

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

April 2009

Prophetic church, the future
waits your liberating ministry;
go forward in the power of
love, proclaim the truth that
makes us free.

—Marion Franklin Ham

The Care and Feeding of Your Part-Time Minister

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

You have—or are thinking of having—a part-time minister. This may be your first minister, one of several different part-time ministers, or you are used to having a full time minister and have had to cut back. Part-time ministry is tricky for both the congregation and the minister. There is always full-time work to do—and more—in a congregation of any size.

Here are some pointers to help you get the most out of your part-time ministry.

Be clear about what your minister does and doesn't do

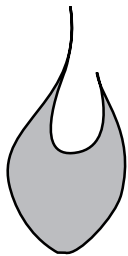
The work of ministry involves many things—creating and leading worship; teaching adult or youth religious education classes; supervising a small group ministry program; attending governing board, committee, and task force meetings; being involved in local interfaith work; attending local, district, and national Unitarian Universalist meetings and events; working on social action events; visiting sick, dying, hospitalized, and shut-in members and friends; providing pastoral care; dealing with conflict and other problems; writing newsletter columns . . . the list goes on and on.

You have a part-time minister. He or she cannot possibly do all these things. What are the most important things for your congregation? What do you need to hire a professional for and what can you do with the laity? The clearer you are with yourselves and your minister, the happier you will all be. When you figure out the best job description, put it in writing in a contract or covenant and evaluate it regularly.

Understand that serving your congregation may not be the only work of your minister

Many part-time ministers have other work, volunteer or paid. Your part-time minister might be raising young children or caring for an

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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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elderly or disabled family member. Your part-time minister might be working as a chaplain or teaching at a local college. Your part-time minister might be an artist or a writer, a carpenter or a farmer. Your part-time minister could be serving another congregation—or two.

Make sure it is clear when is the best time, and what is the best way, to reach your minister so as to not interfere with his other commitments. Find out the best way to reach her in an emergency. This will make everyone's life easier. It can be hard for a minister to balance the needs of several commitments, so do your part to ease the way.

Understand that your minister may not live nearby

Your part-time minister may live in town—or several hours away. If your minister comes in from a long distance, help make his time in town more productive for everyone by scheduling meetings, classes, potlucks, appointments, or other events far enough in advance. Make sure your minister has a comfortable and private place to lay her head and relax after a hard day of working for you. Don't expect him to socialize with you, go out for dinner and a movie, or otherwise do things that aren't in his job description—unless he asks first.

If she lives in town, respect her time and other commitments. Don't drop in on him or assume he can drop everything to help you if it's not really an emergency. If you see her at the movies, the library, or your child's basketball game, be friendly, but don't expect her to sit with you or share more than a passing "Hello, and how are you today?"

Don't use your minister as a secretary or a sexton

You are hiring a professional, and a part-time one at that, so use your minister's time well. He should not be copying the order of service or the newsletter, making coffee or cleaning up the kitchen, ordering supplies, or sending membership numbers to the Unitarian Universalist Association. You can use volunteers or paid staff for these tasks—just don't use your minister! You will be wasting her valuable time and your valuable money. Let him worry about the upcoming memorial service while you worry about the cleanliness of the sanctuary and the restrooms.

Respect your minister's private life and family

Ministry is hard work. Even part-time ministers have work on their minds when they are not "on the clock." Sermons are considered as they drive to the grocery store or work out at the gym. The latest congregational brouhaha is on their mind as they fall asleep. But the leaky roof or the canvass that's falling short, and what to do about it, should not be part of your minister's dinner table conversation. Make sure

you don't overburden your part-time minister with too many tasks. Help her if she seems to be overwhelmed. It can be hard to create boundaries and care for oneself in such a time-consuming profession. Help out by respecting the contract or covenant you have with your minister and don't call him when you know he's busy with other things.

Also, don't expect your part-time minister's family to be part of the church. They may want to be, and that's fine. Welcome them and include them. But many families of clergy want to attend church and be part of a congregation without being under the microscope of "the minister's family." Especially if they live out of town, you may never even meet them. Don't take it personally.

Thank your minister often

Everyone likes to be thanked! Be sure to say how much you appreciated something they did or said, especially if you don't see your minister very often. Part-time ministry can be especially challenging, and it's often hard to see if any important things are happening if you come to a congregation just a few hours or days a month. Point out successes, share failures, and figure out together how to do things better.

Turn to the Committee on Ministry if you have concerns about your minister

Part-time ministry can be difficult for both the minister and the congregation, especially if either are used to full-time ministry or no ministry at all. Expect a few bumps along the way as you figure things out. If there are problems, turn to your leadership or your Committee on Ministry (even a tiny congregation should have this committee: see *Small Talk*, Volume 3, Issue 6 for information on setting one up) to help figure out a solution. It could be that the minister's contract or covenant needs to be revised, or a volunteer or paid administrator needs to

be hired. Whatever it is, don't let it smolder—bring it up and ask for help.

Don't be afraid to try something new

Part-time ministry will be part of the life of small congregations for a long time to come. It's a new model for many, and it makes sense to reevaluate and change things as time goes on. The old model of full-time ministry, wife and family helping out, and many hours of having tea with the ladies' auxillary just doesn't work for today's small congregations. Be creative and create a partnership that works for your congregation and your part-time minister. It'll be the basis of a productive and healthy relationship!

Don't expect your minister to socialize with you, go out for dinner and a movie, or otherwise do things that aren't in his or her job description—unless he or she asks first.

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

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and Ellen Germann-Melosh!

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