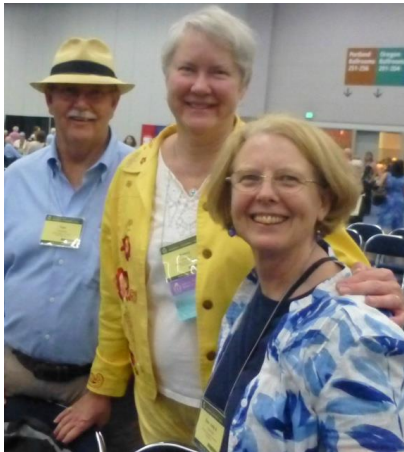
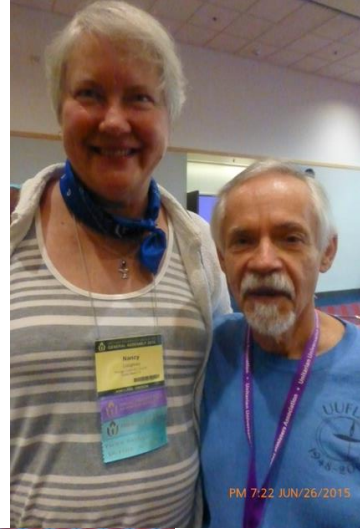


## **General Assembly: Bringing it Home**

There are at least two parts of attending General Assembly, or “GA” as it is often referred to: The first is what went on at GA. This can be broken down into several parts including the business of GA such as receiving reports, debating issues for vote such as business resolutions, by laws changes, Actions of Immediate Witness and the activities around these business measures. Other pieces of what went on at GA included significant worship services, usually several each day, and some as featured events such as The Service of the Living Tradition organized by and for our ministers, religious education professionals and our music leadership professionals. Worship concluded on Sunday with the biggest UU Sunday service anywhere – think about 5,000 people gathering in one place singing, sharing, listening intently and being moved by words and wisdom of prophetic women and men. An amazing experience that I relish each year I attend GA.

Other pieces of the GA experience: A standout highlight occurred on Friday night with the Ware Lecture featuring Cornell West, a professor at Princeton and a noted national speaker on race – just another gathering with 5,000 of your best friends for the week! More about that shortly. Other events – hundreds of workshops on almost any topic you can think about: social justice, worship, political discussion, business of the Association, Religious education, choir, other music, church and staff finances and many, many more. Making a decision about where you will spend your time is one of the hardest things to do. Then there is the Exhibit Hall – perhaps a hundred booths with everything from the UUA Bookstore and Beacon Press to booths for Meadville Lombard and Starr King to small booths selling t-shirts, scarves, and other tchotchke to take home. It is always fun to walk through and see what is going on in the booths and it is one of the best places to run into old friends. And what about convention center food? Not so memorable in a good way.



Social witness is a prominent part of any GA, whether it is debating which items will make it to be approved as Actions of Immediate Witness (which is kind of like having to decide which of your kids you like best and then once you have done that deciding if you really want to keep them). The formal Social Witness gathering was to support indigenous tribes in the Pacific Northwest in their efforts to keep traditional fishing grounds and native

lands from being despoiled by commercial enterprise and development. But the most interesting, gratifying and fun part of GA Social Witness was the Supreme Court ruling on Friday morning of GA providing for full recognition in all states of same gender marriage rights. The entire plenary session was put on hold to celebrate. President Peter Morales invited every person whose marriage was previously not recognized in every state or persons affected by state laws prohibiting same gender marriage. Several hundred people jammed on stage with wild enthusiasm from the floor and joyous music accompanying them. It did not end there though... all day long throughout the Portland Convention Center, in the hotels, on the sidewalks and on the trains, people smiled, hugged, danced, laughed and otherwise celebrated. It kept on right to the close of GA. It was really a special place to be for a special day in the country's history.



This was not the only special moment at GA though. On Friday night –the same day as the SCOTUS ruling – Dr. Cornel West presented the Ware Lecture. The Ware lecture has featured some of the most honored thinkers, philosophers, politicians, writers and theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and now here into the 21<sup>st</sup>. It has included the likes of Jane Addams, Reinhold Niebuhr, Howard Thurman, Linus Pauling, Martin Luther King, Jr, Jesse Jackson, Kurt Vonnegut Jr, Elliott Richardson, May Sarton, Shirley Chisholm, and in more recent years, Morris Dees, Julian Bond, Holly Near, Van Jones, Mary Oliver and more. Cornell West though was in rare form. Coming off a day of celebration over Marriage Equality and the recent events of Ferguson, Charleston, Baltimore and more he had much to say and was eloquent and animated in his presentation. I had read the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr when he presented the Ware lecture in 1966. He said to the group assembled, *“I need not pause to say how delighted I am to be here tonight, and to have the privilege of being with you for this important*

*meeting. ... There are those wonderful moments in life when you speak before a group that is so near and dear to you that you don't feel like you have to engage in the art of persuasion. You don't feel like you are in the midst of strangers. You know that you are with friends. I can assure you that I feel that way tonight."*

I think Cornel West felt the same way. He knew he was with friends and fellow travelers. He knew he was with people that like him were arrested in Ferguson. He let it all out. Martin Luther King, Jr spoke on



the topic "Don't Sleep through the Revolution" in 1966. Cornell West had no intention of letting anyone sleep through the revolution or anything else that night. Dr. West spoke for over an hour without any notes. He had four topics he explored with us: Integrity in the face of oppression; Virtue in the face of brutality, Honesty in the face of mendacity and Decency in the face of insult. I cannot adequately summarize all

Dr. West had to say on these but I encourage you to go online to [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) and watch the lecture for yourself. I have been struck in recent days by the response to the killings in Charleston and how these principles that Dr. West lays out have been lived by the survivors, the families, the larger Charleston community and now finally the South Carolina state legislature. I found his words an inspiring way to live life not only in dealings of race but in other areas of oppression. The oppressors cannot withstand an unending response of integrity, virtue, honesty, and decency however much and for however long they may try. I am encouraged. I am very encouraged.

For some of us, the business affairs of GA are important as well. I suppose that comes from my seven years on the UUA board and four years as Secretary of the UUA. I was glad to be back in the midst of it despite the formal but necessary requirements to keep several thousand people from dissolving into chaos and confusion. The primary activities of what are called the plenary sessions are several: present reports, take up debate and votes on business items and actions of immediate witness [briefly describe these], and honor and give appreciation to

individuals and groups. There were two people honored for special awards that have some connection with OCUUC. The first was the Distinguished Service Award for the Advancement of Unitarian Universalism. It was presented to Rev Clark Olsen for his lifelong service to Unitarian Universalism. He went to Selma in 1965 and was with Rev. Jim Reeb when they were attacked by angry klan members and Rev Reeb died the next day from his injuries. Clark is the son of one of our former ministers, Rev Arthur Olsen. Clark's mother and sister were both members of our church following Arthur Olsen's death. Clark and his wife Anna have been friends for a number of years and I am very happy for his selection. It is well deserved.



The second award presented was The Angus McLean award for Religious Education. Ginger Luke has served for many years as the DRE for River Road Congregation in Bethesda, MD and has only recently retired. So how is she connected to OCUUC? She and her husband, Don



Chery, are fairly frequent visitors to OCUUC. They have a son and grandson who live nearby here in Costa Mesa and if they are visiting on a Sunday morning they always come to church. You may have seen Don helping his grandson who uses crutches come up during the Time For All Ages. Don and Ginger told me they will be visiting again this summer and are likely to be in church. Make sure if you meet Ginger to congratulate her on this well-deserved award.

The business of GA can be summed up fairly succinctly. We passed three Actions of Immediate Witness including a statement supporting the Black Lives matter movement, support of climate justice through a global climate agreement in 2015 and support of an immediate end to immigrant child and family detention. We also approved a Statement of Conscience affirming [reproductive justice](#), which concludes, “we work toward reproductive justice, and commit to replacing insecurity with safety, fear with acceptance, judgment with love, and shame with

compassion.” Statements of Conscience are developed as part of a three-year study/action process by congregations and the Commission on Social Witness.

The UUA Board and the Commission on Appraisal proposed a motion to make the Commission a committee of the board. After much debate the



proposal was voted down by the delegates who chose to keep the Commission an independent appraisal body reporting only to the delegates at GA. It appears delegates were not at all anxious to give up that authority. Not much of a surprise really. We also voted the slate of candidates for the various

elected board, committee and commission positions, which surprised the candidates for the Commission on Appraisal to some degree. Now, I know that does not sound like much for over twenty hours of plenary time but you know the old saying that if there are twenty UUs in a room each will have their own opinion on any topic. In this case there were 2,000 delegates in the room. Even with all that, I enjoy it as theatre and as our democratic process.

Now I said at the beginning of my talk, there are at least two parts of GA with the first being the experience of GA. The second though is probably more important, or at least it should be, and that is what we bring home with us. If we did not come back with something to share then the whole point of a GA is wasted. For my part, and I speak only for myself, I come back with a refreshed attitude and some energy to take on the work of another church year. I can tell you that by the time we wrapped up our own church year shortly before GA, I was feeling a little disheartened. We had a canvass which did not reach its goal and mostly because of people we did not hear from at all despite me sending repeated emails. We ended up having to pass a budget which is only balanced by hoping those we did not hear from will do what they did last year, hoping the county will refund some our property taxes and worst of all having to

have each of our employees take a mandatory reduction in hours to lower wages. All-in-all, it was not a good way to end the year.

I needed something for an attitude adjustment and an energy recharge and General Assembly was just the thing I needed. I was reminded that even though we are a tiny denomination the religious tapestry of the country we continue a proud tradition of having an over-sized impact relative to our numbers in the national civil discourse. How many times have I watched on the national news this year about some social protest and seen those yellow t-shirts emblazoned with “Standing on the Side of Love”? We are as visible as anyone and more so than most. We show up! GA reinforces this just by the sheer numbers of people in the room. It is hard to not get excited when thousands of people around you are getting excited. And it makes you want to do something. We come back with new tools, new ideas, new songs, new connections, new ideas and a better and deeper understanding of Unitarian Universalism.

I’m excited to be up here now telling you about GA and thinking about all the things we can do in the coming year with a new board, a crowd in the room on Sundays, a mission to reach out to the community and draw them in. You passed a resolution at our annual meeting to make homeless issues a project for all of us to come together on in different ways that appeal to our own levels of sympathy, compassion, caring and outreach. Whether it be making sock sacks, lunch bags, showing up at city council meetings, volunteering at a shelter, preparing or delivering meals for ATM – I hope you know that without our meals many ATM clients would be homeless as well. While homeless issues may be a common focus it does not mean it is our only outreach. Every month we make a significant financial contribution to local agencies helping the communities they serve. We support through discounted rentals dozens of people dealing with addictions.

It is not only social justice. I learned long ago that our church sits on a three legged stool. Social justice is one of those legs but religious education and spiritual development, or worship as some may call it, are the other two legs and without all three the stool falls. We are so fortunate to have a quality RE program under Rayna’s leadership and a quality music program under Beth’s leadership and dynamic, thought-

provoking, intellectually stimulating and spiritually meaningful worship and other programming under Reverend Sian's leadership.

I needed GA to help me get back to looking at the bigger picture and everything that is going so well at OCUUC and far outnumber any difficulties we face. In fact, my expectation is that challenges will be the opportunities to rise to our very best selves as we work from a spirit of cooperation, good faith, creative thinking, planning ahead and a reawakened sense of our own abundance. I do know however that this can only happen when we work together. When I am asked by someone what can they do to help I have several suggestions: first, come to church every Sunday you are able. Make it a priority. Second, become involved. Join a committee where you feel you can make a contribution, say yes if you are asked to help with an event or a project and maintain high expectations of the church. Do that and we cannot fail. The money will follow, the leadership will be shared, the mission will be served and we will all be the better for it.

This year we had nearly a dozen members attend GA. I hope that they have all come back enthused, energized, equipped, evangelized and encouraged to bring the spirit of General Assembly to all of us. Next year, GA is in Columbus, Ohio. I plan on going back and I hope many of you will as well.

