

Spring Conference 2023 – "Thirty Years Both Ways"

Compiled by Jonalu Johnstone, Conference Publicity Chair

A total of 131 members of UURMaPA plus 13 special guests (two newly retired ministers and one partner, one theme presenter, one UUA VIP and eight panelists) joined together to contemplate the past and future on May 1-3 during the Spring Conference, once again on Zoom. Two small groups, in Wilmington, DE and Albuquerque, NM, were able to break bread together. Though the rest of us did not have the physical presence of others, we did have true camaraderie, intimate conversations, and sacred connections across the miles.

Skilled storyteller and musician Reggie Harris, who provided Monday evening's performance, suggested the word *sankofa*, from the Twi language of Ghana, as resonant with our theme. *Sankofa* means looking back to look forward, or examining the past to see what we might want to bring forward. Throughout the conference, we endeavored to do just that. Reggie himself, cradling his guitar in his hotel room as he was leading a Civil Rights Tour, interwove stories of that movement with upbeat movement songs and experiences with the Living Legacy Project, which helps educate participants about the racial history of the US. He had many of us clapping and singing along, safely muted in our homes. Reggie created the mood, staying hopeful and optimistic, while honest about past struggles and oppression.



That mood echoed through much of our exploration during the conference—the three theme panels, our worship together, small group connections, and more. Each of the members of the planning committee has prepared a brief report on their area.

Theme Panels — by Wayne Arnason

The theme for this conference, "THIRTY YEARS BOTH WAYS," originated in conversations about the events around the 1993 UUA General Assembly. Ideas for what theme panels might be possible expanded when we remembered other important events in culture and technology from 1993.

Monday's first panel, "After The Ball Is Over," brought together a diverse group of colleagues and friends who shared personal experiences from before, during, and after the 1993 General Assembly that concluded with a Thomas Jefferson-era costume ball, a moment that highlighted the way planners had

thoughtlessly centered White experience. Wayne Arnason, Janice Marie Johnson, Barbro Hansson, Leon Spencer, Elnora Williams and Mel Hoover each told their personal stories and reflected on the evolution of anti-racist and anti-oppression work after the Ball in their own lives and within the UUA.

Our Tuesday theme Panel, “Women, Identity and Leadership,” brought together for the first time four women who have aspired to the UUA Presidency. Current UUA Presidential Candidate Sofia Betancourt acted as Moderator for a panel featuring Carolyn Owen-Towle (1993), Diane Miller (2001) and Laurel Hallman (2009), inviting conversation about women in leadership in our Association and the ways that identity issues shape (and some would say distort!) our expectations about leaders. Memories and insights from each person about the circumstances 30, 20, and 10 years ago, the changes that have happened since, and the future of identity considerations in leadership roles in denominational and congregational life all made for an engaging conversation that sparked many moving comments and questions.

The third theme Panel on Wednesday fulfilled the “Both Ways” title with the focus “The Future of our Movement and our Ministry – Multigenerational Perspectives.” Three serving ministers, in parish and community roles (only one of them a retiree with a new community ministry career), and a seminary president each gave us their points of view from which to look towards the future. Jacqueline Brett, Elias Ortega, Chris Rothbauer and Arvid Straube began with reflections on a study described by Arvid that predicts two-thirds of our congregations might not exist or exist very differently thirty years from now. This somber prediction brought forward comments from several panelists about the sources for hope they find in their ministries, colleagues, and students. All reflected on the ways that resilience and flexibility will be required for our movement not only to survive but to thrive.

Worship — By Lynda Sutherland

Worship for our Spring 2023 Conference was intentionally woven through with elements of our theme. I enjoyed working with the group of ministers who served on the planning team. The level of enthusiasm and creativity was amazing, and we had so much fun together as we discussed theology, messaging, artistic and technical elements, ways to make Zoom worship more engaging and worship-full, and so much more.

One of the things we tried this year during the Service of Remembrance surprised even those of us who crafted and presented the service. This was the open invitation for participants to express memories, thoughts, prayers, or other things they might like to share about the colleagues and partners we were honoring. About halfway through the service, I began noticing a feeling of real, present, intimate community, of walking together on holy ground.

Reading the feedback from the surveys, this element felt powerful for many. We got lots of great ideas and feedback from those who responded, and I am looking forward to incorporating many of them in worship planning for our Fall 2023 Conference, coming up October 23-25.

Small Groups — by Sonya Sukalski

I've come back several times in my life to Margaret Mead's wisdom that small groups can change the world. Once again, a UU small group has done that. I started meeting with the Spring Conference planning team at the beginning of the year, and immediately sensed that this team was going to pull off a one-of-a-kind event. My timeline for communications was laid out clearly for me by Barbro Hansson, so that I could foresee month by month what I would need to accomplish. With that, it was relatively easy to imagine when and how I would need to communicate with the list of 25+ people who had done it in the past to encourage them to consider doing it again.

The planning team was always willing and able to provide suggestions for improvements to what I created. I had the experience of contributing something worthwhile to a team effort, of which our small groups were just a piece. It is always a little bit hard to predict just how many will register, and from those folks, how many will be able to navigate the technology, schedules and the vagaries of life to show up able to engage, but so many of you did! I know I am fortified by the sharing I did on the day, as well as having pulled together as an organization to create connections for many of you. I appreciate all the affirmations in the evaluation forms, and will know how to do it better next time. Thanks to all who participated, who said yes to facilitating, and who gave thoughtful feedback over the last couple of months!

Odyssey — by Charles Stephens

Odyssey presentations are always a highlight of our UURMAPA conferences. I enjoyed preparing and presenting mine years ago, so gladly agreed to help the planning committee with that portion of the conference.

Working with Carol Hepokoski was a pleasure. Carol raised the bar not only by openly and honestly sharing stories of her interesting personal, academic, and ministerial life with us, but Carol also included the Odyssey of her more recent retirement life. Carol shared how in retirement she decided to explore her hand and eye at art work. She combined that with her deep love and knowledge of nature. Carol impressed us all with her gorgeous renderings of beautiful plant life.

If asked to present your Odyssey at some point, I encourage you to accept the challenge. You will learn about yourself. And others will have the opportunity to learn about and appreciate you and your life journey.

UUA Business — by Wayne Arnason

The spring conference usually does not include time with UUA and UUMA leaders, but we felt it was important to invite Richard Nugent from the Office of Church Staff Finances to give us an update on the changeover from TIAA to Empower as the Retirement Plan so many of us participate in. Richard offered an overview and particular information downloads on notable areas of concern, especially avoiding tax withholding on housing allowance withdrawals and making the decision to annuitize TIAA Traditional Accounts. He got many questions and even though the time was short, Richard made it clear that he and his staff try to be readily available to help.

The President of UURMaPA Susan Rak offered an overview of the Board's work and introduced several Board members to discuss highlighted areas of the Board's work this year.

Wilmington Hosts its Second Pod Gathering — by Richard Speck

Nine UURMAPAns came together at First Unitarian Church, Wilmington, DE, to share being together during the Spring UURMAPA Conference. We had people coming from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware. Attendees were Richard Speck, Janet Tillman, Dave Hunter, Lillia Cuervo, Paula Maiorano, Roger Fritts, Leslie Westbrook, John Manwell, and Phyllis Hubbell.

We had snacks and drinks to welcome everyone and keep them from getting too hungry. During breaks, people went to local restaurants to eat. We had dinner at a local diner the first night, a seafood restaurant the second night and Panera's for those who were still here on Wednesday night. People were free to come and go as they needed to. One even took a nap in another part of the building. We had a good conversation around the two breakout sessions with lots of input from



Attendees in Wilmington DE, from left to right beginning with the back row: Richard Speck, John Manwell, Roger Fritts, Dave Hunter, Paula Maiorano, Janet Tillman, Phyllis Hubbell, Leslie Westbrook, and Lilia Cuervo.

all. During breaks, conversation flowed between us. Everyone expressed interest in doing it again in the fall. So, we are planning our third Pod for the next conference.

You may ask how we did it. Richard reserved a room from the church office with a large screen TV connected to a computer for everyone to watch. It also had a camera so others could see us as well. We sat in a semi-circle to see the conference. Paula handled the snacks and drinks. Richard brought a cooler with ice to keep things cold.

Richard learned how to get the computer turned on and connected to the church's WIFI. It was a simple set up that took a minimum of effort. The whole Pod experience was simple for Richard and Paula as hosts. We might plan a communal meal at the start of the fall conference to welcome everyone together. As you can see, hosting a Pod in a church was easy. Perhaps more of you will try this type of gathering for the fall. Let Richard know if you have any questions. He would love to help you get started.

Thanks and Invitations — by Barbro Hansson

An effort like this one requires a great deal of coordination, communication, and planning. (We deeply thank the conference chair, Barbro Hansson, who managed to keep us pulling together even through international travel.) Anne Marsh served as scribe, so we had authoritative notes to refer to so we could remember what we had committed to. Jon Claney once more ably managed the technical aspects of our gathering, ensuring that everyone in the program was adequately lit and heard, organizing and playing videos at the appropriate time, splitting us into random small groups, and in general, making all the secret magic of Zoom come together.

Each member of the planning team did masterful work in their particular area that they have described above, and all contributed through participation in planning meetings to the overall coherence and quality of the conference. Thanks, too, to all who attended and especially, to those who gave feedback. It seems that they liked the conference as much as we on the planning team did!

Now, for the invitation! Whether or not you were present this time round, please come to the Fall Conference: October 23-25, 2023. More pods are planned, and you, too, can plan one if you have a few people nearby who want to participate together! Finally, if you are so inclined, joining the planning team for a conference can be a great way to work with colleagues and produce something of value to a bunch of appreciative people. To do so, contact Barbro Hanssen at barbromhansson@gmail.com.

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