

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

March 2006

“People say, what is

the sense of our small effort.

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time... No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless.

There’s too much work to do.”

—Dorothy Day

Welcoming Congregation in a Small Congregation

by guest contributor **Rev. Keith Kron,**

Director of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns

One of the congregations I visited this year that made me proudest to be a Unitarian Universalist (UU) was in Chestertown, Maryland. They met at 9 a.m. in the Quaker Meeting Space in what felt like a living room. Some 40 people crowded in for the service on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, grateful to be with one another. The music was simple and lovely, but more than anything else there was a reverence for life that permeated the congregants.

I found myself wishing this type of experience for every Unitarian Universalist.

The congregation there had asked me to come as they were working toward becoming a Welcoming Congregation. As Director of the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender (BGLT) Concerns, I was delighted to do this. Being with congregations is my favorite part of the job. Over the last 10 years, I have been to over 400 Unitarian Universalist congregations either for worship or to lead a workshop, some more than once.

Congregations of every kind

We work with congregations of all sizes and locations. I went to St John’s, Newfoundland many years ago and preached. I consulted with the religious education folks about BGLT youth issues in Seward, Alaska. I led a church-sponsored community-wide workshop last year in Honolulu. I preached at the Fellowship in Orlando, FL some years ago (where my sister came and said if she were ever going to join a congregation, it would be this one). I’ve been to the huge



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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 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
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congregation in Tulsa, OK, a mid-size congregation in Cincinnati, OH and a small congregation in Portland, OR. Our Office is glad to work with people who want to work on BGLT issues.

Can we do this if we're small?

A recent post to an Interweave Continental e-mail list expressed the concern that Welcoming Congregation work was next to impossible for small congregations. This was disheartening, but not surprising. Almost 80% of our congregations above 550 members are Welcoming Congregations. Nationally we are nearly at 50% of all UU congregations, though our smaller congregations are nowhere close to this.

The Office of BGLT Concerns (OBGLTC) wants to send the message encouraging small congregations that they can do Welcoming Congregation work—even though many of them (like Chestertown) may in fact be far more welcoming than many of our certified larger congregations.

We've noticed a couple of obvious difficulties over the last 10 years that small congregations encounter in doing the work. Often there is a concern that there aren't enough people power or time to do the work. Often we hear that there are more important priorities like making sure the basics happen. Occasionally we hear that one or two persons are against the work, and there is often the fear in congregations where "everybody knows your name" of people not getting along and creating a rift in a congregation that doesn't need one, or possibly another one.

Debunking myths

Let's look at some of these and other myths and concerns about doing the Welcoming Congregation:

Myth/Concern #1: We're too small. West Burke, VT, a congregation of 8, is a certified Welcoming Congregation. If you are smaller than they are, then you might be able to say this. Otherwise, it's more a matter of figuring out how to manage the process.

Myth/Concern #2: The process is too much for us given our person-power. Here it is time to get a little creative or at least contact OBGLTC for a conversation. Time and humanpower challenges are often realities of smaller congregations. We continually encourage people to adapt the program to their culture and population. And congregations do.

One of the first things to do is to look at the Welcoming Congregations action steps and see which of the Action Steps you are already doing. You may be surprised. Often congregations that have been worried about how to do this discover they are already doing many of the actions, and the rest of the tasks are not as daunting as they seem. You also don't have to do every one. The Office really looks for congregations to do work about educating themselves, institutionalizing welcoming congregation practices in the congregation, and making some connections with the wider world—and then having the membership vote this as part of their identity.

Our subtle biases often surprise us, and taking time to examine them and deal with them is not only a justice issue, but it's spiritual work as well.

Congregations have even done various sessions as worship services, or shortened them to do forums before and after services. They've done weekend retreats, held public forums, and volunteered on specific projects with the BGLT community. Every congregation has done it in their own way, and so can you.

Myth/Concern #3: Why do we need to do this? We already welcome everyone. You probably do, to some degree. The Welcoming Congregation program allows you to examine how welcoming you are and ways which you could widen that welcome. Often congregations who believed they were welcoming found ways in which they were less welcoming than they thought (like what questions they asked newcomers) and ways to be more welcoming. Our subtle biases often surprise us, and taking time to examine them and deal with them is not only a justice issue, but it's spiritual work as well.

Myth/Concern #4: Why are we only welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people? Churches (and fellowships perceived as churches and religious bodies) have more often than not

excluded BGLT people historically. Doing this work is about changing the way in which religion is perceived by many. We have the opportunity to live our values and make a difference in the wider world by doing this. We also may find ways to be more welcoming of all people by specifically focusing on one group of people.

Myth/Concern #5: Will we become a gay church? It hasn't happened yet. The real question is, "Will we be

a place where all the people who would be UUs can be UUs?" And there are a lot of people out there who aren't BGLT who want to go to a congregation like this.

Myth/Concern #6: Can we get help? Yes. Contact:

oblgtc@uua.org
kkron@uua.org
 617.742.2100 x475
 or visit our website at *www.uua.org/oblgtc*

OBGLTC is here to help you as you need! We look forward to working with you.

Small congregation resources online

A series of handouts for the small congregation—written by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, on diverse and practical topics—are available on the web in PDF format, at *www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm*. Many thanks to Andrea Lerner for making them available online! Feel free to copy and distribute to your congregation's leadership—but please make sure that all content and formatting is unchanged.



Over 30 small congregations have shared their stories. Now it's your turn. Send us your strengths and success stories so others 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 you can send your stories:

Please send your "Best Practices" by email to both of us at ecgermann@earthlink.net and sky@vtlink.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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Go to www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm to download these back issues of SMALL TALK!



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