

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

September 2006

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**People say, "What is the sense of our small effort?"**

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.

—Dorothy Day

## Greatest Challenges #1: Growth

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

It was another great General Assembly (GA), held this year in hot and steamy St. Louis, Missouri. The focus fell a great deal on congregational leadership—for congregations of all sizes. It was inspiring to see the video presentation from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes in Tamworth, NH (80 members) as the first recognized small Breakthrough Congregation. Copies of all the videos of the 2006 Breakthrough Congregations should be available by next year's GA in Portland, Oregon.

Last year, I asked visitors to the small church booth and my workshops what was the one thing the Unitarian Universalist Association could help them with. The top five answers were: growth, acquiring, raising money for, or repairing your building, lay leadership development, religious education, and advertising (see the September 2005 Small Talk for resources in these particular areas). This year, I phrased the question differently—

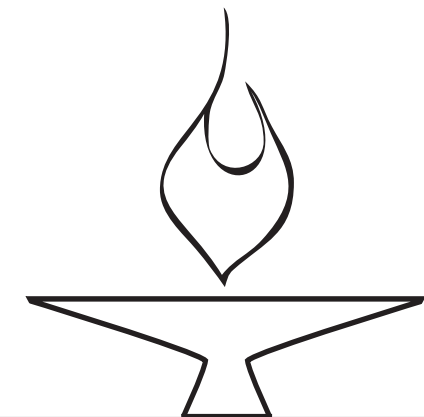
### What is your congregation's greatest challenge?

While many of the answers were the same as last year, they were also different. Here's this year's top five:

- 🌸 Growth
- 🌸 Retention and burnout of members and lay leaders
- 🌸 Ministry
- 🌸 Finances
- 🌸 Conflict and change

As these are all very big topics, I'll address each one in the next few issues of Small Talk. For this month, let's focus on the #1 topic two years in a row.

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# 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.

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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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## **Growth—a perennial concern for the small congregation**

Can we grow? Should we grow? How do we grow? How big to be? If we're bigger, won't we have more money and more people to do the work? Take these questions one at a time—don't assume that growing is the best thing to do, or will be the answer to all your congregation's problems.

### **Can we grow?**

Start here, because if the answer is no, you can sit back, relax, and focus on being the best congregation of your current size. Unitarian Universalists are one-half to one percent (or more) of the population, given your area and demographics. (Is your community a church-going culture? Is it politically liberal or conservative? Is there a college nearby?) So, take a look at your population—in the surrounding area as well as in your town or city. How far are people willing to drive to events—or church—in your neck of the woods? Make a circle on a map at that distance and find out the population inside the circle. Then do the math, and check your figures.

For many small, rural congregations, they may be as big as they will ever be barring a drastic change in the population and demographics of the area. For suburban and urban congregations, it will be clear that the small congregation could easily be mid-size (150-500 members) or large (500+). Those congregations need to do some discerning—just how big do we want to be? Most small congregations will fall somewhere in between. The 35 member group that could probably be 75, or the 75 member group that could easily be 125 fall into this category.

### **Should we grow?**

This is the central question. No matter your demographics, if the current members of your congregation do not really want the congregation to grow, it won't. There's no use in taking a lot of time making plans for growth, asking for help, or feeling like you are required to grow if you don't want to. Have a series of congregational meetings or retreats (most helpfully with an outside facilitator) and really hash out your vision and make sure there is broad consensus. Growth can be hard work, so you need everybody on board.

### **How do we grow?**

You grow by doing everything right. Fancy advertising campaigns, beautiful state-of-the-art buildings, and full time ministry are not necessary for a small congregation to grow. High quality worship, cov-

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enantal behavior toward one another, one community service/social action project, and a truly warm and friendly congregation are all you need—that, and all your old ghosts shaken out of the closet, dealt with, and buried.

Congregations that do not deal well with conflict, or haven't in the past, need to learn new ways to be together. Visitors can feel the tension and the anger right away, no matter how good your worship or how fabulous your Social Hour.

We'll talk about conflict and change in a future issue, but, for now, take an honest look at how you are together, and see if you need help ridding yourself of old demons or bad behavior.

If you're a healthy group, then just keep doing great things.

Thoughtful worship with great music, a time of reflection, a sense of community, and meaningful words will touch any member or guest. A genuine warm, appropriate, and caring demeanor when speaking with new folks—with a follow-up later in the week—will go a long way toward drawing people in and keeping them. Find out the reason(s) the new person has come, and find a way to address their need. Bring them into the community. Mentor them, care for them, and get them connected.

I think it's a myth that you need a dynamic religious education (RE) program for children to be able to grow. It's one of those chicken-and-egg situations—it's hard to have a good RE program without a solid bunch of kids, but you do need to be ready if they show up. Find a way to make your worship services truly intergenerational, and have someone ready to do child care for the little ones. Once children are regulars, then you can develop a specific program for them. But there's no reason that older children (5 or 6 and up) and adults can't share in the same kind of worship experience. And in some areas, the demographics just aren't conducive to young families with kids. In that case, just be

the best congregation you can be that serves mid-life and senior adults. There will always be plenty of them!

### **How big to be?**

That's up to you. Obviously, if your demographics say you can go from 20 members to 50 members, then that's the size you'll aim for. If you're in one of those areas where you can be large or mid-size, and don't want to be, you'll have to take a different tack. One choice is to plan to split off into two congregations once you reach 100 members or so, and then split again if everyone still wants to stay small. Or if there's one cohort that wants to go for the large size, and another that wants to stay small, they may want to split into two groups right from the start. There's no sense in spending your energy fighting with each other—that just guarantees frustration, and no success for anyone. I see no problem in spreading Unitarian Universalism as wide and as far as possible. The more congregations, the merrier! If you split in two, just remember to stay friends, work together on some projects, and support one another.

### **If we're bigger, won't we have more money and more people to do the work?**

The simple answer to this one is no. Every congregation, of any size, thinks that more people equals more money and more bodies to do the work. Yes, there will be more money if there are more people, but more people require more services that cost more money. It's a Catch-22. As for doing the work, the point is to streamline your governance and your activities to fit with the number of folks you have. If your system is cumbersome and tiring for volunteers, then you're just going to burn out the new people too, and that's no good. People do not join a religious community to run a rummage sale or be put on the governing board because no one else wants to be. More on this in the next issue!

## A note from the editor

Thanks for subscribing to Small Talk, the monthly newsletter designed to strengthen the small Unitarian Universalist congregation!

I am no longer co-employed by the Northeast District and the Unitarian Universalist Association as Small Church Specialist and a member of District staff. I am now an independent small congregation consultant, available to help you and your congregation via email, phone, and in person—as long as your congregation is not in Maine, New Hampshire, or Vermont.

The Rev. Karen Brammer is now the Small Church Specialist and District staff member, in that position. Please contact her at [kbrammer@uua.org](mailto:kbrammer@uua.org) with any of your needs. Otherwise, feel free to contact me at [sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net).

—the Rev. Jane Dwinell

## 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)

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



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