

Strengthening the Conversation at General Assembly



Purpose of Linkage Conversations:

- bring to April 2014 Board meeting perspectives about the role of delegates in the democratic process, as we plan conversations for GA 2014 about creating a more robust and inclusive democratic process at GA.

Participants:

- Board members, Executive Director and Administrator of UUMA (9 participants)
- Board members, active member of EqUual Access (4 participants)
- Transition team members and participants in Faith Architects (3 young adults)
- Steering Committee of Allies for Racial Equity (8 participants)
- TRUUST (transgendered persons and allies --5 participants)
- Officers and former officer of Interweave Continental (3 participants)
- Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee

1. If you have ever attended the business session of General Assembly as a delegate, think of a time you recently attended. How did you decide to attend? To who or what did you feel accountable when participating and making decisions?

- many religious professionals attended because role required it; one stated feeling responsible as an automatic delegate; 2 religious educators noted attending to make connections and sharpen professional skills.
- young adult attended to bring an underrepresented YA perspective; to help UUA be more welcoming to young adults
- “Who wants to be a delegate? Here’s your yellow card!”
- several participants described wanting to represent congregation as a delegate

Differing experiences of accountability:

- Some religious professionals felt *primarily* accountable to congregations
- Some religious professionals felt *primarily* accountable to best interests of Unitarian Universalism
- Many participants felt accountable to whoever funds attendance
- Two participants recounted experiences when congregations did not have process for delegate preparation and input from congregation. One participant tried to discern what congregation would likely say. The other acted out of self-guidance and self-education. Even with preparation, “things are heard in the moment”; delegates had a duty to “understand and interpret and do the best that we could.” One participant noted, that even when advised to “just use her conscience”, she tried to vote in ways consistent with the social justice group and how the congregation operated.
- One reported only feeling accountable to own conscience when there was lack of funding

- one participant felt accountable to congregation and also to the interests of the UUA and other congregations
- congregation, to DRUUMM, and to “future seekers”
- One participant reported not feeling any accountability, and much later worrying that congregation didn’t know what was going on.
- One felt accountable to congregation and future of Unitarian Universalism.
- Several that felt accountable to congregation also felt accountable to own conscience.
- One DRE felt accountable to faith, institution, profession and identity group.
- One seminarian, while knowing the culture of the congregation well enough to make decisions, and having personal views in line with congregation, also felt responsibility to congregation to “shepherd it to the best possible version of itself.”

- The more energy and support from congregation, the more accountability to congregation.
- Accountable to larger faith, identity group members (DRUUMM, TRUUST), ministerial colleagues, early on to own concerns, later to faith and colleagues

2. To who or what do you feel a delegate should be accountable when participating in the business sessions and making decisions?

- Many of the religious professionals agreed delegates should be accountable to mission of Association. Balance is needed between mission and particular decisions in which delegates have interest. They spoke of a 3-tiered understanding of accountability to (1) their own conscience, (2) those who sent them, and (3) the prophetic intent of Unitarian Universalism (in ascending order).
- Some participants noted that in a clear up-and-down vote, it is important to know where the congregation is and vote the direction given. Yet when delegate acts in other ways--in speaking on issues, then one's conscience and the future of faith may come into play more.
- Several noted that as we are becoming more than an association of congregations, but of other kinds of communities, accountability becomes more complex.
- One noted accountability to personal experience, and importance of bringing personal stories to the discussion (such as buying food with food stamps during a discussion of ethical eating).

- Young adult noted a hierarchy of accountabilities: the 7 principles and the movement as a whole; the congregation; and personal judgment/personal ethic.
- Several voiced basic accountability to congregation but additional answers were:
- “UU principles. Own values. Wider denomination. Religious movement.”
- “Accountable to prophetic leadership, to explain my vote.”
- “Accountable to the vision of Unitarian Universalism, not just the mission. Accountable to congregations.”
- “A strong sense of accountability to people of color, historically marginalized communities, youth and young adults.”
- “Self, others, larger UU purpose.”

- Future generations of UU”
- “Would be nice if more delegates were accountable to RE programs and children’s interests and concerns.”
- Delegates are representative of his or her congregation, and should act in accord with the values and priorities of that community. Also need to vote with personal integrity and accountability to the Association as a whole--to make it a stronger, more energetic association that bears witness to the seven principles”
- “Representation of the congregation would be very important because of the large privilege of having expenses paid. Second accountability would be that as a member of a subgroup of the congregation...All the ways of describing accountability are important.”
- “Delegate is accountable to the church sending them--and the church is accountable to the moral bent of the universe or God--whatever concept makes you comfortable in describing the best version of the congregation.”

3. If delegates were expected to make a greater commitment to their delegate role--such as making a two-year commitment to serve, staying engaged with the UUA Board through webinars before or between Assemblies, communicating to their congregations on issues before the General Assembly and actions taken--how would that affect your willingness to serve?

- Concern raised by religious professionals that people are just not interested in governance. Suggest making GA a time for linkage and learning and “end the old assumption that it is an essential opportunity for direct democracy.”
- Several noted that an opportunity to be in conversation would make them more willing to serve; one noted increased willingness if delegates were willing to spend the time and effort to be informed.
- One noted willingness to serve was related to current high level of volunteering.
- “People step up when you expect more from them” v. concern with setting expectations high.
- Increased time commitment would affect willingness.
- If it was not enough of a 2-way conversation, and it just a marketing tool of UUA--not interested.

- If it is a true dialogue with delegates invited to equally respond with their best thinking-- that's interesting. Important that delegates have an equal role in input. Would love that we make exciting discussions.
- Two-year commitment would be more interesting--the follow-through and continuity and expression of view over longer period would be interesting.
- “Would be excited by it. Would want to serve more.”
- Concern about the impact devoting a leader for two years to GA will have on congregational leadership development path. Like the idea of engaging congregations in the preparation.

4. How would it affect your ability to serve?

- It sounds good in theory but there are doubts that there is time and money enough, especially in smaller congregations. More effective use of technology will be essential but that open the gap further between haves and have-nots. Would require a significant financial commitment on the part of both the UUA and the congregations.
- Those with disabilities already have higher costs to travel to GA--greater financial commitment may disproportionately affect them.
- Longer-term commitment could be problem for young adults in transition.
- Funding needs to be provided.
- “It would be impossible for me financially.”
- A few said it would not affect ability to serve.

5. Who do you think then would most likely serve as delegates?

- Retired people with an interest in governance which would directly undermine our efforts at greater inclusion in decision making and vision casting
- Persons with even more financial, class and professional resources than we have now would be delegates.
- Those with personal resources or those from a congregation that has resources. Or someone that has passion.
- Older, retired members without commitments to young children or jobs.
- Those who are already active in the congregation and who have already made commitment

- to extra time--so would not drastically change who represents the congregation now.
- People who have other kinds of institutional commitments, such as RE's and those who are in organizations that have meetings at GA.
- Those passionately dedicated to the faith with most time and resources. The wealthy or retired. People who feel called to the culture or the way we do business. People who are drawn to the process of Robert's Rules of Order.

**6. To promote a more diverse and inclusive delegate body at General Assembly, in what new ways could individuals be encouraged to serve?
How could they be supported in that role?**

- Financial assistance was mentioned most.
- Technology for on-line participation with appropriate platforms and necessary tutorials. Invitations keyed to programs, young families, activists. Technology may gravitate against greater inclusivity. Real inclusion is hard work that requires face-to-face contact.
- Need to build trust in delegated authority. Need visible feedback loops that assure people that they are being heard, their ideas considered and that involvement has a definite impact.
- One participant noted he has seen congregations achieve diversity in delegates when their governing boards or leadership took ownership and made it a priority, rather than let delegates be self-selecting.
- Support other than financial is important. Example: GA has done more to have programs

- available for children, and to make it more interesting for families.
- would like to see not only congregational delegates but regional at-large delegates charged to answer to the larger movement. Feels that DRUUMM need specific representation, representing people of color. Those not members of congregations still need to be represented.
- Give congregations more resources for understanding how to choose and inform delegates. Help congregations understand how to look for marginalized identities in their own delegate selection process.

- More education and training together for delegates.
- More conscious outreach to underrepresented communities. UUA needs to incentivize and encourage dialogue in congregations on discernment of who should represent the congregation. Provide a structure or set of guidelines that would produce a more diverse pool of delegates.
- Description of delegate roles should include requirement of interaction with congregation--so input is broader than delegates themselves and there is conscious representation of a broader base. There should be uniformity among delegates about how they are accountable to groups.
- Need more intentional selection of delegates. More marginalized identities (accountability to those groups, representing MC concerns)

- Reach out to congregations not normally represented. There is a cultural element--have a way to move forward that isn't so "Robert's Rules of Order" driven.
- Ask whether there are congregations that can sponsor those that cannot go. Now, churches with the most resources have the biggest voice.
- We need education on congregational polity and how the UUA serves congregations.
- Cluster representation of congregations in covenanted association.
- Would I be willing to give up GA every year if we could better support people of color and young people? The answer is YES.

The UUA continues to explore how technological advances can improve accessibility to General Assembly and diversify the delegate body. Do you have suggestions for improving off-site participation to accomplish those goals?

- Two groups had a sense that reliance on online access to GA proceedings would reduce inclusion. One group felt it better to strengthen the conversation at the local and regional levels so as to establish a credible conduit that informs an empowered board. Equal Access participants noted that GA has gone far in making onsite GA accessible. Trend could reverse if off-site participation through technology is seen as the best means to accommodate people with disabilities. Technology could re-segregate people with disabilities.
- One participant noted that years ago she would have said we can do all our business virtually. Then she went to GA in Minneapolis, was presented with the idea of boycotting Phoenix, and came out with the idea to bear witness. “Being together affects our ethics.”
- Many comments around need to be more fully included and participating as an offsite delegate. Add a dial-in voice chat room? Create a sense of community with other offsite delegates; be able to see faces of delegates; a roving reporter engaging with offsite delegates; allow ability to chat with offsite delegates.

- That face to face contact is necessary is not true for anyone under 30 years of age. Yet in using technology, need to balance needs of older and younger. Linking single individuals to an event from offsite is a bad idea--one is more likely to participate if engaged as part of a community.
- Offsite delegates need opportunity to interact in person, particularly if delegates' involvement onsite will include conferences and group discussions.