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# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

February 2006

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“We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again. We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.”

—George E. Odell

## The Committee on Ministry, or: Do We Really Need Another Committee?

by guest contributor **Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar**,  
*Co-District Executive, New Hampshire/Vermont District*

A Committee on Ministry (CoM) is one of the most important, delicate and often misunderstood of all church committees. Indeed, it has been said that a well functioning CoM is one of the most vital committees in a healthy congregation.

The Department of Ministry and Professional Leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association says The Committee on Ministry’s “role is to help strengthen the quality of ministry for the congregation. Its main task is to monitor, on a regular and continuing basis, the effectiveness of the congregation’s ministry.”

### But how is this done, you may ask?

In relation to the professional ministry a CoM should:

1. Check in with the minister at each month’s meeting, asking simply “How is it going? How does it feel to you (the minister)? Where is there tension? Where are there bumps in the process? What are you hearing from the parishioners? What help or support do you need?” And, as lay leaders, to ask of one another, “What are we hearing from parishioners? What tensions or bumps do we observe?”
2. Work with the minister to set annual goals for his/her work at the beginning of the year, and to assess at the end of the year what progress was made towards those goals.
3. Review the minister’s salary, expenses and benefits, and advocate as needed for appropriate compensation.



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# About Small Talk

**Small Talk** is a newsletter published monthly by the Small Church Specialist of the Northeast District.

SMALL TALK is devoted to strengthening the small Unitarian Universalist congregation through informative articles, resources, and good ideas.

**the Rev. Jane Dwinell,**  
*Content Editor*

**Dana Dwinell-Yardley,**  
*Layout and Design Artist*

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If you have questions, comments, or ideas for future issues of Small Talk... if you'd like to publicize your small church's events... or if you'd just like to chat about small congregations...

Please contact  
the Rev. Jane Dwinell at:

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Sign up to receive Small Talk via email (as a PDF) at  
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4. Work with the minister on his/her continuing education, sabbatical planning and other professional development.

5. Hear concerns from parishioners; convey them to the minister, and help to process appropriate response.

## **Working together, good times and bad, part-time or full**

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century we have matured in our understanding of shared ministry. We operate now as congregations in which everyone is called to live out a ministry in some fashion. Although there is a particular role for the professional ministry, the larger view is one of ministries intersecting and mutually supporting one another. In such a climate, the work of the CoM is not only to be of support and service to the professional minister, but also to keep its finger on the pulse of the larger work of ministry. Is it fulfilling its potential? Is it serving both the members of the congregation and the larger community well? Are its many facets working in harmony?

When all is going well with the ministry of a congregation, it is easy to neglect the work of a Committee on Ministry, but that is the very time when a strong committee with good practices should be sustained. A congregation is blessed to have such a committee up and running when tension, misunderstanding or even conflict arises between the professional ministry and one or more parishioners, or among individuals or groups within the congregation.

Is a CoM needed in a small congregation, especially one with a part-time minister, you may wonder? In some ways it may be especially needed in such circumstances where roles and responsibilities, boundaries and accountability are less clear and less well understood than in congregations with a full-time minister.

## **Some scenarios...**

Imagine: The church president and minister have come into conflict with each other. There is a growing mistrust of each other's motives. Communication becomes tense; face-to-face contact becomes more formal and forced, i.e. meetings where others are present; telephone conversations become shorter, more infrequent; e-mail becomes the predominant means of communication, and the tension ratchets up.

Imagine: A single minister becomes intimately involved with a member of the church who is single and parenting two young children. The relationship is ongoing and mutual. The member involved is a youth group advisor. Some parents of members of the youth group,

feel uncomfortable about this relationship and think it should be ended.

Imagine: The board president holds strict expectations for children's behavior. She is of the 'children should be seen and not heard' school. She holds the Director of Religious Education (DRE) accountable for the behavior of all the children when they are at church events and repeatedly berates her for the casual conduct of some of the children in worship and in other church settings. The DRE feels increasingly besieged and is considering resigning.

Situations such as the above have all occurred in small congregations. Without a safe, sensitive place for such matters to be processed, for all parties to be heard, and for thoughtful reflection about what steps should be taken, conflict can escalate, bad behavior can do deep harm to congregational functioning, individual lives and professional careers can be damaged beyond repair. A Committee on Ministry can make all the difference.

### **Best practices for a Committee on Ministry**

**Size:** Three members is a good size. The committee should be small enough so that a close trusting relationship can be developed among the members, and confidentiality can be assured.

**Selection:** A good model is for the minister to recommend several names to the board which would then select three. It is important that all members of a CoM be people whom both the minister and the board trust, and who have the respect of the congregation. It is also important that none of these are friends of the minister.

**Regular meetings:** to insure that the CoM is attending to the broad range of matters under its

purview, that it is regularly taking the pulse of the congregation and that it can address issues before they become problems.

**Confidentiality:** For all parties to feel safe, and to avoid an unhealthy climate of rumors, all discussions of the CoM must be confidential.

**Is a Committee on Ministry needed in a small congregation, especially one with a part-time minister, you may wonder? In some ways it may be especially needed...**

**Visibility in congregation:** Because of the nature of its work, it is easy for CoMs to be nearly invisible in the overall life of the congregation. But it is essential

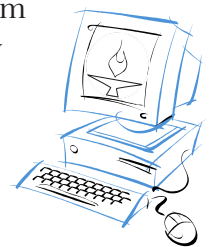
that they have a high profile so that when there are concerns that need to be processed, people will know that there is an appropriate place to do so. Frequent newsletter articles, after-church forums (not for processing sensitive issues, but for talking about the general work of the committee), etc. are recommended.

*Editor's note: Does your congregation have a successful Committee on Ministry? Share your stories with us so that all may benefit. Email them to me at [sky@otlink.net](mailto:sky@otlink.net), or snail mail at 1 Bingham St. Montpelier, VT 05602. Thanks!*

—Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist*

### **Small congregation resources online**

A series of handouts for the small congregation—written by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, on diverse and practical topics—are available on the web in PDF format, at [www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm](http://www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm). Many thanks to Andrea Lerner for making them available online! Feel free to copy and distribute to your congregation's leadership—but please make sure that all content and formatting is unchanged.



# Over 30 small congregations have shared their stories. Now it's your turn. Send us your strengths and success stories so others may benefit!

## Who we are:

Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist for the Northeast District*  
 Ellen Germann, *former District Executive of the Mountain Desert District*

## What we are doing:

Based on our experiences and deep commitment to our small congregations, we are endeavoring to write a guide for Leaders of Small Congregations. We want to include in this guide real-life examples of things that work for small congregations—and we want to highlight your congregation's particular successes! We believe that learning by example is a powerful aid in moving toward healthy congregations.

Depending on the response to this request, we may also develop a resource for sharing of "Best Practices Among Small Congregations."

## How you can help:

Please send us stories of things that have worked well for your congregation. These may include:

- ✿ Ways of communicating
- ✿ Creative Religious Education for only a few
- ✿ Organizational structures that have made a difference
- ✿ Fundraising efforts that were successful
- ✿ Ways of worship that have increased meaning
- ✿ Cooperative efforts with other churches in your community
- ✿ And any other ideas you would like to share

## How and where you can send your stories:

Please send your "Best Practices" by email to both of us at [ecgermann@earthlink.net](mailto:ecgermann@earthlink.net) and [sky@vlink.net](mailto:sky@vlink.net).

Please respond soon. We are in the process of writing our guide and want to be sure that you are part of the story.

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Go to [www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm](http://www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm) to download these back issues of SMALL TALK!



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