
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

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May 2005

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## “Everybody is a

story... Sitting around... telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way wisdom gets passed along.”

—Rachel Naomi Remen, from her book  
*KITCHEN TABLE WISDOM*

## Knowing Our Stories – and Telling Them

by Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist  
for the Northeast District*

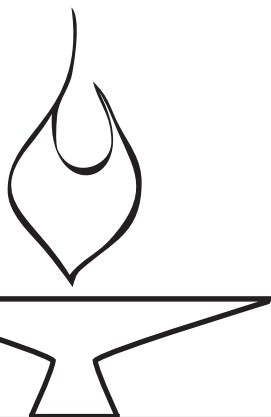
The story is at the heart of the small congregation. From societies that are over 200 years old, to groups barely in their infancy, the story holds us together. Everyone remembers the time when... take your pick. It could be when the youth group burned the spaghetti for their fundraising dinner for the Heifer Project. It could be when old Mr. Smith sat in the front row with a stopwatch to make sure the minister stayed within the hour. It could be the Sunday morning when the oil tank sprung a leak and the congregation bustled out of the sanctuary and into the basement to deal with the mess. It could be when the Candlelight Vigil inspired shouts of hate that turned into understanding several months later.

### Recognizing your stories, and creating new ones

Some stories stay with congregations in an unhealthy way – like the time when the theological split created a congregational division that has never healed, and the more conservative church down the road is a constant reminder of that split. Or the time the minister was run out on the rails. Or the time when there was not enough money to pay the heating bill and the church had to close for the winter.

We must recognize and honor the stories at the heart of our small congregations – learn from them, heal from them, and create new ones that will last long into the future. We have a lasting faith, and the small congregation is at the core of that. Negative stories can perpetuate negative feelings. It is best to find a way to “exorcise” them – through talking, ritual, creating a new version of the story, and finally letting go. If your congregation can’t let go of its negative stories, ask yourself why. Just like people, congregations can have low or high self-esteem based on past events.

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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,
Content Editor

Dana Dwinell-Yardley,
Layout and Design Artist

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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  
the Rev. Jane Dwinell at:

[sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net),  
802.229.4008, or  
1 Liberty Street  
Montpelier, VT 05602

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## The story of Lyons, Ohio

Here's a story that I heard recently in a speech given by Gini Courter, Moderator for the Unitarian Universalist Association, at the recent NH/VT District Annual Meeting. I found it moving, and I share it with you.

"Nearly twenty years ago the Reverend Emmy Lou Belcher served as the ministerial intern for our congregation in Lyons, Ohio. Emmy Lou and I had some business together, so she invited me to come to Lyons for lunch. Lyons is about an hour west of Toledo, almost an hour south of Ann Arbor, Michigan. It is in the middle of rural America, the middle of nowhere. If you drive through Lyons from the east or west you might not even know that you've passed through; only north- and south-bound vehicles need to stop at the flasher.

"In case you passed through from the east or west, I will tell you that Lyons is a singular place in almost every respect: it has a single hardware store, a single café that serves only breakfast and lunch, a single gas station, a single elementary school and a single combination junior and senior high school. There is, however, some religious variety. Lyons has two churches: one of them is Unitarian Universalist. Emmy wasn't at the parsonage when I arrived on time (almost) and hungry, so I walked across the street and into the church basement.

"Emmy and a woman in late middle-age were setting up the marquee to announce the coming Sunday's sermon title, taking white letters from labeled compartments and ordering them on a tray. This seemed like a non-trivial task. I pulled up a chair. When this task was complete, the woman asked for instructions on mounting the letters on the sign outside. I said I would help, and Gladys and I went outside to work on the sign. Tom, a local farmer, introduced himself as he went in to talk to Emmy 'just for a few minutes.' Gladys and I finished just in time to meet another congregant who was stopping by on his – and my – lunch hour. I sat down and folded the orders of service. Lyons is a small congregation. It didn't take long. I was almost finished when a mother with two small children in tow stopped by the basement to drop off a pie for the minister and chat for 'just a few minutes.'

"By this time, I must have been visibly fuming. When I had arrived ninety minutes earlier, Lyons and its Unitarian Universalists had seemed quaint, sort of Norman Rockwell-esque. Now I could clearly see that these folks were bumpkins: the Beverly Hillbillies without

the Texas Tea, Green Acres without Eva Gabor. I needed some space, so I went upstairs and opened the back doors of the sanctuary. What I saw took my breath away.

“The afternoon sun streamed through the large stained glass window above the chancel. I don’t know much about art. But I love art, and there is some art that has an essence that is unmistakable.

That window over the chancel was a Tiffany window. I walked into the sanctuary. More Tiffany – windows on my left and my right, both sides of the sanctuary, up in the balcony. A dozen Tiffany windows. I stood transfixed in the middle of the sanctuary, caught in wonder as I watched the lush blues and purples and verdant greens dance on my shirt and my skin. I never even heard Emmy Lou open the door.

“When they built their church, families each agreed to pay for one window. It wasn’t easy... but these people were committed to their church.”

“When they built their church, families each agreed to pay for one window. It wasn’t easy; farm life has always been hard. Some years the crops weren’t good, and it wasn’t easy to put the money aside. But these people were committed to their church. When they received word that their windows were ready, they hitched up their horses and took twelve wagons up the Erie Canal to New York

City and personally picked up these windows so they would arrive safely. If you look carefully you can see the name of a family on each of the side windows. Some of these families are still here. Some of them have been here in the last hour. They love their church no less than their great-grandparents did. And in case you’re wondering, yes, they’re Tiffany windows.”

This is a story that has stayed with this congregation – they know how to work together. They know how to commit their energy to their church – as small and as isolated as it is. They

know how to commit their dollars – as hard-earned as they are. Lyons will never be a large congregation. It’ll never be mid-sized. My current UUA Directory says they have 48 members. My guess is that not only will they always be small, I’ll bet they’ll always be family-sized.

And that’s OK. Beyond OK, that’s wonderful. The Unitarian Universalists of Lyons are important to our faith, important to each other, and important to their community. That’s what a religious community should be – whatever the size.

What’s your story?

## The Issue Index

Go to [www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm](http://www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm) to download back issues of SMALL TALK!



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# Small is Beautiful!

## Resources and Networking for Small Congregations

August 26-28, 2005 ☀ Ferry Beach Camp and Conference Center ☀ Saco, ME



*Last summer's Small is Beautiful was fun, mellow, and a learning experience for all. This year will be even more fun. Come join us as we learn, play, relax, worship, and celebrate the small, strong congregation!*

*Small is Beautiful is open to anyone from a small congregation (less than 150 members) from anywhere in the world.*

### Registration and prices

For more info on cost and registration, contact Ferry Beach at:

5 Morris Avenue, Saco, ME 04072

Phone 207.284.8612

Fax 207.283.4465

send queries to [craig@ferrybeach.org](mailto:craig@ferrybeach.org)

**Or register online at**  
**[www.ferrybeach.org](http://www.ferrybeach.org)**

### Come join us at Small is Beautiful, and...

- ☀ Learn from one other and wonderful presenters at useful workshops of many flavors
- ☀ Relax in the beautiful surroundings of Ferry Beach
- ☀ Get to know like-minded folks from other small congregations
- ☀ Have fun!

### This year's presenters:

- ☀ the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist for the Northeast District
- ☀ Dana Dwinell-Yardley, freelance layout artist and designer and Communications person for Interweave Continental
- ☀ the Rev. Bill Zelazny, District Executive for the Ballou-Channing District
- ☀ Cindy Spring, former Program Consultant for the NH/VT District

## Small Church Specialist's Calendar

### When?

May 21<sup>st</sup>

June 21<sup>st</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>

### What?

Small Congregation Conference

General Assembly

### Where?

New York City, NY

Fort Worth, TX

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

Just give her a call at 802.229.4008, or send her an e-mail at [sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net).

