

Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness Report on UUA General Assembly 2014 July 19, 2014

Video links updated March 2, 2015

Included!

The BIG news from General Assembly 2014 in Providence, Rhode Island, is the addition of “family and relationship structures” to the Association’s non-discrimination statement. UUPA understands this language to include polyamorous families and relationships, and also a variety of family and relationship structures different from polyamory, some of which are UUPA’s allies.

Delegates voted final adoption of an extensive revision to Bylaw II-C-2.3, previously Non-discrimination, now Inclusion. Delegates conserved and updated the previous language of Non-discrimination by moving it to Rule G-2.3 and amending the language.

Video of discussion from about 8:45 to 21:15:

<http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2014/business/vii/296147.shtml>

Rule G-2.3 now reads, with new language in bold:

“The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member congregations and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to **racialized identity**, ethnicity, gender **expression, gender identity, sex**, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, **family and relationship structures**, age, language, citizenship status, economic status, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.”

Delegates Desmond Ravenstone (Arlington Street Church, Boston, MA) and Jasmine Walston (First Unitarian Church, Louisville, KY), who also represent identity groups Leather & Grace and UUPA, respectively, moved the addition of the phrase “family and relationship structures” in the designated mini-assembly. The mini-assembly adopted this proposed phrase, along with the other proposed new language, with almost no discussion. All of the proposed language became “incorporated amendments” for consideration by the full assembly.

When the full Assembly considered the Rule with its incorporated amendments, several delegates spoke. All delegates but one spoke from the procedural microphone.

- What is the meaning of “racialized identity”?
- How can we add “body shape” to the statement? Moderator Jim Key ruled it out of order this year, as it wasn’t addressed in the mini-assembly.
- How is “sex” used in this context?
- The delegate first in line at the pro microphone advocated for transgender inclusion.
- Is it in order to separate the various proposed language additions? Moderator Key ruled it out of order.
- A delegate described racialized identity, gender identity, gender expression, and sex. (1:19)
- A delegate noted the traditional dual view, male/female, of gender and sex, noting that this is why additional terms are needed.
- No delegate asked for the meaning or scope of “family and relationship structures.”

- No delegate spoke from the con microphone.

Consistent with the rules of debate, Moderator Key closed the discussion and called for a vote. Both Desmond and Jasmine stood in line at the pro microphone prepared to speak, but did not have the opportunity.

The motion overwhelmingly carried. Harlan tweeted the outcome. The UUPoly community celebrated.

Right Relationship with the Assembly

A concern subsequently arose among some individuals, both within and outside of UUPA, that the lack of discussion may have resulted in delegates voting without realizing what they were voting for. The language “family and relationship structure” received no definition prior to the vote. While UUPA seeks to be included in a legal fashion, we also seek to be included in a just fashion. The integrity of the vote matters as much as its legality.

After seeking counsel from another UUPA trustee, the UUA legal advisor, and a member of the GA Right Relations Team, Jasmine addressed the assembly to express these concerns. Jasmine timed her address prior to the Responsive Resolutions in the Agenda, so that delegates would have an opportunity – admittedly brief, but nevertheless real – to take action in response if they discovered they had cast a poorly informed vote.

Jasmine chose conservative language as a way to maximize Moderator Key’s control over the discussion, stating that the language was proposed by members of “identity groups that can be controversial” and offering to name those groups if Moderator Key wanted. Moderator Key stated that the process was handled properly, and that it was out of order to re-open the discussion.

UUA Trustee Michael Salwasser spoke next, clarifying that family structure “includes people that others might find controversial and might not realize are included” and that this specifically includes polyamorous individuals. He then defined polyamory and pointed out that the discussion defined racialized identity, but not family structure. Moderator Key thanked him for his clarification.

Video of discussion at about 29:30 to 33:30

<http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2014/business/viii>

No further statements were made on the assembly floor related to the issue.

Effects

The coming year(s) offer amazing opportunities to polyamorous UUs as we claim this new language of non-discrimination for ourselves and assess the effects, if any, of the lack of discussion prior to the vote.

- It is possible that UUPA, poly UUs, and our allies have done our work so incredibly well that the vast majority of delegates readily understood polyamory to be included within the scope of the new language and were prepared to accept it. Perhaps no discussion was needed regarding polyamory.
- It is possible that some delegates wanted to take further action upon learning that the term includes polyamory within its scope, but did not have time to utilize the Responsive Resolution segment of the agenda.
- It is possible that many delegates left the assembly hall early, as the agenda for the last session was essentially complete, and thus did not hear Jasmine or UUA Trustee Salwasser speak.

Privilege

These events unfolded on the assembly floor as a bizarre mixture of marginalization and privilege with which UUPA will continue to grapple in coming years.

- The marginalization: Moderator Key stopped a known polyamory advocate from naming aloud to the assembly her polyamory identity group and her group's ally, a kink identity group.
- The privilege: UUA Trustee Salwasser followed up by naming polyamory to the assembly anyway. However, he did not name kink. Polyamorous UUs received mention on the assembly floor, while kinky UUs did not. Delegates were informed that polyamorous UUs understand that we fall within the scope of new language; delegates were not so informed about kinky UUs.

Delegate Desmond Ravenstone, who also serves as a trustee of Leather & Grace, had collaborated with Jasmine on the amendment language and preparation of remarks for the pro microphone in the expectation of speaking. Desmond stood second in line to speak, ahead of Jasmine by mutual agreement. The expectation was that both terms – polyamory and kink – would be spoken on the assembly floor.

In light of the preparation, the absence of the mention of kink on the assembly floor, while polyamory was spoken aloud by a UUA Trustee, seems awkward and uncomfortable. This outcome highlights UUPA's elevation to a place of privilege, if only a small amount.

Poly UUs and UUPA would do well to remain cognizant of both the blessings and pitfalls of privilege as we try it on for size and learn how to wear it.

- We risk misusing our newfound privilege in ways that harm others or abandon allies.
- We risk misjudging our newfound privilege and failing to do the work that still awaits us.
- The promise before us is to make use of this privilege to “reach out in love” in multiple directions.

Now just as much as before, polyamorous UUs have work to do. We must raise awareness within our congregations, districts, regions, and independent organizations about this new language and its transformative power of inclusion for polyamorous UUs. The new language of Rule G-2.3 provides a starting point for conversations about how it might be implemented at various levels of the association. As we do so, we would be well-advised to keep in mind the autonomous, self-governing nature of UU congregations, and to approach each of them with respect and gentility.

As we do this work, we hold in our care the members of our own UUPA identity group. This much is our obvious, most straight-forward direction of care.

We also hold in our care our allied identity groups, those who blazed a path before us, and those whose work is newer than our own. It is frightening to extend a hand to help someone else on the climb, even while our own toe-hold still feels tenuous and uncertain. And yet, this is the very meaning of religious community and the very nature of justice. Our UU principles and sources will guide us and cover us with courage, even when our own personal courage fails us.

Even as we engage this work, we also hold in our care those UU congregations, UU members, and UU religious professionals who are as yet unwilling to welcome us, whether because of misperceptions, fear, or other reasons that we don't understand. Our UU faith teaches us that they too are our people. Love reaches out to those who oppose us, every bit as much as we want love to reach out to us.

And once again, we hold in our care the members of our own UUPA identity group, some of whom struggle with the extension of our care beyond the immediate interests our own identity group. Our very own, with whom we disagree, are still our very own.

Poly UUs are called to live the inclusion we want extended to ourselves.

Twitter Updates

Throughout GA, UUPA Trustee Harlan White updated UUPA members and anyone else who chose to follow his tweets on General Assembly happenings from the poly UU point of view. View Harlan's tweets @MSErosong, or track #uuaga and/or #uupaga

Banner Parade

UUPA Trustee Valerie White carried the UUPA banner in the banner parade during the opening celebration. The next morning, staffers displayed the banner at the UUPA booth.

Curriculum

UUPA was unable to place the *Love Makes a Family* curriculum in the UUA Bookstore at General Assembly this year due to missing the April deadline. A calendar reminder for 2015 has been entered for the Board to make timely arrangements.

Social Gatherings

No social gatherings for UUPA were arranged at GA 2014, Providence. UUPA will try in 2015 to arrange one or more gatherings. Participation in this effort by members of UUPA and UUPoly are welcome and will improve the likelihood that gatherings will be arranged.

Booth Activity

UUPA Trustees Valerie White, Harlan White, Duane Dillman, and Jasmine Walston worked shifts at the UUPA booth in the 2014 UUA Exhibit Hall. Two UUPA members and three interested newcomers also worked shifts. Valerie also worked the Interweave booth and sang in the GA choir.

Harlan displayed a slide show of UUPA related images, including photos, UUPA's mission statement, UUPA's logo, the words to Hymn 145 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, and poly songs. Along with UUPA's brochures, the table included:

- *Love Makes a Family* curriculum, display copy
- *Coming out in Faith: Voices of LGBTQ Unitarian Universalists*, a book that includes an article by UUPA trustee Ann Schranz, display copy
- UUCARDS brochure. UUPA is a member of UU Curriculum and Resource Developers, and is listed in their brochure.
- Leather & Grace brochure and letter of support.

Booth staffers responded to inquiries that Leather & Grace is a new group that is different from UUPA, and that UUPA was providing them with a place for their literature. Some booth visitors made positive comments, grateful that the L&G brochures were available. Several visitors quietly picked up L&G brochures without saying anything on the subject.

Religious professionals visited UUPA's booth, along with lay people. Although UUPA began our GA visibility in 2002, some visitors still expressed surprise at UUPA's booth or had never heard of polyamory. One visitor discussed closet concerns and fears about the consequences of being outed. Booth staffers encouraged DREs and others to consider the polyamory curriculum, *Love Makes a Family*, for congregations and religious professional retreats.

Submitted by Jasmine Walston, Secretary