

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

May 2010

The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

—Theodore Parker

A Little Goes a Long Way

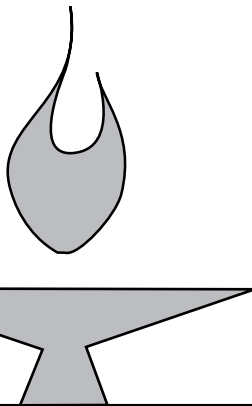
by guest contributor **Lee Marie Sanchez, consulting minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Anaheim, CA**

Editor's note: I was impressed when I heard about all the wonderful social justice work being done by this fifty-member congregation, so I asked their consulting minister to share their story with you.

Fifty-two years ago, on a hot July evening in 1958, a number of liberal-leaning groups met together in Orange County, California, to talk about forming a Unitarian church. The group had trouble coming together around topics familiar to present-day Unitarian Universalists: politics and theology. But the Rev. Lewis McGee, who was then serving as associate minister at the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles (and who is profiled in the book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, by Mark Morrison-Reed) arrived to give them some needed direction on how to organize. And, so in this very, very conservative county, a new Unitarian society was born.

Rev. McGee came back a few years later, to serve as a one-year interim in 1961. Remember this was even before the voting rights act of 1964, when segregation was going strong. Orange County was the home of the John Birch Society and one of the most conservative places in the United States. While the county has changed much demographically, it is still a haven for conservative politics. Our church, however, is more reflective of the changes in society as a whole and in the changing county. At least one quarter of the congregation is Hispanic/Latino/a, including the minister, the religious education coordinator and leaders on the board and committees. There are people who were born in Asia, Africa, Latin America, as well as Europe—and Americans of a very wide variety of races and ethnicities are well represented.

Over these last five decades, the congregation—with name and location changes—has been focused on social justice. There are both joys and concerns around being a social justice congregation; in the 1960s,



Inside...

About Small Talk.....pg 2
More from Anaheim...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.

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continued from page 1

the church split over the Vietnam War. Before the split, the congregation had more than 300 members with quite a few children. Today, at less than fifty members, around ten children, and a half-time consulting minister who is still a candidate in seminary, our church continues to be at the forefront of justice. That focus brings in some folks and certainly deters others.

The number of justice activities for a small church is quite impressive. This past year the congregation voted to place solar panels on our roof with money from the church budget and additional monies raised from individuals. For this we have received commendations from the Sierra Club and the California State Senate, and were given the Global Stewardship Award from the Pacific Southwest District of the UUA.

Some may ask, with a congregation of less than fifty individuals, how is it possible to be committed to so many issues? Well, first of all, we have members whose whole lives have been committed to being activists, and many members are involved in many more than one of the committees and affinity groups. The congregation still manages to attract the sort of people who are passionate about peace and justice, the environment, and now marriage equality as values central to their very beings. Groups like those interested in solar power and equal rights just grew organically. Other issues are carried by one or two people or a few who create task forces to do the necessary work.

Last year, after completing several months of workshops, panels, watching videos and more, the congregation voted unanimously to become a Welcoming Congregation, and then went on to form an Interweave chapter with more than two dozen members.

This spring, with leadership from our Interweave group, the congregation took on the project of replacing all of the grass in the landscaping with drought-resistant plants on the way to becoming xeroscaped some day. We did this in conjunction with a Disney-sponsored program called "Give a Day, Get a Day," which gathered seventy volunteers—none of them Unitarian Universalists, lots of them families with children—from all over Southern California, working together and getting to know us UUs!

The congregation just entered into a shared associate membership with the Islamic Center of Orange County and the Servite Catholic High School in Anaheim, as part of Orange County Congregation Community Organization/PICO (People Improving Communities through Organization), working together with the Poverty Task Force in Anaheim with the well-organized goal of ending homelessness in Anaheim in a few years.

For several years now, we have provided free space every Saturday morning for a group called La Escuelita del Pueblo to teach English as a second language and citizenship skills for many dozens of immigrants. Just recently, our social justice committee placed immigration concerns as its top priority, and a new book group formed on justice concerns is informing itself on gang-related issues.

Potlucks for Progressives is another activity sponsored by the social justice committee on Fridays once or twice a month; a potluck followed by various films and speakers about a whole array of socially relevant topics, from environmental issues to immigration, peace and justice activities, education concerns, and more.

The church's original building was actually self-built by the members of the congregation. About fifteen years ago, the California Highway Department bought the property for new freeway access, so the members used the money from its sale to purchase outright a former savings-and-loan bank. It has some interesting architecture which some have likened to a step pyramid—which, considering the neighborhood is 61 percent Hispanic/Latino/a, seems to suit us well.

Five years ago, the congregation built a “one-room schoolhouse” for religious education, hoping that if we built it they would come. Just building it, of course, did not cause them to come, but the congregation was ready when first there was one child, then three . . . and then we hired a very part-time religious education coordinator and, slowly but surely, we now have a great little RE program.

The building has reflected the new thrust of being a Welcoming Congregation in many ways. One woman, married by the minister in that window of opportunity in California for same-sex couples to wed, arrived with her wife, her time, and much talent and treasure to beautify the sanctuary, the RE building, and the meeting room. She also created a

beautiful minister's office which now provides space for additional meetings.

One of the most dramatic changes was organizing the foyer, shifting all the free-speech publications to make sure that materials on Unitarian Universalism

were more visible. Located there, beautifully written, with a gorgeous new chalice logo brimming with orange blossoms, are the words I say each Sunday: “Welcome. And welcome home.” Every week, more people, seeing the huge rainbow flag draped around

the corner of our building, are coming and finding a truly welcoming home.

All of this beautification, energy, new members, and the presence of children in the church reflects a move from a more secular perspective to a very spiritual one. There is room for a wide variety of differences, demonstrating unity in their diversity. One constant comment from nearly every visitor is how very friendly this church is!

Looking back at the past, one can see the strong connection to our bright future. We are now a very multi-everything congregation, with people from a wide variety of cultures, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, class, age, and theologies. Flying that rainbow flag has brought in a great number of people who self-identify with many of the above, bringing a new spirituality strongly tied to social justice.

The challenge now will be to honor the past, with its strong emphasis on social justice, while continuing to welcome the new people, the new spiritual and cultural resources, and the new technologies which will allow us to move into our future together.

“The arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice,” (a quote from our Unitarian ancestor, Theodore Parker, often attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr. and used again by our President Obama) is surely something in which we may have faith today if we understand that a little can still go a long way with our most enduring UU values.

Today, at less than fifty members, around ten children, and a half-time minister . . . our church continues to be at the forefront of justice.

The Issue Index



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VOLUME 1

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

VOLUME 2

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

VOLUME 3

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

VOLUME 4

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

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

VOLUME 5

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

VOLUME 6

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

VOLUME 7

The Financial Crisis and Your Congregation	January 2010
Climate Change and the Small Congregation	February 2010
Advice for Leaders	March 2010
Advice for Followers	April 2010
A Little Goes a Long Way (social justice)	May 2010

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