

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

January 2009

Love is something if you give it away. . . you end up having more/It's just like a magic penny/Hold it tight and you won't have any/Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many/They'll roll all over the floor!

—Malvina Reynolds

Sharing Staff in the Small Congregation

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

Small congregations of all sizes struggle with the staff question. Should we have staff? What kind of staff, to do what, and for how many hours? What can we reasonably do as volunteers, and what tasks are best done by a paid professional? What is the appropriate amount to pay our staff and can we really afford it? Ellen and I devoted an entire chapter to these nuts-and-bolts questions about staff in our book, *Big Ideas for Small Congregations*, but I'd like to talk about a different idea here—sharing staff with other small congregations.

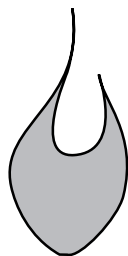
The pros and cons of sharing staff

There are both good things and not-so-good things about sharing staff. Your staff member could become confused as to which congregation is doing what, or could feel more loyalty to one over another. It would be easy for one congregation to blame the other congregation for using the staff person too much, or somehow cutting into “our share.” Jealousy is always a possibility.

On the other hand, a shared administrator might be able to do some tasks faster, like reporting data to the Unitarian Universalist Association or your District, since he or she would already be familiar with the process. Two congregations could share a newsletter, for example, and that would save both money and the staff person's time.

A shared minister could write one sermon to deliver in more than one congregation, and that would save time, energy, and money. However, a shared-topic worship service might not meet the needs of all the congregations involved.

By sharing staff you might get enough hours together to give someone a half- or fulltime job, with benefits. Many people are looking for such a position, though many others are happy with just a few hours a week. And some people would simply not like to work for more than one con-



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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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gregation, fearing confusion, complication, and lack of clarity.

There are many variables, and many pros and cons. The trick to successful staff sharing is clarity of roles and expectations, and a good relationship between all the congregations involved.

Developing a good relationship

Before you begin sharing staff with another congregation, you should develop relationships between the members and friends of the congregations. Hold some joint social events—picnics, potlucks, movie nights—to get to know each other as people. Share worship together several times to see how similar—or different—your worship styles are. Have the leadership groups (board of trustees, executive committee, steering committee, etc.) spend a day together on retreat to talk about sharing staff and what the pros and cons would be. Don't even consider sharing staff if you all don't like each other. Be sure to talk about your ways of handling conflict and whether or not your groups would have the expertise and maturity to deal with any disagreements that came along.

Clarity of roles and expectations

If it seems like the right thing to share staff, then it's time to get together to create a job description for the position(s), and how you would expect to handle things like paying the person's salary (does each congregation pay their share directly to the person, or does all the money go to one congregation who writes one check and handles necessary reporting to state, local and federal bodies?), and supervising and evaluating the person (one personnel committee made up of members of each congregation, or individual leadership groups doing their own supervising/evaluating?).

The clearer you can get about the job description, the pay, and who's responsible for what *before* you hire someone, the smoother everything will go, both for the staff person and the congregational leadership.

What staff can you share?

It is possible for more than one congregation to share an administrator, sexton (or janitor), director of religious education (DRE), or minister. It might even be possible to share a musician or music director with some planning and creativity. A lot depends on what you want from the staff person, how far apart geographically your congregations are, and what time and where you worship.

For congregations that are nearby (a half-hour drive or less), sharing staff is quite simple. Up to an hour's distance gets trickier, and be-

yond that, it may only make sense to share a DRE or a minister. A lot depends, however, on how far people like to drive in your part of the country, and which town the staff person lives in (or whether they live somewhere in between). An administrator, for example, can do many things from home by phone and computer: emailing a completed order of service, for example, to someone else who will bring the copies to worship. In this day and age, so many administrative tasks do not have to be done in an office somewhere. You are only limited by your imagination.

A minister and a DRE could even travel together for worship—attending two services back-to-back if the congregations are nearby, or planning to attend one congregation one week, and another the next week. This would encourage a DRE and minister to work together more closely and have time to talk when they're on the road, which would save them time (a moving staff meeting!), and probably improve your programming as well.

The trick to successful staff sharing is clarity of roles and expectations, and a good relationship between all the congregations involved.

Be sure to consider sharing staff with a non-UU congregation, especially if the nearest Unitarian Universalists are simply too far away. It would work to share an administrator with a small liberal Christian or Jewish congregation, and possibly a music director or DRE. You might even have success sharing a minister with an open-minded United Church of Christ congregation, as they are the closest to us in polity and theology. We have worked successfully with the United Church of Christ on many projects in the past, including for the creation of the Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum. It's worth a try, especially if your congregation leans more in the theist/Christian direction.

Some final thoughts

Sharing staff can work effectively if the congregations know themselves well, the staff person knows himself or herself well, and clear guidelines are in place. There will be bumps in the road in the first year or so as everyone figures things out—and later on as changes arise—so be prepared, and don't think you have failed if there are problems. If your congregation has been used to having full-time staff in the past, don't expect the same model of "administrator and minister at the church office on a regular basis." Part-time workers may prefer to work from home, which can also be more cost-effective for your congregation if you don't have to pay additional heating and utility bills. Our changing economic times call for creative solutions, so be sure to think beyond what you've done in the past.

And while you're sharing, don't forget to share your youth group, Our Whole Lives class, small group ministry program or other adult religious education programs, and social justice activities. The more we work together, the stronger we will be. And that's a good thing!

If you've been successful sharing staff or programming with another congregation, I'd love to hear about it. Email me at jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com.

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

The new book by Jane Dwinell
and Ellen Germann-Melosh!

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for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations

<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk>

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