

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

April 2010

## I am only one.

But I am still one.

I cannot do everything.

But still I can do something.

And because I cannot  
do everything,

I will not refuse to do the  
something I can do.

—Edward Everett Hale

## Advice for Followers

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

Last month, I gave congregational leaders some pointers. This month, the pointers are for the rest of you. It's important to remember that the followers are as important as the leaders. You need one another; it's a symbiotic relationship. A religious community is created by people working together — following and leading.

So, followers: listen up!

### Volunteer to do something

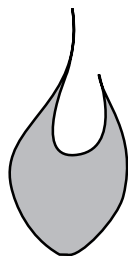
Don't always wait for a leader to approach you about doing a task. Volunteer first. It will make their life — and yours — easier.

Don't volunteer to do just anything, however: volunteer to do something you enjoy. There is a task for everyone in a congregation. You can work with the children, provide music, bring food for social hour, make the coffee, tend the gardens, bring flowers, keep the bulletin boards in order, write cards to people who are ill or in need of care, wash the dishes, pick up the sanctuary, keep the kitchen organized, or polish the silver. There are a multitude of small but important tasks to keep your congregation running smoothly. Ask your leaders how you can be of help.

And above all, when you volunteer for a task, follow through with it and do what you have said you'll do.

### Bring your concerns to the right person

If something is going on in your congregation that bothers you, talk to the leader in charge of that area. (If you are unsure of who that might be, ask your board chair, your minister, or your administrator.) Don't just complain to your friends or fuss about it at social hour or in the parking lot. Whether it is a minor or major concern, things will not change unless the right people know about it.



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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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Before you bring your concerns to the right leader, consider how you could help solve the problem. If you're concerned that the rest rooms are not that clean and well-stocked, you could volunteer to take over that task. If you think that people are not contributing enough financially, you could volunteer to run the pledge drive. If you feel that visitors are not welcomed well enough, you could offer to organize a group to do that. (And if you just have some good ideas of things to do that aren't really of items of concern, share those ideas with your leaders, too!)

If you have a major concern (an issue with a staff person, or an incident of sexual harassment or abuse, for example), plan to bring someone with you when you talk to the leadership. (Leaders: there should be more than one of you present as well if someone has a major concern.) Too often there can be blaming and finger-pointing, and it helps people be on their best behavior if two followers meet with two leaders.

However, do not be offended if the leaders listen to your concern and then choose to solve the problem in a different way than you would. Remember, there are at least five solutions to every problem! Which brings us to . . .

### Learn to forgive

Being a leader is hard work. It is all too easy for followers to second-guess the leaders' commitment, skill, and motivation. Your leaders want to do what's best for the congregation, but no one is perfect. They may stumble and fall, and they need you to pick them up, brush them off, ask how you can help — and then move on.

It's amazing how often congregations hold onto the "story" of when this or that bad thing happened with the leadership. Unless it is something really egregious, like sexual abuse or financial impropriety, learn to forgive and forget. (And if it is egregious, please enlist the support of District staff to help your congregation through the crisis.) One day you may be a leader, and you will want people to forgive you your failings too.

### Show up

You are a member of a congregation — a community. You need to show up and participate on a regular basis in order to make that community as strong and as healthy as it can be.

Plan to attend worship every week (unless you are ill or have other pressing obligations). Participate in congregational meetings and activities that are part of your congregation's mission, attend District gather-

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ings, take your turn with the children, be welcoming to visitors, and pledge as generously as you can.

The leaders can't do it without you, and neither can the other members of the congregation. You are all in this together. Building community — both within the membership and in the larger world — is what Unitarian Universalism is all about.

### **Respect the democratic process**

The fifth principle of Unitarian Universalism is to “covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.” This means that you, as a follower, need to attend congregational meetings (annual and specially called ones), listen to the facts of the issue, listen to what your fellow congregants have to say about it, voice your own opinion, and then vote.

The democratic process does not end there, however. Part of the process is to support the outcome of the decision — even if you did not vote in favor.

Every congregation has the right to choose what constitutes a majority vote for any given issue (a simple majority, two-thirds, or three-quarters, for example). Whatever your congregation's choice, it's important to remember that when the majority decides, then that decision will move forward — whether or not you like it.

Be gracious. Support the majority wish. It's part of building community and respecting the democratic process. Naysayers who try and undermine a majority-approved decision only undermine congregational life. If the congregation has voted to do something that you deeply disapprove of, it may be best for all concerned that you leave the congregation and find a more compatible spiritual home.

### **Remember to thank your leaders**

So often, leaders of small congregations are expected to *always* be the leaders, and it is all too easy for

them to get burned out. One way to help with that burnout — besides doing your fair share and taking your turn as a leader! — is to thank your leaders for what they do. They attend board meetings and look out for the financial health of the congregation.

They deal with many small details and many large projects. It can be fun — and it can be tiring. If your leaders are facing a work or personal problem as well, it's all the more challenging.

So look out for your leaders.

Send the board and staff periodic thank-you notes for a job well done, a kind word said, a conflict avoided, or an easily-understood balance sheet created. Drop them a line or give them a call if you know they are having other challenges in their life. But most of all, don't expect them to serve forever. Next year it's your turn!

**Don't just complain to your friends . . . Whether it is a minor or major concern, things will not change unless the right people know about it.**

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