

Reflection (Noah)

Hello members of the congregation,

My name is Noah Nourse and I am a tall white male wearing glasses with black hair. Today, October 22nd, 2023 is a day of reflection and gratitude. This past summer myself along with the others up here were given the privilege to attend General Assembly in Pittsburgh

I am here to tell you my story and give my reflection on General Assembly. To start off, being at GA gave me a sense of community. Honestly, just being there with all of the different people made me feel like part of a community. Everyone was very welcoming and made me feel right at home. The second I walked into the convention center and started talking to people, I felt welcomed and a part of this community.

Everyone was at GA for the same purpose: to learn about Unitarian Universalism, meet new people who shared the same beliefs, and hear from speakers who can teach you and help you explore the religion deeper. For me, one of the coolest parts of GA was seeing and meeting other people, especially youth.

Even before GA had started, there was a discord that had been set up. Discord for those who don't know, is basically an app that people use to text and send messages. The link for this discord was sent out to every youth and even before GA had started, I connected with a couple youth. I was able to meet people from California, Ohio, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, just to name a few. There was also a decent amount of people from Massachusetts, and I was glad to represent the church.

I flew down by myself a day late and I was nervous that I wouldn't be welcomed the same as the others. Lucky for me, I was wrong. When Landen and I walked into the venue, we instantly spotted some other youth. They welcomed us and we joined their card game. Just like that, we met other youth and made new friends.

The feeling of being welcomed by all these other kids I hadn't met was a great feeling. There were around 40-50 other youth there, just a couple more than our congregation. Anyways, the feeling of seeing all of these youths was amazing. It

helped me remember that there were others outside of my congregation who believed in the same principles that I did.

During GA, we were also lucky to be able to attend the bridging ceremony. While I was not a fan of all of the singing, seeing all of the kids walk across the stage and under the arch was very cool as it symbolized their transition from a child to an adult. It made me think, "That could be me in two years". The thought of that is a good one as it would be really cool to go back to GA as an upcoming adult and participate in the bridging ceremony. It would really come full circle.

During GA, we were also given the privilege to meet the current (well now past) and upcoming (now current) president of the UUA. The reverend Susan Frederick-Gray and Reverend Doctor Sofia Betancourt were great speakers and I enjoyed getting to hear them speak.

I never expected to meet the head of all of the UU's. It was really amazing to hear them preach and give their opinions about different topics. They have both done great work for Unitarian Universalism and to see them in person was somewhat of an honor to say the least.

Meeting and seeing the presidents was great, but seeing all of the other ministers was special as well. Being in the presence of so many important Unitarian Universalists was a great feeling. To see all of these people who have really made a difference in the world by promoting our religion that we cherish so greatly, well to say the least, was a really good feeling.

A lot of the speakers at General Assembly stressed the importance of youth as well. I think that a lot of great points were made about involving youth in the congregation. One of the points that was repeated constantly was, "Youth are our future, take care of them and involve them." I am glad to say that our church is definitely doing that.

Since the end of covid, Our RE program has been revitalized and our youth group has restarted as well. When the speakers mentioned youth, I would always remember and say to myself, "Good thing our church is doing that". Overall, GA

was a great experience. It was great to meet other youth, meet important people from the UUA, and learn more about our religion as a whole. This couldn't have happened without you, the congregation. Thank you to Ben Gold, Laurel, and Abbey for chaperoning. And thank you to all the people who donated to the youth group fund. Thank you all, I hope you enjoyed learning more about General Assembly.

Reflection (Naomi)

I am a medium height, white female with light brown, medium length hair and very round glasses. My general assembly journey and connection to other UU's started a few months before we even left Massachusetts.

I reached out at an opportunity to sing as a music leader during the synergy bridging ceremony, which is the service where youths transition to being young adults. I didn't quite know, when reaching out, what I was getting myself into, but it ended up being an amazing experience, one that I'm very grateful for, and because of it I had a friend before we even got to GA. Someone I had a lot in common with, my own age, from an entirely different part of the country (DC), who was also UU, who I didn't have to explain to her such a big part of my identity and who I am- she just knew, because it's a part of her too.

When we got to GA, I had a couple rehearsals, where I did have to sing into the mic, and I was absolutely terrified at the prospect of singing in front of over a thousand people, into a mic, but I did it scared, and I'm proud of myself. And the reason I was able to do that big scary thing that I was so afraid of, that made me shake all over, was because I knew I was in a place where everyone wanted me to succeed. Everyone there at general assembly wanted to support me and wanted me to do well, and I knew that. I felt that support.

Backing up a bit, when we all first arrived (minus Noah), I was very overwhelmed, for two reasons. One was simply that there were so many people, and I was overloaded with information, but another was that I was so in awe of everything I saw before me. I looked around and saw so many people that were all

so different from each other, but there was also a sense that no matter who you were or what you looked like, you were welcome.

We went to the convention center just in time for the banner parade after we checked in, where we got to see tons of banners representing different churches from everywhere across the country. Each one was a little bit different, but all showcased the community they were from. One person was joyfully handing out colorful plastic flower boas, and I still have mine hung up in my room. This experience was especially meaningful to me because it was the first time I truly got to see so many people of my faith in one place.

Unitarian Universalism has become such a big part of my identity, and sometimes it can be lonely being a teenager in a faith that doesn't have many teenagers, especially one that I don't always talk about at school or to my friends. But there, in that place, this big part of my identity was understood and reflected in everyone I saw, and it was one of the most comforting experiences of my life. Everywhere I looked, I saw comfort and safety and understanding.

That is something I have always loved in our church, that feeling of no matter what, you have a place here, and something that I was overjoyed to see continued within a larger gathering of Unitarian Universalists. There was an innate understanding present that is so hard to describe or explain.

Another experience that particularly brought out that connection was the first time I was in the teen room. There was one for the youth and one for young adults, so we were in the youth one, and after we went to the second orientation, Noah, Landen, and I joined a game of apples to apples that was going on. There were already so many people (about 10?) around a very crowded table, but when I walked over and very awkwardly asked to join, they all clamored to make room and pull up a few more chairs for us. Everyone paused and went around and we all said our name, age or grade, and pronouns, and although some people were already friends and laughing and joking with each other, I never felt excluded from that because I came a little later. I felt welcomed. The people, the youth, that were there, were there because they wanted to be. And I wanted to be there with them.

All in all at general assembly, there was understanding, discussion, love, support, and conflict, but conflict in a way that (mostly- at least in all the discussions I had) was respectful and mindful of other people's experiences and perspectives. The debates within the youth especially were something I loved and was glad to experience. Noah mentioned being able to visit with and ask questions of the former and current UUA presidents, and while I wasn't able to be with the former president I got to see and ask a question of the current one. Those discussions with those two women, as well as the discussion between the youth and the advisors both before, after, and at other times, were very interesting and informative.

There were a lot of different viewpoints brought up, and there's often no one right answer, but I felt like during those debates people listened to what everyone else was saying, and responded directly with respect and recognition- which is something that can be very difficult to find in today's era of social media and politics. There was such an effort to be inclusive and truly truly supportive throughout all of GA in a way that made me so proud to be a unitarian universalist.

Since going to GA, I have been much more open about my faith and the fact that I am a part of this church. I am so grateful that I got to go and experience general assembly, and I can't wait to go again. Thank you.