

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

May 2009

This is my home, the country
where my heart is; here are
my hopes, my dreams, my
holy shrine; but other hearts
in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as
true and high as mine.

—Lloyd Stone

The World of the British Unitarian Congregations

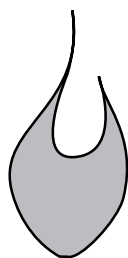
by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

I recently had the wonderful opportunity to spend a month working with the Unitarian congregations, lay leaders, and ministers in the London District. While in London, I led two all-day workshops, met with the ministers, and led worship (“took the service,” as they say there) and worked individually with six congregations.

I also had the opportunity to speak at the Growth Day during the British General Assembly, traditionally held the week after Easter in a different location every year. This year’s GA was in Chester, in northwest England, a city with a rich Roman and medieval history. A spectacular feature of the city is the complete wall surrounding the city center, started by the Romans in the early part of the first millennium and finished by the English later on. It was wonderful to be constantly surrounded by ancient stones while working on the future of our faith.

Why would a small congregation consultant go to one of the largest cities in the world? Because almost all the British Unitarian congregations are small, and many—perhaps most—are very small. There are about 4,000 Unitarians in the United Kingdom, in about 165 congregations. That puts the average congregational size at 25 (the average size in the United States is 140). The largest congregations are in the 200-member range, and there aren’t many of them. (There is also a group in Britain, similar to the Church of the Larger Fellowship, that provides online contact for Unitarians who don’t live near a congregation.)

Unitarianism in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland is a very marginal religion—historically and presently. Of course, religion itself is fairly marginal in the UK: only about 5 percent of the population attends a church of any kind. That says something in a country where there is an “official” state religion. The Church of England is still the largest faith in the UK, but in many cases it’s because the Church runs



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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
802.229.4008
1 Bingham Street
Montpelier, VT 05602

Jane is also available to consult with your small congregation.

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many of the best schools and you have to be a member to send your children there.

Unitarianism arose in Britain during the Protestant Reformation. For many years, those with Unitarian beliefs could be jailed. Many of the churches I attended were founded in the 1600s and had a history of ministers being imprisoned. Other churches were founded more recently (1800s to the 1980s). Most all have had their ups and downs in membership. Unitarianism in Britain has always been on the outside, so it never had the parish church “success” found in many of our New England congregations.

The church buildings are primarily older, though there are some more modern buildings—often built when an older building had to be torn down for safety, financial reasons, or “urban progress” (for a road to be built or widened, for example). Unitarianism in Britain has been—and remains strongly in some places—a more Christian religion than in the States. Many of the buildings display Christian-themed stained glass and architecture. (The official name of the British Unitarians is “The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.” And we think Unitarian Universalism is a mouthful!)

I felt quite at home with the British Unitarians and in their church buildings. Much of it felt like New England to me and there was the same sense of pride in their free-thinking faith that we have in the U.S., the sense of being a haven for the liberal religious viewpoint. Christian Evangelicalism is the fastest growing religion in Britain, offering a mega-church presence with 24/7 programming, modern music, cafés, day care centers, and small groups. The Unitarians know they have to keep their faith alive to offer a liberal alternative to the religious seeker.

I also felt the similarity to U.S. Unitarian Universalists in the British Unitarians’ challenge with the theological diversity found within their own ranks. While I believe far more British Unitarians are Christian or theist than UUs in the States, there are still plenty of atheists, agnostics, New Agers, Buddhists, and humanists to keep things interesting, challenging, and lively.

Because of this theological diversity, many congregations are looking at their form of the traditional Unitarian worship service, heavily loaded with hymns, readings, and prayers, along with an “address.” Some people are calling for a change in worship to something more open, lively, and relevant. A new hymnal was unveiled at this year’s General Assembly (featuring many hymns from *Singing the Living Tradition* and *Singing the Journey*, along with many hymns newly written by

British Unitarians—they've got some great composers there!) which moves away from the traditional hymn form into songs more accessible, modern, and easy to sing.

Looking at changing the form of worship has created controversy in some congregations. As in any congregation, the idea of change comes with its own stresses, and the British Unitarians struggle as much as we do with finding a way to respect everyone's worship needs while remaining a loving spiritual community.

But, as I pointed out to them, one of the beauties of the small congregation—particularly for the many congregations that do not have ministers—is that you can experiment with different ways of worship. When the gathered community consists of a dozen people or less, you can try something new, sit in a circle, run worship in the Quaker style or in the format of a covenant group. You can make it more intergenerational, more creative, and more inclusive, while respecting the rich history and practices.

At the same time, you can look at the quality of the worship service, which may have fallen if a group is relying solely on sermons and hymns (which may or may not be accompanied by an accomplished musician).

It seems that nobody likes change—least of all Unitarians, who pride themselves on their independence, their congregational polity, and not doing something just because someone tells them to! Many British congregations have taken, or are taking, the step to create a community behavioral covenant. This allows them to face change with a safety net and a respectful way to talk about how to do things. It's hard to be such independent-minded people, listen to other—possibly different—ideas, and still remain in community. A congregational covenant is a wonderful way to do this.

Then there's the issue of leadership burnout in the small congregation. That doesn't seem to change! It's the same old story of the same old people doing the same old tasks until they're tired of it or other people are tired of them.

At least the British don't seem to be stuck with the notion of having multiple committees. They tend to have a governing committee, and then pull small groups together to do other tasks such as putting on a social or fundraising event. I encouraged them to keep this model: just to be sure to rotate leadership, train their successors, don't ask newcomers to help too soon, and keep it simple. Trying to do too much tires everyone out, whatever country you're in.

One thing that seemed to be missing for most of the congregations I worked with was a clear mission, a way to reach out beyond the church community to put Unitarian values into practice in their local area. Many individuals had a commitment to a local, national or international social needs organization, but the congregations as a whole didn't. They began to talk about ways they could reach out into their local community with their time and talents to fulfill a need. The British are faced with the same problems of poverty, immigration, and the repercussions of the global economic crisis as Americans are. There are plenty of needs to fulfill.

I had a lovely time meeting people from all over the country, having tea with them (lots of tea!), and listening to their stories, their history, and their commitment to Unitarianism. It was a pleasure to help them move forward and give them a few ideas, but mostly let them know they are not alone in their struggles and challenges. Their society may not be as religiously-oriented as American society, but that doesn't make Unitarianism any less relevant.

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