

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

April 2006

“We covenant to

affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

—the Seventh Principle
of Unitarian Universalism

The Greening of the Small Congregation

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

In April we think of Earth Day, and the blossoming spring landscape. Some areas have already been in bloom for a while; others are just getting hints of the glories to come. Wherever we live, we appreciate the wonders of our planet, and the ever-turning cycle of the year.

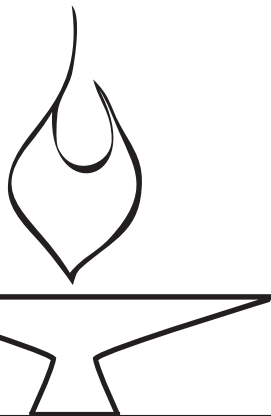
This is a good time to think about how environmentally aware and astute your congregation is. Even if you are in rented space, there is much you can do. For those congregations who want to delve deep into how they directly affect the environment, there is the Green Sanctuary program developed and sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for the Earth organization (formerly the Seventh Principle Project). You can purchase a copy of the curriculum, and find out more about the work that they do on their website at www.uuministryfortheearth.org.

In the meantime, here are some ideas to get you started.

Do an energy audit of the space where you worship.

Whether it is a library or school rental or a historic church building, walk around and check out the lighting, the heating, the windows, and the insulation. Look at the building materials and think about them—are they toxic, or do they aggravate people’s allergies? Can any of the materials be replaced with something healthier? Even in a rental, you can offer to replace the light bulbs with compact fluorescents, and keep the heat at a cooler temperature, and the cooling at a warmer temperature. Find out how much electricity and heating/cooling fuel you actually use, and aim to use less.

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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.

the Rev. Jane Dwinell,
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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...

Please contact  
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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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## **Do an audit of your Social Hour and potluck habits.**

Disposable plates, cups, and flatware are damaging to the Earth, and get expensive. A smaller congregation can easily use real dishes, mugs, silverware, and cloth napkins. Don't send those napkins home with someone only to be run through an energy-hogging dryer! Make sure they're hung on a clothesline, or clothes rack. Consider how you wash dishes after an event, making sure it's a sanitary process without being environmentally harmful. Check out your coffee, tea and other beverages offered—are they from sustainable sources, and do you recycle your containers? How about potlucks? Have you ever considered having all vegetarian potlucks, or all local food potlucks?

## **Do an audit of your office supplies and habits.**

Do you use recycled paper (post-consumer content) for your order of service, newsletter, and other documents? Do you recycle what you do use, and do you keep what's appropriate as scrap paper for note taking, and Religious Education projects? Do you turn off computers, copy machines, and the like when not in use? Do you find a reuse/recycle center for your dead and outdated electronic equipment? Do you turn the lights off when not in use, and keep the hot water low or off between events? Are you careful to not waste supplies, and not use toxic products? That helps the budget as well as the environment.

## **Do an audit of the congregation's transportation needs.**

Is your worship space accessible by public transportation (if your area has it)? Could you arrange carpooling to church so as to reduce the amount of cars driven? Is there a way to encourage walking or bicycling to services and events? Many congregations complain that they run out of parking spaces before they run out of room in the sanctuary. How is it for you? Gas prices are only going to get higher, and for some people it may make the difference between attending church or not. Yet, people may be embarrassed to speak up about it—an all-congregation effort to carpool could be a lifesaver for some.

## **Consider your worship and lifespan religious education.**

Do you celebrate the seasons, have earth-centered reading, hymns, and decorations on Sunday? Do the children learn about the importance of the Earth during their Religious Education time? Do the adults have an opportunity to talk about environmental concerns, and what actions they can take as individuals, families, and a congregation? Small Group Ministry is perfect for these conversations, as well as a "Simplicity Circle" or speaker's forum on the environment. By

connecting the Earth with our spirituality, we may be more likely to make necessary individual and congregational changes.

### **Look at your local community's environmental needs.**

Does your community have a particular issue that needs addressing—no recycling facilities, landfill problems, air pollution, a toxic waste site, a river that needs cleaning, no space for a community garden? Is there a way that your congregation could make a direct impact on the larger community? Every congregation needs a mission, and there may be an environmentally-based one just staring you in the face. Choose a project that the kids and the teens can get involved with, as well as adults of all ages—the small congregation that works together has a deeper relationship with one another, and can handle better the inevitable crises when they come along.

### **Don't forget to have a garden!**

Nothing makes people happier than the sight of green and growing things. Consider having a flower garden, and a vegetable garden. “Edible landscaping” is both attractive and fruitful. There are many books on the subject. If no one in your congregation can use the food, donate it to your local food shelf. The kids might enjoy growing pumpkins, or sunflowers, or some other festive crop. If you're in a rental space, offer to tend that building's window boxes or flowerbed as a community service. And don't forget to have a compost pile, or send the Social Hour leavings home with someone who does. Time your Flower Communion Sunday with the time of the greatest blooms in the church's garden—that way people who forget their flowers can go outside and pick what they need.

### **Change is challenging**

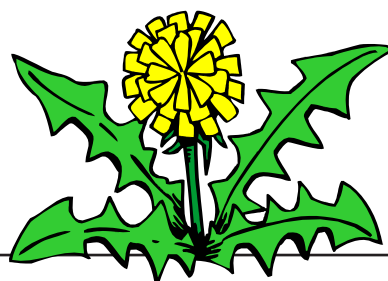
Helping the environment means making long-lasting—and in some cases, challenging—personal changes. Driving less, sitting in a cooler—or hotter—worship space, forgoing that second (or first) cup of coffee, choosing local food over far-away-raised food, following the adage “use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without”—all can be hard. It

helps to have support from one another. With rising gas prices and the getting-to-be-obvious consequences of global warming, we all have to make some serious changes, and many of

them sooner rather than later. As a religious community it behooves us to work together to help our planet. After all, we are all interconnected, and what we do eventually affects other people.

Good luck on your journey—our planet is precious.

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### **Small congregation resources online**

A series of handouts for the small congregation—written by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, on diverse and practical topics—are available on the web in PDF format, at [www.umetrony.org/misc/materials.htm](http://www.umetrony.org/misc/materials.htm). Many thanks to Andrea Lerner for making them available online! Feel free to copy and distribute to your congregation's leadership—but please make sure that all content and formatting is unchanged.



# Nearly 40 small congregations have shared their stories. Now it's your turn. Send us your strengths and success stories so others may benefit!

## Who we are:

Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist for the Northeast District*  
 Ellen Germann, *former District Executive of the Mountain Desert District*

## What we are doing:

Based on our experiences and deep commitment to our small congregations, we are endeavoring to write a guide for Leaders of Small Congregations. We want to include in this guide real-life examples of things that work for small congregations—and we want to highlight your congregation's particular successes! We believe that learning by example is a powerful aid in moving toward healthy congregations.

Depending on the response to this request, we may also develop a resource for sharing of "Best Practices Among Small Congregations."

## How you can help:

Please send us stories of things that have worked well for your congregation. These may include:

- ✿ Ways of communicating
- ✿ Creative Religious Education for only a few
- ✿ Organizational structures that have made a difference
- ✿ Fundraising efforts that were successful
- ✿ Ways of worship that have increased meaning
- ✿ Cooperative efforts with other churches in your community
- ✿ And any other ideas you would like to share

## How and where you can send your stories:

Please send your "Best Practices" by email to both of us at [ecgermann@earthlink.net](mailto:ecgermann@earthlink.net) and [sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net).

Please respond soon. We are in the process of writing our guide and want to be sure that you are part of the story.

## The Issue Index

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



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