

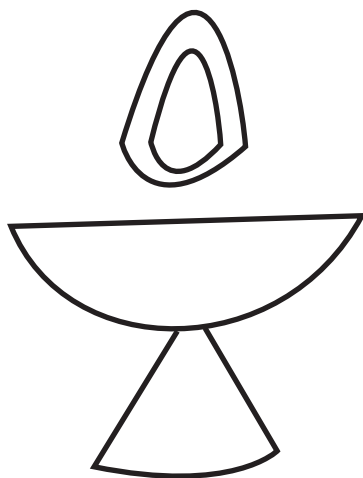
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

May 2004

“Small churches
are tenacious. Some
would call them
tough. They do not
give up when faced
with impossible
problems.”

—Carl S. Dudley



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A Few Thoughts on Growth: Part 2

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist

At the recent Spring Meeting of the Northeast District, Unitarian Universalist Association president the Rev. William Sinkford said that “those in the know” say that Unitarian Universalists are estimated to be .7 of 1% of the population. That means that we could be a potential two-and-a-half million strong! Currently, UUs count a bit over 150,000 with a few over 1,000 congregations. That means that there are plenty of people out there who are missing our saving message. There are no reasons not to grow in numbers!

Or are there?

What are the reasons?

There are many reasons why small congregations do not grow. The first, obviously, is that there just aren't the numbers. Look again at the demographics and population numbers of the area that your congregation draws from. Your 30 member small congregation may draw from a population base of 5,000 people. That means, at .7 of 1%, that you can realistically expect 35 members. So, if you're thirty... pat yourselves on the back, and get ready for those 5 additional folks. On the other hand, if you're a congregation of 50 in an area with a population base of 20,000, you can have 140 members!

Here are some other reasons why you may not be growing in numbers (thanks to David Ray and his book *THE INDISPENSABLE GUIDE TO SMALLER CONGREGATIONS* from which these are paraphrased).

- ⊙ You may be embarrassed or ashamed of your small congregation – buildings, programs, or size.
- ⊙ You like the size you are, and do not want to upset the apple cart by changing.

Thoughts on Growth
continued on page 2...

About Small Talk

Small Talk is a newsletter published monthly by the Small Church Specialist of the North-east District.

SMALL TALK is devoted to strengthening the small Unitarian Universalist congregation through informative articles, resources, and good ideas.

the Rev. Jane Dwinell,
Content Editor

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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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- ⊙ You fear losing a sense of closeness and intimacy.
- ⊙ Those in leadership do not want to lose their power.
- ⊙ Newcomers in your area want a different kind of church than what you offer, and come with ideas that get rejected.
- ⊙ Your congregation is not offering the spiritual depth that many young people are looking for.
- ⊙ With membership comes nothing more than membership. Most people are looking for meaning.
- ⊙ Newcomers are afraid of the serious commitment that you are asking of them.
- ⊙ You don't know how to do outreach in your community.
- ⊙ You want to grow to have more people to do the work or to pay the bills.
- ⊙ Newcomers visit your congregation regularly, but you haven't found a way to interest them in coming back.
- ⊙ Your whole focus is on survival, leaving little energy left for anything else.

} **Unitarian Universalists are estimated to be .7 of 1% of the population. That means that we could be a potential two-and-a-half million strong!**

Look at these reasons for not growing and see if any of them make sense for you and your congregation. Be honest. See if the church culture can be changed or not. It's hard work changing a culture that has been around for a while. If you really don't want to grow, then don't, and don't beat yourself up for it. Put your energy into other things.

## **But if you want to grow...**

But if you do want to grow in numbers – because you think Unitarian Universalism has a saving message and not because more numbers may mean more money or helpers – take the time to look seriously at the culture of your congregation, your visibility, your worship style, the quality of your Sunday morning programming, your organizational structure, and the commitment that you have to change. Change is hard work. It takes a level of commitment that many people don't have – just look at all the failed attempts

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## Thoughts on Growth

*continued from page 2...*

to diet, quit smoking, start exercising, etc. that come with

every New Year's Resolution. You have to want to change – all of you – and then you need to lay out a Roadmap to Change. Just as you don't start a diet or an exercise program without some idea of what that means, you need to have a plan for change in the congregation.

But you need to be honest about your desire for change and what you think that change will look like. Just as many dieters are unrealistic about what size they can be – some people will never be a size 4! – don't set up unrealistic expectations for your congregation. A more expressive, modern worship style may just be too stressful for you, or the thought of lots of children in the sanctuary is just too much. You still need to be who you are – and can you do that in a way that would be enjoyed and accepted by newcomers?

More on the Roadmap next time.

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## A Note from the President

*In the late 1990s and early 2000s the Northeast District of Unitarian Universalist Societies put together a long-range planning effort to look at the needs of the District, and especially the needs of our member congregations.*

*One of the unmet needs seemed to be providing guidance and leadership to our smaller congregations. We decided to attempt to meet this need by asking the Unitarian Universalist Association to help us fund a new position to be known as the Small Church Specialist. With 18 congregations with under 100 members, the need was obvious but the job could be overwhelming.*

*Our Small Church Specialist (at one-quarter time) cannot work with all 18 congregations on an individual basis every year. She is developing opportunities to work with you jointly such as at the Small is Beautiful conference at Ferry Beach next August. I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity.*

*With best regards,*

*Charlie Boothby, President, Northeast District*

## Here's a Way to Make Your Congregation More Visible!

The First Universalist Church of Dexter, ME is offering simple, clear, and inexpensive roadside signs that announce your congregation. The top of the sign is a 30 inch diameter black and white flaming chalice logo with the words "Unitarian Universalist" around it. Below that you can have a custom-designed rectangular sign with the name and location of your congregation. You may also add an arrow and mileage sign below that. Each sign is \$50 (\$40 is you order 3 or more) plus \$15 for the name of your congregation, and \$10 for the arrow / mileage sign. Each sign requires a 4x4 wooden post – or equivalent metal post – of your own purchase for installation.



This is what the folks in Dexter have to say about these signs: *You have seen similar 30-inch signs announcing the presence of Kiwanis, Rotary, and Lions, among others. These signs have the advantage of uniformity – they are immediately recognizable as "official" by the traveling public and serve several purposes: they acquaint the general public with the UU logo, they let passing drivers know we are active in town, they inform the traveling UUs that there is a local church or society available, and they show we care about spreading our message.*

I love driving around Maine and seeing these signs; they warm my heart. It would be great to see them everywhere!

If you're interested in ordering some signs, contact Ann Kendall at [davken@tdstelme.net](mailto:davken@tdstelme.net), by snail mail at POB 294, Dexter, ME 04930, or by phone 207.277.4901.

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## Need Worship Resources?

The Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) has recently launched **Church OnLine**, a web component of our Church on Loan program that has been serving small UU congregations for over a decade. Through Church OnLine, congregations can access:

- ⊙ Sundays Online – More than 80 complete services with sermons by well-known UU ministers available for use in worship.
- ⊙ Religious Education Curriculum Plan – designed by professional RE directors for small RE programs.
- ⊙ Religious Education Connections – online resource with ideas for seasonal celebrations, informative articles, and games and activities for families and children.

⊙ Between Sundays – a website designed to help parents and other adults answer religious questions raised by children and youth.

⊙ E-mail lists – CLF offers several email lists to help our members stay in touch with each other, and to share announcements and resources.

Also included are several print materials, plus access to the CLF Loan Library: a great resource for the growing congregation that does not yet have a library of its own. If you don't have internet access, you can still use Church on Loan. Ask us how!

For details, visit <http://www.clfuu.org/churchonloan> or call 617.948.6166.

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## Small Church Specialist's Calendar

### When?

June 22<sup>nd</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>

July 25<sup>th</sup>

July 31<sup>st</sup>

August 29<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>

### What?

General Assembly

Board Retreat

Board Retreat

Small is Beautiful conference

### Where?

Long Beach, CA

Westbrook

Pittsfield

Ferry Beach

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**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).

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*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 calendars!*

