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# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

December 2005

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## “When the song of

angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are  
home,

When the shepherds are back  
with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,

to heal the broken,

to feed the hungry,

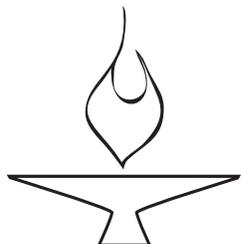
to release the prisoner,

to rebuild the nations,

to bring peace among the  
brothers,

to make music in the heart.”

—Howard Thurman



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## Celebrating the December Holidays

by Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist  
for the Northeast District*

The dark time is here (unless you're not in the northern Northern Hemisphere), and celebrations and parties abound—in our communities, and in our congregations. For time immemorial, people have gathered to pray for the return of the sun, to sing, to dance, to tell stories, to eat, and to be together. How shall we celebrate in modern times, and in our Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations?

Some of us may remember fondly Christmas Eve services of our youth, complete with manger scenes, familiar carols, and the birth story from the Gospels. Others may remember Hanukkah celebrations, plenty of gelt, and the nightly candle-lighting ritual. Still others may have celebrated Kwanzaa, recalling the importance of gathering together in community. And some of us may have grown up in a country that was Christian-centered, with expectations that we were all the same, and in this holiday together, yet we were part of families who did not acknowledge the holiday.

This mix of Decembers-past all come together in the local UU congregation. How to celebrate the December holidays in a way that respects everyone's theological viewpoint, and, at the same time, provides depth and meaning in the darkness?

This year there is also the challenge of the calendar itself. December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas, falls on a Sunday. Some small congregations are choosing to meet as usual; others are not. Some are celebrating on Christmas Eve; others are celebrating on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Still others don't celebrate at all knowing that their small numbers will be even

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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 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...

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smaller come holiday travel time.

By the time you get this issue, your congregation will have already decided what to do. But calendars being what they are, this issue will come around again, and, no matter the day of the week of December 25<sup>th</sup>, the holidays will be with us every year for quite some time.

Small congregations will never have the numbers to pull off a big holiday pageant, or have other "large-scale" productions, but something cozy and simple can still be meaningful. For many, the December holidays are about music, candles, silence, and the celebration of peace, hope, and love. A simple worship service blending these elements can be created by a congregation of any size, with or without a minister.

## **Music for the holidays—and silence**

No matter their theology, everyone loves Christmas carols, and many of the old standards celebrating the season such as *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*, and *Winter Wonderland*. There are many chants from the pagan community that speak specifically to the return of the light. There are songs from the Jewish tradition, and there are songs from other cultures. There are classical pieces, and jazz tunes. Choose the kind of music that is appreciated by your group, and find a way to provide it.

No choir? You can still get together one or a few voices who would like to sing for the occasion, or you can make the congregation the choir by practicing songs before or after church the 2 or 3 Sundays before your special worship service. No instrumental musicians in your congregation? Look to local area performers, high school and college music students, and musicians from other congregations. It could be a great way to reach out to potential UUs. Don't forget your children and teens when you're looking for music.

In balance with the music, find time for silence in the service. The power of group silence is immense—it gives us time to listen to the music of the spheres. Just like the silence of a snowstorm, sitting together at such an emotional time of year can be powerful.

## **Candles**

For many, no December holiday service would be complete without candlelighting. However, candlelighting can be dangerous, and needs to be done in a safe way, and within local ordinances. If your community does not allow open flames inside a building, you can use elec-

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tric candles, or take the candlelighting outside—a perfect way to light up the darkness!

If you go ahead with the tradition of each person holding a lighted candle, be sure to have fire extinguishers handy and a trained person in charge of each one. Have a phone accessible for calling 911 if need be. Use candle-protectors, and make sure there are enough adults supervising the children and others who may need help.

**For many, the December holidays are about music, candles, silence, and the celebration of peace, hope, and love. A simple worship service blending these elements can be created by a congregation of any size, with or without a minister.**

Celebrate with plenty of candlelight if you can—electricity if you can't. It's time to chase away the darkness.

### **Peace, hope and love**

Worldwide, everyone seeks peace and love, and a feeling of hope at this time of year. With wars all over the globe, communities still recovering from immense natural disasters, and many lonely, cold, hungry and homeless people about, we need to find a way to feel hopeful, to feel love, and to find peace—and to share that with others.

Remember those in need during your December holiday service. Take a special offering to benefit a local agency, your Minister's Discretionary Fund, an international group such as the Red Cross, or any of a multitude of other worthy organizations. Collect canned goods for the food shelf, mittens and hats for those without, or toys for children who may have no gifts under the tree.

And don't forget those for whom the holidays are a tough time—those who may feel estranged from their families, those going through divorce or separation, those

struggling with a serious illness, those who are facing their first holiday season without a loved one. Many congregations choose to have no public worship service on Christmas, Christmas Eve, New Year's, or any Sunday that falls in that time period. I hope that you will reconsider this in light of the

fact that there may be members of your group who will be alone, or otherwise have no place to go to celebrate. If you have no worship service during this time, make sure your folks who might otherwise be alone have someone from the congregation to spend

part of the holidays with. You can also have a simple readings-songs-and-silence service followed by a potluck for those "low" Sundays. Even if you don't have your usual turnout, those who do come will appreciate being together—and isn't that what peace, hope, and love are all about?

### **Create your own rituals**

Many congregations have one or more rituals that are unique to their December Holiday service—one that everyone looks forward to each year. If you don't have one yet, create one! If you do have one that you think is especially great, let me know what it is and I'll publish the list in a future issue of Small Talk. That way, people can get planning for next December—the Wheel of the Year never ceases to turn.

But most of all, have a wonderful, joyous, sane, and meaningful holiday season!



## Introducing... RE Express!

The Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) is thrilled to announce RE Express, a new offering—free to CLF members or for a small fee to non-CLF members. Tired of searching the Web for religious education (RE) curriculum resources? Wish a fully online step-by-step curriculum would appear in your in-box automatically every month? Introducing... RE Express—a bundle of three wonderful offerings!

### 1. CLiF Notes: A Monthly Curriculum for Families and Small Groups

A complete curriculum plan with a session each month on Unitarian Universalist Identity, World Religions, Principles in Practice and Worship. Just add art supplies and stir!

### 2. KidTalk Web page

Monthly information and activities on everything from holidays around the world to spiritual practices and social justice projects.

### 3. REsources for Living

Featured in our *Quest* publication, this column speaks to Unitarian Universalist kids and families about how we practice our free faith.

RE Express is free to CLF members and Church on Loan groups (see [www.clfuu.org/churchonloan](http://www.clfuu.org/churchonloan)) and available at the introductory price of only \$99 per year for non-members. To join the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) and/or to subscribe to RE Express, contact CLF at [clf@clfuu.org](mailto:clf@clfuu.org) or 617.948.6150.

## Small congregation handouts now online

If you stopped by the Small Congregations booth at General Assembly, you may have picked up one or more of the handouts written by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, on many different topics pertaining to small congregations.

Now all of these handouts are available online in PDF format at [www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm](http://www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm). Many thanks to Andrea Lerner for getting them online! Feel free to copy as many as you need and distribute to your congregation's leadership – just make sure that all content and formatting is unchanged.

## The Issue Index

Go to [www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm](http://www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm) to download these back issues of SMALL TALK!



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