
Small Talk

strengthening the small Unitarian Universalist congregation

December 2003

“Small is strong.

“The twenty-first century is the century of small, strong congregations. More people will be drawn to small, strong congregations than any other kind of congregation. Yes, there are many mega-congregations; their number is increasing greatly. Nevertheless, around the planet, the vast majority of congregations will be small and strong, and the vast majority of people will be in these congregations.”

— *Kennon L. Callahan, SMALL, STRONG CONGREGATIONS*

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What is a small congregation?

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist

It’s hard to pin this one down... Everyone seems to have their opinion as to what constitutes a “small” congregation. When I was hired as the Northeast District (NED) Small Church Specialist, the staff and Board of the Northeast District defined “small” as less than 100 members; really, less than 90 members (we have two congregations that are teetering in the high 90s ready to bump over 100). We have a couple other small congregations that will most likely go over 100 members within the next 5 years.

The Unitarian Universalist Association defines a small congregation as less than 150 members.

The big picture – Family and Pastoral

So where does that leave us? I prefer to look at the whole picture when defining, and working with, small congregations. The church administration and growth literature prefers to use these definitions of church:

Family size – 50 active members or less
Pastoral size – 50-150 active members
Program size – 150-350 active members
Corporate size – 350+ active members

So, it appears that the NED small congregations are of two types: family and pastoral. A Family church is called that because usually a “family” (blood relation or not) controls the leadership and activities of the church. In some rural communities, it actually is a family, often descendants of the founding families. In other cases, it is a matriarch and/or patriarch who have drifted into their role over the years so that now nothing is done or is changed without their permission, whether or not they are actually part of the governing body. The Family church is group-centered.

As a church moves past an average of 35 in attendance at worship and

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About Small Talk

Small Talk is a newsletter published monthly by the Small Church Specialist of the Northeast District.

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 good ideas for future issues;

If you'd like to publicize your small church's events in *What's Happening*;

Or if you'd just like more information or ideas;

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edges closer to 50 or more, the Family church becomes the Pastoral size church. Fifty people is too many for everyone to know well, and so the congregation moves away from being a single group, to being many smaller groups – formal or informal. The glue that holds all the groups together is the minister; thus, the “Pastor-al” church.

For many members of small congregations, the change from Family size to Pastoral size is very hard. People are saddened to lose the “close-knit family” feel of less than 50 in worship. They worry that, along with their inability to know everyone, that also means that everyone won't know them and all they have done and contributed to the church over the years. It is an unsettling time for everyone.

Not all small congregations will move from Family to Pastoral. One is not “better” than the other; they both just *are*. The geography, economy and demographics of an area will often be the final determinate of how many members a small congregation can expect. You can figure that at least 1% of the population of the area you draw from (probably a half-hour drive or less) will be open to being Unitarian Universalists (UUs). If there are 10,000 people in your area, that's 100 members.

The trick, of course, is getting the message out to those potential UUs, and being welcoming to them when they arrive. That will be the subject of another newsletter!

How do you staff your small congregation?

The fact is this: you need 125-150 active members to support a full time minister.

The smallest of small congregations may prefer not to have a minister, but to rely on guest speakers (from in and outside the congregation) to lead worship, and to rely on the church community to provide pastoral care to one another.

But most small congregations want to have ministerial services of some kind – for leading wor-

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ship, providing pastoral care, and lending organizational expertise to Board and committee meetings.

How can a small congregation afford a minister?

Many small congregations are turning to Consulting Minister arrangements; that is, hiring a minister by the hour (\$25/hour is a good place to start) for certain services. It's a different relationship than a "called" minister, but can be successful in helping a congregation meet its ministerial needs. It's up to the congregation to decide what services they are looking for – what is pressing in their community? Are there many elderly and shut-ins who need pastoral care? Is there an active interfaith clergy group in town that could use the presence of a UU minister? Is quality worship a central ingredient to the health of the community? Is social justice and diversity important to everyone?

At least 1% of the population of the area you draw from will be open to being Unitarian Universalists.

A good rule of thumb is this: a congregation can usually afford a Consulting Minister as many hours per month as there are active members. Hours can be increased from year to year as the membership grows.

More important than a minister?!

However, more important than a minister for small congregation staffing is a church Coordinator (also known as an Administrator or a Secretary). It helps to relieve burnout if there is a designated person "where the buck stops." The Coordinator can be responsible for document creation (orders of service, newsletter, brochures), bookkeeping, buying supplies (who else will keep the toilet paper and the coffee stocked?), picking up messages and mail, and generally being the contact person – who to call when you want to know something, or find out how to get something done. A small church Coordinator generally works 5-10 hours per week, depending on the need, and can be paid about \$10/hour.



Some small congregations also pay for religious education (RE), music and custodial services. RE folks and custodians also earn about \$10/hour. Musicians generally receive \$50-100 per worship service, depending on how many pieces of music they play, if they also conduct a choir, or are expected to choose the hymns or do other creative things.

It's up to you – the beacon of liberal religion!

In other words, defining and staffing a small congregation is really up to the congregation! Look at your individual needs, your community, your gifts and your challenges. Look at your mission and vision for Unitarian Universalism in your area. Let go of the "we're a close-knit family" and open yourselves to being a "beacon for liberal religion" in your community.

What's Happening in January and February!

Northeast District Events

January 31st

Northeast District Board meeting,
Brunswick

February 7th

"Beyond the Collection Plate:
Creating Generous Congrega-
tions" with Michael Durall,
Yarmouth

February 13th-15th

UU ski weekend, Sangerville

**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.

Small Church Specialist Calendar

January 28th-29th

North Atlantic Field Staff Meet-
ing, Connecticut

January 30th

In Maine

January 31st

Northeast District Board Meeting,
Brunswick

February 1st

Worship Leader, Edgecomb

February 7th

Michael Durall workshop,
Yarmouth

February 8th

Meet with Sangerville congrega-
tion

Don't Miss...

Small is Beautiful!

Small Church Conference

August 29th-31st, 2004

Ferry Beach Conference Center

Mark your calendars and stay tuned
for more info!

