

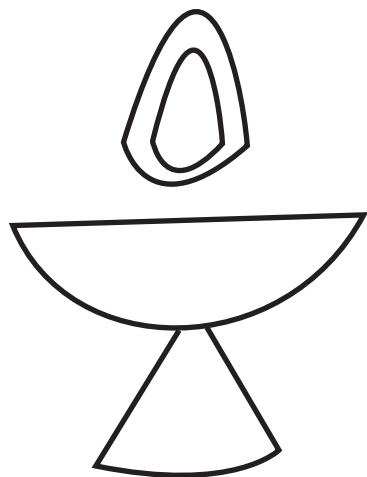
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

March 2004

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead



Social Action in the Small Congregation... ...Can We Really Do It?

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist

The world’s needs are great, and our faith calls us to help with those needs. But can a small congregation make a difference, and even find the time and energy to do social action? The answer is Yes and Yes. The trick is to keep it simple.

Don’t try to take on all the world’s ills, for we all know they are many – war, homelessness, drug addiction, domestic abuse, teen suicide, hunger, loneliness, racism, homophobia, environmental degradation – the list goes on and on. What to do? Choose. Find the place where your congregation’s gifts and passions meet your local community’s needs.

What are your gifts?

Perhaps your congregation is good at food and hospitality. Maybe you can organize a soup kitchen or a food shelf. Perhaps your congregation is good at welcoming traditionally marginalized groups. Maybe you can open a once-a-week (or month) drop-in center for bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender and questioning youth. Perhaps the arts are important to your congregation. How about free art and music classes for poor children and adults? Perhaps your congregation is passionate about the environment. Maybe you can open a recycling center if your town doesn’t have one, or volunteer to care for nearby hiking trails. The possibilities are endless.

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What is your passion? What are your gifts? What is your area’s greatest need?

Here are what other congregations have done:

© Provide an annual free Community Thanksgiving Dinner. This congregation

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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,
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If you have questions, comments, or good ideas for future issues...

If you'd like to publicize your small church's events in What's Happening...

Or if you'd like more information....

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discovered that for all the food baskets and free meals around the holidays, there was nothing on Thanksgiving Day itself. So with donated food from local businesses, farmers, and the congregation, this free dinner now serves 200 people, both as a sit-down meal at the church as well as deliveries to shut-ins.

☉ **Become a Welcoming Congregation.** Take a look at the issues facing bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people and our own feelings about them. After studying, and voting, on this important issue, you can then offer safe space to queer folk, open a teen center, or have a monthly movie and popcorn night on BGLT themes.

☉ **Become a Green Sanctuary.** This is a curriculum, much like *the Welcoming Congregation*, that raises awareness about environmental issues and how individuals and congregations can make a difference. Once your church grounds are "green," you can then offer information and classes to local businesses and residents. One congregation that became so involved with this also created walking paths for people to have a quiet space to reflect on the important of nature to their spiritual lives.

} **The important thing is to choose one thing and do it. Don't spread yourself thin by taking on too many worthy projects, for there are many.**

☉ **Open a Thrift Shop.** Not only can this be a fundraiser for the church, but it provides an important service to low income people, to those who care about the environment and living simply, to families who lose their belongings in fire or flood, to abused women who often flee their homes with only the clothes on their back, or for those who just like a good bargain. You only need to be open a few hours per week, on Friday evening or Saturday morning, for example.

☉ **Hold a monthly Coffee House or Movie Night.** If loneliness, a high teen drinking rate, and isolation is a hallmark of your community, offer a monthly (or weekly) social event that will get people out and together, having fun and relaxing without drugs and alcohol. Community-building is important everywhere. Soon it will be a time-honored tradition, and your congregation will be known as a place to gather.

☉ **Start an after-school program.** If the children in your area are struggling with reading and other school work, or simply have no place to go and your church is near a school, consider starting an after-school program. This can be done in conjunction with other

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churches, local college students, or perhaps the PTA as a way to handle the time commitment.

© **Supply free firewood to needy (and cold) people.** If your congregation is in a rural area where wood heat is popular, has the storage space and the muscle power, start a firewood give-away program. The congregation that does this has an empty carriage shed behind their historic church that they fill with 10-15 cords of split and stacked wood, and then they donate a truckload at a time to people in need.

© **Start a food shelf or a soup kitchen.** If there are hungry people in your area, and this service is not being offered, then start one. Donations of food can come from many sources, you can write grants with which to purchase food, and community volunteers can be found to cook. Or consider hosting a senior meal site. You don't have to be open daily, or even weekly. Some congregations do this monthly. Fulfilling the need to some extent is as important as doing it all.

The important thing is to **choose one thing** and do it. Don't spread yourself thin by taking on too many worthy projects, for there are many. Find the place where your gifts and your community's need meet, and get started. Keep it simple. Don't overtax yourself, or leave the burden on the shoulders of one person. Get a commitment from the congregation, share the leadership, and don't be afraid to call it quits and try something else if it just doesn't seem like the right thing.

### **But what about committees and organizations?**

What about a Social Action Committee? Don't we need one? What about all those UUA resolutions that need to be studied, and all the other important issues out there? What about the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office (UU-UNO), and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)? Don't we need to support them as well?

The issues of the larger world are important, and no doubt many people in your congregation are already working on them. But you don't need a committee with monthly meetings, and a miniscule (if any) budget to get the work done. This is about social **action** (doing something) as opposed to sitting around and talking about issues. Of course, your congregation should keep aware of current issues, the importance of writing letters to elected officials, etc. but this can be done through your newsletter, and / or a designated table or bulletin board in your social hall. The individuals who are concerned about particular issues (war, abortion, gay rights, racism, etc) can post the information there on an informal basis. Those who want to gather to look at current UUA resolutions can do so. The UU-UNO and UUSC can be supported by yearly donations and worship services such as Guest at Your Table.

**The issues of the larger world are important... but you don't need a committee to get the work done. This is about social ACTION (doing something) as opposed to sitting around and talking about issues.**

Our faith calls us to action. Whatever your congregation chooses to do, know that you are changing the world for the better, even if only in a small – but significant – way.

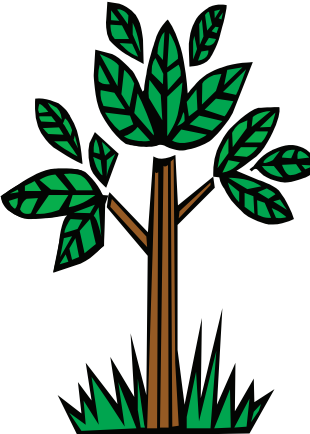
**What's Happening... in March, April, and May!**

**Northeast District Events**

| <b>When?</b>                                | <b>What?</b>                             | <b>Where?</b> |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------|
| March 27 <sup>th</sup>                      | Northeast District Board Meeting         | Ferry Beach   |
| April 30 <sup>th</sup> -May 2 <sup>nd</sup> | Youth Con and Bridging Ceremony          | Ferry Beach   |
| May 7 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup>        | NED Annual Meeting and Spring Conference | Yarmouth      |
| (and looking ahead...)                      |                                          |               |
| June 25 <sup>th</sup> -28 <sup>th</sup>     | Mini General Assembly                    | Ferry Beach   |



**Small Church Specialist's Calendar**



| <b>When?</b>                             | <b>What?</b>                                 | <b>Where?</b>     |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| March 24 <sup>th</sup>                   | Small Congregation Workshop with Tony Pappas | Rhode Island      |
| March 25 <sup>th</sup>                   | Staff Meeting                                | Portland          |
| March 27 <sup>th</sup>                   | Northeast District Board Meeting             | Ferry Beach       |
| March 28 <sup>th</sup>                   | Meeting with congregation                    | Oakland           |
| April 6 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup>   | North Atlantic Region District Staff Retreat | Senexet House, CT |
| April 23 <sup>rd</sup> -25 <sup>th</sup> | Leadership Conference                        | Ferry Beach       |
| May 7 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup>     | NED Annual Meeting and Spring Conference     | Yarmouth          |
| May 9 <sup>th</sup>                      | Worship                                      | Houlton           |

**The Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist,  
is happy to meet with your congregation!**

Just give her a call at 802.334.8831, or send her an e-mail at [sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net).

*Don't Miss...*

*Small is Beautiful!*

**Small Church Conference August 29<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2004  
Ferry Beach Conference Center**



*...Mark your calendar and stay tuned for more info!*