

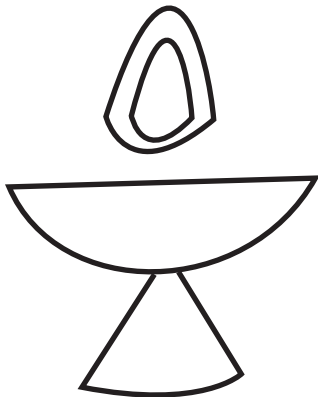
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

January 2005

“Conflict is a part of everyone’s life; we can’t eliminate it. Nor would we necessarily want to – for new insights and growth can emerge from well-managed conflict.”

–Speed B. Leas,
consultant of the Alban Institute,
and nationally recognized authority on conflict in churches



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The Challenge that No One Likes to Talk About... Conflict in the Small Congregation

by The Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist for the Northeast District*

It’s a fact of life that once you get at least two people together, those two are bound to disagree about something at some point in their relationship! Add in another person, and another, and another, and the chance for conflict escalates. Disagreement is inevitable. How couples, families, and congregations handle disagreement is the essence of being in relationship. Some groups handle disagreement better than others, and generally no one likes the stress and challenge of dealing with a conflict.

Just as in families and couples, congregational disagreement can come in many, many flavors – from who does what, to how to deal with lack of follow-through, from likes and dislikes in room decoration and use, to what language and behavior is appropriate to use. Many small congregation function like families, though they may not have the same vested interest in staying together and the deep love that gets many families and couples through crises. But remember that conflict is good and informative, and often heralds change – positive change. It’s an opportunity!

We’re all different!

We all handle conflict differently – there are the aggressive ones among us who like a good fight, there are those who shrink from conflict and may actually disappear rather than engage. There are those who like to be the go-between, to help those in conflict settle their differences. Mostly, though, conflict makes us all uncomfortable to some degree whether we engage by fight or flight. What is your favorite way to handle conflict? What about those around you, in your congregation and in your family?

And, unfortunately, as in some families,

Conflict
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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.

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If you have questions, comments, or good ideas for future issues...

If you'd like to publicize your small church's events...

Or if you'd like more information...

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occasionally there are church members who are abusive in some fashion (usually verbally or psychologically, rather than physically), and for everyone's safety, the relationship needs to end. Often though, the person isn't purposefully trying to be abusive, it's just that they may not know how, or be willing, to be in right relationship with others.

## **Why do conflicts arise?**

Conflicts can arise over money -- who knows about it, who invests it or manages it, and what it is spent on. Conflicts can arise over space use and renovations to the buildings and grounds. Conflicts can arise over who is in charge or whose ideas get implemented -- sometimes the patriarch and matriarch of the congregation hang on too long in the face of declining health or new energy that brings new ideas. Conflict can arise over how relationships are expressed in the congregation -- with parents who have "out-of-control" children, for example, or with an adult who might be a little too "touchy-feely" with other adults. Conflicts can arise over a minister or other staff member. Conflicts can arise when one or more members are not willing to go along with the decision of the governing body or the congregation. Conflicts can arise when a member goes ahead and takes on a project or activity without working with or even acknowledging the congregation's process for doing so (a perennial problem in the small congregation) or when a member does not follow through on a project.

## **What to do? Or not to do?**

It's best not to sweep the conflict under the rug and hope it will go away. It's best not to implement policies to avoid dealing with one problem person or one problem issue. It's best not to let the problem fester for years in hopes that it will eventually go away. It is best to face the problem head on. But how?

Carefully, and with love, and with lots of support.

If the leadership is not aware of the problem, then you need to discuss it with the appropriate person in charge -- if it's a Religious Education problem, discuss it with the Director of Religious Education, and the head of the RE Committee. If it's a problem with the minister, take it up with the Committee on Ministry. If it's a problem with another staff person, take it up with the governing body. If it's a problem with the governing body leadership, take it up with the minister, or, if you have no minister, with your District Executive or Small Church Specialist. If it's a problem between two church members, then ask a trusted third member to act as mediator while you all sit down together and talk it out. If conflicts have escalated to the point where there is seriously negative or danger-

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ous behavior, contact your District Executive immediately for assistance.

Never have a conversation about a problem with just one person. It is safer and healthier to discuss it with two people, together. Then things have less of a chance to be misunderstood or misconstrued in a “me vs. you” way. Get your thoughts together before the meeting, perhaps discussing the issue with your spouse or a trusted friend who does not have anything to do with the situation. Make sure you are working with facts as well as feelings. Sometimes actions can be misconstrued if you don’t have all the details. No sense in creating conflict if there is none to begin with!

When you, and the appropriate leadership of the congregation, are ready to discuss the situation with the person or persons at the center of the problem, be prepared to feel uncomfortable, and, at the same time, do all you can to be comfortable. Arrange to meet in a neutral, and physically soothing, location. Make sure the meeting is at a time of day when everyone is rested and doesn’t have to rush off to other obligations. Take your time. Be prepared to speak truthfully, clearly and from the heart. Be prepared to listen deeply and fully, to understand the other person and the situation in a new way. Be prepared for anger, and for tears. Be prepared for most anything. Have an action plan in mind to resolve the situation, but be ready to compromise, if appropriate.

### **How to avoid conflict in the future**

Many people in small congregations feel that their smallness means that they don’t have to have all those cumbersome policies and procedures that larger congregations have. Not so. Every congregation should have a Safe Congregation Policy – to safeguard the children and adults from inappropriate sexual and emotional behavior, as well as to safeguard everyone from physical dangers such as fire. Every congregation should have a Disruptive Persons Policy that

outlines a way to handle people with other kinds of inappropriate behavior.

But you can’t write a policy dealing with disagreements over flooring for the new social hall, or the minister’s latest sermon, or whether or not the kids are served juice and cookies during RE. Some disagreements just have to be hashed

} **Many congregations function better and may finally start to grow when conflict is settled.**

out by the appropriate folks. They may take time to resolve, or be resolved easily and simply, and you’ll breathe

a sigh of relief and wish you had brought it up sooner.

### **Endings and beginnings**

But some disagreements will not end neatly and happily... people may leave the congregation – temporarily or permanently. That’s OK. Endings are hard and painful, and may feel worse before they feel better, but a clear and fairly-processed resolution always for the best – for a family and for a congregation. Try not to beat yourself up about it, or be angry at the “powers that be” – try to learn from what happened, and help figure out a way to prevent a dangerous escalation of conflict in the future. Know that many congregations function better and may finally start to grow when the conflict is settled. You may lose a person, or several, to the conflict, but if the conflict is truly over, you will find the the increased energy and vitality will bring new people in who will want to stay. Many of our visitors can feel when there is tension in the air, and will avoid returning. The same visitors will also feel lightness and good will, and will look forward to returning.

Conflict in the small congregation can be especially challenging. If a handful of people leave, it may mean a drop of 5 or 10 % of the membership – something a larger congregation would absorb without hardly noticing. But, in most cases, a congregation who handles conflict face-on and in a healthy way will rise from the ashes stronger, and clearer, about working together in beloved community.

# What's Happening in January, February, and March!

## Northeast District Events

| When?                                  | What?                       | Where?                              |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| January 29 <sup>th</sup>               | Board Meeting               | Belfast, ME                         |
| February 5 <sup>th</sup>               | Winter Meeting on RESOURCES | Brunswick, ME                       |
| March 4 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> | Youth Social Justice Con    | 1 <sup>st</sup> Parish Portland, ME |
| March 12 <sup>th</sup>                 | Board Meeting               | TBA                                 |



## Small Church Specialist's Calendar

| When?                                      | What?                              | Where?            |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| January 26 <sup>th</sup> -27 <sup>th</sup> | N. Atlantic District Staff Retreat | Senexet House, CT |
| January 29 <sup>th</sup>                   | Board Meeting                      | Belfast, ME       |
| January 30 <sup>th</sup>                   | Worship and Meeting                | Edgecomb, ME      |
| February 5 <sup>th</sup>                   | Winter Meeting on RESOURCES        | Brunswick, ME     |
| February 6 <sup>th</sup>                   | Worship and Meeting                | Castine, ME       |

**Conflict Resources!**

**Stand Up to Problem People with Protective Policies**  
[www.uua.org/interconnections/leadership/vol6-3-leadership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/leadership/vol6-3-leadership.html)

**Handling Disruptive People: Policies That Ease the Strain**  
[www.uua.org/interconnections/leadership/vol1-2-leadership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/leadership/vol1-2-leadership.html)

**Safe Congregation Info**  
[www.uua.org/cde/education/safe-cong.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/safe-cong.html)  
[www.uua.org/interconnections/toolbox/vol5-4-toolbox.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/toolbox/vol5-4-toolbox.html)

**The Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, is happy to meet with your congregation!**

Just give her a call at 802.229.4008,



# Small is Beautiful!

## Resources and Networking for Small Congregations

August 26-28, 2005 ✧ Ferry Beach Camp and Conference Center ✧ Saco, ME

Small is Beautiful is open to anyone from a small congregation (less than 150 members) from anywhere in the world.

Put this conference on your calendar – last summer's *Small is Beautiful!* was fun, mellow, and a learning experience for all. Next summer will be even better!

There will be more information in future issues of SMALL TALK.