

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

March 2010

## These are hard times

in which a genius would wish to live. Great necessities call for great leaders.

—Abigail Adams

## Advice for Leaders

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

The biggest challenge for small congregations seems to be around leadership. “We don’t have enough people to do the work.” “The board doesn’t listen to us.” “We can’t get anyone to volunteer for tasks.” “The leaders are all burned out — and the congregation, too.”

All congregations need their leaders (as well as their followers), but not everyone is cut out to be a leader. It takes a certain balance of skills to lead without being bossy and to remember that you are leading a religious community, not a business.

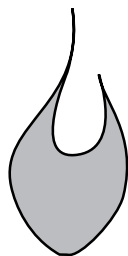
Here is some advice for congregational leaders.

### Keep the big picture in mind

It’s all too easy for leaders to get caught up in the minutia of congregational life. As a board member, it’s not up to you to change the order of service, the time of worship, the color of the bathroom, or the kind of coffee that is served at social hour — unless the congregation has specifically asked you to. It is up to you to watch over the assets of the congregation — the budget, the building, the staff — and to always remember why the church exists: to serve both the congregation and the larger community. As you make decisions, keep these factors in mind.

### Listen

You have been asked and have agreed to be a leader in your congregation. That means you need to listen to the congregation, their concerns, their dreams, and their hopes. You also need to listen to your coleaders (lay and professional). Everyone has different ideas: some will work for your group, others won’t. But before you dismiss an idea, you need to hear it. Learn to listen.



## Inside...

**About Small Talk.....pg 2**

**More Advice.....pg 3**

**Issue Index.....pg 4**

continued on page 2

## 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.

**the Rev. Jane Dwinell**  
*Editor*

**Dana Dwinell-Yardley**  
*Graphic Designer*

If you have questions, comments, or ideas for future issues of *Small Talk*, please **contact** The Rev. Jane Dwinell at:

jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com  
PO Box 243  
Montpelier, VT 05601

Jane is also available to consult with your small congregation.

**Sign up** to receive *Small Talk* via email (as a PDF) at <http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalknewsletter>.

**Back issues** can be downloaded for free at [www.spiritoflifepublishing.com/newsletters](http://www.spiritoflifepublishing.com/newsletters).

If technology isn't your thing, you can receive *Small Talk* as a **paper copy** by sending \$10 per year to the above address.

This is Volume Seven, Issue Three.  
© the Rev. Jane Dwinell, 2010.

continued from page 1

### Learn to compromise

You and the other leaders will not always be in agreement. A congregation, even one with a minister, does not have one boss. Always share your opinion with other leaders and listen to theirs. Look for the places where there is agreement and the places where compromise is in order. Perhaps you all agree that the restrooms need to be handicapped accessible, but you disagree on how to accomplish that. Keep the “what” and the “why” in mind as you seek a solution to the “how.” Once a decision about how to move forward is agreed on, support it, even if you didn't initially. There is nothing more destructive to congregational life than a leader (or a follower) continuing to lobby for their idea when that idea has been voted down.

### Be faithful

This means that you will show up for meetings, get your agenda items in on time, read the minutes and reports, and keep yourself informed about what is going on. It also means that you will do what you say you will do. If you are assigned or volunteer for a task, accomplish it by the given date or find someone else to do it if you can't. More than that, being faithful means that you show up every week for worship, that you participate fully in congregational life, and that you take your faith seriously. Your church is not a social club, but an organization that exists to help you become a better person and to help make the world a better place. That takes work on everyone's part. Sometimes hard work. So, be faithful and show up.

### Keep it simple, and learn to say no

Sam wants an adult religious exploration program. Chris wants a choir. Alex wants to organize a protest against the war. Rowan wants a small group ministry program. Jamie wants to set up a soup kitchen. These are all great ideas, but as a small congregation you can only do so much. Remember to keep it simple: focus on a quality Sunday time together (worship, religious exploration for children, social hour, welcoming for visitors), pastoral care for those in need, and a mission in the larger world. If you have extra time and energy for other things, fine. If Chris is willing to run the choir and has the talent to do so, then it's fine to say OK. But if Chris wants to you hire a choir director, you may have to say no. Know your limits — as leaders, as a congregation, and financially.

As leaders, you need to keep your own involvement in the congregation simple as well. Just because you're on the board, it doesn't mean that you are automatically a worship leader, social hour host, newsletter editor, web guru, plumber, or copy machine repair person. No one

---

person can — or should — try and do it all. And if serving as a leader of your congregation is interfering with your health or your personal life, feel free to step down.

### **Train your successors**

Just because you're in a leadership position in your small congregation doesn't mean you have to (or should) serve forever. Respect whatever term limits are in your bylaws — and be sure to train your successor. Too many congregational leaders think that no one but them is capable of doing such a good job. That attitude will surely cause burnout, yours or others. The congregation belongs to everyone, not just to you.

By mentoring the next generation of leaders, you will have an opportunity to take a break from board meetings and financial reports and do other things for the church. If you don't get burned out first, you'll have the energy to work with the children, offer music for worship, or tend the flower beds. Our congregations need many different skills to keep

them going, and many different kinds of leaders. Give the gift of your experience to someone else.

### **Keep up the morale**

So often, we get bogged down in the day-to-day running of the congregation and forget to have fun. Constant complaining never got anyone anywhere.

If you're trying to do too much, it will show in the energy level of the congregation.

Keep it simple, celebrate your successes often, and remember to thank people. Take the time to write a thank-you note, make a phone call, bring a special cake to social hour, or send flowers to honor accomplishment, hard work, commitment, patience,

and integrity. It is challenging to be part of a religious community, to be called upon to be our best selves, and to serve others. We need to remember to laugh, to throw a party, to make fun of ourselves, to cry, to play with the kids, and to be grateful. Gratitude is a spiritual practice. Make it one of yours.

*Next month: advice for followers!*

**Being faithful means that you show up every week for worship, that you participate fully in congregational life, and that you take your faith seriously.**

## **A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations**

### **Big Ideas for Small Congregations**

The hands-on book by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh!

Order now at [www.spiritoflifepublishing.com](http://www.spiritoflifepublishing.com)

### **Email discussion list**

for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations

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

### **Email list for ministers of small congregations**

<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min>

# The Issue Index

Download back issues for free at  
[www.spiritoflifepublishing.com/newsletters](http://www.spiritoflifepublishing.com/newsletters).



## VOLUME 1

<b>What is a Small Congregation?</b>	December 2003
<b>Governance Structure</b>	January 2004
<b>Numbers (statistics to keep)</b>	February 2004
<b>Social Action</b>	March 2004
<b>Growth: Part One</b>	April 2004
<b>Growth: Part Two</b>	May 2004
<b>A Roadmap to Change</b>	June 2004

## VOLUME 2

<b>Small is Beautiful Report</b>	September 2004
<b>The Small Church of the Future</b>	October 2004
<b>Publications: Part One (layout)</b>	November 2004
<b>Publications: Part Two (content)</b>	December 2004
<b>Conflict</b>	January 2005
<b>Creative Worship</b>	February 2005
<b>The Annual Canvass</b>	March 2005
<b>Small Group Ministry</b>	April 2005
<b>Knowing and Telling Our Stories</b>	May 2005
<b>Summer Worship—Yes or No?</b>	June 2005

## VOLUME 3

<b>Small Congregations Speak Out</b>	September 2005
<b>Building a Music Program</b>	October 2005
<b>Technology: Help or Hindrance?</b>	November 2005
<b>Celebrating December Holidays</b>	December 2005
<b>Transformational Congregations</b>	January 2006
<b>Committee on Ministry</b>	February 2006
<b>Welcoming Congregation Work</b>	March 2006
<b>Greening the Small Congregation</b>	April 2006
<b>Religious Education for Children</b>	May 2006
<b>So You're Looking for a Minister</b>	June 2006

## VOLUME 4

<b>Greatest Challenges #1: Growth</b>	September 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout</b>	October 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #3: Ministry</b>	November 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #4: Money</b>	December 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #5: Conflict</b>	January 2007
<b>The Small Congregation in Transylvania</b>	February 2007
<b>Buildings: Pros and Cons</b>	March 2007

<b>Capital Campaigns</b>	April 2007
<b>Going to Two Worship Services</b>	May 2007
<b>Wrapping Up the Church Year</b>	June 2007

## VOLUME 5

<b>Integrating Children</b>	September 2007
<b>Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change</b>	October 2007
<b>Another Look at Social Action</b>	November 2007
<b>How to Get the Work Done</b>	December 2007
<b>What Should We Do With Our Visitors?</b>	January 2008
<b>The Meaning of Membership</b>	February 2008
<b>The Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches</b>	March 2008
<b>How to Help Your Building Pay for Itself</b>	April 2008
<b>New Orleans: New Life for Small Congregations</b>	May 2008
<b>Small Congregations at General Assembly</b>	June 2008

## VOLUME 6

<b>The Living Room Church, Part One</b>	September 2008
<b>The Living Room Church, Part Two</b>	October 2008
<b>The Living Room Church, Part Three</b>	November 2008
<b>Anti-Racism Work in the Small Congregation</b>	December 2008
<b>Sharing Staff in the Small Congregation</b>	January 2009
<b>How to Run a Meeting</b>	February 2009
<b>Peter Morales for UUA President</b>	March 2009
<b>The Care and Feeding of Your Part-Time Minister</b>	April 2009
<b>The World of the British Unitarians</b>	May 2009
<b>Some Good Ideas from the British Unitarians</b>	June 2009

## VOLUME 7

<b>The Financial Crisis and Your Congregation</b>	January 2010
<b>Climate Change and the Small Congregation</b>	February 2010
<b>Advice for Leaders</b>	March 2010

## Great Book for Sale!

Give your congregational leaders the best hands-on guide to the small congregation: *Big Ideas for Small Congregations: a friendly guide for leaders*, by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh.

**\$20 each • \$15 each for 10+  
 \$12 printer's seconds**

[www.spiritoflifepublishing.com](http://www.spiritoflifepublishing.com)