenant** of our principles.

In affirming and promoting the budding fellowship down the road and across the ocean

we **support** our own spiritual growth,

we **enrich** the vitality of this very fellowship.

We honor the diversity in our unity,

And we celebrate our beloved faith!

1. *UUA General Assembly 98, Congregational Polity: History and Practice, Rev. John Buehrens and Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley*

GA

General Assembly Information

www.uua.org/ga

Future GAs

June 21-25, 2006 St. Louis, MO
June 21-25, 2007 Portland, OR
June 26-30, 2008 Ft. Lauderdale, FL
June 25-29, 2009 Salt Lake City, UT

Past GAs

Highlights are available in the UUFCC library
Borrow tapes and CDS.

Better yet, Sunday, February 19, noon to 12:30, come to the UUFCC for a screening of the Rev. Robert Hardies, senior minister of All Souls Church, in Washington, DC delivering his GA sermon "Born Again... and Again... and Again"

A Taste of GA

2006 JPD Spring Conference
March 31 to April 1
Arlington Virginia
Learn more at <http://www.jpduua.org/>