
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

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November 2005

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## “Connections are

made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening...

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.

Live a life you can endure...”

—Marge Piercy, from her poem  
Connections Are Made Slowly.



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## Technology: a Help or a Hindrance?

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

Our lives have changed since the Internet has arrived at our home, school and library computers. We are connected to people, ideas, and things all over the world—instantly. E-mail has done many things for us. I am able to keep in touch with long distance friends in a much easier way, and more frequently. At the touch of a key, I can say hello, send photos, link to a website, or send a joke. It’s fun, and it’s easy. Professionally, I am able to keep in touch with colleagues, and all of you, and keep up-to-date with what is going on within the Unitarian Universalist Association, and among interfaith small congregation folks.

It can also be dangerous. Our messages may accidentally get sent to the wrong person. We can be misunderstood because typewritten words do not contain body language and nuance. If we respond and hit “reply” too soon, tempers can escalate. We can feel so bombarded by e-mails—junk and not junk—that we simply hit “delete” and don’t read them at all, possibly missing some important information.

And then again, many of us do not even use, or want to use, computers, e-mail and the Internet.

### Create a policy

How can small congregations use this technology in a way that helps our communities grow and strengthen, get some work done in an easier and more efficient way, and not start an internal war?

By creating a policy. If you have specific guidelines for the use of e-mail within a congregation, you can avoid many of the problems that arise. Shall your congregation have a chat group? An an-

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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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nouncements-only list? A governing board decision-making list? Who gets to post announcements, and what kind? What kinds of decisions can be made, and who can make them? There is much to think about.

## **Appropriate announcements**

E-mail is a handy way to remind members and friends of an upcoming special event at the church—the harvest dinner, the wreath-making day, the flea market, the youth group sleep-over. As long as these events are also being announced at worship, and through the newsletter, there's no harm in also reminding those who have e-mail.

The challenge comes when people want to use the congregation's e-mail list to announce non-church activities. Think about how announcements are used during worship—does your congregation allow non-church-related events to be announced? Is it OK to announce the play at the high school if one of the youth is in it, or just because someone wants to announce it? How about the candlelight vigil at the federal building, or the speech by an international environmentalist, or the Progressive Party organizing meeting?

In a small congregation, the leadership can hold a meeting after worship to get people's opinions on this topic. E-mail announcements, newsletter announcements, and worship announcements can all be discussed, and a policy can be created that works for everyone. The goal is to present useful information to people without being overwhelming or unwelcoming. Remember to tie in e-mail (and verbal, snail mail, and newsletter) announcements to the ministry and mission of your congregation.

## **Using e-mail to do business**

The governing body, committees, and task forces may want to use e-mail to do business in between meetings. It can be handy for people who need to follow up on an issue after a meeting to post the results of their research. Decisions that need to be made in between meetings (ones that don't require extensive conversation or visuals) can be made by e-mail. Posting a "to-do" list can be useful. That way everyone sees who has agreed to do what, and by when. E-mail can increase accountability. It's also great for previewing brochures, letters, and other documents for comments before a final version.

Other uses for e-mail include posting an agenda prior to a meeting, and posting the minutes soon afterwards. Both of these functions help make business more timely and efficient. Don't forget to save these

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documents on paper as well—or be sure that the Clerk backs up their computer documents on disc.

But, all that being said, e-mail is not the place to debate an important issue, to complain about people, or to undermine the ministry and mission of the congregation. Remember the caveat that you should only send any e-mails that you would be happy to see on the front page of the newspaper! Even if you think you're being careful, e-mails have a funny way of ending up in the wrong people's hands (or computers). It's all too easy to hit the "send" button in a moment of pique. Read your church business e-mail, and take a break. Wait to answer anything in a few minutes, or a few hours, or even the next day.

If a congregational group is going to use e-mail to conduct business it's a good idea to find out everyone's e-mail habits. Some folks check their e-mail every day, or several times a day; other may check only once or twice a week. You may need to make a policy or have a recommendation as to how quickly a response is needed or wanted. If it's a very important issue that is time-sensitive, a phone or in-person meeting may be best.

Each group can also decide whether or not to communicate simply by listing everyone's e-mail addresses in the "to" box, or by creating an e-mail newsgroup via Yahoo or Google. It's up to you. Using a newsgroup allows the communications to stay within the group (and not be accidentally sent to others), and can be created with an automatic "reply all" function. Most newsgroups also only allow members to post, which cuts down on spam and other unnecessary postings. Just go on the Yahoo or Google websites to see how to set up a group.

For someone who is computer-literate, it's a simple process.

### **Don't forget your website!**

You can create a calendar of congregational activities on your website and allow members to post meetings, events, worship, and special activities.

If everyone shares in doing the posting, the work can be spread around. Or perhaps your administrator, if you have one, can do the job. That way those with Internet access can check dates and times of events in a simple way (and leave the front of the refrigerator for other things).

Some congregations choose to keep their directory—password-protected—on the congregation's website. This can make things easier for the person putting the directory together and updating it, and can allow easy access from any location that has a computer. You will also want to have paper copies for those who need or want them, and for the archives.

### **What about those without e-mail?**

There is the issue of leaving out people who do not have Internet access. Remember that when public announcements or news go out by e-mail, you should also make them available to those without Internet access. Your newsletter, order of service, or announcement time at church are good ways to get the news out to those without e-mail.

If the majority of your congregation doesn't have Internet access, then e-mail-based congregational communication will not work for you. However, if only a few members do not have e-mail, it may be possible to encour-

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age them to get free e-mail accounts and read their e-mail at the library. For others, you can set up an “e-buddy” system—one person with e-mail pairs up with someone without e-mail and commits to keeping that person informed at least once a week of what has transpired. This improves communication within the congregation and gives some members a simple way to help out by being an “e-buddy.”

## It's a modern world!

Sometimes I fret about how disconnected we may become as Internet use increases, and in-person contact goes down. However, that's what our religious communities are for—keeping up the in-person connection. And if using e-mail makes the business of a small congregation go easier, then let's do it.

*Thanks to John C. Turner of the Unitarian Universalists of the Chester River, Chestertown, MD, for suggesting, and helping with, this article.*



## Small congregation handouts now online!

If you stopped by the Small Congregations booth at General Assembly, you may have picked up one or more of the handouts written by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, on many different topics pertaining to small congregations.

Now all of these handouts are available online in PDF format at [www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm](http://www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm). Many thanks to Andrea Lerner for getting them online! Feel free to copy as many as you need and distribute to your congregation's leadership – just make sure that all content and formatting is unchanged.

## The Issue Index

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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