The Online Delegate Experience

Over the last few years, the UUA has worked to make General Assembly more and more accessible to people who were unable to attend due to economic, geographic or health reasons. A big piece of this puzzle has been the expansion of the General Assembly content available over the Internet. Previously, delegates were able to cast votes in the general sessions and take part in the events in the main hall. This year, the UUA expanded online offerings to include interactive access to the business mini-assemblies and to nine of the workshops.

There is no complete substitute for being able to look in peoples' eyes and shake their hands at an in-person conference. But flying to Portland and paying for several nights in a hotel is expensive. Not everyone and not every congregation has the resources to pay for in-person delegate representation, even with UUA scholarships. Online delegates are an excellent way for a small congregation to make its voice heard, and to expand the delegate pool to people who have limited means or constraints of time or health.

My experience as an online delegate started almost by accident. I signed up for General Assembly as a non-delegate participant in order to evaluate the online workshops for our congregation (Buckman Bridge Unitarian Universalist Church). The plan was that I would set up shop in one of the classrooms at our church building to provide access to congregation members who were interested in the topics covered by the streamed workshops. I took notes on the workshops and posted them to our church web site for use by people who would find the content helpful, and several members of our congregation were able to experience what an online, streamed GA workshop experience would be like. (My notes are available at http://bbuuc.org/ga-2015/.)

Late in the process, one of BBUUC's delegate slots became available. Since I was already registered as a "non-delegate participant," it made sense to have me flip my registration to "delegate" and submit the credentials supplied by our President. The change in registration went as smoothly as we could ever have hoped. The General Assembly's tech team worked hard to make sure every online participant's experience was as complete and fulfilling as possible.

Participating as an online delegate is a very different experience than being there in person. On the one hand, we have to watch through the limited point of view of a video feed controlled by the people in the hall who decide where to aim the camera. The sights, sounds, smells and feelings of a meeting hall will never be able to burst through your TV screen and into your direct experience.

On the other hand, some of the technical resources available to online participants provide dimensions that are not available to on-site delegates. The chat room feature on the online GA interface allowed all of the online participants to interact with each other and assist each other. Throughout the conference, participants and tech team members assisted each other in the creation of a real virtual community that asked questions, provided guidance, argued points of policy or history, and provided links to background material.

Several times, in the midst of a contentious debate, someone with one point of view would help someone with the opposite point of view navigate the phone bridge system to make their point on the main general session floor. Nobody had to check their feelings or opinions at the door. Everyone worked together to make sure that everyone was able to represent their congregation in a respectful, cooperative examination of the issues. The online community on the chat room was an excellent example of the sort of respectful, cooperative discourse that the UUA stands for.

Were there problems? Of course. And things that could have been done differently? Absolutely. After the session, participants received a survey asking for their input into how to make the experience better for next year. Since I have professional background as a manager of a globally-dispersed IT operational team, and as a facilitator for online graduate-level courses from Boston University, I provided a lot of suggestions for ways to improve the experience for online participants. But I also gave the online delegate experience a full five stars for opening General Assembly to hundreds of participants who were not able to travel to Portland this year.

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2015 BBUUC Online GA Delegate