

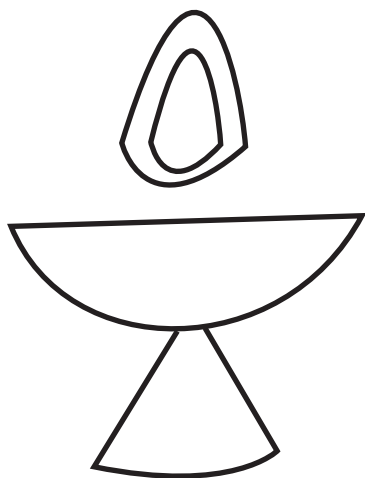
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

April 2004

“The church is perhaps one of the few places left where we can meet people who are different than we are but with whom we can form a larger family.”

—Henri J.M. Nouwen,
theologian



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A Few Thoughts on Growth: Part One

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist

There's a lot of talk these days about church growth. Bigger is better! 24/7 services! Let's spread the good word! The Unitarian Universalist Association is in the midst of a big push for growth and has spent a big chunk of money recently on an advertising campaign in Kansas City, complete with billboards and a newspaper supplement.

Of course we want more people to hear the good news of our faith. If more people hear about us, and venture into one of our congregations, and stay, then we've grown, right? Well, maybe yes, and maybe no. There's much more to growth than merely numbers.

There are three kinds of growth: spiritual growth, maturational growth, and numerical growth. Let's look at each of them.

Spiritual Growth

Many Unitarian Universalists find spiritual growth to be the number one reason why they are part of a Unitarian Universalist religious community. We are called to find meaning in life, to ask the hard questions, and to look for answers that make sense to us. Our third principle is "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." A church that offers meaningful, in-depth worship and religious education is helping its members and friends in their quest for spiritual growth. Seeking to understand our Unitarian Universalist history and theology, as well as the wisdom of the world's religions, we each come to discover our own path, in community.

How is the quality of your worship service? Do the speakers offer insights that you ponder throughout the week, that you're eager to share with friends and family, and that help you find some kind of deeper understanding? Is your worship space warm, inviting, beautiful

Thoughts on Growth
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About Small Talk

Small Talk is a newsletter published monthly by the Small Church Specialist of the North-east 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

Dana Dwinell-Yardley,
Layout and Design

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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 in What's Happening...

Or if you'd like more information....

Please contact the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, at:

[sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net)

802.334.8831, or

5124 Lake Road

Newport Center, VT 05857

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If you would like to receive Small Talk electronically, please e-mail sky@vtlink.net.

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and conducive to enjoying the service? How is the music? The time with the children? Do you embrace meaningful, seasonal rituals? How is "joys and concerns" – a time when people share from their deepest selves, or just another excuse for announcements and political diatribes? How is your religious education program for children and youth? Do you offer a Small Group Ministry program for people who want an opportunity to go deeper?

What can you do to enhance the spiritual growth of your congregation?

## **Maturational Growth**

We come to church to worship, and deepen our spirituality. But then we run into... other people and the challenge of working together in community. You can tell the extent of your congregation's maturational growth by how well your group handles differences of opinion and conflict, large and small. Maturational growth comes when people are able to speak the truth in love, and are responsible about the church finances, the care of the building, and each other. Maturational growth comes when the church ceases to be a Sunday morning social club and becomes a religious community seeking to build heaven on earth, for everyone. All of our principles speak to maturational growth.

**If a guest can feel warmth and caring in the sanctuary, in the way the children are responded to, or in the way they are greeted, they will probably come back.**

How does your congregation handle conflict? Are there those ready to say "it's my way or the highway" or are you able to sit down together, hear one another's opinions, and come to an agreement on how to proceed, either by consensus or the democratic process? How do you handle disruptive people (members or friends)? Do you safeguard your children and adults with a Safe Congregation Policy? Are all your congregational and board meetings properly warned and led so that everyone has an opportunity to listen to and speak about important issues?

What is your organizational structure like? Do the same people do the same tasks year after year, without end, until they die or burn out, or do your committees and task forces have term limits and a clear charge? Is the work shared fairly among those who wish to participate? Are people bullied into helping or donating money, or is there joy in pledging, and joy in participating? Does your congregation have a mission in the larger community – a way to bring

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your faith into the world?

What can you do to enhance the maturational growth of your congregation?

## Numerical Growth

Once you have a stable organizational structure and way of handling conflict, a clear mission, and a meaningful Sunday worship experience for adults and children, then you can consider how best to expand your numbers. Newcomers who walk into a hornet's nest of conflict, hear a boring guest speaker, or are unable to find a clean restroom will probably not come back. It will be an always-losing battle if you try and attract new folks without having your house in order first. If you act desperate for new people because you think they will bring in more money or provide extra hands to do the work, you'll lose every new face who walks through your door.

But if a guest can feel warmth and caring in the sanctuary, in the way the children are responded to, or in the way they are greeted, they will probably come back. It can be a scary thing to venture into an unknown church for the first time. It may take someone several months to get up the courage to do it. Some people say that visitors make up their minds about a church within the first 8 minutes. That's why I always encourage visitors to try it again another week because, often, every Sunday is somewhat different. But the good feelings must be there. Without good feelings, even the most beautiful sanctuary and the best music program will not bring people back another time.

**Look at your building, your parking, your sanctuary, your fellowship hall, your restrooms, your order of service, and your newsletter with the eyes of a first-time visitor. What do you see? What do you feel?**

Look at your building, your parking, your sanctuary, your fellowship hall, your restrooms, your order of service, and your newsletter with the eyes of a first-time visitor. What do you see? What do you feel? Warmth and welcome, or insularity and a sense of "it's just us and we're a happy family, without you."

### **Join the smalltalk email chat list!**

A new email chat list, through the UUA, has been started for lay leaders, DREs and ministers of small (less than 150 members) congregations. **If you like email conversations, and want more ideas for your small congregation, then sign up at <http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk>.**

Henri Nouwen speaks of the church as a family. Many church growth promoters say that if a congregation thinks of themselves as a "big, happy family" then no newcomers will be welcome. But many people come to a small congregation seeking the warmth and intimacy of just that kind of relationship. How can you have an inclusive (not exclusive, or destructive) feeling of family in your religious community? Just as every extended family welcomes a new baby with joy, so should you welcome each new face that wishes to join your religious family. It can be done. Our saving message awaits all the closet Unitarian Universalists in your area.

What can you do to enhance numerical growth of your congregation?

More on growth next issue!

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## RE for Small Congregations

by the Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Religious Education Specialist

Religious Education resources are being developed for small congregations. I would like to try to include information on these resources in *Small Talk* on a regular basis. The Rev. Jane Dwinell and I work with small congregations in the Northeast District, and I am also the Minister of Religious Education for the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF), whose function is to provide resources for families and small groups.

The number of RE resources offered by CLF online is ever expanding. These include:

- ☉ The REsources column in *Quest*, online and hard copy, including back issues.
- ☉ *Between Sundays*, activities for children and

youth organized by age and subject matter.

- ☉ *Connections*, a seasonal online resource.
- ☉ A new RE curriculum that is online, covering ages 3 through 18.
- ☉ *uu&me!* magazine for kids age 7-12, online and in hard copy.
- ☉ Online discussions on CLF-RE, the Religious Education electronic list for parents and small-group religious education leaders who are members of CLF.

Further, congregations and small groups that subscribe to CLF's Church on Loan service can receive a wealth of additional resources, both online and in print. We've also got curricula available to CLF members through our Loan Library. You are welcome to contact me with questions and comments about CLF religious education materials, at 32 Stevenstown Road, Litchfield, ME 04350, or via e-mail at [hjzidowecki@uua.org](mailto:hjidowecki@uua.org) or [hzmre@hzmre.com](mailto:hzmre@hzmre.com)

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### Small Church Specialist's Calendar

#### When?

May 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>

May 9<sup>th</sup>

June 22<sup>nd</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>

July 31<sup>st</sup>

#### What?

NED Annual Meeting and Spring Conference

Worship and Congregational Meeting

General Assembly

Board Retreat

#### Where?

Yarmouth

Houlton

Long Beach, CA

Pittsfield

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

Just give her a call at 802.334.8831, or send her an e-mail at [sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net).



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*Don't Miss...*  
*Small is Beautiful!*  
Small Church Conference & August 29<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2004

**Ferry Beach Conference Center**

...Mark your calendar and stay tuned for more info!

