

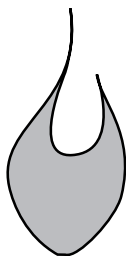
# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

November 2008

We'll build a land where  
we bind up the broken/We'll  
build a land where the cap-  
tives go free/Where the oil of  
gladness dissolves all mourn-  
ing/Oh, we'll build a prom-  
ised land that can be.

—Barbara Zanotti, adapted from  
Isaiah 61 and Amos 5:24



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## Inside-Out, Upside-Down, Large-Small Church World The Story of the Living Room Church, Part Three

*Editor's note: This is the final installment of the tale of The Living Room Church, a new and radical way of being a small congregation. In this issue, you'll get some ideas for revisioning your own congregation's way of being in the world.*

by the Rev. Ron Robinson, Turley, Oklahoma

But what of the existing, typical, small church that has been around for fifty or more years, either maintaining a status quo of place, style, or numbers throughout most of those years, or being a once larger church now decreasing in numbers? How can these congregations — perhaps your congregation — become incarnational missions where current resources are yielding so many transformational results that if they closed their doors their immediate community would not only notice but be drastically affected?

What do I think existing small congregations can do to live more fully in this way, the way of a new plant? Well, we went for three years without any bylaws or a budget (actually, we have gone almost the whole time without a budget; just the knowledge that everything goes into mission and being broke helps that). So suspend your bylaws for a specified time, at least a year and preferably more, because it takes sometimes three to five years to create culture change. Get rid of all committees and leadership “positions,” so often the protected turf of self-selected leaders who control the church, and see yourselves as starting anew. Create a “discontinuity with the past.”

Your minister, area consultants, and others can help you do this, and there are lots of ways to walk with one another through this transition. You can create a curriculum of change that includes studying culture, studying what new church plants and social ministries and even entrepreneurial businesses are doing, studying how to turn communities inside out. Take the time to rediscover the roots of your faith tradition

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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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so you can branch off in new ways. Do a demographic/ethnographic study of your own church community and of the area within two miles of where you are located. Become acquainted with the “abandoned places of Empire” and consider ways to relocate there, either wholly or in part with new partnerships and new missions (though nothing is the same as becoming a part of a place where you already have enough resources to make a huge impact). As part of that study, learn about the multiple generational cultures, perhaps within your own group, and especially in the area around you. Discern ways that your folks in their sixties and older can see themselves as helping create a legacy of change for the future beyond themselves, instead of lamenting being part of a loss because church is not what it used to be for them.

You can also look at ways you can turn over your existing space to the larger community — perhaps following our approach of seeing what your community needs and using your building for those purposes, and *then* figuring out how you can do worship or education for your own members. Also, consider how you can take events that have been primarily just for church members and to meet a church budget, and make them outward-focused to help meet a community need and to bring in community folks as planners and leaders of events.

Speaking of budgets, do away with an annual budget and move toward monthly or quarterly budgeting, enabling you to live closer to the edge and to be more responsive to the chaotic forces of a changing culture. If you have inherited the curse of an endowment, look for ways to channel it into mission and not into maintenance. That might be hard to do, but inspiration will come — I would love to hear the stories of how it is working. Perhaps as you expand your sense of yourself as church, your sense of how an endowment is used will change, too. Consider ways to partner with others to enlarge your sense of yourself and your mission. Maybe it is working with nonprofits of varying kinds. Maybe it is being a part of a new multisite congregation where you become a particular missional wing of a larger church. Mergers out of weakness often create more weakness, but if you approach it from sources of strength and spirit and innovation and radical discontinuity with the past, it can grow. Maybe another small church can be the worship center and your small church can be the mission center, or vice versa, two poles creating energy back and forth between them like a Jacob's Ladder.

Maybe there's no way you can imagine doing any of this and are feeling a bit despairing (after all, some studies have shown that in nine out of ten cases people will choose to die rather than to change). So instead, find hope as you look for just one way to begin some new, mis-

sional activity outside of your usual parameters of time and space and people. Seed it, nurture it, protect it from those who wish to call it a weed and kill it, let it grow, and watch it self-sow someplace else.

In time, it will change the sowers as well as the world. Stories of this abound.

Risk death. Risk failure. Risk people leaving. Risk healthy conflict. In fact, cultivate all of that. (Besides, they are all going to happen at some point anyway.)

It is a good thing. Many church planters aren't concerned if their group is around in ten or one hundred years or more. What keeps us up at night is whether we are sowing enough seeds of change now, and trusting enough that our faithfulness to our mission is all we need worry about.

Which begs the question: do you know and feel what your mission and purpose is, in your own life and in the life of your church? Don't do a long process to figure that out, and don't waste your time coming up with a long paragraph to describe it — something that not long from now no one will be able to recite or remember. But, in sharing, listen to the

stirrings of the prophets and the poets and theologians among you. Learn from those outside your group. Then, you will find the phrase (no longer than a dozen words) that will mark you and guide

you and set you free to act. For us, again, it is being "a body of people making Jesus visible in the world." For you it may be "a body of people making Freedom/ Love/Justice visible in the world" or something else altogether.

Being "small," or "micro," or "tribal," or "relational," or "communal" are all terms for something that is happening not only within religious spheres, but across all our cultures. It is being on the cutting edge of new ways of being church in the twenty-first century and echo back to the ways of the early church in the first millennium after Jesus. It is exciting to be here and to have such an opportunity now, right within our grasp — if we will let go of our fears, and, in the words of one of our beloved hymns, let the "life that maketh all things new" grasp us.

*The End. . . for now. . .*

**Seed [your missional work],  
nurture it, protect it from those  
who wish to call it a weed and  
kill it, let it grow, and watch it  
self-sow someplace else.**

## Reverend Ron Robinson's Recommended Reading

Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars*

Neil Cole, *Organic Church and Search and Rescue*

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches*

Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *The Shaping of Things To Come, The Forgotten Ways, and Exiles*

Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*

Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashimi Brock, *Saving Paradise*

Lyle Schaller, *Small Congregation, Big Potential*

Tom Sine and Shane Claiborne, *The New Conspirators: Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time*

Robin Trebilcock, *The Small Church At Large*

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