

A Historic General Assembly for Justice

Justice GA Briefing
Text and photos by Julianne McCall



Attending the Unitarian Universalist Association's Justice General Assembly in Phoenix this summer was a deeply moving experience and a true testament to the core of the UU community. Many longtime participants of GAs shared their excitement over an annual gathering that finally prioritized one of the most unifying and crucial pillars of our faith: action. And there was plenty of it, with more than 3,700 sets of hands ready for community work, interaction with local people and immigrant support organizations, and witness events, such as the 2,000-person strong protest at the infamous Tent City Jail.

For some background, in 2010, the SB 1070 bill was passed in the state of Arizona, primarily granting permission to state law enforcement officers to demand citizenship documentation from any person, a right originally held exclusively by federal officers in cases where they had reasonable suspicion of one's undocumented status. In addition, the state imposed punishments for those caught helping undocumented persons, whether they provided shelter, employment, or transportation. The effects of the bill have exacerbated an already dire situation by legitimizing racial profiling and criminalizing a non-criminal act. While the care and management of undocumented persons has never been handled well by the region, these days the circumstances have grown even worse. As mentioned earlier, one facility in particular, Tent City Jail, does not allow its thousands of detainees to escape from the sweltering desert heat, where temperatures reach into the mid-40s (Celsius) and mid-50s in the tents themselves. Detainees report maggots in their food and humiliating treatment from the guards. Nationwide 122 detainees have died in the last year, never having been convicted of a felony. Is this the same America that prides itself on respect for human rights?

Two years ago, when the bill was passed, the UUA had already reserved the Phoenix Convention Center, so they put to a vote the decision of whether to boycott the state and back out of the commitment or lead thousands of UUs to help our

partners in Arizona fight against the cruelties inflicted by the new law. I participated in the vote as a delegate from my San Diego fellowship, and the response was an overwhelming commitment to go to where help was desperately needed. During the two years between that and this year's GA, President Morales and many other UU leaders put themselves on the line during protests, hearings, and marches, while providing support to partner organizations in the immigrant communities. Local community leaders presenting during the GA program repeatedly commented on and thanked the sea of yellow "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign T-shirts that accompanied their activities over the years.



To be clear, the purpose of hosting GA in Phoenix was not to protest against immigration laws, but rather the issues that fuel the laws and are perpetuated by them. We were there to fight against the exploitation and harassment of undocumented persons and the caustic racism that instigates such policies.

During the four days, daily caucus meetings and plenary sessions afforded the opportunity to gain an inside view of the business of the UUA, as well as the breadth of activities it manages on a regular basis. I also had the pleasure of attending many of the more than 100 excellent workshops offered, some highlights being "Justice Ministries: Into the Heart of Your Congregation"; "Bending Toward Justice: Race, Immigration and Religious Education"; "Economic Justice for People with Disabilities"; "Water Justice and the Blue Revolution"; and "Justice as a Family Value." I would be very happy to supply my notes to anyone interested in these topics. The most significant result of the plenary sessions was the decision to place Reproductive Justice at the forefront of congregational social justice projects for the year, as the Congregational Study/Action Issue for 2012-2016.

The worship services touched my heart, particularly the Synergy Worship (video and transcript here: <http://www.uua.org/ga/2012/worship/200297.shtml>). Titled the "Call Across All Ages," five speakers represented different generations of modern-day UUs, and the stories were powerful reflections of lives devoted to furthering progress against the pervasive injustices in one's own lifetime. From shared moments during the Vietnam War draft process that inspired one man to become an attorney for low-income,

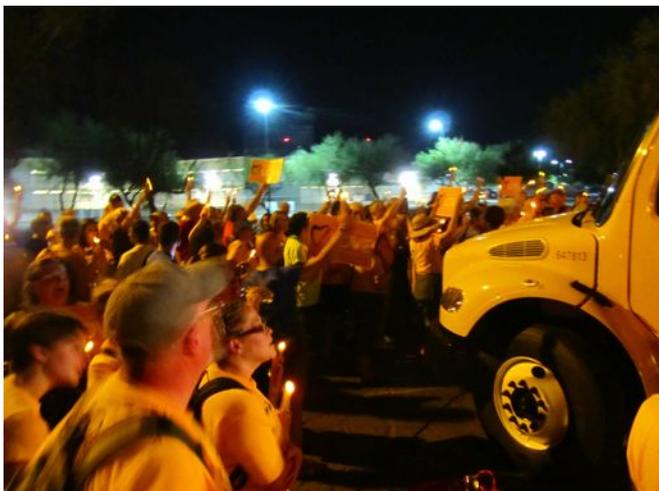
under represented communities to those spent in a human rights workshop led by Martin Luther King, Jr., the entire service was beautiful, with the final time dedicated to the Bridging Ceremony for youth graduating high school.



Thousands of protesters arrived singing songs of freedom, comforting those with family and friends in the jail, and carrying signs, such as the one pictured here, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The Ware lecture, too, was fascinating and energizing. Maria Hinojosa, anchor and managing editor of National Public Radio's Latino USA, shared her observations of the "Culture of Cruelty" that has developed as a result of misguided policies and corporate interests driving the deportation and detention system. When we learn about injustices, "What you do with this information is your job as members of the greatest living democracy... we have the capacity to create a new America."

To wrap up the charged, inspiring conference, Rev. John Crestwell of the UU Church of Annapolis, Maryland, stated during the Sunday service, "Justice is love in action... Justice is not just in what we say, it is in what you're willing to do." I believe the UU community has achieved a critical milestone in our history as "change makers", realizing the dream of a justice-oriented GA by giving action the ultimate priority. It is my greatest hope that the energy, passion, and commitment toward activism continue as regular elements of our religious practices in the months and years to come.



UNLESS THE MOMENT IS UNPLEASANT, IN WHICH CASE I WILL EAT A COOKIE.

QUOTES

"Discipline is remembering what you want."

~David Campbell

"Most of the shadows of this life are caused by standing in one's own sunshine." ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." ~Mahatma Gandhi

"Nothing is easy to the unwilling." ~ Thomas Fuller

"Self-respect is the root of discipline: The sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself."

~Abraham Joshua Heschel

"The best day of your life is the one on which you decide your life is your own. No apologies or excuses. No one to lean on, rely on, or blame. The gift is yours - it is an amazing journey - and you alone are responsible for the quality of it. This is the day your life really begins."

~Bob Moawad

"It is a man's own mind, not his enemy or foe, that lures him to evil ways."

~Buddha

"What makes resisting temptation difficult for many people is they don't want to discourage it completely."

~Franklin P. Jones

"If passion drives you, let reason hold the reins."

~Benjamin Franklin

"What you have to do and the way you have to do it is incredibly simple. Whether you are willing to do it, that's another matter."

~Peter F. Drucker