

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

May 2006

“Always the child’s

own thoughts should be
encouraged.”

—Sophia Lyon Fahs,
Unitarian Universalist religious educator,
in her book FROM LONG AGO AND
MANY LANDS, published in 1948.

Welcoming Children to the Small Congregation

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

One of the biggest worries for many small congregations has to do with children—how to find them, how to keep them, how to entertain them, how to teach them, what to do with them. Whether you have no kids or three kids or 10 or 20, it can be simple to incorporate religious education for children into the other activities of the congregation.

If you have no children (yet!):

Be prepared! Gather a box of supplies so you’re ready to go should some children show up. Focus the items for the younger set (under 8 years), as older children should be able to stay in the service. Have a small selection of picture books with meaningful themes, some basic art supplies (crayons, markers, paper, glue, scissors, glitter, etc), a candle or chalice, a hymnal (or other music book with children’s songs), and a book of short readings. Make sure there are a handful of adults in the congregation who are willing and able to go with the children should they arrive. A parent will probably want to come the first time, but, if not, make sure there are two adults with the children. Besides protecting the adults and the children from any possible misbehavior, the two adults can support each other when, and if, they get to the “what do we do now?!” stage.



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Start your time together with a short song or reading, and lighting the candle or chalice. Have everyone introduce themselves with their name, where they live, and something that’s their favorite (food, color, animal, etc). Tell the child(ren) about the church, what you do there, what UUism is (an elevator speech for children!), and ask them more about themselves. Depending on the age group, what they say, and how much time you have, you can move into reading a book

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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...

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Sign up to receive Small Talk via email (as a PDF) at
<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalknewsletter>.
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or two, drawing pictures, and talking more. Don't forget snack time—juice and crackers are always a big hit with any age group.

You can also get a copy of *The UU Kid's Book* by Charlene Brotman et al. (available at the UUA Bookstore) to have in your “be prepared” box. This book has many stand-alone activities. Familiarize yourself with a handful of them, and have the appropriate supplies on hand to be able to play some of the games, or do some of the activities.

If your imagination gets stuck, remember that you can coordinate the children's activity with any theme that is happening in the church, or in the larger world—holidays (religious or secular), unusual weather, current events (local, national or international), or today's sermon topic. Gear the conversation, picture book and art activity to the day's theme, and the ages of the kids.

You can use this simple RE package if you have just a couple of small children, or for irregularly-attending children. The lack of kids is often not the biggest problem for small congregations—it's the kids that show up now and then. In our busy society, and one with many divorced families, the every other week child, or the child visiting the grandparents is often the sole child in the RE program.

To prepare for babies and toddlers, you can either elect a couple of congregation members who are willing to watch them during the service, or you can create a “quiet room” where a parent can stay with their child(ren) and be able to hear the service. Set up a usable space with speakers, a rocking chair, and a box of clean and safe age-appropriate toys.

## **If you have just a few children (5 or less):**

For a small group of children less than 7 or 8 years old, you can use the above system, or launch into a curriculum. Contact your District Program Consultant or Religious Educator for ideas geared to the ages of your children.

If the kids are age 8 and older, you can easily have them stay in the worship service for the entire time. Plan on the first part of the service being “kid-friendly” with music, a short reading, the chalice lighting, joys and concerns and the offering. They can even learn to sit quietly for mediation or prayer time.

When it comes to the sermon, consider your usual format. Does your sermon tend to run longer than 15 minutes? Is it full of weighty

words and ideas? Is the delivery lively and easy to understand, or do some speakers drag? Kids like quality messages just like adults. Consider having at least two sermons a month appropriate for kids 8 and up. That may mean doing something different than a sermon—a short play, dramatic reading, or short talks by several people, for example. Perhaps you could choose a universal theme to run through the year and build the child-friendly services around that theme.

There is much religious education for the whole congregation that can be explored with these intergenerational services. The seven principles, UU history, world religions, the Golden Rule, and the larger themes of death, illness, anger, forgiveness, and love can be presented so that any age can understand. Have the kids participate as well. They can read a story, or a prayer. They can light the chalice, play some music, or even speak briefly about a topic—it all depends on the child. With encouragement, they can become a vital part of the congregation. Knowing that the adults care about them and respect them enough to have them participate will stay with our young people for their whole lives.

### **If you have 5-15 children:**

Depending on how many willing adults there are to lead Religious Education, you can have one group, or several groups. The One-Room Schoolhouse concept works in our congregations just like it did in the old days out in the country. Children are segregated by age all week in school—being all together one day a week for an hour is fun for them, and can help build strong and lasting relationships within the congregation. Or you can flow between one or more groups depending on how many children show up on a given Sunday, and how many leaders you have. RE is a time to be flexible and creative.

**Knowing that the adults care about them and respect them enough to have them participate will stay with our young people for their whole lives.**

### **Resources, resources, resources**

There are many, many resources out there for religious education (RE). The UUA Bookstore sells many curricula. Your District Staff has curricula to loan, and great ideas to share. District and Regional RE conferences happen all the time. UU Camps and Conference Centers all have different RE programs. The Church of the Larger Fellowship has special RE packages for small congregations. (There are links to all these resources on [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org).) Spirit Play, a new curriculum designed by Nita Penfold, is perfectly suited to the small congregation ([www.spiritplay.net](http://www.spiritplay.net)). And if you're going to buy only one RE book, get yourself a copy of *Starting from Scratch: How to Begin Your Own RE Program for Children and Youth* by Ann Fields, Jeanne Nieuwejaar, and Cindy Spring (available through the UUA Bookstore).

Good luck with your RE program. Let me know what successes you have.



### **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.umetrony.org/misc/materials.htm](http://www.umetrony.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.



# Small Congregation Events at General Assembly 2006

Come to St. Louis this summer and find out how your small congregation can be vital and strong!

**General Assembly will be held in St. Louis, MO from June 21–25, 2006.**

**You can register by visiting [www.uua.org/ga](http://www.uua.org/ga).**



## Workshop at Ministry Days

✿ **Can the Small Church Grow?**  
 Tuesday, June 20  
 1:30 p.m.–2:45 p.m.

## Workshops at General Assembly

✿ **Small is Beautiful**  
 Saturday, June 24  
 2:15 p.m.–3:30 p.m.

✿ **Small is Beautiful (repeat)**  
 Sunday, June 25  
 1:45 p.m.–3:00 p.m.

## Exhibit Hall Booth

✿ **Visit the Small Congregation booth!** Here you can pick up your free “I ♥ My Small Congregation” ribbon, take home helpful handouts and resources, and chat with the Small Church Specialist. We are located with the District Services booth in the Exhibit Hall.

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



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