

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

October 2005

“Singing in community

brings us together and lets us know that we can raise a clear and unified voice... a congregation that loves to sing is almost always a vital and strong religious community.”

—*The Rev. William Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, in the foreword to Singing the Journey, the new supplement to Singing the Living Tradition.*



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Building a Music Program in Small Congregations

by guest contributor **Steve Finner, Music Director at the St. Johnsbury, VT Unitarian Universalist Church**

By way of introduction, I am entering my fourth year as music director of a small congregation, having moved here from a large church (All Souls, Washington DC), where I was an active layperson, singer and chair of the music committee (among many other jobs). I have been very active, and an officer, in the Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network (more about that later), am a composer and arranger, and for fifteen years have been conducting workshops for small congregations on empowering the congregational voice.

There were approximately 20 members when I came to St. Johnsbury which quickly rose to 26 with the start of the choir. Our membership reached 44, but with the normal comings and goings is currently at 36. Our choir sings two Sundays a month and numbers nine plus myself and the accompanist. Thus, the choir is more than the Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network (UUMN) recommended 20% of a small congregation, and when all are present, is a third to one half of those in attendance. While I obviously feel very good about this, it did not happen overnight, and in fact, has taken a full three years to reach that point. We are privileged to have a talented accompanist who can also sing, and most important, the congregation is a singing congregation. My intention in this article is to tell you some of the things I did and recommend for building a successful music program in a small congregation.

The congregation is the choir!

Now, in spite of the fact that having a choir is nice and can happen, the starting point is to recognize and make clear to church members that the congregation is the choir. By this I mean that the

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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.

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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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role of music in worship is central and it is the congregational voice. Therefore it is the first task of a music director to encourage and empower the congregation to sing strongly and well, and the choir will most likely come from the nucleus of members who are willing to come forward, learn hymns before services and lead their fellow congregants in singing those hymns. Therefore, the rest of this article deals with congregational singing and information on starting and growing a choir will have to wait until another time.

I am fortunate in that my minister leaves the job of selecting hymns to me. Every few months we sit down and he reviews his plans for services and sermons inviting my input. Based on that meeting, I select hymns for each service keeping in mind a balance between the old familiar hymns that everyone (or most) like to sing and choosing new ones that, although they may stretch vocal boundaries at first, quickly become part of the familiar group. On the Sundays I am present, whether or not the choir is singing, I lead the congregation in the singing of the hymns. This is not to say that I stand in front and conduct the congregation as if they were a formal choir. But I do keep a beat and often move through the congregation singing the hymn with them. On choir Sundays, the choir also stands in front of the congregation singing the hymn and I invite choir members on those Sundays when the choir is not singing to do the same.

If the tune is a new one, the accompanist plays it first. Sometimes she will play it as the prelude. If the melody is a bit tricky, I will have the choir rehearse it before service, sing the first verse and then invite the congregation to join in on subsequent verses. Even if the hymn has parts or vocal harmonies, I encourage the hymns to be sung in unison to start. As the congregation gains confidence in singing a particular hymn as time goes on, I will teach harmonies to the choir and sometimes simple ones to the congregation. Remember, that your accompaniment, be it piano, organ, guitar or other instrument, usually provides harmonic structure to enrich the overall sound.

## **Musical tips and tricks**

There are a number of musical devices that strengthen both the sound and the confidence of the congregation. One, of course, is the singing of rounds. But be careful not to begin the round until all have sung the selection in unison at least twice. And as you divide up the congregation into sections for each round, make sure you have your choir or group of strong singers evenly distributed among the sections, with someone leading each section. Most of the selections in *Singing The Living Tradition* (hereafter STLT) between #383 and

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#401 can be done as rounds. If the piece indicates 3 or 4 parts and you feel you only have enough for 2 parts, bring your second part in as indicated. Sometimes I divide my congregation into two or three parts for a four part round and when I am sure they are singing it well, I become the solo third or fourth part. Rounds are best sung acapella as it can be confusing for someone to be singing one part while hearing a piano play another part, which is quite different than hearing others *sing* another part.

**One method used by a number of small congregations which do not yet have a choir is to invite those interested to come into the sanctuary fifteen minutes before the service and rehearse the hymns.**

Another device for making a varied sound is to have sections of the congregation alternate on subsequent verses, such as all singing the first verse, upper voices the second verse, lower voices the third verse, and all joining together on the final verse. Or you can alternate between the front and back or the left and right hand sides of the congregation. There are some pieces that sing well if you have the congregation turn and face across the aisle so everyone is looking at someone else when they sing. A good piece for doing this is “From You I Give, To You I Receive” (STLT #402).

### **Good accompaniment is key**

The accompanist is key to congregational singing. If your congregation has hired, or has in its membership, a strong sight reader, you are indeed blessed. We hire high school students, both because of availability and economics. My current accompanist started as a sophomore and is now very good, though she is a senior and will be graduating. The first year her salary was \$35 a Sunday and has been increased \$5 every April. Thus, it will be \$50 when she graduates, and I hope to start her successor at \$40 and raise that \$5 every year. She has the piano edition of STLT and I have taken the wonderful new volume *Singing The Journey* (STJ),

and cut off the binder, punched holes and put rings through the holes so that the book easily lies flat on the piano. I email her the hymns for each Sunday the preceding Wednesday or Thursday so she can rehearse them.

If you do not have a pianist, then you may want to find a guitar player, as many of the STLT selections can be accompanied by guitar and all the selections in STJ have guitar chord indications. There are a number of selections in both volumes that can be accompanied

by a harmonica or other instrument, and also those which can be sung acapella. Many pieces in both volumes will benefit considerably from the use of percussion, and suggestions for the use of percussion are given in *Singing The Journey*. (The reader wishing specific advice about alternate accompaniments, which tunes can be done acapella, and the use of percussion is encouraged to contact me at [steve@finner.info](mailto:steve@finner.info))

### **Start making a joyful noise!**

Now that you have some ideas and tips, the next step is to start the process of using them. One method used by a number of small congregations which do not yet have a choir is to invite those interested to come into the sanctuary fifteen minutes before the service and rehearse the hymns. Last spring I did a workshop for the Glasgow, Scotland Unitarian congregation, and I just learned that they now have a group of singers gathering once a month an hour before services to do this as well as to learn some simple responses (chalice lightings, benedictions and the like). Alternatively, invite people to stay for awhile after the service (and Social Hour) and rehearse the hymns for the following week.

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## Music Program continued from page 3...

I mentioned at the start of this article my involvement in the UUMN (Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network). Any congregation that is seriously interested in strengthening its singing voice and enhancing its worship should join the UUMN. The dues of \$50 for small congregations is one of the best deals around. Besides a quarterly newsletter and opportunity to attend the Annual Conference (as well as regional conferences), UUMN maintains a Mentor program designed for small congregations to assist in developing a music program, growing a choir, choosing repertoire and more. I have been privileged to have been a mentor for a number of congregations and the experience has been mutually beneficial. For more information, go to [www.uua.org/uumn](http://www.uua.org/uumn).

I hope the above is helpful, and perhaps I can share thoughts on building a choir in a small congregation in a subsequent issue. In the meanwhile, all the best in leading your congregations to “make a joyful noise.”



## 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.

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Go to [www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm](http://www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm) to download back issues of SMALL TALK!



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