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Low attendance expected for UUA's General Assembly

Security concerns, economic woes, heat deter attendance at Fort Lauderdale event.

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Registration for the 2008 General Assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., is the lowest it's been in years. Planners are expecting about 3,200 people to attend the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, which runs from June 25 to 29. That is down from 5,700 last year in Portland, Ore., and 4,400 the year before in St. Louis.

Several factors are contributing to the more modest attendance this year. Some potential attendees are boycotting the meeting because post-9/11 security checks at the port of Fort Lauderdale require people to show government-issued identification prior to entering the convention center. Others are believed to be saving up to attend next year's GA in Salt Lake City, where an election for a new UUA president will be held. Add to that rising gas prices and transportation costs as well as a general economic malaise. And then there's the heat. "I suspect that Fort Lauderdale in June may not be the most appealing time for folks," said Jan Sneegas, the UUA's director of General Assembly and Conference Services.

But what the Fort Lauderdale event might lack in quantity, it will make up for in quality, Sneegas said, citing workshops on a broad variety of topics, including civil liberties; speakers such as eco-justice advocate Van Jones; and the performance of a UU cantata. Sneegas believes that in terms of the quality of its programming, it may be the best GA ever. "The program is very strong," she said, "and the people who come will have a wonderful experience."

UUA Treasurer and Vice President of Finance Tim Brennan said the attendance numbers are in line with projections for the event. It was expected to draw numbers similar to the Fort Worth, Tex., GA in 2005, which 3,600 people attended.

Brennan noted that General Assembly is budgeted separately from the budget for the larger Association, so dips and spikes in attendance do not affect the UUA's general operating budget. Instead, any extra money from GA, which is expected to break even

each year, goes into a GA reserve fund. Last year in Oregon, for example, 1,300 more people than originally expected attended the meeting. Planners expected 4,500 participants and 5,800 showed, generating a GA budget surplus of \$294,000. (Brennan explained that the reserve account is used for direct GA expenses only, but not the expenses of UUA staff and leadership in providing workshops and materials).

No pattern has emerged that shows GA planners why attendance spikes one year—as it unexpectedly did in Portland—and falls the next. Boston in 2003 drew the largest number of participants, 7,300, as it was expected to, being in the Northeast and in the UUA’s headquarters city. Long Beach, Calif., in 2004 drew 4,300. Fort Worth in 2005 had 3,600. St. Louis drew 4,400 in 2006. And Oregon had 5,700 in 2007.

Security issues have kept some registrants away. The Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center, the principal GA venue, lies within the perimeter of the Port of Fort Lauderdale and thus is subject to federal security regulations that mandate that all people eighteen years of age and older show a government-issued ID at the entrance to the facility. The policy has raised concerns about racial profiling, particularly for minors without government issued photo-IDs, whom port security officials will admit on a case-by-case basis.

At its January 2008 meeting, the UUA Board of Trustees voted to stay at the Fort Lauderdale venue, urging GA planners to include significant programming on civil liberties.

“I’m pleased that concerned UUs will be participating in the GA conversations about documentation, identity, and safety,” said Janet Hayes, UUA public relations director. “Controversies often inspire our best work as a democratic Association, like our 1987 Business Resolution to witness for GLBT rights in any meeting site that has laws that discriminate against that community. Twenty years later, we’re still bound by that resolution.”

In addition to the focus on civil liberties, Sneegas noted other highlights of the Fort Lauderdale meeting.

- A process using “**appreciative inquiry**” methodology to determine the UUA’s goals for youth and young adult ministry, antioppression/antiracism/multiculturalism; and environmental justice.
- A lecture by national environmental leader and social activist Van Jones, whose work is focused on social inequity and environmental destruction.
- A public witness event called “Valuing All Families,” to call attention to GLBT concerns in Florida.
- The debut performance of the seven-movement “Sources: A Unitarian Universalist Cantata” by the Rev. Jason Shelton and the Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons.