

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

October 2007

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**Never doubt that a small**  
group of thoughtful, committed  
citizens can change the world.  
Indeed, it's the only thing that  
ever has.

—Margaret Mead,  
anthropologist

## Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change: A New Way to Look at Your Congregation

by **The Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist**

**W**e gather together for worship, for fun, for board meetings, to be with the children, to raise money, to eat, to sing, and to create heaven on earth in our community. There are many ways to do these things, and often we do them in a hit or miss fashion. Sometimes we do things like the congregations we came from did them (whatever our previous faith). Sometimes we do things like we do at our workplace. Sometimes we think “church”—let’s have a worship service, forgetting that we need money to do that, and a place, and suddenly we need a bank account, a pledge drive, and nonprofit status, and it gets overwhelming.

There’s a way to step back and look at all the things you do (and need to do) and focus on getting them done in the easiest and most productive way. That’s where Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change comes in.

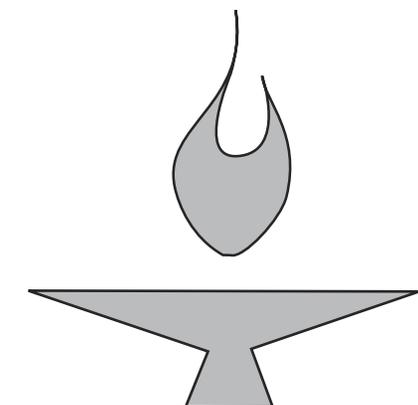
Small congregations need to center, connect, and create change to be able to survive and thrive. This way to look at things in your congregation is like a three-legged stool—without one leg, the stool will tip over and the congregation will falter. How is your congregation doing in these three areas?

### Centering

Centering is about grounding in basic structures and support—governance, money, property, staff, communications, conflict management, and the all-essential paperwork.

The first leg of the stool, Centering gives a congregation a base from which to provide programming. Without a simple and

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A New Way
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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.

the Rev. Jane Dwinell

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clear organizational structure, a congregation will be unable to move forward to serve its members, friends, and larger community. Every congregation needs some sort of leadership, a budget, a place to meet, a way to communicate and handle conflict, and at least a bare minimum of paperwork. At some point, a congregation will consider hiring staff, purchasing or renovating a building, and will need to expand ways to do things.

Centering activities include leadership, buildings, money, staff, conflict prevention and resolution, communication, and creating bylaws and policies and procedures. By looking at these areas, you can figure out the best structure for your congregation, and decide how to raise money, take care of your property, and keep in touch with your members, friends, and visitors. You can consider when and if you need staff, who to hire when, and how to be a good employer. Then there's conflict—understanding it and learning the best ways to deal with it.

Centering activities give you a base from which to Connect and Create Change. Centering may not be the most “sexy” work of your congregation, but without that solid organizational base, it's hard to move forward to work on social justice, spiritual growth, interfaith connections or any other spiritually deepening, life changing activity of the small congregation. Read on.

Connecting

Connecting is about being in relationship with something larger than ourselves through worship, religious exploration, caring, hospitality, and reaching out to other faith communities

The second leg of the three-legged stool, Connecting is the part of congregational work that involves reaching out to something greater. With the Centering work of creating structure in place, we now come together to learn, celebrate, deepen, connect, and reach out. Whether you connect with other members of the congregation, your visitors and friends, other religious communities in town, or the greater world of Unitarian Universalism, you are moving outward. Connecting is also a time for connecting with yourself—your needs, gifts, joys, fears, and experience of the divine. It is the place for growing and changing—for individuals and for the community. Although most faith communities think of worship as their primary activity, it is not the only means of connecting. It is simply the most visible.

Connecting is about the many ways of being in relationship. By considering each of them, and their place in your congregation, you can improve and strengthen your religious community.

Creating Change

Creating Change is about creating heaven on earth within our congregations and the larger world.

The third leg of the stool, Creating Change covers social action work (your mission), and growth.

Your congregation needs to look beyond the four walls of your meeting space—to visitors, to spreading our faith, and to doing something to make the world a better place. This doesn't have to be complicated or hard—you don't have to do everything for everyone. Keep it simple and keep it useful.

Choosing the mission of your congregation—that place where your congregation's gifts meet your community's needs—is the most vital thing you can do as a religious community. Grounded by a solid structure (Centering), deepened by our connection with others and all that is sacred (Connecting), we are then ready to move our faith into the wider world. Through the strength and joy we find in our congregations, we are compelled to act. Your congregation's mission becomes a vital part of who you are and what you do. Find one thing to do to help your local community. Embrace it, commit to it, and do it. The change that happens will be on many levels—personal growth, congregational deepening, and community transformation.

Choosing the mission of your congregation is the most vital thing you can do as a religious community.

Every congregation talks about growth. Some people think that more members will mean more money and more hands to do the work. But if you have created a good structure and an appropriate budget for your congregation through Centering, you know that having more members just means having a more vital and interesting community. Not every area that has a small UU church has the population base to grow much; others could grow to be mid-size and large congregations. Is growth the right thing for your congregation? Do you want to spread our faith? Do you want to open the circle and welcome everyone to the table?

Creating Change is what we are here for. Many aspects of our world—local and global—are broken and hurting. Our faith calls us to mend that which is broken as best we can. What will you do?

Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change—as you make decisions, gather together for worship or fun, or dream about the future, focus on these three areas. Plan your budget around these three areas, highlight them in your newsletter and on your website and bulletin board, and remind people of their importance. They will make your congregation strong, vital, and healthy—prepared to change lives and transform the world.

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

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for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations
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