

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

January 2007

The moment of conflict holds such promise: the opportunity to approach life creatively, make a different choice, visit a different planet—opportunities we would not be otherwise offered if it weren't for the conflict. Conflict is one way in which we come to know the world and understand each other.

—Judy Ringer,
Unlikely Teachers: Finding the
Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict



Inside...

About Small Talk.....pg 2
More on Change.....pg 3
Need a Consultant?...pg 4

Greatest Challenges #5: Conflict and Change

by **The Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant**

It's January—time for New Year's Resolutions! How many of you resolve to do something new for yourself each year? I gave up New Year's Resolutions a long time ago when I realized that I wasn't following through, and only getting depressed. That's the story of New Year's Resolutions—they're all about change, and that's why we don't always keep them. Change is hard. Period.

With change comes conflict. When you're trying to change your diet, your exercise habits, or any other typical resolutions, you get into conflict with yourself. You argue with yourself when you don't feel like going out for a walk or when you're tempted by that box of donuts at the office. Your desire for greater health is in conflict with your desire for instant gratification. Sometimes you win; sometimes you lose. But at least you're only arguing with yourself.

In a religious community, change generally comes with conflict—of some kind. That arguing may take place inside your head, but more likely it takes place in the pews, in the social hall, and at the board meeting. More voices raise more questions, and more conflict builds—unless you prepare, and have clarity and vision about the change.

Communication in the small congregation

In small congregations people tend to do things without going through formal means of decision-making and communication. Sometimes, they just do it without telling anyone. Sometimes, they speak to the board chair, the administrator, or the minister—whoever they perceive to be “in charge.” It could be last year's board chair if they like that person better.

Conflict and Change
continued on page 2...

About Small Talk

Small Talk is a newsletter published monthly by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small church consultant.

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

the Rev. Jane Dwinell,
Editor

Dana Dwinell-Yardley,
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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  
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Sign up to receive Small Talk via email (as a PDF) at
<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalknewsletter>.

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Many people in small congregations like the informality, and that is good—to a point. For minor changes, it's okay. But for major changes, there needs to be conversation, maybe even a congregational retreat, and often a full congregational meeting and vote. As congregational leaders, you know what style works best for your group.

## **Delegate decisionmaking**

Many governing boards of small congregations tend to “micro-manage” everything from where the chalice goes in the sanctuary and how many hymns should be sung, to what kind of coffee is served and what kind of flowers are planted. These kinds of decisions are generally a waste of the governing board's time, and should be left to volunteers. The board can choose a couple of the best gardeners in the congregations to plant and tend the flowers, and the social hour coordinator to decide about the coffee. The Worship task force can decide about the elements of worship.

If your congregation would balk at letting only one or two people make these decisions, consider holding a monthly post-worship meeting to discuss these topics. Announce the topics ahead of time, and those who want to chime in their opinions can grab a cup of tea and join the conversation. That way, those who care about a certain topic can feel heard. This could save a lot of grief in the long run.

## **Involve everyone in major change**

For really big decisions like choosing whether or not to have a minister, to purchase or renovate a building, to go to two services, or to drastically change the worship format, the leadership needs to first ponder these choices and gather supportive material (or people). Then it's a good idea to hold a congregational meeting or two or a more lengthy visioning or retreat session before voting at a congregational meeting. It's a good idea to contact your District staff if you're pondering any of these ideas. There are many other congregations that have taken these paths, and their collective wisdom is useful. Many Districts also have congregational consultants that can come and facilitate such meetings or retreats. It's a really good idea to have someone from outside of the congregation facilitate these meetings. Since everyone wants to register their opinion, and the facilitator really can't, an outside person is the perfect solution.

If your preparation before the vote is thorough, chances are the vote will go well. Decide before the vote what percentage is necessary for passage of the idea. A simple majority is not enough. Two-thirds,

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three-quarters, or 90 percent are common choices. You probably have a sense of what your congregation needs.

### What if someone says no?

Even if the vote passes by the recommended majority there may still be nay-sayers who resent the change (unless the vote is 100 percent). They may leave the congregation. They may fuss and fume about how things weren't fair or were shoved down their throats. If you know those things are not true, just let it go—there's probably nothing you can do to change their mind. At the same time, there may be people who voted against the change, but, once it was approved, become enthusiastic supporters. Don't assume that just because someone voiced a negative opinion at a congregational meeting that they'll always feel that way. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

**It's a good idea to hold a congregational meeting or two or a more lengthy visioning or retreat session before voting at a congregational meeting.**

No one wants to think that they drove someone away from the congregation, but in reality if someone is really against a change, they may not be happy continuing to participate. The democratic process is challenging for many of us. We like being in the majority. For some people, this aspect of our faith just doesn't work, and it's best to let them go with a, "I'm sorry. We'll miss you."

On the other hand, many changes come along naturally as time passes, as fashions and society change. Many of our older members who came to Unitarian Universalism as humanists are challenged by the increasing spirituality and "God talk" in many of our congregations. Maintaining a theological balance and an open mind in this area is a struggle for many, many of our congregations—of every size. If this is a conflict or change your congregation is going through, please be patient and loving toward one another. Newcomers need to understand and appreciate the love the

old timers have for their church, and the old timers need to understand and appreciate the love the newcomers have for what they have found. It is a deep religious quest to walk together in peace with this kind of difference.

### Here are the key things to remember:

- 🌸 **There will always be change.**
- 🌸 **There will always be conflict.**
- 🌸 **Change and conflict do not have to be destructive.**
- 🌸 **Planning for change** and offering opportunities for the **sharing of ideas** may reduce the intensity of any conflict.
- 🌸 No matter how careful you may be, **some people may leave** the congregation.

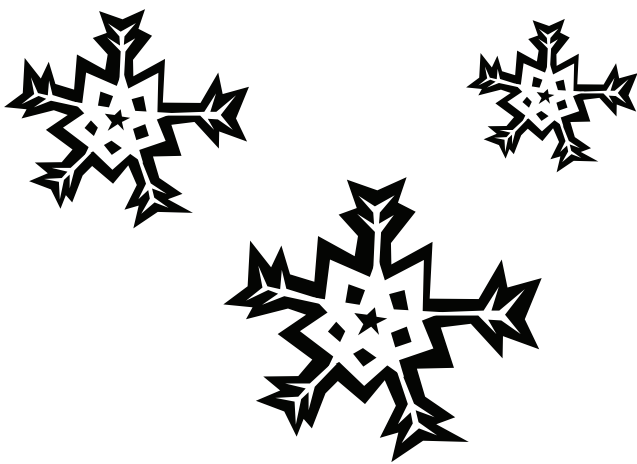
🌸 **Your leadership should be comfortable** dealing with conflict. If not, they should get some training in this important area.

🌸 **Ask for help** from your District Staff or a professional mediator before the conflict escalates out of control.

🌸 **Create a congregational behavioral covenant** before there's a conflict, and use it as needed.

Good luck, and have patience with one another!

*Next month: I'm headed to Europe with my family for seven weeks, and we plan to visit some of the Unitarian congregations in Romania (all small!) while we are there. The February issue will be a reflection on our travels. Depending on Internet availability, you may receive that issue in February. If not, look for it in March.*



## The Issue Index

To download these back issues of *Small Talk*, visit [www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm](http://www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm)!



## Need a Consultant?

Ellen Germann-Melosh, former District Executive of the Mountain Desert District, is now available as a small congregation consultant to serve congregations west of the Mississippi. You can contact her at [ecgermann@earthlink.net](mailto:ecgermann@earthlink.net) or 520.529.0990.

## Resources for Small Congregations

### Email discussion list

for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregation  
[lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk](http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk)

### Email list for ministers of small congregations

[lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min](http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min)

### Handouts by the Rev. Jane Dwinell

1-2 page handouts on: change, finances, governance, leadership, publications, Small Group Ministry, welcoming, and worship  
[uumetry.org/misc/materials](http://uumetry.org/misc/materials)

|                                         |                |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| <b>What is a Small Congregation?</b>    | December 2003  |
| <b>Governance Structure</b>             | January 2004   |
| <b>Numbers (statistics to keep)</b>     | February 2004  |
| <b>Social Action</b>                    | March 2004     |
| <b>Growth: Part One</b>                 | April 2004     |
| <b>Growth: Part Two</b>                 | May 2004       |
| <b>A Roadmap to Change</b>              | June 2004      |
| <b>Small is Beautiful Report</b>        | September 2004 |
| <b>The Small Church of the Future</b>   | October 2004   |
| <b>Publications: Part One (layout)</b>  | November 2004  |
| <b>Publications: Part Two (content)</b> | December 2004  |
| <b>Conflict</b>                         | January 2005   |
| <b>Creative Worship</b>                 | February 2005  |
| <b>The Annual Canvass</b>               | March 2005     |
| <b>Small Group Ministry</b>             | April 2005     |
| <b>Knowing and Telling Our Stories</b>  | May 2005       |
| <b>Summer Worship—Yes or No?</b>        | June 2005      |
| <b>Small Congregations Speak Out</b>    | September 2005 |
| <b>Building a Music Program</b>         | October 2005   |
| <b>Technology: Help or Hindrance?</b>   | November 2005  |
| <b>Celebrating December Holidays</b>    | December 2005  |
| <b>Transformational Congregations</b>   | January 2006   |
| <b>Committee on Ministry</b>            | February 2006  |
| <b>Welcoming Congregation Work</b>      | March 2006     |
| <b>Greening the Small Congregation</b>  | April 2006     |
| <b>Religious Education for Children</b> | May 2006       |
| <b>So You're Looking for a Minister</b> | June 2006      |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #1: Growth</b>   | September 2006 |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout</b>  | October 2006   |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #3: Ministry</b> | November 2006  |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #4: Money</b>    | December 2006  |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #5: Conflict</b> | January 2007   |