
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

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January 2006

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## “Smaller churches

are the right size to be a nursery for the newborn, a haven for the pilgrim, an oasis for the parched, a hospital for the sinner, a contact group for the change agent, and a hospice for the dying.”

—David R. Ray, from his book  
*THE INDISPENSABLE GUIDE FOR  
SMALLER CHURCHES*

## Transformational Small Congregations

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

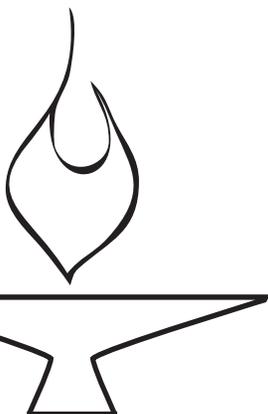
There has been much talk lately about “transformational” congregations. Four such congregations—of different sizes—are now being chosen each year and highlighted at General Assembly. This is not a competition, but a way for us to share, and to learn about one another. Why is one congregation chosen “transformational” over another? The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has a long list of criteria that they look at in making a determination.

What makes for a congregation that *transforms* people’s lives—the lives of the members and friends, and the lives of others in the congregation’s community? Here’s what I think makes for a transformational congregation.

### First and foremost, quality worship.

Without a deep and meaningful worship experience, people will never be moved to explore, change, and deepen their own lives. Our congregations need to create a place where people can trust one another enough to be vulnerable about their thoughts and feelings about life, and death, and their connection to that which is greater than themselves. What works for one congregation may not work for another. There is not one right way to do worship. Some congregations prefer classical music; others, more modern jazz, and world music. Some congregations are moved by sitting in silence together, or praying together, or singing together. However, all good worship is anchored by words—simple, deep, and meaningful—words that make us stop and think, stop and feel, as we take time out of our busy lives to be together. These words challenge us to grow, to act, to be willing to be moved. Does your congregation have quality worship?

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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.

the Rev. Jane Dwinell,
Content Editor

Dana Dwinell-Yardley,
Layout and Design Artist

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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...

Please contact  
the Rev. Jane Dwinell at:

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Sign up to receive Small Talk via email (as a PDF) at
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## **Second is mission.**

A congregation without a mission is not a religious community, but a social club. A congregation of any size only needs to have one mission, but for a small congregation that is paramount. There are so many needs in our world; so many people who are hungry, homeless, at war, depressed, abused, or otherwise unable to live a meaningful life. Our congregations can help—we can't do *everything*, but we can do *something*. What are the gifts of your members and friends? How do those gifts fit into the needs of your local community? Find the place where your gifts meet your community's needs, and everyone wins. Most of all, everyone has the potential to be transformed. What is your congregation's mission?

## **Third is generosity.**

Does everyone moan and groan when it comes time, once again, for the yearly canvass, or the morning offering? Or do people gladly, and with joy, pull out their wallets or their checkbooks and *give until it helps*? Is your congregation afraid to talk about money, or does everyone understand the link between generosity and mission, and generosity and quality worship? Are people willing to share, to not be embarrassed, and to not feel pushed to give? A strong sense of generosity, and an understanding of the important link between generosity and a meaningful spiritual life, will transform lives. Is your congregation generous?

## **Fourth is a willingness to change, and to be changed.**

Change can be scary, especially if you don't feel in control of it. Is your congregation willing to change the order of service, the time of worship, the way the governing board operates, the way joys and concerns are handled, the way religious education is done, the kind of music you usually have? Are you all even willing to talk about change—to start the conversation with one another—no matter the outcome? Are you willing to pursue a majority-considered, and majority-approved idea even if you aren't that crazy about it—or at least let others pursue it without grumbling about it, and challenging it? The joke is that no one likes change except a wet baby, but I've known some babies in my lifetime that didn't want their diapers changed no matter how sopped they were. Is there a way to practice creating change together by starting with something small, and working your way up to larger things? Or do you already practice healthy change?

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## Fifth is radical hospitality.

This term, once new and fresh, may seem to be getting old and tired, but I find it still has deep meaning. Radical hospitality, to me, means to welcome the stranger, *and* welcome the friend, without holding onto preconceived notions of what someone is like, or may be like. Radical hospitality is linked to change. What if we truly become welcoming to those who seem like an “outsider” in our community—whether that means people of color, queer folk, poor people, disabled people, people from “away,” people without children, people with children, people who don’t drink coffee, or people who are politically conservative? Can we really do it? Can we really welcome the stranger as if they were the Messiah? Can we welcome the friend in the same way? Are we even welcoming to those who are currently members and friends of our congregation? Simply by sitting in the same seat each Sunday, or talking to the same people at Social Hour, we may not even be hospitable—radically or not—to those who are already part of our religious community. How hospitable is your congregation?

**Are we connected to other Unitarian Universalists? We have much to learn from each other. Are we willing to leave the safety of our own community, and friends, and congregation to expand our horizons, and share of ourselves?**

## And last is connection.

Are we connected to other Unitarian Universalists, be they in neighboring congregations, at District or cluster meetings, or working for the UUA? Do we generously pay our District dues, and our Annual Program Fund fair share? Do we send delegates to District Annual Meetings, to General Assembly, and to other conferences and meetings in our area?

Unitarian Universalists are of many different stripes, and colors. We have much to learn from each other. Are we willing to leave the safety of our own community, and friends, and congregation to expand our horizons, and share of ourselves? Simply

attending worship at a neighboring congregation can open our eyes to new possibilities and greater depth. How connected are you?

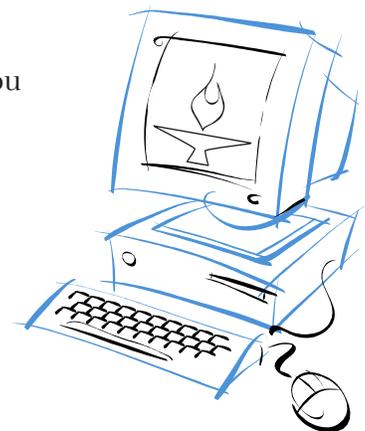
I want to hear your stories of the ways in which you consider your congregation to be transformational. Send them my way via email, or snail mail, and I will compile them for future issues of Small Talk.

And remember, together, we can transform the lives of those we touch and help to bring peace on earth.

## Small congregation handouts available 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.

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 and distribute to your congregation’s leadership—just make sure that all content and formatting is unchanged.



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# Here's your chance to brag about your church community. Share your strengths so that other small congregations may benefit!

## Who we are:

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

Ellen Germann, *former District Executive  
of the Mountain Desert District*

## What we are doing:

Based on our experiences and deep commitment to our small congregations, we are endeavoring to write a guide for Leaders of Small Congregations. We want to include in this guide real-life examples of things that work for small congregations—and we want to highlight your congregation's particular successes! We believe that learning by example is a powerful aid in moving toward healthy congregations.

Depending on the response to this request, we may also develop a resource for sharing of "Best Practices Among Small Congregations."

## How you can help:

Please send us stories of things that have worked well for your congregation. These may include:

- ✿ Ways of communicating
- ✿ Creative Religious Education for only a few
- ✿ Organizational structures that have made a difference
- ✿ Fundraising efforts that were successful
- ✿ Ways of worship that have increased meaning
- ✿ Cooperative efforts with other churches in your community
- ✿ And any other ideas you would like to share

## How and where can you send your stories:

Please send your "Best Practices" by email to both of us at [ecgermann@earthlink.net](mailto:ecgermann@earthlink.net) and [sky@vlink.net](mailto:sky@vlink.net).

Please respond soon. We are in the process of writing our guide and want to be sure that you are part of the story.

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## 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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