

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

November 2007

We are in the world
to change the world.

—adapted from Käthe Kollwitz

Another Look at Social Action

by **The Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant**

We Unitarian Universalists love to talk about the pressing social issues of the day—global warming, same sex marriage, racism, the war in Iraq, the question of Palestinian rights, the crisis in Darfur, and so on. We listen to (or preach) sermons on these topics, write letters to our elected officials, donate money to organizations, hold informational meetings, and attend public hearings or peace marches. We are activists, one and all.

The individual things that we all do to make our world a better place are all important, and all necessary. But what does your congregation do to make your local world a better place? In other words, what is your congregation's mission?

Your mission is not your mission statement. Your mission is the thing that your congregation does for your local community. It's an active thing, not a talking and discussing thing.

Along with quality worship and religious exploration (for all ages), a way to care for one another, a solid organizational structure, and a process for handling conflict, your congregation needs a mission to make your congregation strong, solid, and whole.

Many small congregations feel they are too busy—and too small—to take on a social action project of any kind. Not true. There are small congregations all over that are doing wonderful things for their community. In fact, you may already have a mission and not know it.

Do you let a food bank or soup kitchen use your building so that the hungry in your area will be fed? Do you host or help at the homeless shelter on a regular basis? Do you run an after school program or help with tutoring in the local schools? Do you have a thrift



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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.

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shop? Do you provide low cost or free space for artists or musicians to practice their art and give lessons? Do you host a support group for bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender or questioning youth?

These are all things that some of our small congregations are doing as their mission. In some cases they didn't even realize they had a mission until it was pointed out to them.

Your mission doesn't have to be complicated, expensive, or a lot of work. Your mission could be a once-a-year event, something done once a month, or something done once a week. It's up to you to figure out what works best for your congregation.

Here's how to find a mission.

Look at your congregation's best skills

Many congregations are very good at food and hospitality. Other congregations have an overflow of artists. Other congregations are all senior citizens with a wealth of life experience. Some congregations have many children or adults who love children. Some congregations care passionately about issues such as racism, immigration, same sex marriage, or environmental concerns. Find the place of passion in your group.

Look at your community's needs

Let's say your congregation's skills lie in the food and hospitality area. Does your community have a food shelf, a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter, a free holiday meal at Thanksgiving or Christmas, a breakfast program for hungry kids, a community garden? If your community is missing these services, you could start one. If your community does have these services, you could inquire whether they need help in any way. Your mission may be as simple as being in charge of supplying fresh produce to the soup kitchen, giving the soup kitchen a location, or washing dishes once a month. Just ask. The professionals serving the hungry in your area will be happy to tell you what they need.

Get commitment from the congregation

The leadership of your congregation should start the conversation about mission, and get input from members and friends in whatever way works for your group—casual inquiries at social hour, a formal questionnaire, small group meetings, an all-congregation meeting. Toss around a few ideas, look at what you might already be doing without realizing it, assign some people to talk to professionals who

may be active in a chosen venue to see what is needed—then choose a mission, and be proud of it!

Keep it simple and find a way for everyone to be involved

You don't have to cook for the soup kitchen every day or every week if that's just too much for your group—once a month is plenty. Or you could choose a mission that's a one-time event like a holiday meal. Find a way for your children to be involved. They can collect food donations, make decorations, wait tables, or play music for your guests. If you have folks with limited time and energy due to personal crisis, health issues, or just a busy schedule, find something for them to do, too—perhaps baking a pie, donating a few jars of peanut butter, making phone calls, or writing thank you notes.

Celebrate your mission and remember to thank everyone

Make sure there's a regular column in your newsletter about your mission, that you list it in your order of service or on your signboard outside the church (“Our mission is to help feed the hungry in Smalltown USA”), and have a section of your bulletin board devoted to it. Include your mission in worship at least once a year—talking about the effects of hunger and poverty and what people have

learned and felt from participating in your mission, for example. Your leadership should keep track of everyone who participates (in whatever way) and thank them with notes, small gifts, on a plaque or bulletin board, or in worship. Be proud of what you do!

Don't be afraid to change your mission

If it starts to seem like it's too much to host the senior meal site once a week, see if you can cut back to every other week, or once a month. Or

look into finding another small congregation in your area that might be interesting in participating. Perhaps everyone is tired of food and hospitality, and wants to focus on environmental issues instead. You

get to choose, and you get to change. Just be sure to find another congregation or organization that will take over your project, and go through another congregational process to choose a new mission. Congregational and community needs change over time—a fresh start might give you new energy.

Our faith calls us to act for justice, and there is so much work to be done in our world. It can get overwhelming. Just remember that we can't do everything, but we can do something. Find the right something for your congregation, do it well, and give thanks for the opportunity to be of use to your local community.

} **You get to choose, and you get to change. A fresh start might give you new energy.**

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

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for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations
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