

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

April 2008

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

How to Help Your Building Pay for Itself

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

Editor's note: Even if you currently rent or lease your building, you may still find this issue helpful. Read on.

Many of you wrote in to request a *Small Talk* about your building. It seems like buildings are both a blessing and a curse. On the upside, a building is yours to use when you like, to decorate as you wish, to put up signage, lighting and inspirational messages for the public to see. On the downside, you have to pay for that privilege in upkeep, utilities, emergencies, mortgage, and staff or volunteer time.

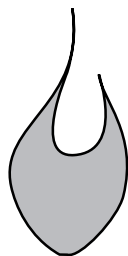
On top of that, our small congregations are in wide variety of buildings from historic, on-the-town-green, New England churches, to modern buildings that don't look like a classic church. Many small congregations gather in buildings previously used for something else — barns, strip malls, funeral homes, town halls, storefronts, doctors' offices, warehouses, schools, you name it. Some of you are in buildings that are way too big for your needs; others are in buildings that are starting to get cramped. Some of you are thinking about buying your first building, or selling what you have and finding a new home.

So what to do? Owning a building generally costs more than renting or leasing, so here are some ideas to help your building pay for itself.

Link building use to your mission

Having a clear mission makes it easier to figure out how best to use your building. Is your mission feeding the hungry? Use your building for the local food shelf, soup kitchen, or senior meal site. Is your mission raising consciousness about the environment? Host a thrift shop. Is your mission caring for the children? Offer your space for an after school program and parenting classes. Is your mission supporting the arts? Invite music or art teachers to hold classes in your space. Is your mission to support bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender

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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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people? Offer your space for support groups, a lending library, and a social center.

But wait, you say — won't these activities cost us more money than we're already spending on our building? Yes and no. Depending on your mission and how you use the building, you may make money — a thrift shop, for example, can bring in \$10,000 a year or more. If you are offering other services as part of your mission, you can apply for grants to support that mission. Grantors do not give money for building maintenance, but they do give money for office space, utilities, and staff time toward carrying out your mission. Receiving grant money that helps to cover the electric bill and the copier lease will allow you to allocate more of your money for building maintenance. You can ask art and music teachers to give you a small percentage of what they charge for classes. You can also solicit donations from organizations and people in town that would also like to support your mission.

Offer office space to compatible nonprofit organizations

Many small nonprofits who need a small room, phone, and use of office equipment might be happy to rent from you. Depending on your building, you may have several small rooms that could host several small nonprofits. They can share office equipment and supplies, and larger meeting space. They would probably tend to use the building during normal business hours during the week — when you're not using it. On the rare occasions when they might need to hold a Saturday event or a weeknight board meeting, you can simply coordinate schedules.

Some caveats: Many congregations choose to rent to a day care thinking that it would be compatible use, but often run into problems regarding religious exploration space, and whose supplies are whose (plus dealing with many building and safety modifications required for a day care). I would recommend not sharing space with a day care center unless they can be in their own wing or area that you don't need to use at all (and they pay for their own modifications). Another tricky space issue: Some congregations choose to rent their steeple to a cell phone company for a tower. This is a controversial building use, so be sure to take your time with such a decision and don't just sign on for the money.

Share your building with another religious community

Small congregations of every faith struggle with building upkeep. Perhaps the best thing for your group would be to share space with another congregation. You don't have to limit your choices to a Jew-

ish or Muslim congregation that would worship at a different time, but any congregation of any faith who is interested in ongoing interfaith dialogue.

Depending on your building, you might be able to create two separate worship spaces with a common fellowship hall and religious exploration space. That way you both can create a worship space that's right for your worship needs without having to move things around or feel uncomfortable around someone else's religious symbols. You can work on mission together, have your teens run a joint youth group, and share in the cost of phone, copier, computer, and other office equipment.

If you're thinking of building or buying a new congregational home, start looking now for another congregation to share with. There may be another small group stuck in a big, old church building that would be happy to share. Or if you want to build, you can plan to create a building that will work for everyone's needs. We Unitarian Universalists claim to be open to all religious traditions — sharing our church home with another faith community can be mission and outreach, financially and environmentally savvy, all at the same time. It's a great option.

Make your building energy efficient and take care of necessary upkeep

As oil prices get higher and concern about climate change grows, it makes sense to take care of our buildings and make them as energy efficient as possible. Have a weatherization consultant come in to test your space and recommend steps to take to insulate, heat, cool, and light your building in a way that will save you — and the environment — in the long run. Then raise the money to do that. The payback is worth it.

You can also raise the money to take things a step further and install solar panels on your roof or a small wind turbine, depending on your location.

Small congregations of every faith struggle with building upkeep. Perhaps the best thing for your group would be to share space with another congregation — of any faith.

Especially if your mission concerns the environment, you can use your building as a model to other organizations in your area. There may be grants for this kind of retrofitting. Check with your local renewable energy folks to see what they know.

If you're in a historical building, you may have to follow certain regulations to maintain the architectural integrity of your building as you make it more energy efficient. The good news is that there is historic preservation money to do that. Check with your state and local authorities about historic preservation money, what it can be used for, and how to apply.

In the meantime, take care of what you have. Replace roofing as needed — before it leaks. Paint or stain your building on a regular basis — before it peels and rot sets in. If your steeple needs work, do it (or consider removing the steeple altogether depending on its beauty and historical merit). Take care of stained glass. Replace old windows with new, double- or triple-pane windows. Care for your church home as you would your own home. It only costs more in the long run to put off necessary repairs and upkeep. Make a five- or ten-year plan for building maintenance and upkeep and work the costs into the budget each year (and do the work!). Don't balance the budget on the back of the building any more than you would balance the budget on the back of the staff.

•••

And let me know of any creative solutions your congregation has found to this never-ending issue of buildings and finances.



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