

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

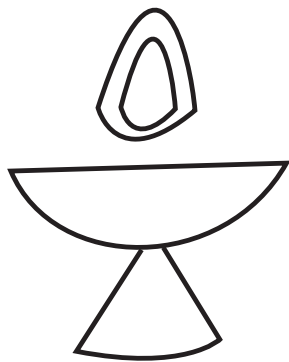
April 2005

## “Small group min-

istries can affirm and care for congregants in new ways and inspire visitors to return. Often, pledging goes up and volunteer work expands. The groups can help equip people to create and sustain relational communities where justice, democracy, and human dignity prevail. They can work wonders and transform lives.”

—Thandeka,

*Unitarian Universalist theologian*



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## Small Group Ministry in the Small Congregation

by Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist  
for the Northeast District*

Over and over, people say the reason they love their small congregation is because of the intimacy it provides. Sometimes people say, “We don’t need a Small Group Ministry program... we’re already a small group!”

But a Small Group Ministry program is different than being a small group. It is an intentional way to deepen spiritually, and to really get to know a group of people. It is a simple way to become intimate and honest with one another, and to learn to care for one another in times of joy and in times of need – something that doesn’t always happen at Social Hour.

### Taking conversations to a deeper level

In a small congregation, we have more opportunities to get to know each other in informal ways. Social Hour is not crowded, and we can walk up to anyone and start a conversation. But how deep can we go? There’s probably only time to chat a little about the sermon, or the music, or the weather, or the yummy cake being served. There isn’t the time, or the atmosphere, to really sit down and have a deep, and safe, conversation. Perhaps the sermon triggered feelings of loss, or feelings of fear. Can you imagine sharing that over a cup of coffee in the fellowship hall while small children are buzzing around, and people are soliciting volunteers for the next fundraiser? Can you imagine being moved to question different aspects of your life, and then share it with someone at the back of the sanctuary or on the front lawn?

Small Group Ministry groups provide safety, and a quiet time set aside specifically for deep and intimate sharing. Small Groups meet somewhere that feels comfortable to their members. They meet for a specific period of time, with a specific covenant, at

**Sm. Group Ministry**  
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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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the Rev. Jane Dwinell at:

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Sign up to receive *Small Talk* via email (as a PDF) at <http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalknewsletter>.  
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specific intervals of time. The structure is such to allow people to be ready to open up, to listen, to learn, and to share.

## Enhancing the small congregation

And with that basis of intimacy and trust developed in the Small Group, the rest of congregational life becomes more fun and vital. Small Group members are more likely to come to worship – to see the members of their group. Small Group members are more likely to volunteer for church projects and church leadership positions – they are grateful to their congregation for the Small Group experience and want to give back.

You may think that having a Small Group Ministry program will just add another layer of work onto an already burdened small congregation. On the contrary, it gives people more energy – and a greater reason – to participate, and work to help their congregation grow and flourish. I have heard over and over again that Small Group Ministry has brought a greater sense of spiritual depth, commitment, understanding, and caring to the individual participant – and to the congregation. It is here that we can possibly best live out our Third Principle, “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.”

## Okay, what's the definition of Small Group Ministry?

- ⊙ A group is made up of **no more than 10-12 participants**, preferably 6-8.
- ⊙ A group **meets on a regular basis**, as chosen by the group, generally every other week or twice a month, for **2 hours per session**.
- ⊙ A group **creates a covenant** that expresses how they will be together.
- ⊙ There is **a facilitator** for each session. The facilitator can be the same person each time, or can rotate, depending on the preference of a group.
- ⊙ Each meeting **follows the same format**: opening words, check-in, discussion of the topic through a reading and specific questions, “likes and wishes,” and closing words.
- ⊙ There is **an “empty chair”** – that is, new members are welcomed within the limit of 10-12 people. When a group reaches 10-12 people, it splits in two.
- ⊙ There is a **connection to the church community** through an annu-

al service project for the church, and one for the **larger community**. However, not all participants have to be church members.

### **Tell me more!**

Every congregation that has a Small Group Ministry program needs to have at least two groups, even if there are only 3 or 4 in each group. It's better to spread the energy around, and by having more than one group, you can offer them at different times (a day group and an evening group, for example) or in different geographic locations in the area your congregation serves.

The facilitators need to have basic training in group process, and support for their on-going work. The facilitators can be trained and supported by your minister, if you have one, or partner with a nearby larger congregation that has such a program. Perhaps District staff can train and support your facilitators. Be creative! In a group that rotates facilitators, there should be training for everyone, and one or two contact people that receive on-going support.

**I have heard over and over again that Small Group Ministry has brought a greater sense of spiritual depth, commitment, understanding, and caring to the individual participant – and to the congregation.**

Small Group Ministry can be done with children and teens, and can work well as a Religious Education program. The same model holds, except an adult will need to facilitate with smaller children.

It is a wonderful way to bring new folks into the congregation. Friends can invite friends as an introduction to our faith. Many people find a Small Group to be less threatening – and more meaningful – than attending worship. It is also a great way for new people to be assimilated into the life of the congregation very quickly and deeply.

Lesson plans can be created by the minister or facilitator, or found

through many of the current Unitarian Universalist resources on Small Group Ministry (see Resource box). There are often workshops on how to do Small Group Ministry at the District and regional level, as well as at General Assembly. If you're interested, plan on attending a workshop, or ask your District staff for help.

Small Group Ministry is perfect for the small congregation as a way to increase intimacy and commitment, and bring new people into our faith!

## **Small Group Ministry Resources**

- ◎ *The book Small Group Ministry, by Bob Hill, available through the UUA Bookstore (800.215.9076, or [www.uua.org/bookstore](http://www.uua.org/bookstore))*
- ◎ *The many publications offered by the UU Community Church of Augusta, ME (207.622.3232, or <http://home.gwi.net/~uuccaug>)*
- ◎ *The UU Small Group Ministry Network has been formed and their website is chock-full of any and all information you might need, at [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)*
- ◎ *Ferry Beach is holding a Small Group Ministry conference, August 13-19, 2005. Visit [www.ferrybeach.org](http://www.ferrybeach.org).*



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## The Issue Index

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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## Small Church Specialist's Calendar

| <b>When?</b>                            | <b>What?</b>                      | <b>Where?</b>     |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| April 24 <sup>th</sup>                  | Leading Worship and Meeting       | West Paris, ME    |
| May 6 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup>    | Northeast District Spring Meeting | Auburn, ME        |
| May 21 <sup>st</sup>                    | Small Congregation Conference     | New York City, NY |
| June 21 <sup>st</sup> -27 <sup>th</sup> | General Assembly                  | Fort Worth, TX    |

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**The Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist,  
is happy to meet with your congregation!**

Just give her a call at 802.229.4008, or send her an e-mail at [sky@vmlink.net](mailto:sky@vmlink.net).



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## *Small is Beautiful!*

### **Resources and Networking for Small Congregations**

August 26-28, 2005 ✧ Ferry Beach Camp and Conference Center ✧ Saco, ME

Small is Beautiful is open to anyone from a small congregation (less than 150 members) from anywhere in the world.

Put this conference on your calendar – last summer's *Small is Beautiful!* was fun, mellow, and a learning experience for all. Next summer will be even better!

There will be more information in future issues of *SMALL TALK*.