

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

September 2007

Give us a child's eyes, that
we may receive the beauty
and freshness of the day like
a sunrise. Give us a child's
heart, that we may be filled
with wonder and delight.

—Sara Moores Campbell

Integrating Children into the Small Congregation

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

There are many wonderful things about small congregations, but one of the best is that your children can be part of everything you do. While it's really great to have a dynamic Religious Exploration (RE) program for your kids, it's also meaningful for them (and for your adults) to be part of the full life of your congregation. Here are some ideas:

Worship

In our denomination, it is common practice for children to attend the first part of the worship service. In this first part, there is usually at least a lighting of the chalice, one hymn, and a reading or two, perhaps an affirmation, maybe the offering, and often Joys and Concerns. There probably is a story or a "time for all." Then the children are "sung out" to their RE group(s). They are in the service anywhere from ten to thirty minutes, and then in RE for an hour or so. They get a taste of worship, of sitting and standing, of music and of words. They get a sense of community. They may also get the feeling that the adults can't wait to be rid of them so they can get on to the "real" business of church.

How are your children treated during worship? Do they participate by lighting the chalice, doing a reading, taking the offering, sharing their Joys and Concerns? Do they sit with their parents, or their friends? Do they pay attention, or do they whisper together in the back row? Is the story or "children's time" interesting and meaningful, relating to the rest of the service or what they're doing in RE? Or is it just another moralistic picture book? Do the adults laugh at their "cute" ideas, or treat them respectfully?

Children can participate in all aspects of worship. The younger children can help



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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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take the offering, or assist the greeter(s). Once they can handle fire carefully, they can light the chalice. When they're comfortable reading or memorizing, they can do a reading, lead the affirmation, or even do the children's time. They can play music, lead hymns, take part in a skit or a dance, offer a prayer, or do all or part of the sermon. They can be a full, and integral, part of worship. Integrate your children every week, but at least four to six times a year (once a month is ideal), plan a full intergenerational worship service.

Mission

What is the one thing your congregation can do to bring heaven on earth to your community—in other words, what is your congregation's mission? Do you participate in the local food shelf or soup kitchen? Do you host, or assist at, the homeless shelter? Do you build houses for Habitat for Humanity, host a thrift shop, a community garden, or an after-school program? Your children can be a part of any of these missions.

Children love to do what adults are doing—that's how they learn, more than from teachers, books, or computers. Our children are watching us, and are absorbing how to be (or not to be) in the world. They have energy. They have curiosity. They care about the world. They have good ideas. To leave them out of your congregation's mission is to deny them a significant experience in their life—and yours.

Even the youngest can do something. Food is involved in many missions—whether you are actually feeding people who are hungry, or feeding volunteers who are working on a project. I have yet to meet a child who didn't like to help prepare or serve food (especially when it's not in their own home!). Young children can play with other children, they can talk with the elderly, they can make music, tell stories or jokes, fetch things for the adults, or just bring another perspective to the gathering. Older children and teens can participate fully with the adults and may even want to take on a project themselves—running a thrift shop, for example, or putting on a birthday party for all the kids in the homeless shelter.

Leadership

Yes, our children can be leaders. Toddlers may want to help “watch” the babies, the early elementary age group may want to play with the toddlers and show them around the church or help copy and fold the order of service. Pre-teens and teens can serve on committees and task forces, can lead worship, can help organize events, and can lead RE groups for younger kids.

Our young people have many skills. Technology, especially, is one area that they may be more comfortable with than the adults. Your children or teens may be able to design your newsletter or website, run the sound system, set up podcasts of the sermon, burn CDs of music to be used for worship, or make a video of your congregation for YouTube.

It's important that the current leaders of your congregation watch for future leaders and nurture them. Look to your teens, in particular. You may see a natural future board president, minister, treasurer, music director, or administrator among them. Once your teens have "come of age" (through whatever process your congregation has), they can become full voting members and serve on the board of trustees. They can be part of a search committee for a minister or Director of Religious Exploration. They can be your General Assembly or District annual meeting delegate. Don't forget to ask them for their financial pledge, as well.

Religious Exploration

Becoming a truly intergenerational congregation means that *all* adults take their turn helping with the RE program. Many adults don't want to miss out on worship, but being with our children can be as enlightening and as meaningful as worship. Some adults are uncomfortable around children, or around certain age groups. Some adults feel they don't have the skills to "teach" a class.

Participating in a religious community means we will be pushed out of our comfort zone to grow as human beings. We get to practice the Golden Rule, and connect with one another in a deeper way. If being with children sounds uncomfortable or scary to you, all the more reason to do it! Since it's now recommended that there always be two adults with any group of children, you can solve this problem by pairing a comfortable-with-children adult with someone who might like to work on their skills in

this area. RE time is not "school" time—our kids need a break from school-like structure. RE time is "church" time. Your children need the same meaningful, connecting, growth-enhancing experience that your adults do. Your small congregation can find a way to create that community and that experience in everything that you do, but it's especially important that it be there when your children

gather together and look to your adults for direction. It's up to the adults to model the Beloved Community for the children (or the children will have to do it for the adults!). Be sure to take your turn.

} **It's up to the adults to model the Beloved Community for the children (or the children will have to do it for the adults!).**

Children are the future of our faith—but they're also here with us now. They will remember the way they were treated at church when they grow up, and, based on that experience, they will either choose to participate in a religious community or not. It's all up to you. Work with one of the greatest gifts of the small congregation—the ability to be a truly intergenerational spiritual community. And don't forget to have fun!

Resources for Small Congregations

Email discussion list for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregation

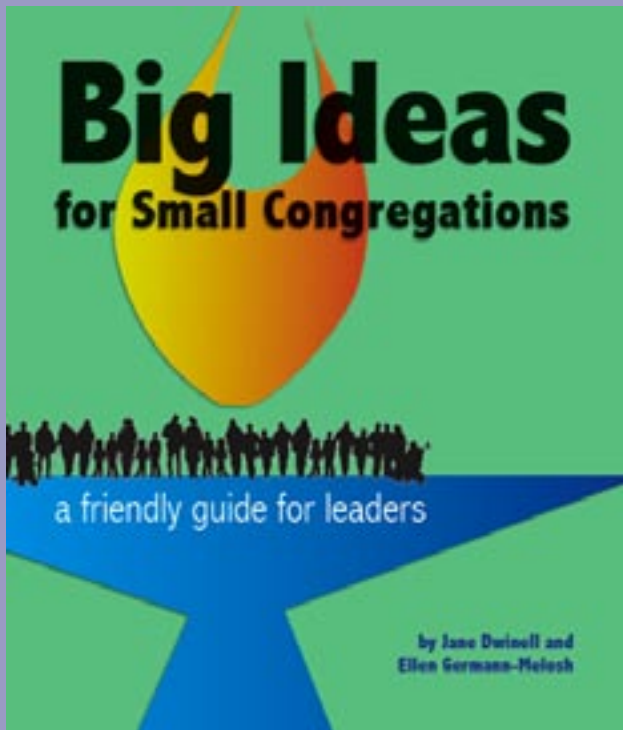
<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk>

Email list for ministers of small congregations

<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min>

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