
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

November 2006

To know a congregation,
love it, care for it, and lead
it, a person must understand
it—who it is, where it is, how it
works, and what makes it tick.

—David R. Ray, *The Indispensable
Guide for Smaller Churches*

Greatest Challenges #3: Professional Ministry

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

At the 2006 General Assembly in St. Louis, many people approached me with questions about professional ministry. This is a challenging topic for many small congregations. Should we have a minister? What kind (consulting/contract or called)? What is the minister supposed to do? Can we grow without a minister? Can we find a minister who understands small congregations? Can we afford a minister?

Myths and stereotypes of ministry

Many people in small congregations are wary of professional ministry. Others place the minister on a pedestal. Reality is in between. Ministers are not evil incarnate, bossy, and full of bright ideas that will just make people angry. Nor are they eternal saviors, guaranteed to provide the best in pastoral care, preaching, and social action all the while helping the congregation grow to record numbers.

Ministers are *people*—specially trained people, yes—and so each individual minister is not necessarily the right one for every congregation. It's true that some ministers don't understand small congregations, and do not want to serve them except as a stepping stone to a larger congregation. On the other hand, there are other ministers who adore small congregations and are happy to work part time. The trick is to be up front about all of this with anyone you interview so you know where they stand. Choose the right person for you—even if you have to wait several years to do so—and chances are the relationship will be happy and productive.

The most charismatic minister will not make a congregation grow alone. The congregation has to want to grow, has to be in an area where growth is possible demographically, and has to have their house in order. In other words, if the congregation is not well-

Ministers
continued on page 2...



Inside...

About Small Talk.....pg 2
More on Bunout.....pg 3
Resources.....pg 4

About Small Talk

Small Talk is a newsletter 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,
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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
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*This is Volume Four, Issue Three.*

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grounded and healthy in their practices of worship, leadership, conflict management, and social action, even the most dynamic minister will have a hard time helping the congregation grow.

If your congregation is challenged in any of these areas and you know you need improvement, a minister can help. But to expect the minister to do it all is a recipe for failure—and even more conflict. Working together is the way to growth and success.

And no, you don't need a minister to grow and be a healthy congregation. You can do without. But that choice needs to be deliberate and agreed upon by the congregation. And then you need to agree on how to improve whatever needs to be improved—your welcoming of newcomers, your organizational structure, your worship, your social action. Without a minister who could offer help, you may choose to bring in a consultant, take advantage of District or General Assembly workshops, or ask a nearby congregation that handles this area well for assistance. It always helps to have the eye of an outsider tell you what seems to be working well and what isn't.

The June 2006 issue of *Small Talk*, "So You're Looking for a Minister," goes over much of this material, and offers suggestions to help you discern if you do want a minister, and why, so that you can have the greatest success in finding someone who is a good fit for you.

## **OK, we've chosen a minister. Now what?**

Congratulations! I hope it will be the beginning of a beautiful relationship. And as with other important relationships, it is vital to be honest from the start, making expectations—on both sides—clear. Your Search Committee and Governing Board can work on this as they negotiate a contract or covenant with the new minister.

It's important to remember that the minister is not to be feared, or thought of with suspicion. There are many people in small congregations—particularly those congregations who have been lay-led for a long time—who worry that a minister will come in, take over and tell people what to do. This should not happen if everyone is up front from the beginning about the expectations of the minister and the congregation. A minister does not have to lead worship every Sunday, for example, but can be more in the background, preaching once a month and training others to lead worship. It's all up to you and the needs of your group. But do try to give the minister the benefit of the doubt. They want the relationship to work out as much as you do.

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Don't turn the minister into a secretary or sexton. You've hired this professional to be your spiritual leader, not to fix leaky toilets, make coffee, or copy the Order of Service. Make sure these roles are clear from the beginning. It's not that the minister will never make coffee or use the copier, but it shouldn't be an expectation.

Don't expect the minister's family to attend every event, take a leadership role in the congregation, or even show up at all. Your relationship is with the minister, not with their family. Each minister has worked this out privately with his or her family members in advance, no doubt throughout their seminary journey. Some partners are of a different faith. Some partners or children want to stay home and relax on Sunday morning. Some partners or children are private or shy people. Others jump right in. Be prepared for whatever happens.

### **Ministers are people, too**

Thank your minister often, and sincerely. Not a "that was a great sermon" comment at Social Hour, but perhaps a note written later in the week as you, once again, thought about something that was said. If you know the minister is having a personal challenge—a family member who is ill, for example—give them a call to ask how things are going and to say you're thinking of them. Caring and compassion goes both ways. Professional ministry can be lonely work—reach out, appropriately, if you can. But, remember, don't expect the minister to be your "friend" or to treat you differently because you said something nice or made them a casserole.

Ministers are not perfect. They have good times, and bad times, in their personal lives, and in their work lives. They can do wonderful things for a small congregation, but they can't do it alone. Show

up for worship, take your turn volunteering in some capacity, participate in congregational meetings, and bring your concerns and complaints directly to the minister and/or the Committee on Ministry (*see the Feb. 2006 issue for more about this Committee*). We are

here to deepen our lives in our religious communities through relationship, caring, and compassion for others. And that goes for the minister as well as the congregation.






And at some point, the minister will leave. Sometimes a conflict ends the relationship; sometimes it is a family or financial issue.

But mainly it is because the minister is ready for a new professional challenge, and feels that they have done all they can do for your congregation. The end of a relationship is hard, and the mystery of a new one still stands in the future. Look forward to the transition—it's simply another chance for growth and learning for you as individuals and as a congregation.

*Next month—Greatest Challenge #4: Finances.*

## **About this issue**

*This issue is the third in a series of Small Talks addressing the five greatest issues facing small congregations, as voiced by visitors to the small congregation booth at General Assembly 2006. The top five, in no particular order, are:*

-  **Growth**
-  **Member retention and burnout**
-  **Professional ministry**
-  **Finances**
-  **Conflict and change**

**Here we are—all of us—all upon this planet,**  
bound together by a common destiny, living our  
lives between the briefest of the daylight and  
the dark.

Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precar-  
ious, flickering flame of life, how does it happen  
that we are not knidred in all things else?

How strange and foolish are these walls of  
separation that divide us!

—A. Powell Davies, *Unitarian Universalist*



## Resources for Small Congregations

### Email discussion list

for leaders (lay and paid)  
of small congregation  
[lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk](http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk)

### Email list for ministers of small congregations

[lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/  
smallchurch-min](http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min)

### Handouts by the Rev. Jane Dwinell

1-2 page handouts on: change, finances,  
governance, leadership, publications, Small  
Group Ministry, welcoming, and worship  
[umetry.org/misc/materials](http://umetry.org/misc/materials)

## The Issue Index

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|                                         |                |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| <b>What is a Small Congregation?</b>    | December 2003  |
| <b>Governance Structure</b>             | January 2004   |
| <b>Numbers (statistics to keep)</b>     | February 2004  |
| <b>Social Action</b>                    | March 2004     |
| <b>Growth: Part One</b>                 | April 2004     |
| <b>Growth: Part Two</b>                 | May 2004       |
| <b>A Roadmap to Change</b>              | June 2004      |
| <b>Small is Beautiful Report</b>        | September 2004 |
| <b>The Small Church of the Future</b>   | October 2004   |
| <b>Publications: Part One (layout)</b>  | November 2004  |
| <b>Publications: Part Two (content)</b> | December 2004  |
| <b>Conflict</b>                         | January 2005   |
| <b>Creative Worship</b>                 | February 2005  |
| <b>The Annual Canvass</b>               | March 2005     |
| <b>Small Group Ministry</b>             | April 2005     |
| <b>Knowing and Telling Our Stories</b>  | May 2005       |
| <b>Summer Worship—Yes or No?</b>        | June 2005      |
| <b>Small Congregations Speak Out</b>    | September 2005 |
| <b>Building a Music Program</b>         | October 2005   |
| <b>Technology: Help or Hindrance?</b>   | November 2005  |
| <b>Celebrating December Holidays</b>    | December 2005  |
| <b>Transformational Congregations</b>   | January 2006   |
| <b>Committee on Ministry</b>            | February 2006  |
| <b>Welcoming Congregation Work</b>      | March 2006     |
| <b>Greening the Small Congregation</b>  | April 2006     |
| <b>Religious Education for Children</b> | May 2006       |
| <b>So You're Looking for a Minister</b> | June 2006      |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #1: Growth</b>   | September 2006 |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout</b>  | October 2006   |
| <b>Greatest Challenges #3: Ministry</b> | November 2006  |