

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

March 2008

Q. What is the definition of
Unitarian Universalism?

A. A place where all your
answers are questioned.

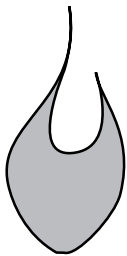
—UU joke

The Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches

by Anthony B. Robinson, guest columnist

Editor's note: Many of you email me to ask questions about what to do — to help your congregation grow, to learn what to do with a minister, to figure out how to get the work done without burning everyone out, to figure out how to get people to donate money, to decide what to do about bylaws, organizational structure, and bad weather days. The concerns of small congregation leaders are vast and varied — and all important.

But sometimes we take ourselves too seriously, and a bit of humor may help us learn, grow and change. I was recently told about this great little article from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, and just had to share it with you. Mr. Robinson has given me permission to do just that — read this through once for the laughs, and then read it again slowly for the depth. We can all learn something from his “seven habits.”



On the theory that a capacity to laugh at ourselves and our foibles is good for the soul, I recently wrote a piece for use in my own denomination, the United Church of Christ, called “The Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches.”

I suspect it can be generalized, with some mental editing, to temples, synagogues and other religious congregations. Tongue in cheek, here it is:

1. Elevate mediocrity to a spiritual discipline.

Figure out where average falls and aim below there. Doing things with excellence, joy and flair may make someone uncomfortable. God doesn't really expect much anyhow.

2. Take no risks.

A successful practice of risk avoidance is often best achieved by sending any and all

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About Small Talk

Small Talk is 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.

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new ideas to a minimum of four boards or committees who understand it's their role to say no to any new ideas. This process may need to be reinforced by remarks noting how a particular idea might make the church liable, cost money or ruffle feathers.

3. Practice the following evangelism strategy: "If they want us, they know where to find us."

Assume that everyone does know where you are and what you are. It also can be helpful if your building looks like a medieval fortress. If you don't have that going for you, encourage ushers and greeters to look like palace guards as they perform their role.

4. Blame early and often.

Maintaining dysfunction in a congregation is made easier if scapegoats are regularly identified. In some congregations, ministers make wonderful scapegoats. You may also blame "newcomers," or "people who don't understand how we do things in this church." If all else fails, blame the conference, the denomination or Satan.

5. Always be prepared to make an account of the excuses that are within you.

Have an all-purpose excuse such as, "I've just been so busy" (elaborate at great length just how busy you are, implying that no one else is busy). Occasionally try out a creative new excuse, such as, "Our dog ate the printer-ink cartridge and required an emergency appendectomy. He is now very busy, too."

6. Make it clear to all that the job of the pastor(s) and staff is to keep everyone, meaning church members, happy.

Think of your church as the "Love Boat" and the pastor as the cruise director and activity planner. The job of clergy and staff members is to keep everyone on board happy. If someone is unhappy, it's a sure sign your pastor is not doing the job.

7. Spend as little money as possible.

Even though you may enjoy spending money on personal things like a car or a cruise, you can demonstrate your commitment to modesty and simple lifestyle at church. The very best programs cost nothing. And why would your church building need renovation? If it was good enough for your grandparents, it'll be good enough for your grandchildren.

...

The other half and literally the flip side of the booklet is, “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Churches.” But we’ll save those tips for another time.

Churches, temples and synagogues have a high calling — to deepen the spiritual lives of their members. And yet they are very human institutions beset by human foibles and, yes, sin. In this, of course, they are not unlike other voluntary groups, companies and other institutions. Sometimes it’s good to laugh at these things.

What’s even better than laughing at our foibles are the countless people in congregations who, despite frustrations and challenges, continue to work and

serve with flair, courage and good humor. Such wonderful people manage to remind us all of the grace and love that often go unseen or are taken for granted in our various communities of faith.

Assume that everyone does know where you are and what you are. It also can be helpful if your building looks like a medieval fortress.

After all, it’s no great thing to be active and engaged when everything is going swimmingly. It is a great thing when people persist when frustration is real and change of ineffective habits is slow in coming. Hats off to those who persist!

Anthony B. Robinson is a United Church of Christ minister, speaker, consultant and writer. His recent books include Common Grace: How to be a Person and Other Spiritual Matters, and Leadership for Vital Congregations.

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Unitarian Universalist Joke Corner

Q. What is the definition of UU diversity?

A. When there are three different colors of Toyota Prius in the parking lot.

Q. How many members of a small UU congregation does it take to change a light bulb?

A. Twenty. Six to form a committee to discuss the ecological implications of compact fluorescent vs. incandescent bulbs, five to form a committee to discuss labor practices in lightbulb factories, four on the aesthetics committee to discuss the exact tint and wattage, one to leave the church because the lightbulb is being changed, three to leave the church because it isn’t going to be the lightbulb they originally wanted, and one who just goes ahead and changes the lightbulb without consulting anyone else.

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A book of interest . . .

*The Fellowship Movement:
 A Growth Strategy and Its Legacy*
 by Holley Ulbrich (member at the
 UU Fellowship of Clemson, SC)

Tells the story of the 20-year history of the lay-led fellowship movement, an initiative that gave birth to a third of today's Unitarian Universalist congregations. The author explores the ways in which this unique movement has influenced our congregational culture. Useful for leaders and others interested in church growth. (Skinner House) \$14.00. Available from the UUA Bookstore at www.uua.org/bookstore.

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