
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

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June 2005

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## “In this refulgent

summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life.

The grass grows, the buds burst... the air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine... and the new hay.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson,  
from The Divinity School Address

## Summer Services – Yes or No?

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

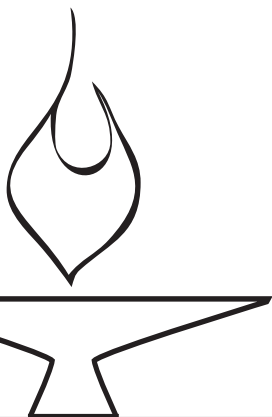
To worship or not to worship...that is the question for many small congregations. Unitarian Universalists (UUs) in long-standing congregations are used to “having the summer off.” This tradition goes back a long way – to the summering of the city folk in the peaceful rural climes, to the farmers having too much work to do to find time to go to church. Newer congregations have either adopted this old tradition, or have rejected it in favor of going all year ‘round. Some long-lived congregations have taken the bold step to not stop in mid-June and start up after Labor Day in September, but to go all year.

But, wait! You say, “We’re all so tired. We need the summer off.” It probably feels that way to most of you. But summer gatherings do not have to be complicated, or hard to put together. Summer can be different, a chance to experiment, and a chance to connect with old and new friends. Many UUs are traveling in the summer, and appreciate being able to attend worship, and having the opportunity to discover new congregations. If your church is in a popular summer tourist destination, you may actually have more people to serve in the summer even though you won’t see them all winter. Once you get to discover the summer-only UUs out there in your region, you’ll look forward to their return each year. Summer-only attendees may actually have more energy and enthusiasm to do things around your congregation, and can help ease the feeling of we’re-too-tired-to-go-on. You also may find several retired or vacationing ministers in your area that would enjoy leading worship once during the summer. Summer time can be creative, fun and different.

### Why stay open?

Even though the old joke goes that God

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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*

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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/small-talknewsletter>.  
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trusts the Unitarians to take the summer off, the reality is that, for many people, attending worship on a weekly basis is important to them. Ask a room-full of UUs who attend church regularly and you'll find a multitude of reasons why. Some people need the weekly grounding and centering that the worship experience provides. For others, the congregation is their family, and they want to see everyone and make connections. Still others want their children to learn good habits, one of which is regular attendance at their congregation. There are undoubtedly more reasons than these. The fact is that regular worship attendance is very important for some people, and when church closes for the summer they lose a vital piece of their lives.

It's also a fact that many people are "church-shopping" in August. Families who move tend to do so in August so that their children will be settled in their new home before school begins. These folks are exploring their new communities, and one of the first places they seek new friends and a place to belong is a religious community. If your doors are shut, they'll try someplace else and may not return.

What does staying open look like?

Staying open all year doesn't mean that Sunday morning needs to look the same twelve months of the year. You can experiment with different worship forms – Quaker-type silent worship, a shorter service, intergenerational worship, outdoor worship, a small group ministry format, an adult religious education curriculum format, all music services, etc. The possibilities are endless. As long as the worship experience is good quality, you don't have to necessarily stick with a sermon-readings-hymns format.

And don't worry about scheduling Social Hour hosts and greeters. Plan on having lemonade and a potluck Social Hour every week. Food is less important in the heat of the summer, so whatever shows up (or doesn't) for munchies is fine. The first person to arrive becomes the greeter – feel free to take turns. You can have a simpler order of service, or none at all if you have good leaders.

You can choose to meet at a different time than Sunday morning, if you wish. Perhaps people in your area would respond better to a late Sunday afternoon gathering, followed by a potluck supper. Or maybe you would choose to meet earlier than usual on Sunday morning to give people the time to go off to other activities. If you're not in a northern clime, but in a southern one where summers are too hot, an evening service – or an early morning one – might be just the thing.

Environmentally, and financially, churches in northern areas can keep their doors open in the summer for little, or no, money. No heat is required, and many of our older sanctuaries are actually pleasantly cool places in the summer. If you are in a high heat and humidity area, you may want to look at ways, and places, to gather so that you don't have to run air conditioning. Perhaps a basement room is cooler than the sanctuary, or someplace outdoors in a grove of trees.

(Conversely, in the winter, many northern congregations choose to meet in a parlor or fellowship hall so that they don't have to heat a large and poorly insulated sanctuary.) Do what is best for your group, given your climate, and your facilities.

What about the kids, and the staff?

You can plan an all-year religious education program, or you can plan for a more "summer camp" atmosphere. The children can do things outdoors around the church, like having a garden that grows vegetables for the local food shelf or flowers for nursing home residents (the adults might like to do this too!). They can also spend time being creative, reading books, playing cooperative games, baking cookies for Social Hour, singing songs, and just having fun together. Or you can plan worship in such a way that children of all ages are welcome.

If you have a minister, you and the minister can work together to determine the best time for the minister to take vacation time. Some ministers rely on having the summer off, just as much as the congregations do, but other ministers prefer to spread their time off over the year. Taking one month in the winter and one month in the summer can be refreshing for the minister, or two weeks every season. It actually can be harder on the minister to go virtually non-stop for ten months, and then have to cram all their time off into one span of time.

If you have other professional staff, same goes for them. Even if your staff is part time, they still need to have a clear chunk of time off for their own rest and relaxation. Figure out what works best for everyone involved.

Do something fun and different!

Summer is also time for other fun activities for your congregation. If you're in an area where the winters are long and cold, summer is the time for sprucing up the church buildings and grounds, taking care of the flowers and shrubs, holding a flea market or a big yard sale, having a picnic together, or offering the UU version of "Vacation Bible School" to the kids. Your larger community may hold activities that you can tap into – for fun or for fundraising. Perhaps there's a community theater nearby, and you can offer a pre-theater dinner. Perhaps there's a weekly community band concert on the green, and you can offer refreshments. Perhaps there's a parade or a local fair where you can have a float or a booth. All these type of activities provide many things – publicity for the congregation, a sense of connection to the larger community, and a chance to do something fun and different together. Of course, you can do only fun activities, and not worship as well, but a quiet, centering time on a regular basis can draw people, and keep people, together.

Choosing to be open all year or not is an important decision for every small congregation to make. Be thoughtful about it, and don't just "do what we've always done." You don't have to do the same thing every year, whether or not you have chosen to have worship all year 'round. Creative and good ideas abound.

And let me know what your congregation does – and why. We can all learn from each other, especially in regards to this important issue.

Small is Beautiful!

Resources and Networking for Small Congregations

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



Last summer's Small is Beautiful was fun, mellow, and a learning experience for all. This year will be even more fun. Come join us as we learn, play, relax, worship, and celebrate the small, strong congregation!

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

Registration and prices

For more info on cost and registration, contact Ferry Beach at:

5 Morris Avenue, Saco, ME 04072

Phone 207.284.8612

Fax 207.283.4465

send queries to craig@ferrybeach.org

Or register online at
www.ferrybeach.org

Come join us at Small is Beautiful, and...

- ❁ Learn from one other and wonderful presenters at useful workshops of many flavors
- ❁ Relax in the beautiful surroundings of Ferry Beach
- ❁ Get to know like-minded folks from other small congregations
- ❁ Have fun!

This year's presenters:

- ❁ the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist for the Northeast District
- ❁ Dana Dwinell-Yardley, freelance layout artist and designer and Communications person for Interweave Continental
- ❁ the Rev. Bill Zelazny, District Executive for the Ballou-Channing District
- ❁ Cindy Spring, former Program Consultant for the NH/VT District

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