

The church assembled: Why I love denominational gatherings

by [Lee Hull Moses](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue



The author and her daughter at the designated “selfie spot” of the 2015 Disciples of Christ General Assembly. Courtesy of Lee Hull Moses.

The next General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is scheduled for 2017 in Indianapolis. It might be the last of its kind. The church’s tradition has been to meet every other year, and the agenda always includes approving plans to schedule the gathering that’s four years out. But at this year’s GA in July, the assembly declined to approve any such plans. With declining attendance numbers and rising costs, many wonder if gathering at a convention center is still the best model.

I was six months old the first time I attended GA. I imagine my parents pushing me in a stroller through the convention center. I wonder if I made noise during the business sessions, if I fell asleep on my mother’s shoulder during the evening worship services. I’ve only missed a handful of GAs since then. My family went often when I was a kid, though we missed a few here and there. I skipped the two in college, which I regret—the concert held at Red Rocks when the assembly was in Denver lives on in Disciples lore, and I missed it. I don’t regret missing Fort Worth in 2007; my daughter was born two weeks later.

My memories of GA as a child are few and hazy. But I remember being on a bus for a field trip with the child-care program, sitting next to my parents during worship, and wandering around the exhibit hall collecting freebies from the various organizations’ displays. I remember watching my parents greet old friends they hadn’t seen in

years—back when they didn't have social media to fill in the gaps. Assemblies as a teenager meant running around with youth group friends, flirting with boys from other churches (or, more accurately, watching other girls flirt with the boys and wishing I knew how they did that), and playing icebreaker games in hotel conference rooms.

As a young adult, I sat with old camp friends and seminary classmates in the back row of the bleachers making snarky comments about the length of the worship service. Then we talked over drinks until all hours of the night, and then we got up early to do it all again the next day.

This year I took my own kids to GA in Columbus, Ohio. It was my daughter's third assembly and my son's second (his third if you count his in utero appearance in Nashville in 2011). Gone are the days of late-night drinks; now I'm the one dropping the kids off at the child-care program, sneaking out of workshops to take them for a swim in the hotel pool, and keeping them occupied during evening worship. (The snarky commentary remains, but I promise it's all in good fun.)

For an event held in a soulless convention hall, GA is remarkably kid friendly. I'm lucky: my parents still come, so our family's adult-to-child ratio is favorable. But more generally, the assembly organizers do a good job welcoming families. Child care was offered all day and into the evening, so the kids got to play and I got to attend sessions. During worship, large family areas were set up with activities and musical instruments for kids—places where it was OK to make noise and move around. I rarely get to sit with my children during worship, so I cherished the moment when my son sat on my lap, enthralled by the liturgical dancers on stage, and I delighted in watching him and his grandfather pretend to play inflatable guitars during the songs.

I liked wandering around the convention center with my daughter, introducing her to people who have been important in my life—the minister who married my husband and me, my preaching professor, the mentor who gave me an internship when I wasn't sure what I was doing with my life. My daughter and I took a photo together at the official selfie spot. (I'm not kidding. The sign said, "Selfie Spot.") I was tickled when she asked, on the last morning, if she could go back to the exhibit hall "to get some more stuff"; I remembered my own days of gathering up as many pens and key chains and doohickeys as I could. (There were more giveaways in those days, due to more ample resources and less sensitivity to what all that plastic junk was

doing to the earth.)

I'm glad that my kids get to experience the church like this.

The question of whether the Disciples should keep doing this is a valid one. It costs my congregation hundreds of dollars to send me to GA, between travel, registration, lodging, and expensive restaurant meals. I know that I'm lucky to serve a church that sees value in this and has the resources to do it; not everyone does. And it's always worth evaluating how we do things. We've been using this model for nearly half a century now; at a minimum it's time to check in.

The buzz among my friends and colleagues includes alternative suggestions. We could hold the assembly every three or four years instead of two. We could go to a college campus with dorm rooms instead of a convention center with hotel rooms; we could even have a big campout festival like Wild Goose. There are pros and cons to each of these ideas, and there are other ideas we haven't thought up yet.

I don't know the answer. What I do know is that we are a covenantal church; we are obligated to one another only by our relationships. We need time and space to nurture these relationships—in person, where we can hug each other and meet each other's children and stay up late together. We need the time and space to connect with the manifestations of the church that enable us to do ministry more deeply and widely than any one congregation could ever do on its own. There were nearly 4,000 people at the assembly in July. Not one of them would have come if they didn't love the church, and that is an incredible thing to behold.

We are also people who build our lives on the hope of resurrection. So if this particular tradition dies, I will grieve mightily but will trust that new life will spring up in its place. I trust our leaders to make wise decisions. I trust that we will find ways to gather the church so that we nurture the relationships that make us strong.

On Monday night during GA, as I was walking with my son into the assembly hall for worship, he remembered a song he'd been taught at the church we visited the previous morning. He mumbled a couple of words but then lost the tune and looked up at me. "How does that song go?" he asked. So I sang it for him:

I am the church, you are the church,  
we are the church together.  
All who follow Jesus, all around the world,

yes we're the church together.

He sang along, and we joined the masses, the people of God going into worship in the house of the Lord.