

Winter 2014 – 2015

# Crossings

*The Magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Church  
at Washington Crossing*

**Tapestry of Traditions**  
**How We Celebrate the Holidays**

**An Ever-Evolving Concept**  
**Being a Welcoming Congregation in 2015**

**The Joys of GA**  
**Why We Go, Go Again,  
and Are Changed by It**

*Our Principles in Action ♦ Celebrating Our 98th Year*





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### CROSSINGS: OUR PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

Articles in *Crossings* focus on the positive work done by UUCWC members and friends that demonstrates our congregation's commitment to the [7 Principles](#). Many good works by our committees, teams, and individuals are inspirational. Unless you are intimately involved with these efforts, however, you may not be aware of the time and selfless dedication, the challenges overcome, or the joy experienced by those involved — not to mention the impact on those who benefit from their work. By telling our stories, we hope to inspire even greater engagement in social justice, charity, and other positive efforts within UUCWC.

### UUCWC MISSION STATEMENT

Inspired by our Principles and Purposes, members of the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing unite to create a welcoming, caring religious community. Within this community, we encourage and affirm the individual's quest for authenticity, wisdom and spiritual deepening. We gather to celebrate the wonder of the cosmos and the mystery of life, its passages, its joys and sorrows. Compelled by justice, we give voice to societal concerns and reach out to touch the lives of others.

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Unitarian Universalist Church  
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### INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

## 4 Bring Your Own Tradition to This Holiday

Unitarian Universalists may be able to lay claim to the most diverse collection of holiday practices around. Lifelong UUs have homegrown traditions, while those coming to our movement from other faiths integrate old customs with new truths. Six of our members share how they create a meaningful holiday.

## 10 'Well Done is Better Than Well Said'

Ben Franklin's quote appropriately describes UUCWC's Welcoming Congregation designation. That achievement 20 years ago didn't mean an end to our work in ensuring that LGBT people are treated fairly. As we've learned from our own history, being a Welcoming Congregation requires ongoing action, not just words. *Part 2*.

## 16 What's So Great About GA?

This year, more than 30 people from UUCWC went to General Assembly — the largest contingent we've ever sent. Many who went say they came home inspired and plan to go again. Why? And how have GA attendees channeled their inspiration to build and strengthen our faith community at UUCWC?

ON OUR COVER: The Mitten Tree for HomeFront children is a UUCWC tradition. Read about some of our members' other favorite traditions on Page 4.

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# A Recipe for Our Winter Holiday: BYO-7('Tradition')...

## ...And Add a Dash of Our Sources of Inspiration

Many lifelong Unitarian Universalists find uniquely individual meaning in the holidays. Many more of us come to UU from faiths with rich holiday traditions. Getting here doesn't mean you have to leave everything behind at the holidays.

Here are 6 stories of how our members incorporate cherished traditions into the holiday season.

*Story by  
Margaret DeAngelis*

For this issue of *Crossings*, I was given a list of topics from which to choose. I picked this story — one that would explore how our members celebrate the holidays, the tapestry of traditions that they hold dear, and what that means as a Unitarian Universalist.

This topic piqued my interest. Since becoming a member of UUCWC in 2007, I have worked on building my own theology. During this process, I have questioned what I believe and thought I had made room for the traditions of *my* past. But as I began to ask those questions, I also started to change how I celebrated and thought about Christmas.

In November 2008, I was taking a religious education class with our minister at the time, Rev. Charles Stephens, and I explained to him that I was feeling melancholy. I understood my journey would consist of growth and change, and by now I had begun to see the birth of Jesus and the celebration of Christmas differently. I knew Jesus wasn't born on Dec. 25, but I still "bought in to the story" of how Jesus came to be. I wanted to believe in the feeling of this beautiful story. But as I started to question more deeply, I could no longer buy into it. I could not imagine how to make my old traditions fit in.

As we walked out of class, Rev. Charles replied, "Being UU

doesn't mean you have to throw away your old traditions. You can incorporate them into a new way of thinking. And over time you may change your feelings again — and that's OK. The six sources of inspiration can still be a part of who you are."

I thought I understood what he was saying, but at the time I was so enthusiastic about becoming a Unitarian Universalist and my reasons for change were so strong and decisive, I could no longer embrace my old way of thinking about Christmas with my new knowledge. So after Thanksgiving, I basically went cold turkey! My first decision in this process was to leave our family nativity scene in its box in the basement. I believed it was a myth and the scene felt a bit silly to me.

But Christmas is still my favorite celebration of the year. I love the lights. I love the story of hope. I love the... magic, although as I get older I feel less magical and more practical.

So "practical me" picked this article. And "practical me" experienced some magical moments as others told me their stories of



Jayme Trott, Sallie Dunner, and Nina Todor in harmony at the Schenks' Holiday Sing-Along.

tradition, hope, faith, and inspiration.

### **Caroling in community**

Now just to state the obvious, most UU congregations are a diverse group of people — and ours is no different. Our sources of faith include Jewish, Christian, humanist, and earth-centered traditions. Hanukah, Christmas, Winter Solstice, and Kwanzaa are celebrated, to just name a few.

Many scholars believe that the date of Christ's birth, right after the winter solstice, was chosen to coincide with pagan celebrations of light and renewal of warmth. Hope, faith, and giving are recurrent themes. Birth is the symbol of hope, a return to the sun, and the promise of what is to come.

Some of the many ways in which we celebrate are with trees, in homage to the European pagan custom, and by giving gifts, a



tradition borrowed from [Satur-nalia](#), an ancient Roman agricultural festival to celebrate the winter solstice, along with other pre-Christian traditions.

One UU tradition I have come to love is going to Joe and Michele Schenk's house to sing Christmas carols. Joe and Michele offer this as an auction event, and it usually takes place a couple of weeks before Christmas. I love the festive energy, how their home is decorated, and the feast before and after we sing. Most of all, I love the company. It is during this time that at least one person reminds me that the carol "[It Came Upon a Midnight Clear](#)" was written by Edmund Sears, a 19th century Unitarian minister. The carol not only celebrates the birth of Jesus but also addresses social justice, a theme central to Unitarian Universalism. I have also learned that "Jingle Bells" was written by James Lord Pierpont, a music director at the Unitarian church in Savannah, Ga., who was homesick for his native Massachusetts — or so [one version the story goes](#).

Joe shared with me that the Schenk family Christmas Eve tradition is to visit [Longwood Gardens'](#) Holiday exhibits, outdoor light displays, and organ

sing-alongs. Then they head home at dusk in time to get dinner before Christmas Eve services, either at UUCWC or at [Tinicum United Church of Christ](#), where Michele is the pastor.

In their everyday lives and as exemplified during the Christmas season, the Schenk family clearly honors the [Third](#) and [Fourth](#) Principles — respectively, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

### Real candles on the tree

Bonnie Ruekgauer says her family's "unusual tradition" began about 30 years ago. "With an extended family that is almost totally Christian, it's a practice that seems to be loved by everyone," she says. "We light live candles on our Christmas tree!"

The parents of Bonnie's husband, Bernie, immigrated to the United States from Germany and Sweden, where lighting candles on a tree is a well-established tradition. "Our family and friends gather around our Christmas tree, and we invite people to light one of the 12 candles in memory or honor of someone. We often remember people who have passed away in the past year or those who aren't able to be with us for the holidays," Bonnie says.

Why 12 candles? "Who knows? We sure don't!"

Perhaps this tradition's most in-

spirational moment comes after all the candles are lit. "We turn off the lights and silently enjoy the beauty of the glowing tree," says Bonnie. "After a few minutes, we sing "[Silent Night](#)." Even after the song ends, we sit together for a little while longer, enveloped in the warmth of the burning candles, reluctant to blow them out and turn on the lights."

The Ruekgauers brought this tradition to the church in the 1980s, when the Crossings Room was the sanctuary. "We lit the candles on the church tree for two or three seasons. At that point, more safety-conscious minds prevailed and we ended the practice," she recalls.

What a beautiful event that must have been in the Crossings Room.

### The right time to share

Terry Caton shared her story with me about growing up as a "cradle Unitarian." Her father and mother were charter members of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis. Two moves later, when she was 15 years old, her family settled in Yardley and became members of



Live candle on the Ruekgauer tree

our own congregation — what was then the [First Unitarian Church of Trenton](#).

"When I was about the age of 9, the Christmas-birth story of Jesus was presented as a lovely story. It was important to the Methodist church members down the street, but it was important to us in a *different* way," Terry recalls. "Nonetheless, it was a really nice story about a hardship of a young family having a baby in a barn."

Terry was more likely to believe in Santa Claus than the idea that a savior of men's souls was born in an outbuilding surrounded by cows and sheep and visited by a bunch of wise men with fabulous gifts. But "I liked the *story* of Jesus and could see how the birth story was similar to other heroes in Greek, Roman, and Egyptian traditions. Every religion has a miraculous birth story and also a catastrophe that mankind had to overcome. We didn't ignore the story of Jesus. We talked about it at church. It was put out in the curriculum along with other stories about great teachers."

Terry treated me to her life growing up. "Ma' and 'Grumpy' were my father's parents — non-practicing Episcopalians who listened to church services on the radio. They had a small Christmas tree. 'Nonna' and 'Granddaddy' were Mother's parents and lived in Newark." She wasn't sure if Granddaddy went to church, but Nonna was probably a humanist. And it was Nonna's

big home in Newark where she grew most fond of going during the holidays.

At Terry's own home, there was always a tree-decorating tradition where her brothers brought in the tree and set it up. One of her fondest memories is of Nonna's ornaments, a special collection that Nonna had assembled over the years. And when Nonna passed away, Terry and her sister-in-law divided the ornaments among Nonna's 13 grandchildren. She believes the oldest cousin was given a Christmas ball from 1898

"that now lives under glass." Another ornament, from the White House Christmas Tree during the Kennedy administration, literally blew off the tree. It rolled down the icy, snowy slope of the lawn and into her Nonna's hands through the White House fence.

I have to say, Terry's description of dividing her Nonna's ornaments after her death was beautiful and heartbreaking. We both sat at opposite ends of our phone in tears.

But one of her most beautiful memories is of explaining to her mother that she is Wiccan. "It took me a long while to tell her," Terry recalls, but when she explained the connections and rituals to her mother, her mom "realized it was a natural progression for her daughter to be a witch."

Terry's story of that day is a beautiful tale of some of the very things we strive for as UUs: inclusion, sharing, and finding common ground. "I went to Mom's and put up a tree on the 21st [of December] to celebrate solstice. I cast a circle, sang to her, and did a meditation about the seed in darkness growing up to light — and right at that time, I put the lights on. My mom was so amazed at how it affected her. I was able to share how important it was to me, and Mom appreciated the beauty of it. Mom may not have been so comfort-



able with the ritual of casting the circle, but I wrote the ritual and used my own words. I showed her there was another path to the goals we both were seeking.

"It took five years to speak about this to my mom," Terry says. "In the end, she was comfortable that I had found a religious home in my life."

Terry shares that "A lot of Christ-



James Lord Pierpont



# A Gift of Love — No Wrapping Needed

*In Diana Barbera's home, a uniquely personal holiday tradition has evolved. It's a story of gratitude, told best in Diana's own words.*

I was raised enjoying the holiday traditions in a large Catholic family. Although money was scarce, kids were not, and my parents did all they could to make Christmas special. We decorated, made presents, visited friends and relatives, sang in choirs and joyfully prepared for weeks.

After I left the Catholic church in my teens, I became a Buddhist, then a UU in my early 30s. When I started my own family, I did return to some of the traditions of the holidays, which included gift giving. But after years of buying and receiving presents, feeling the accompanying stress, then seeing the excess and waste, this tradition was up for serious reconsideration.

So after trying many different ways to honor the spirit of giving, we now share in this way: We set aside special time privately and quietly to really think about one another. Then we make a list of the reasons we love each other, the qualities that we honor in each, moments that left us with a new awareness of who they are, acknowledgements of how they contribute to our world, big and small.

One person at a time is the receiver while the rest of us take a turn expressing our love. The receiver does not talk, but just listens and breathes in all the goodness. We pause often, giving space to really allow it in and we do not interrupt each other. Everyone has a turn to be the receiver and many turns to be the giver.

This gift of the heart is so powerful, uplifting, and fun too. Expressing our love is beyond precious and the real treasure we carry with us forever. It requires no shopping, no wrapping, and never gets returned.

mas is remembering family, but I am a pagan, and the Wiccan religion is very meaningful to me. I have a tree, a solstice log, and a lot of ornaments — many that are pagan-related. I celebrate a female goddess while still singing the traditional carols and loving the story of the birth of Jesus.”

## Menorahs and mangers

Although her ancestry included Unitarian and Universalist clergy, Charlie Groth's parents were raised Protestant. Some combination of her oldest sibling's objection to confirmation classes and her father's discomfort with Charlie's Methodist christening led the family to seek a religion where they all felt comfortable. She credits her parents for church shopping — with all five kids in tow — finally finding their home at the First Unitarian Church of Trenton when Charlie was still a toddler. Later, when the church moved to Titusville, Charlie would meet her future husband, Dan, at our church — and the rest is history, or *herstory*. Dan had been a Presbyterian minister but left the ministry and found a religious home in UUCWC.

Charlie's family has long cherished the spiritual diversity of the holidays. When she was 10 years old, her sister started dating a Jewish man who would teach them about Hanukah. Another sibling also married into the Jewish tradition. “Half of my nieces and nephews have a Jewish parent,” she says. “My eldest brother is UU and my sister is a UU minister. My brother's daughter celebrated [Coming of Age](#) and a Bat-mitzvah. We have two menorahs, and since the kids were little we have celebrated the Jewish holidays with family and friends, including Holly Bussey and Jim Sanders.”

Growing up UU, Charlie understood that God-fearing people can lose faith over time. “But I didn't believe in God, and I remember telling my Grandma just that. Grandma was astounded.

“I read the bible, but I saw it differently. I didn't believe Jesus was the son of God, so the virgin birth was not so much a part of Christmas,” she says. “But I loved the idea that the animals talk at midnight. I liked to sing ‘[The Friendly Beasts](#),’ which is all about the animals taking care of the baby.”

To Charlie, Christmas consists of holly, lights and the tree — and family traditions that incorporate them all.

“In my family, traditionally, the Christmas tree was really important. In my grandfather's generation, it was put up on Christmas Eve because they were German immigrants. The children were excused and the tree was decorated and set up with candles on the branches. Then the children were brought back in, and the idea was that the tree was set up for the children — a gift for them, a way to take care of them. After that, they sang ‘Silent Night’ in German.”

Charlie, Dan, and their daughters carry on elements of these traditions today. After returning home from UUCWC on Christmas Eve, they have a service of their own, just like when Charlie was a child. “There's a lot of carol singing, and it builds from there,” she says. “We read *The Night Before Christmas* and sing ‘Silent Night’ in English and German.”

The meaning of “Silent Night,” she explains, is somewhat different in German than how many of us may understand it. “Sure, it is about peace on earth, but it is also about ‘quiet night, holy night, and that everything sleeps with a lonely watch. Only the trusted high holy pair holds the boys with the locks of hair.’ It is the night that is important, the watching through the night. Taking care of a child. Even shepherds were watching too.

“We have a manger scene that is really beautiful, and some pieces



A couple of rogue angels with accordions crash the manger scene in Charlie Groth and Dan Tuft's home.

were carved by my dad. I have carved a figure. And the angels are playing trumpets, except there is one rogue angel playing an accordion and another accordion player my dad carved,” she laughs. “I don't know how it got there.”

I laugh too. I think that sounds just about right. Leave it to a UU home to celebrate many faiths and spiritual beliefs and to accept all angels — as diverse as their instruments may be.

## Coming full circle

As for me, this article became my holiday gift. After many years, I finally understand what Rev. Charles said to me that evening. And in writing this article, I heard it through many hearts and voices. I also realized that I may have forgotten our Unitarian Universalist six sources of inspiration and only focused on the knowledge I was accumulating. The first source says, “Direct ex-

perience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

Thanks to all the beautiful people who helped me write this article. You rejuvenated my sense of hope. This year, I will take out the nativity scene that belonged to my parents and was loved by my mother. Being UU reminds me that I *can* renew my spirit. I am grateful for the magic of this congregation, which encourages me to open up to the sources of inspiration that continue to create and uphold life.

MARGARET DEANGELIS has been a member of UUCWC since 2007. She looks forward to sharing the Christmas season with her husband Ron, their family and friends and their many four-leggeds.



# WALKING A COURAGEOUS PATH

*UUCWC's Welcoming Congregation designation was never meant to be a one-and-done historical artifact. It is a call to action — an ongoing commitment to ensuring that LGBT people in our congregation and beyond our walls are treated fairly. Repeatedly, our own history has shown why we cannot rest on accomplishments and expect all to be well.*

Second of two parts

Story by **Phyllis Warren**

Our church's early years as a Unitarian Universalist [Welcoming Congregation](#) — chronicled in Part 1 of this article [[Crossings, Fall 2014](#)] — were full of self-discovery. They also were not without bumps in the road. It wasn't so much that overt prejudices had to be overcome; rather, it took a sustained educational effort to help members and church leaders to understand the complex nature of homophobia and how it is perpetuated socially and within families. At Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing, much of this effort was led by the Welcoming Group for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Individuals (WGGLBI), which became Interweave in 1996.

By the late 1990s, the affirmations that form the foundation of what it is to be a Welcoming Congregation had become such a part of the fabric of UUCWC's leadership and congregation, our focus began to shift from internal

education to external advocacy. We turned to face a society that, for the most part, still marginalized people whose sexual orientation is outside the mainstream.

## Externally, taking on local and national issues

In 2000, UUCWC's Board of Trustees rejected a request for sponsorship of a member's Eagle Scout service project. The denial was attributed to the Boy Scouts' discrimination against gay scouts and leaders. The board's action followed the UUA Board of Trustees' disapproval, eight years prior, of Boy Scouts of America policy that, at the time, prohibited atheists and gays from being scouts and leaders.

Congregants and Rev. Charles Stephens stepped up actions in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues. From 2001 to 2003, Interweave sponsored an

annual Rainbow Cabaret to make the LGBT community and its allies more visible, and the proceeds were donated to community agencies. In 2002, Rev. Stephens spoke at a New Hope Town Council meeting in support of an ordinance that eventually passed protecting gays from discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations. Also, at about this time, former UUCWC member Russell McTague spoke at a rally at the [UU Congregation at Montclair](#) to kick-off a campaign to legalize same-sex marriage, a notion that, to many people at that time, seemed as distant and unreachable as the stars.

In 2003, the United States Supreme Court ruled in [Lawrence v. Texas](#) that sodomy laws were unconstitutional. That same year, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled in [Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health](#) that barring gays and lesbians from marrying violated the state constitution. In 2004, UUCWC ratified a statement of support for same-sex couples to marry and, two years later, filed a religious [amicus curiae](#) brief supporting the couples in the [Lewis v. Harris](#) case then being heard by the New Jersey Supreme Court. The outcome of *Lewis v. Harris* led to the state legislature's passage of New Jersey's civil union law in 2006. That year, Rev. Stephens conducted same-sex marriages in New Paltz, N.Y., despite the fact that by doing so, he faced threat of arrest.

Today, with public opinion about people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender becoming increasingly positive — backed by research showing that the offspring of LGBT people are no different from those raised by heterosexual couples — there has been gradual recognition by courts and state legislatures of the essential unfairness of

## LGBT EQUALITY TIMELINE

NATIONALLY		In the UUA and at UUCWC
The American Psychiatric Association (APA) categorizes homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance	1952	
President Eisenhower bans homosexuals from working for the federal government	1953	
Stonewall Riots, New York City	1969	
	1970	UUA General Assembly passes resolution to end discrimination against gays
APA removes homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses	1973	
Wisconsin becomes first state to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation	1982	
	1987	UUCWC forms group to address gay and lesbian needs
	1988	Ruth Samsel and Barbara Livingstone establish WGGLI at UUCWC
	1989	UUA initiates Welcoming Congregation Program
	1991	UUCWC becomes 1 of first 5 UUA Welcoming Congregations
	1992	UUCWC declares itself "no-hate zone" in wake of Gay Bash '93 at Washington Crossing State Park
	1993	WGGLI becomes WGGLBI, signaling inclusion of bisexual concerns; UUA issues formal disapproval of Boy Scouts of America (BSA) prohibition against gay scouts and leaders

“He didn’t even know what to call gay people.”  
— Michelle Hunt

preventing same-sex<sup>1</sup> couples from marrying. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state in the United States to allow same-sex couples to share in the freedom to marry. Ten years later, the tide has turned sharply in the struggle for marriage equality: Just last May, Pennsylvania became the 19th state to allow same-sex marriage; six months later, same-sex couples had the [freedom to marry in 35 states](#). Six states explicitly ban same-sex marriages and the issue is tied up in appellate courts in nine more, although potential [Supreme Court action in the next year or two](#) could resolve the issue on a national basis.

### Internally, more growing to do

In 2002, informal conversations began to take place about the welcoming words said at the start of UUCWC services and the possibility of changing them. In November 2003, the Board of Trustees appointed a Welcoming Statement Task Force to change the church’s welcoming statements. The effort created conflict within the congregation; LGBT members feared the controversy indicated a change in attitude towards sexual minorities. Many LGBT members of the church had felt particularly drawn to the church, and even moved to tears, by hearing that the church specifically welcomed them as “gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender” people.

<sup>1</sup> “Same-sex marriage” is the term used throughout this article to denote marriages between people of the same gender. “Gay marriage” is not used because it is not accurate in that it does not include those people who identify as bisexual or are fluid in their sexual orientation who marry persons of the same gender. By being conflated with gays and lesbians, bisexual individuals are thereby rendered invisible.

The task force proposed that there be two types of statements: One would constitute a general greeting; the other would consist of our specific commitments — to be a peace site, to be a Welcoming Congregation for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning, to be on a Journey Toward Wholeness (the UUA anti-racist, anti-oppression initiative), and to be a congregation that strives for accessibility. These commitments would be incorporated into the lighting of the Candles of Fellowship at the start of each service. (Years later, when UUCWC attained Green Sanctuary status from the UUA, a fifth candle representing this accomplishment was added).

As a result of the work of the Welcoming Words Task Force, a number of new greetings, to be rotated from week to week, were developed. Among the newly created welcoming words was the following, which included the words “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgender,” written by Lydia McMorrow:

*We arrive from many paths, with many stories, and we rejoice in the richness of our diversity. So if you are young or old, male or female, you are welcome here. If you are partnered or unpartnered, you are welcome here. If you are gay or straight, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual, you are welcome here. Whatever the shade of your skin or the shape of your features, the place of your birth, your physical or mental abilities, you are welcome here. We welcome and invite all here to help create the beloved community for which we are always striving.*

In a 2003 interview, Michelle Hunt, a long-time member of UUCWC and former member of WGGLI, expressed pride in her association with the group. That interview reflected the changes

in attitude that have taken place since WGGLI and WGGLBI were created. Michelle made reference to a straight congregant who conceded that he “didn’t even know what to call gay people. He didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. He didn’t know if it was a good thing or a bad thing to say the word *gay*.” Michelle talked about “this great gulf in the learning curve until we were able to communicate openly,” a process that began long ago yet continues to this day. While we have traveled very far from that time — and straight people no longer feel that *gay* is a charged word — we still struggle over the use of words such as *queer* or *dyke*. And for many teenagers, the phrase “That’s so gay” has replaced other derogatory — often racist — references.

The incremental nature of understanding and the acceptance that comes with it were reflected in a 2007 congregational survey. With more than half of the membership responding, 98% felt that UUCWC did a “good” job of welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. On the social justice part of the survey, however, only 17% thought that social justice efforts should focus more on “gay marriage and civil unions,” and 9% felt that social justice efforts should focus on “equality for sexual minorities.”

Within the congregation, the next significant event implicating LGBT issues took place in 2010. The Boy Scout issue was revisited when a UUCWC youth member requested permission to create a labyrinth on the grounds of UUCWC to fulfill an Eagle Scout requirement. Several congregational forums and open discussions took place, culminating with the Board denying the request — as it had in 2002. Subsequently, a petition for a congregational meeting was circulated, and

NATIONALLY		In the UUA and at UUCWC
President Clinton signs Defense of Marriage Act	1996	WGGLBI becomes Interweave
Vermont becomes first state to legalize civil unions	2000	UUCWC Board rejects Eagle Scout project, mirroring UUA disapproval of BSA policy on gay scouts
Supreme Court rules sodomy laws unconstitutional	2003	
Massachusetts first state to legalize same-sex marriage	2004	UUCWC issues statement of support for same-sex marriage
Lewis v. Harris case leads to civil unions in New Jersey	2006	UUCWC files friend-of-the-court brief in Lewis v. Harris
President Obama signs Matthew Shepard Act	2009	
“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repealed	2010	
	2011	UUCWC engages in dialogue with Boy Scouts following 2010 Eagle Scout-labyrinth issue
	2012	Living the Welcoming Congregation instituted at UUCWC, signaling inclusion of transgender concerns
Supreme Court strikes down Defense of Marriage Act; New Jersey becomes 14th state to allow same-sex marriage	2013	
Pennsylvania becomes 19th state to allow same-sex marriage	2014	UUCWC calls first openly gay minister



*“It continues to be important to raise awareness of our history.”*

— Ruth Samsel

the decision was placed in the hands of the membership. Sixty-one voting

members narrowly approved a motion to allow the scout to build the labyrinth. Yet even this would not be the ultimate outcome; moments after the vote was counted, the scout emotionally told those who remained at the meeting that he would withdraw his request because of the conflict it had generated.

The fact that the “Boy Scout issue” had the power to generate controversy and conflict over an extended period of time suggests that there is a need for continued work, understanding, and dialogue on this kind of issue and related topics.

### Expanding our focus

In the spirit of promoting understanding through continual learning and discussion, UUCWC has embarked on what is sometimes referred to as “Welcoming Congregation 2” — the [Living the Welcoming Congregation](#) (LWC) program. Focusing specifically on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity faced by people who are bisexual and transgender, LWC is facilitated at UUCWC by Kathy Frey, Loren McAlister, and Heather Edwards. Kathy, who with Loren co-chairs our congregation’s participation in [Standing on the Side of Love](#), talks about what motivated her to take on this challenge:

“When I found out about the Living the Welcoming Congregation program at General Assembly, I thought it would be a natural next step for UUCWC. It had been a long time since the church had received its Welcoming Congregation certifi-

cation, and the original Welcoming Congregation program had not included bisexuality and transgender topics. LWC seemed to be a way to help new members increase their understanding of LGBT issues and to help those who had participated in the original Welcoming Congregation workshops and activities update their knowledge.

Kathy believes the program is equally important for LGBTQ and straight folks. “I have learned a lot facilitating LWC, a program that I hope will continue to empower our members and friends to live out our commitment to welcoming LGBT individuals. The most rewarding times have been when someone who is not LGBT has had an ‘A-ha!’ moment in a simulation exercise, being able to understand in a small way what it’s like to be LGBT.”

### Where we go from here

Clearly, our congregation has been hard at work for many years — indeed, over many decades — to ensure legal, political, and social equality for sexual minorities.

The Welcoming Congregation designation is not meant to be only a historical fact reflecting something that our congregation did once, many years ago. It is also a call to action, the ongoing commitment to ensuring that LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> people in our congregation and beyond are honored, understood, welcomed, and treated fairly. Despite the passage of time from the days when UUCWC was first designated a Welcoming Congregation until now, the hard work — practical, spiritual, political and emotional — is still unfinished. Although WGGLI, WGGLBI, and Interweave no longer exist in our congregation, Ruth Samsel believes there is a continued need for an Interweave-like progeny to advocate on LGBTQ issues.

“It is important to continue to develop projects that

bring everyone together to accomplish a particular goal,” says Ruth, an original WGGLI member. “Since I have lived through the beginnings of all the Interweave transitions, I would like to make a plea for the continuation of the group in a very overt way, such as somewhat regular meetings for the purpose of friendships, communication, education, outreach, AIDS information and distribution, PFLAG<sup>3</sup> information, and help for those in the process of coming out.

“We have worked a long time with LGBT and straight members, and one of the things we learned in the early ’90s was that not everyone in church was aware of the Welcoming Congregation designation or the history of Interweave. It continues to be important to raise awareness of our history and remind our members how far we have traveled here at UUCWC.”

The issues that motivated our congregation three decades ago and the actions this congregation took to address them are very different, yet still they continue to require our engagement and our attention.

Our history shows that the tools include not only didactic, legal, and political means, but also humor, entertainment, and art. It shows that our church’s involvement has included not only gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and questioning people but also straight allies; not only congregants but ministers in cooperation and collaboration. It shows that our actions have taken place not only within our walls but far beyond them.

Whether the mechanism for continuing this activity will be through a revitalized Interweave or another group, such as an outgrowth of Living the Welcoming Congregation, remains to be seen.



Ruth Samsel shows a T-shirt designed by Lauren Witucki, an early WGGLI member, after UUCWC earned its Welcoming Congregation designation. The pink triangle is emblematic of the Nazi concentration camp badges used to denote gay men.

As LGBTQ issues evolve and transform our congregation, many things are unclear, such as which issues we will focus on (e.g. high suicide rates, homelessness, and child welfare and juvenile justice implications for LGBTQ youth, as well as violence and discrimination in many areas of life) and how we will address them. One thing is clear, however: We will continue to honor our commitments and face the challenges ahead by working together, and that we will not stop until full equality for all people — regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation — has been achieved.

*PHYLLIS WARREN is a retired lawyer who spent her career representing and working on behalf of abused and neglected children. Phyllis has been a member of UUCWC for more than a decade.*

<sup>2</sup>SOGI is an acronym that some people have begun use to denote “sexual orientation and general identity” instead of the awkward “LGBTQ.”

<sup>3</sup>Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.



# WHY GA?

This year, more than 30 people from UUCWC went to General Assembly — the largest contingent we’ve ever sent. Many who went say they came home inspired and plan to go again. Why? And how have GA attendees channeled their inspiration to build and strengthen our faith community at UUCWC?



Unitarian Universalist Church  
at Washington Crossing

Story by Kathy Frey  
Photos by Lou Csabay

If you’ve spent much time at all at UUCWC, you’ve probably heard of “GA.” And in the spring, a commonly heard question is, “Are you going to GA?” But what is GA — and why is going to GA such a big deal, anyway?

GA is shorthand for [General Assembly](#), the annual meeting of our Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) of Congregations. Contrary to its name, General Assembly is not just a legislative meeting. It is a four-day event featuring all things UU.

Bernice and I know why *we* go to GA, but we decided to ask other UUCWC members why they go. To get a fuller picture of the GA experience, we put out a call for everyone at UUCWC who had ever attended a General Assembly to contact us. Then we sent them a brief survey to learn more. Their responses to the question “Why did you go to GA?” included:

- To connect to the larger UU world
- To learn about what the denomination is doing
- To find out about the successful strategies other congregations are using
- To be in community with others from UUCWC and the larger denomination

Many cited having been encouraged by past attendees who told of their wonderful experiences at GA. Others went with a specific purpose — to seek guidance and support for our congregation or to find resources to help us with an important initiative.

## Once is not enough

A more important question was why people go back and, in some cases, keep going back (one person admits to having attended 17 GAs). What makes GA so compelling that it acts like a magnet for those of us from UUCWC and so many more across the country and even outside the United States? These are a few of the reasons multiple attendees gave for going back:

- Attending inspiring workshops
- Meeting like-minded people
- Acquiring leadership skills



The energetic worship service held before [WaterFire](#), Providence’s public arts mission



Kids enjoy GA too. Julia Campbell liked that the convention center was connected to the mall!



- Learning about issues
- Singing with the choir
- Supporting our denomination, locally and nationally
- Hearing new ideas to bring back to UUCWC
- Enjoying fellowship with other UUs
- Attending the amazing worship services and the [Ware Lecture](#)

Although each of us has our own reasons for returning to GA, one underlying element seems to be the comfort of being in a gathering of 3,000 or 4,000 UUs. Perhaps Michelle Hunt put it best when she said it “was like being in a crowd of friends you hadn’t met yet.” And the music! Just imagine the energy that’s created when that same crowd sings [“Blue Boat Home.”](#)

It’s fair to say that except for singing with the choir (which neither Bernice nor I have ever done there), every one of these reasons rings true for us as well. There is, however, one more reason for returning that no one mentioned but Bernice insists that we add: attending plenary. Plenary is the name given to the business proceedings at GA. It’s in these sessions that the big decisions affecting our association are made, including choosing Actions of Immediate Witness, Congregational Study/Action Issues, and approving Statements of Conscience. Only delegates may vote but everyone may attend. Bernice, our resident “plenary junkie,” truly enjoys participating in this democracy in action.

Before Bernice and I went to General Assembly for the first time (Salt Lake City, 2009), we had heard a lot about GA and were excited about going. Our own high expectations were exceeded; both of us were totally blown away by the whole experience. There was so much to do, so many new things to investigate, and so many choices about how to use our time! From workshops, lectures, worship services, and early morning spiritual practices to mini-assemblies, talks, and panel discussions, the sessions seemed to cover every social justice issue imaginable, every topic of interest to individual UUs, and every aspect of congregational life. With as many as 15 or more different possibilities during any one time slot,



UUA sponsored one night of the public arts festive, WaterFire, Providence

## THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS: THE WARE LECTURE

The UUA invites a distinguished guest to address the General Assembly each year. This keynote, known as the Ware Lecture, has been delivered by people from a wide range of backgrounds: the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Kurt Vonnegut, and Norman Lear, to name a few. The 2015 Ware Lecturer will be [Dr. Cornel West](#) of Union Theological Seminary.

Previous Ware Lecturers in recent years:

- 2014: [Sister Simone Campbell](#)
- 2013: [Eboo Patel](#)
- 2012: [Maria Hinojosa](#)
- 2011: [Karen Armstrong](#)
- 2010: [Winona LaDuke](#)
- 2009: [Melissa Harris-Lacewell](#) (now Perry)
- 2008: [Van Jones](#)
- 2007: [Rashid Khalida](#)
- 2006: [Mary Oliver](#)
- 2005: [Elaine Pagels](#)



2014 Ware Lecturer Sister Simone Campbell



Bernie & Mike enjoy the view from the bleachers

any GA attendee could honestly participate only in a small fraction of what was offered. At the end of that first GA, I remember purchasing CDs of several sessions that I had wanted to attend but was unable to get to in person. And so it has gone with every GA I have attended since.

## It’s “transformational”

There seemed to be one unspoken reason for attending GA again and again. Asking the next survey question helped us to put our finger on this. The question was about change — if and how people were changed by their participation at GA. Almost to a person, responders said they had been changed by the experience. The “how” was a bit elusive for some who found it difficult to put into words about what that change felt like. Some shared having been inspired, moved, and uplifted. For most, however, it seemed to be easier to say why they felt like GA changed them:

- Helping me to experience UUism in a different light
- Learning how to speak Truth to Power more effectively
- Worship services that were transformative
- The music
- The lectures
- Increasing my appreciation of the denomination
- Being led to new perspectives
- Learning new skills
- Giving me a lot to think about

For people who attend GA, the benefits are many. These people often experience something transformational. Pamela V’Combe put it this way: “Nothing can solidify one’s commitment and build one’s theology better than GA.”

Personally, I have experienced a deeper commitment to Unitarian Universalism, largely as a byproduct of attending GA. Being with hundreds, if not thousands, of other UUs in the large gatherings, I couldn’t help but be struck by the strength of our faith — people connected by their belief in the individual search for truth and meaning and by their willingness to stand together for justice. From the first evening’s



Banner Parade, when representatives from each of the congregations march in with their own churches' banners, to the final day's worship service, there is a palpable sense of belonging to something larger than our own congregation — something with the power to make a difference on a larger stage.

### Bringing it home

Over the years, members have come back from GA excited about what they've learned and eager to share new ideas and resources with the rest of us back home. Our next survey question asked attendees what they had brought back to UUCWC. Here are some familiar things people said have come from GA:

- The frequent visitor check-in sheet
- Follow-up notes to new members
- Opening committee meetings with chalice lighting and opening words
- Best practices in lay ministry and stewardship
- Caring Ministry program
- Worship Associates program
- Ways to run new initiatives
- Sharing strategies at Church Council
- Workshops
- The Transition Minute
- Music, including the choir's blue hymnal
- Healthy congregation strategies
- Living the Welcoming Program

In addition to bringing specific initiatives home to UUCWC, attendees have developed ongoing connections with other UUs who have similar interests. They have benefitted from workshops on myriad topics, including leadership training, the role of the transitional minister, and social justice issues.

One program brought from GA to UUCWC is [Standing on the Side of Love](#) (SSL, or "sizzle," as it is affectionately called). Created by the UUA, SSL was borne out of violence after a gunman entered a Knoxville, Tenn., UU church service in 2008 and opened fire, killing two and injuring seven. The



"It was like being in a crowd of friends you hadn't met yet"  
— Michelle Hunt

loving and hopeful response of the Tennessee congregation inspired then-UUA President Rev. Bill Sinkford and Rev. Meg Riley to launch the grass-roots public advocacy campaign as a way to respond to identity-based prejudice, oppression, and violence. Standing on the Side of Love at UUCWC is a network of members and friends who witness to the power of love.

It can take quite a while for an idea or program from General Assembly to make its way to our congregation. One year there were so many more sessions at GA than I could attend, I purchased quite a few CDs to bring home and to listen to later. Every once in a while, I would listen to one in my car. More than a year had passed before I finally got to the CD about a program in spiritual deepening for UU's created by the First Unitarian Church of Rochester. The program was called [Wellspring](#), and as I listened to the CD that night, I immediately thought the program would be a great addition to our own Adult Religious Education offerings. Later, after discussions with Rev. Stephens and Robin Pugh, our director of Lifespan Religious Education, we decided to pilot the program at UUCWC. Wellspring is now in its fourth year at UUCWC and more than 45 people have experienced it. Another gift from GA.

### Make the pilgrimage

Our congregation, as well as individual members who attend, benefit from General Assembly. And the UUA, in turn, benefits from our participation



The group catches up with Charles and Alison Stephens



Lori Rahn and Lou Csabay, members of the GA choir

through the commitment and enthusiasm of individuals and through more effective, engaged congregations.

[We may be tiny](#) relative to mainstream denominations, but we are strong as a faith, largely — in my opinion — because we walk our talk, taking to the streets when we see a need and living our principles in ways great and small. Each year at GA, a public witness event is held where hundreds of attendees rally to support a social justice cause. This past June in Providence, R.I., GA delegates [voted to divest from fossil fuel holdings](#), keeping only enough shares to permit introduction of share-

holder resolutions favoring environmental justice. Bernice says that going to GA is a great way to gain a larger perspective on our faith and to start to see our congregation as part of a national, coast-to-coast movement. She thinks every member should make the pilgrimage at least once.

I agree.

*KATHY FREY is a retired teacher who enjoys working with UU Wellspring groups and Chalice Circles. She joined UUCWC in 2007 and serves on its Board of Trustees.*

## REGISTER NOW FOR GA 2015

In 2015, GA will return to Portland, Ore., on June 24–28. A schedule of events can be found on the [UUA website](#). Attendees receive [discounted registration fees](#) for early registration.

The UUA secures a block of hotel rooms for attendees, though rooms sell out quickly. Attendees are encouraged to reserve a room early. The UUA's [housing reservation system](#) opens on Monday, March 2.

### Can't go this year? Upcoming General Assemblies include:

- 2016: June 22–26, Columbus, Ohio
- 2017: June 21–25, New Orleans, La.
- 2018: June 20–24, Kansas City, Mo.



