

# Small Talk

STRENGTHENING SMALL CONGREGATIONS

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## Doing Church Differently at Harmony

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**H**armony Unitarian Universalist Church, a two year old lay-led congregation in suburban Mason, Ohio, is taking an unorthodox approach to Sunday services, and the results are noteworthy — our congregation has doubled in size over the past year and has a 100 percent adult member volunteerism rate.

Harmony started in late 2009 as the brainchild of seven founding families, meeting in members' living rooms with children's religious exploration classes in their basements. Fast-forward to January 2012, and there are now over 150 people who attend Harmony, including over 60 children age 10 and under.

It has been an amazing experience. Clearly there was a need for UU in our town, but we credit the success of our growth to our insistence on offering a UU experience in way that resonates with young, busy families.

88 percent of Harmony's members are adults in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, most with young children. These folks are juggling careers, sports practices, caring for aging parents, and many other activities. They want the full UU experience but they need it in a compact way. That's what led us to offer our AABB style of Sunday services.

AABB is the nickname of our service schedule. Our congregation offers four services each month, but two are encore performances. On the first and second Sundays, the services are identical. Members can check their schedules and choose which service to attend. This same system works on the third and fourth services, again with a new sermon.

This has been a big hit with the RE teachers. Many of them will come teach on the first Sunday and then return on the second Sunday and

participate in the service, or vice versa. We've seen a lot of formerly hesitant people step up to teach — they were always interested in working with the kids but didn't want to miss the service.

We also work hard to meet the needs of the formerly unchurched. Six out of seven board members had never been adult members of any church before joining Harmony. If you look at the research, there is a sizeable population of people out there who have what we'd call "UU leanings," but they stay away from church because of negative associations from past experiences. UU has the right message, but we needed to rethink the form to make it work for our community.

Services at Harmony are contemporary, casual, and interactive. Children have central roles as the chimes ringers (to begin the service) and the chalice lighters. They also have their own featured time for joys and sorrows before heading to religious exploration classes. Each service features a contemporary song played on acoustic guitar that fits with the sermon topic of the day. It's amazing how a song by U2, the Indigo Girls, Radiohead, or even from the latest Disney animated movie can lend itself so perfectly to our themes and values!

Members take turns writing and delivering original sermons, which are accompanied by pictures or political cartoons projected on a screen. After the sermon, adults break into small discussion groups, each with its own facilitator. The groups go more in depth on the sermon topic, helping the congregation apply what they have learned and make deeper connections with each other. The group discussions are by far the most popular element of our worship service. We offer adult RE classes, but not everyone has the time in their schedule to attend. With our group discussions, busy members and visitors can still get a bit of the adult RE experience.

Harmony's modern worship style might not be the perfect fit for all small congregations. The most important thing is to know as a congregation exactly who you are and what the needs are in your community. Small congregations hoping to grow should

not be afraid to toss out the old rulebook and create a worship style and schedule that fits with the congregation's mission and demographics. A few questions that our leadership team continually evaluates include:

- What place do children have in our congregation? How will we show their importance?
- What do busy families need from us and how can we continue to provide more without overtaxing everyone's schedules?
- How can we provide a welcoming experience for adults who walk through the doors and immediately sense that they are in the minority (i.e., anyone who is not the parent of a young child)?
- How can we continue to cultivate a sense of ownership and pride in the church?

The answer to the last question is another Harmony invention, the Time and Talent Pledge Drive. Because it is constantly growing and changing, Harmony runs its financial pledge drive in six-month cycles. With this much growth, it's almost impossible to make a budget that runs for an entire year.

Coupled with the financial stewardship drive is the Time and Talent Pledge Form. Every member fills out a profile of his or her volunteering preferences and the results help form the schedule for the next six months. At a lay-led church, everybody has to pitch in. From mowing the lawn to teaching RE to running our Facebook page, there is a job for every skill set and personality type. We also have a similar pledge form for children, where they can volunteer to pass out programs, read the children's story, or even assist a child with disabilities in the preschool class.

We turn regularly to the Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley, Heartland District Executive, for mentoring. Lisa has been a wonderful resource for us. She has been very supportive of our desire to think outside the box and create something new and different.

This year, we will plan for an eventual move to a larger, universally accessible facility, roll out a comprehensive RE curriculum developed in-house, and seek to achieve Welcoming Congregation status. We

joke that we probably spend more time talking to each other than to our respective husbands. We never stop working on Harmony—we're blown away by the positive response and growth and it just makes us want to work even harder to build this wonderful community.

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**For more information** about *Small Talk* and how to strengthen small congregations of all kinds, contact Jane Dwinell at [jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com](mailto:jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com), or visit her website at [spiritoflifepublishing.com](http://spiritoflifepublishing.com).

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