



2005 Case Study

Prepared for Unitarian Universalist Association by Meeting Strategies Worldwide

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Nearly 4,000 attendees from across the nation participated in the annual General Assembly (GA) of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). The five-day meeting, held in Fort Worth this year, Texas, is an annual summer gathering in which Unitarian Universalists, among other activities, worship, elect officers and vote on resolutions.

A highlight of the 2005 General Assembly was the initial steps taken to bring “greening” elements to the event. The path towards making the GA more environmentally friendly was the result of a GA attendee survey conducted by the Seventh Principal Project. GA attendees who participated in the survey said they wanted a green GA.

UUA’s interest in creating a greener GA is understandable. With any large gathering, the potential for reducing resource consumption is enormous. The GA is no exception. All aspects of producing the Assembly can impact the environment: from location of the GA to the convention center operations to the accommodation operations, to the food and beverage offered and how it’s served, to the transportation options, to the promotion of the event to the exhibit hall. Taking on all of these areas at once could be an overwhelming task.

To better understand the potential impact that the details of an event like the GA can have, consider for a similarly sized, three-day event with 3,000 participants being served two meals a day could use approximately:

- 27,000 plates,
- 36,000 beverage holders,
- 18,000 napkins,
- 45,000 utensils, and
- 13,500 beverage cans or bottles.

HOW GREEN COULD IT BE

Although UUA committed to making the conference as green as possible, two major factors shaped planning. These two factors influenced UUA’s ability to achieve some of the original environmentally responsible goals.

First, prior to the decision to go green, contracts with hotels and the Fort Worth Convention Center, the site of the GA, had already been signed. Since contracts didn’t include environmentally friendly measures, the scope of implementing green practices was limited.

Secondly, the location, the city of Fort Worth, didn’t have commercial recycling available to the convention center or any commercial property. Not offering recycling posed a rather large challenge to provide what most would consider a basic green practice. Meeting Strategies Worldwide’s consultant, Amy Spatrisano, researched haulers in the area that might be able to provide recycling for the event. Fortunately, there was a local hauler, Woody Pemberton, of Tex America who used this opportunity to create a whole new division for their waste haul business.

Subsequently, an agreement with the Fort Worth Convention Center was negotiated to allow a hauler -other than the center’s contracted hauler- access to the facility. The Public Events Manager for the Fort Worth Convention Center, Feleshia Cochran, was instrumental in helping facilitate this happening.

Getting all the necessary parties to agree to work together was one part. The second and more complicated part was in implementing recycling. The convention center staff had to be trained with virtually no lead time. Waste was separated into bins as follows: paper and cardboard, plastics, aluminum, and all other. Trash bins had to be placed in the hallways and meeting areas with signage for attendees to use as well.

The convention center staff did a wonderful job shifting how they disposed of waste to accommodate the new system. Recycling was instituted on Wednesday and within 2 days very little contamination was happening.

The final piece was to also educate the attendees. Linda Friedman, Planning Committee Chair, made an announcement during the Plenary session to inform the attendees of the greening and recycling efforts in place for the GA. By Friday contamination in the trash bins was minimal.

Variations of the following paragraph were used to communicate to facilities, vendors and participants the GA's commitment to reducing environmental impact:

“We not only have a responsibility to be environmentally conscious, we have an extraordinary opportunity to make a very real difference. Through the choices we make in lodging services, logistics, food and beverage, and promotional materials, we can conserve resources on a significant scale. And, we can enhance the attendee experience by empowering them to do the same as individuals.”

PARTNERS IN GREEN

Effectively greening a conference begins with respect for venue and vendor personnel who will be asked to change their routine. Overcoming human resistance to change requires encouraging a sense of ownership and investment, inviting creativity, and nurturing the awareness that instituting environmentally responsible practices, in most cases, also proves to be cost-effective.

As the green consultant, Meeting Strategies Worldwide began by reviewing the environmental policies and systems of each of the participating facilities and vendors. The Fort Worth Convention Center and event hotels had not previously identified environmental stewardship as a priority. The challenge was finding areas where it was economically feasible for them and for UUA. For example, we discussed how a towel and linen reuse program would be both environmentally and economically advantageous—saving energy, water and labor costs for the hotels.

Next, we informed each facility of the UUA's environmental expectations, opening a dialogue for minimizing environmental impact. Having already-signed contracts meant there were fewer incentives for Fort Worth hotels and the convention center to include environmentally friendly measures in their activities. With the philosophy of “you'll never know unless you ask”, the following requests were made to the facilities to implement during the GA.

For Hotels

- Change the sheets and towels every other day, instead of daily, unless requested by the guest.
- Replace consumable amenities only when they are empty – not on a daily basis.
- Use cleaning products that do not introduce toxins into the air or water.
- Instruct hotel housekeeping staff to shut blinds and turn down the heat/air conditioning during the day in rooms while attendees are gone.

For the Convention Center and Caterers

- Use glass or china (non-disposable) catering plates, cups and glasses.
- Do not use polystyrene.
- Serve condiments in bulk containers, not individual servings, eliminating wasteful packaging. This includes sugar, creamer, butter, cream cheese, etc.
- Use shade-grown coffee.
- Use cloth napkins, whenever possible.
- Donate all leftover food to a local food bank.

HOW GREEN WAS IT?

Although contracts didn't require them to green the GA, the convention center and the hotels did implement a number of greening suggestions, resulting in a greener GA. What follows are examples of successes achieved.

Recycling

One of the most noteworthy examples of the power of partnership was the convention center's recycling mentioned earlier. According to figures from Tex-American, the following materials were recycled:

- Plastic: 150 lbs
- Cardboard: 300 lbs
- Aluminum cans: 50 lbs
- Landfill waste/non recycled: 13,746 lbs

Those figures may not seem impressive, but considering this was the first time –with only a several day window- that commercial recycling was offered at the Fort Worth Convention Center, it's huge! This is a legacy that the GA should be proud of building. The experience enlightened and encouraged the convention center staff to consider recycling in the future. It also gave a small local hauling business the opportunity to expand their business by offering a new service. And, you can bet Tex American will be considered when the convention center's contract with their current hauler expires.

The success of the recycling was due to the participation by:

- Convention center workers, who made a significant effort to ensure recyclables – aluminum cans, paper, plastic and cardboard – were placed in appropriate recycling bins.
- Freeman, the decorator for the trade show, and Aramark, the caterer, which both recycled.
- Attendees whom participated in recycling by placing recyclables in the appropriate bin.

Food and Beverage

- Aramark, the event's caterer, put together a menu healthier than its usual offerings. In addition, the company didn't use polystyrene. Plastic and aluminum containers were recycled.
- The local restaurant, Dickey's Barbeque Pit, participated in greening the event by not using polystyrene to serve its food, serving condiments in bulk, offering vegan and vegetarian options, linen table cloths and using biodegradable plates.

Marketing, Communication and Registration

- Rather than mailing paper copies of the general assembly agenda to congregations, assembly organizers made it available on-line.
- Registration packets, which require envelopes and pieces of papers, are not used. Registration confirmations were set via e-mail.
- Soy-based inks and the paper with the highest percentage of post-consumer recycled paper are used for all printed materials, including the program.
- Efforts are underway to purchase re-usable signs for future GAs.

PARTICIPANT EDUCATION

Educated Vendors

Green meetings are becoming more popular, but not every city, convention center, hotel or caterer knows what to expect when greening an event. Therefore, a discussion about participant education must include how the GA aided in the green education of segments of Fort Worth's hospitality market. Talking with venues and vendors about green meeting policies created opportunities to raise awareness and provide information on why the particular practices we were requesting have a positive environmental impact.

Educated Unitarian Universalists

- UUA attendees took back new ideas to their respective congregations, workplaces, and homes. In addition to the greening they saw implemented throughout the conference, attendees were able to attend "Greening Your UUA Congregation," in which they learned tips such as:
 - Using Energy Star light bulbs and other energy efficient products and appliances;
 - Purchasing recycling bins as part of a recycling program, which, at a minimum, includes glass, paper, cardboard and plastic;
 - Using china, silverware and cloth napkins instead of disposable dinnerware at food and beverage functions;
 - Installing low-flow toilets to conserve water;
 - Purchasing and serving condiments and beverages to be served in bulk containers;
 - Purchasing environmentally responsible cleaning products for bathrooms, kitchens and carpets; and
 - Shutting off lights and HVAC when rooms are not being used.
- The GA planning committee members are incorporating lessons learned into their plans for future events, including the 2006 GA.
- The article "A Greener General Assembly," ran in the May/June 2005 *UU World*. The article served as a green meeting primer for those who did or did not attend the GA.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Environmental responsibility isn't an all or nothing proposition. It doesn't have to be 100 percent to have an impact. Every effort, no matter how small, makes a difference.
2. Know your community and its infrastructure. Contact local EPA regarding rules and resources. Make sure waste management is in place; otherwise you'll be asking for things that can't be achieved. Research local laws.
3. Start the greening process with site selection. This allows you to minimize travel required and to choose a facility that has environmental management systems already in place. Interviewing facilities regarding their environmental policies and practices as criteria in decision-making also influences the market long-term

by raising awareness that clients are increasingly basing their site selections on the environmental policies of hotels and conference venues.

4. Stay the course, and don't be dissuaded by expense. Most greening efforts save money. Though some may presently cost more, environmental consciousness is permeating buying practices and driving costs down.
5. The trend toward greening the meeting and hospitality industry is strengthening, which means consumers like UUA members have more options.
6. The challenge is to connect green products and services with real world practices. Meeting planners, businesses, and individual consumers have an opportunity to be bridges in this process.

CONCLUSION

The greening of the GA in Fort Worth was successful in a number of ways. In the short-term, the conference minimized its impact on the local ecosystem. Long term, it raised awareness and educated venues, vendors and attendees.

For many, attending the GA may have been made more meaningful because it was a green event; incorporating the UUA principal of "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

A Unitarian website explains that Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion in which members' deeds speak louder than their words. Unquestionably, greening 2005 and 2006 GAs demonstrate, through deeds, UUA's commitment to the planet.

But there are more than global benefits to the greening of GAs. Because every event that identifies environmental stewardship as a priority is a step in the right direction, UUA is now part of the push to make all gatherings; regardless of whether they involve industry, nonprofits or religious organizations, more environmentally responsible.