

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

September 2008

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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

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

*Editor's note: Some amazing things are happening out there. This month and next I am featuring the story of the Turley, Oklahoma congregation. If you've got something new and innovative going on, let me know and I will feature your congregation in a future issue.*

**by the Rev. Ron Robinson, Turley, Oklahoma**

**H**ere are the facts: the Living Room Church is an emerging Unitarian Universalist church. We have no paid staff. We have six leaders who all work full-time, or near it, at other jobs. We have about ten to twelve at most when we meet weekly for our spiritual gatherings. We have now two children who have a weekly program. We all live in the poorest zip code in the Tulsa, Oklahoma metropolitan area—Turley and environs—where our life expectancy is fourteen years lower than that of the wealthiest zip code (where a high percentage of Unitarian Universalists live).

Within a two-mile radius of our rented space (our primary service area) the population is sixty-six percent African-American and the largest growing population is Hispanic. We have no pizza delivery for the thousands of residents around us; no movie houses for miles and miles, nor any other entertainment venues even though we are only six miles from downtown Tulsa. Most of our schools have been suffering for years and are on the list of “most in need of improvement.”

For worship, we have no hymnals and occasionally no printed orders of service. We have no nametags—and don't want any. And here is maybe the most important fact of all: if you drive down the major street that runs by our rented space, sandwiched between the local post office which is struggling to stay open and a closed laundromat, you will purposefully not see the name of the Living Room Church out front or the hour of worship. Many, many people in our community still have no idea the Living Room Church exists.

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**Living Room Church**  
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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 why should you bother to read about us? Why was I asked to write about us?

Here are more facts: We have 200 or more different people a month coming into our space (not counting when we held the community Halloween party and had 125 new people that night alone). In the past year, since we have been in our new 4,000-square-foot space, we have started a community library, a free internet center with six computers and wi-fi access for those around us who have none at home (especially the youth who come be with us), a free giveaway room of clothes and goods and whatever people wish to donate, a place to watch cable television and to read, a health clinic that meets twice or more a week, a community resource center with a graduate social work student twice a week, and we offer free sandwich meals anytime someone wants one and we are open, which is usually seven days a week at least half a day—and often a full day and late into the night.

We host a twelve-step program. We have started an animal welfare group and helped create another one that in the past two months has helped spay and neuter more than 200 dogs and taken them to no-kill shelters out-of-state.

We have started flowerbeds at the Turley welcome signs, the elementary school, the recreation center, and at local businesses. We have supported community gardens and local food projects. We have gone out on graffiti-removal missions several times and most recently worked to make safe two abandoned houses across from the school playground. We have started weekly nutrition classes. We have held an appreciation reception for local businesses. We coordinate community anti-litter drives two or three times a year.

We offer a free music coffeehouse monthly. We have been the hub for the first ever community planning and envisioning talks here in our unincorporated, fall-through-the-cracks-of-the-sidewalk area, and we have been the hub for local petition drives, voter registration especially for ex-felons, and more. Nearly every day we have people coming in and talking about a project to start. If it fits our vision for the world, we try to help turn them loose through us, whether or not they ever give us a cent. This is part of the permission-giving culture of an “open church.”

And each Wednesday evening we meet for our common meal, open to any who wish to join with us since our community center stays open during our time of worship in the center of the Center. We have a time of spiritual conversation, followed by a brief time of small group worship of lighting candles for joys and concerns, offering individual prayers, saying the Lord's Prayer, having a free and open communion for any who drop by, and holding hands (leaving one

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space open for the stranger we will meet) and singing “Shalom Havayreem” and “Go Now In Peace.”

I want to talk about connecting those two sets of facts. I want to talk about how we moved from being a small church with a vision of being bigger to a church that was intentionally fewer in number so we could do more—becoming an “enough” church. We always have enough—in numbers and in spirit—to become the church in the world and to be a living message in a community full of scarcity thinking. Abundance is all around us, and out of a vision of generosity comes enough to always meet the hurts of the world, our own lives, and our community.

I want to talk about how we moved from being an attractional church (a “come and join us” church) to an incarnational church (a “we will come to you” church). If I talk about numbers I want to talk about how we don’t think in terms of three- and five-year plans, but live month to month with a three-hundred-year vision, a seventh generation vision. We are sowing seeds so that when the time comes we might be the most numerous church in Tulsa though we still might not have more than twelve people gathering in any one place together at any one time in a building without our name on it.

I want to talk about how we moved from being an organizational church—where the church is seen as a religious nonprofit and its holy writ is bylaws, holy space its own named building, holy mission is its own budget and endowment—to being an organic church that is able to transform lives and the world by transforming itself. When we were in our other space, even here in Turley, we seldom had people of color come inside to our events or programs. We were another small “white church” just like all the other small “white churches,” except we were new and all of them had been here for decades. The other new churches in our area are all African-American. Now, in our new space, in our new way of being church, we have a fifty-fifty

racial balance of people coming inside and joining with us in mission, partnering as volunteers, and sometimes joining us for our spiritual gatherings. We have much still to do to create the space to be a place for all, but we have seen a major difference by simply turning ourselves inside out and becoming mission-centered.

The same is true for issues of class and economic factors, and political leanings. When we were in our “small church” space with our language of free and Universalist faith outside our buildings and messages of our Unitarian Universalist principles and the principles of the Center for Progressive Christianity on our doors, we weren’t nearly as effective at building relationships with the neighbors around us, partnering with them, and in some cases having them become leaders of our church as we have since we have gradually put away our messages and again simply lived and worked and dealt with issues affecting everyone.

Any and every small struggling church in our movement has the capacity to change to do this. But only if each church stops struggling. Only if each congregations moves from anxiety to abundance in how they see themselves and those they are trying to serve.

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*Next month: Part Two of the Living Room Church’s story.*

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