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# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

February 2007

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**It is we who bring the home**  
into the place. We can be at  
home anywhere where human  
love and care surround us.

—*Judit Gellard,*  
founding honorary president of  
the UU Partner Church Council,  
from her essay *Displaced*

## The Small Congregation in Transylvania

by **The Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant**

**R**ecently, my family and I had the privilege of spending a week in a small village in Transylvanian Romania as guests of Levente and Eva Keleman, the Unitarian minister and his wife of the village of Okland. It was snowy and cold, but we felt right at home in the rolling hills of the Homorod District, reminding us of Vermont.

We stayed in the nearby village of Újfalu in Levente's grandparents' home. Levente and Eva own this house now, and have fixed it up for visitors—a cozy three-room house with a wood furnace and a modern bathroom. The village of Újfalu is a mile or so from Okland, the roads are dirt, and the cars few. Horse-drawn wagons went by the house daily as people moved hay and firewood from one place to the next. A young girl about eight years old in a pink jacket was happily learning how to drive her family's team of horses.

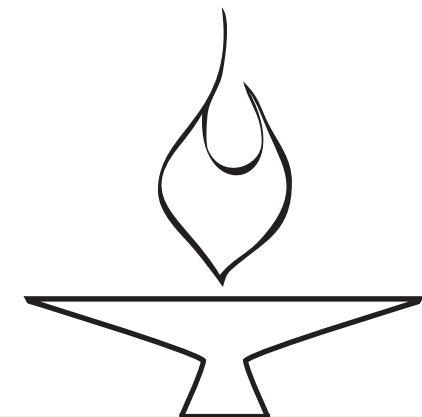
### Life in the Homorod Valley

Residents of Okland, Újfalu, and the other small towns of the district have been self-sufficient farmers for centuries. Each household has a big garden, many fruit trees, and livestock of some kind—cows, sheep, and pigs primarily. Some of the younger people have jobs in the area—teachers, construction workers, veterinarians, loggers—but it seems that most of the older generation sell a little milk, and other farm products, just to get by.

In the midst of all this is the Unitarian church—which has also been part of the fabric of life in this area for centuries. The Unitarian faith is the only one in town, and the church is central to life here—sort of. Everyone is born into the religion, but as in many cases

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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.

**the Rev. Jane Dwinell**

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Jane is also available to consult with your small congregation.

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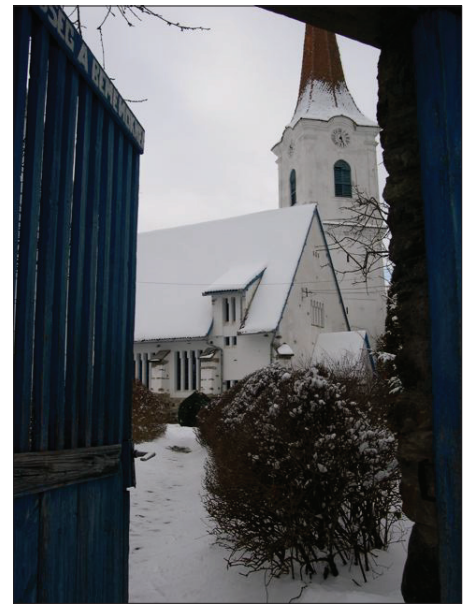
these days, the vast majority of participants in church life are older. The younger people have television (a small satellite dish was on the roof of nearly every house in town) and no time for worship.

### Transylvanian worship

The four of us walked the half-hour from Újfalu to Okland across a windswept valley in time for the 11 a.m. service in the beautiful Unitarian Monument Church—a historic designation. Worship remains a formal event here—no one enters the building until the bell is rung announcing worship. The men and women file through separate doors, and sit on separate sides of the church. The front pew on the men's side is reserved for the board president, on the women's side, for the minister's wife. There is no central heating system or insulation—a small woodstove near the pulpit had a fire going, but it was heating no one. Twenty of us, bundled in our winter coats, sat together, sang, prayed, and listened to Levente's sermon about the importance of embracing the land as a path to the kingdom of heaven. (He used Matthew 13: 44 as his Biblical text: "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.")

Although I could understand no words (except the Hungarian word for "thank you"—*köszönöm*—heard often in the prayer), I understood the intent and the feeling behind worship. I knew Levente was exhorting his flock—that day, primarily people in their 60s and 70s, with a handful of teenage girls and boys—to pay attention, to care for what is theirs, and to be grateful.

After church over a lunch of winter vegetable soup and roast lamb in the parsonage, I asked Levente and Eva about congregational life in Transylvania, and their challenges and concerns. You'll be happy to know that their challenges and concerns are your challenges and concerns—money, energy, commitment, burnout, leadership, and change.



The Unitarian Monument Church in Okland, Romania. The words on the gate translate as "Peace to the one who enters."

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## Challenges and concerns we share

Although every family in town is Unitarian—nearly 400 people in Okland, with an average Sunday attendance of 20–50—and is expected to give an equivalent of \$20 per year to support the church (to understand how much \$20 is in Transylvania, our two very nice hotel rooms in a nearby small city were \$65 total for one night), people do not always fulfill this pledge, and some people give more as they can. Money is always a problem, and extra money for things like roof repair or a new furnace for the parsonage has to be raised separately. Money donated by Partner Churches is important, but Levente and Eva feel strongly that the local congregation should also rise to the challenge of taking care of their own needs.

Then there are the usual problems of finding good leaders, and people willing to do the work that needs to be done. There are also the usual personality conflicts and disagreements that come about when a group of people work together. Who is an effective leader, who will follow through, who gets burned out and complains, who can energize and inspire the congregation—it's the same old story. Sometimes there are good leaders, and sometimes there are not. Sometimes the minister and his wife do all the work. (Who will teach the children? Who will lead the youth group? Who will soothe the music director when the organ malfunctions?)

And then there's change—a different kind of change than what we have here in the United States. In Transylvania Romania, the ethnic Hungarian Unitarians are an oppressed minority, the government is changing (from an oppressive dictator to the oppressive dictator's buddies trying to run a fledgling democracy), and Romania recently became part of the European Union—complete with new (excessive) rules and regulations for small

farmers combined with some hope for a better future. Globalization has arrived in the form of junk food, new cars, and television. The close-knit, self-reliant community strengthened by their Unitarian faith may be an endangered species.

The older people are tired, and rapidly aging.

The middle-aged people are not interested in church. The young people come to church and do things together—but is that because there's nothing else for them to do, and they simply long for when they can leave? The church buildings are beautiful—and very old. It's quite something to sit in a pew and see the year the church was

founded—1518—inscribed on the wall, and know that they will be celebrating their five-hundredth anniversary before long.

It is for both today's community, and the community of the future, that our congregations exist. There will always be challenges and concerns, as well as joy and laughter. Remember the lessons of Transylvania when your congregational challenges get you down. You can truly know that you are not alone.

Although I could understand no words (except the Hungarian word for "thank you" heard often in the prayer), I understood the intent and the feeling behind worship.



Left to right: the Rev. Levente Kelemen, Eva Kelemen, Sky Yardley, and the Rev. Jane Dwinell.

Photos by Dana Dwinell-Yardley.

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## Resources for Small Congregations

### Email discussion list

for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregation  
[lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk](http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk)

### Email list for ministers of small congregations

[lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min](http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min)

### Handouts by the Rev. Jane Dwinell

1-2 page handouts on: change, finances, governance, leadership, publications, Small Group Ministry, welcoming, and worship  
[umetry.org/misc/materials](http://umetry.org/misc/materials)

## Need a Consultant?

*Ellen Germann-Melosh, former District Executive of the Mountain Desert District, is now available as a small congregation consultant to serve congregations west of the Mississippi.*

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