

Small Talk

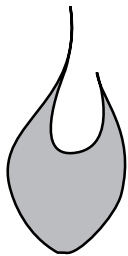
strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

June 2009

We, the constituent

congregations, affiliated societies and individual members . . . acknowledge that the Object of the Assembly is: to promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.

—General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches



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Some Good Ideas from the British Unitarians

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

I was asked to come to London by David Usher, District Minister (a position similar to our District Executive) because the London District has made a commitment to growth — 50 percent over five years. To this end, they asked congregations who wanted to grow to commit to participating in workshops, providing statistics, and to generally do what they could to grow spiritually, incarnationally, and numerically. One of the workshops that I led was specifically for those nine congregations who were accepted into the program. These congregations ranged in size from 10 members to 70 members, in all parts of the district — from the quiet hinterlands to the heart of bustling London.

These congregations embarked on looking at growth long before I arrived. There was a Growth Day at last year's General Assembly, the ministers invited Peter Morales over to do a retreat for them on the topic, and the London District growth congregations were chosen.

Also, a wonderful fellow named Jim Corrigall took it upon himself to visit the fastest growing congregations in the country and report on what he learned. What he found is useful for all of us. Here are Jim's top 12 tips for growth (adapted from an article in *The Inquirer*, April 4, 2009 — their equivalent of the *UU World*):

- **Be intentional about growth**
- **Provide a warm welcome**
- **Maintain a busy and varied programme**
- **Produce good publicity materials**
- **Advertise your presence**
- **Reach out into your community**

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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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- **Covenants build trust**
- **Be open to change and be willing to take risks**
- **Evaluate your successes and failures**
- **Organise inspiring worship and other spiritual activities**
- **Take care of your buildings**
- **Good management structures are vital**

* * *

Many congregations in the UK have a small group ministry program (which they call “engagement groups”). These seem to be successful, much like they are in the States, for providing a place where people can engage more deeply with one another and grow in many ways. Such groups also provide a wonderful way to incorporate newcomers into the life of the congregation. One program that I was happy to learn about is a way to do small group ministry intergenerationally. They call it the “Bright Lights” program: “Doing Church Differently.” Here are some highlights from their brochure:

Bright Lights is run according to Engagement Group principles. The underlying intention is to focus on the way we work and play together, developing our relationships and creating a safe space where every voice has an opportunity to be heard. The group creates a covenant — a set of promises about how to be together — to remind everyone of this deeper purpose.

Each session starts with a song, the lighting of the chalice, and a gathering circle where everyone says their name and may share a little of their news. [Ed. note: Then there is an activity with refreshment break. The activities — with conversation — reflect religious community in some way with elements taken from other world religions (making food or crafts related to a religious holiday, such as a dragon for Chinese New Year) and elements related to social action and responsibility (plays, planting seeds, or games and exercises about cooperating and being together).] Everyone comes together again at the end of the session to share highlights from the afternoon. The session usually closes with a story, another song and a group hug.

Young people who come to the group are always accompanied by a responsible adult and all of the Bright Lights facilitators are police-checked.

Do you feel the need for a spiritual community in your life, without the formality of church, where you and your family are welcome? Bright Lights provides a refreshing opportunity to do church differently. It is a gathering where people of all ages come together to celebrate our common humanity with laughter, creativity, food and good cheer. No-one is too old or too young to take part and feel welcome. Come along and

be accepted for whoever you are, whatever your beliefs.

In addition to the brochure about the Bright Lights program and one about engagement groups, there are several other excellent brochures available.

“A Faith Worth Thinking About,” a multi-page brochure, describes Unitarianism very well. It includes sections on history, purpose, worship, religious education, social action, and theological diversity. It’s nice to have all this information in one brochure.

Another handy brochure is “Visitor: Your First Time at a Unitarian Service?”. This brochure is short but explains Unitarianism and our common worship elements (how they differ or are similar to other religions), and encourages visitors to attend several times before making up their minds.

One congregation has also created a series of brochures for visitors entitled “I Used to Be a [Methodist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, etc.] But Now I’m a Unitarian.” Each brochure describes someone’s theological path (based on a real person) and the similarities and differences of Unitarianism to the original faith. I think these brochures could be very comforting and helpful to someone who has come to Unitarian Universalism after a negative experience with another religion.

Check out the British Unitarians’ national website at www.unitarian.org.uk for more information about these publications and news on what’s going on in the UK.

And, finally, one great thing happening is that the London District has refurbished a small apartment in a building that was formerly the parsonage of a church that is now closed. This two-room flat is available for rent at a very reasonable price for anyone wishing to visit London. It is located in the Bethnal Green area of east London, is a five-minute walk from the Underground station (or a block

to the bus), and is near a shopping district with a grocery store, pubs, and ethnic restaurants. The flat is furnished, has a small kitchen, and is on a quiet street. I spent a month there and enjoyed every minute. It was wonderful to be in a big and exciting city yet feel so comfortable and cozy. Rental information is on the national website.

Just as I always encourage Unitarian Universalists in the States to visit other congregations to learn from them, I also encourage everyone to visit Unitarian Universalists wherever they are — Canada, Britain, Europe, India, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines . . . wherever your travels take you. We can learn so much from one another, whatever language we speak, whatever kind of society we live in, whatever our challenges and concerns are. If you’re ever able, visit the Unitarians in Britain. You’ll be glad you did!

We can learn so much from one another, whatever language we speak, whatever kind of society we live in, whatever our challenges and concerns are.

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

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and Ellen Germann-Melosh!

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