

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

December 2007

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.

—Olympia Brown

How to Get the Work Done

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

Thanks to all of you who sent me ideas for future issues of *Small Talk!* It was a wonderful gift to me—now I have topics for several years to come. If you think of another idea, please don't hesitate to send it to me.

The topic that was requested the most was something along the lines of "We're so small and there's too much to do—how do we get the work done!?" There is much to do to keep a church community going and small congregations in particular feel the pinch. Larger congregations, while having many more programs and activities, have paid staff and a greater volunteer pool to choose from.

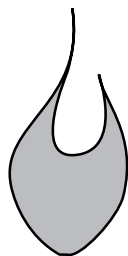
Small congregations suffer from burnout or not enough participation among their volunteer crew for many reasons. People do not start attending church because they want to volunteer to copy the order of service. However, most people eventually do want to volunteer in some way—however small—because they want to give something back to a community that's important to them. It's true that people are much busier than they used to be, and they may find it hard to make a commitment. But more often than not you don't have enough volunteers because your members and friends haven't been asked directly, have been asked rudely, or have been asked to do something that is unclear and has no obvious end.

Here are my thoughts on how to get the work done in your congregation.

Keep it simple

One reason why small congregations feel the volunteer pinch is that they're just trying to do too much. Small congregations need to keep it simple and basic—quality worship, religious explora-

Get the Work Done
continued on page 2...



Inside...

About Small Talk.....pg 2

Resources.....pg 3

New Book!.....pg 4

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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tion for children, and social hour, one (simple) mission, the human connection in between worship times, and care for your physical space (owned, rented, or leased). Part of keeping it simple is to have an organizational structure that's appropriate for your size, and your activities. More about that later.

Decide what really needs to be done

Many congregations hang onto activities or organizational structures "because we've always done it that way." Just because you've always had a chicken pie supper or a Mexican night doesn't mean you always have to do it. Just because you've got a committee structure meant for a much larger congregation doesn't mean you need to keep it. Sit down together (whoever is interested) and make a list of the things that absolutely *have* to get done, and then those that you might like to do *if* you had the people to do it.

Don't forget the little things while you're listing the big things. People have to buy the coffee and the markers, keep the toilet paper stocked, pick up the mail, clean the refrigerator, polish the silver, pick up the sanctuary, and send cards to members and friends who are ill or bereaved. Oftentimes, those little things are what matter most. Sure, someone needs to lead worship, and pay the bills, and coordinate the mission, but if there's no toilet paper in the bathroom or beverages at social hour, all those other activities will not matter.

Create an organizational structure to do those things

If you keep your congregational life simple—Sunday activities, a mission, caring among members, friends, and visitors, and upkeep of your material things (money, buildings, and stuff)—then your governance structure can be simple too. You only need a governing body of 5–6 people, a committee or task force(s) to handle worship, RE, and social hour, a committee or task force to carry forth your mission, a committee or task force(s) to nurture your various relationships, and a committee or task force(s) to be responsible for your material goods. Create job descriptions for these tasks, a process for choosing people to serve (elected, appointed, or just offering to do it?), a clear beginning and ending for service, and a way to train the next generation of leaders and volunteers. Break tasks down into small portions so that people with limited time feel they can volunteer.

Ask people, don't just wait for them to volunteer

Everyone has different skills, talents, time and interest. Don't expect people to flock to the sign-up sheet when you announce you need volunteers for social hour, leading RE groups, organizing worship, cleaning the bathroom, laying out the newsletter, following up with visitors, or picking up the hymnals. Instead, those in leadership al-

ready (your governing board or current committee/task force members) should approach people and ask them if they would do a specific task.

If you know Betty is a great cook and hostess, ask her if she'd volunteer to organize the community holiday dinner. Explain briefly the reasons you've asked her to take this on and why you think she'd be great for the job, tell her the responsibilities and time commitment (and hand those to her in writing too), and ask how long she needs to make a decision. Don't cajole or force her, but make it clear that you think she'd be the best person for the job. If you know that Betty's marriage is on the rocks, or her mother is dying, don't ask her—save her skills for another time or another project.

Thank your volunteers!

So often we're just used to Chris bringing the flowers or restocking the bathrooms every Sunday we forget to say thank you. In our congregations, we usually have the annual thank you service for RE leaders, or perhaps a potted plant for the outgoing President or Chair, but we often forget all the small, important things that get done week in and week out. Have an annual worship service to thank *everybody* who has volunteered in any way. (Will it be everyone who's there?) Or the governing body could make it a habit to write thank you notes at every meeting, or choose a member to make thank

you phone calls once a month. No thank yous by email, please!

When all else fails, hire someone to do it

If absolutely no one will pick up the mail, layout the newsletter, plan worship, or write notes to visitors—hire someone. Or rethink what activities really need to get done, and revise your organizational plan. Sometimes everyone just needs a break, especially if the congregation has gone through a particularly rough time—conflict, the death or loss of an active member or minister, a natural disaster, or other stressful event. It's okay to back off from certain activities for a

while until everyone regathers strength and commitment. So, if you can't drop a task or find a volunteer, just hire someone—and give them a clear job description (easy to do, since you'll already have job descriptions in place for your volunteers). And if your congregation has faced—or is facing—a rough time, be sure to ask for supportive help from your District staff.

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So, remember—the work will get done if you keep it simple and clear, with specific beginnings and endings for tasks, if you have an organizational structure appropriate to the size of your congregation, if you ask your volunteers nicely, and if you thank everyone generously and often.

Don't expect people to flock to the sign-up sheet when you announce you need volunteers. Those in leadership should approach people and ask them if they would do a specific task.

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for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations
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Email list for ministers of small congregations

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

The Issue Index

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VOLUME 1

What is a Small Congregation?	December 2003
Governance Structure	January 2004
Numbers (statistics to keep)	February 2004
Social Action	March 2004
Growth: Part One	April 2004
Growth: Part Two	May 2004
A Roadmap to Change	June 2004

VOLUME 2

Small is Beautiful Report	September 2004
The Small Church of the Future	October 2004
Publications: Part One (layout)	November 2004
Publications: Part Two (content)	December 2004
Conflict	January 2005
Creative Worship	February 2005
The Annual Canvass	March 2005
Small Group Ministry	April 2005
Knowing and Telling Our Stories	May 2005
Summer Worship—Yes or No?	June 2005

VOLUME 3

Small Congregations Speak Out	September 2005
Building a Music Program	October 2005
Technology: Help or Hindrance?	November 2005
Celebrating December Holidays	December 2005
Transformational Congregations	January 2006
Committee on Ministry	February 2006
Welcoming Congregation Work	March 2006
Greening the Small Congregation	April 2006
Religious Education for Children	May 2006
So You're Looking for a Minister	June 2006

VOLUME 4

Greatest Challenges #1: Growth	September 2006
Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout	October 2006
Greatest Challenges #3: Ministry	November 2006
Greatest Challenges #4: Money	December 2006
Greatest Challenges #5: Conflict	January 2007
The Small Congregation in Transylvania	February 2007

Buildings: Pros and Cons	March 2007
Capital Campaigns	April 2007
Going to Two Worship Services	May 2007
Wrapping Up the Church Year	June 2007

VOLUME 5

Integrating Children	September 2007
Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change	October 2007
Another Look at Social Action	November 2007
How to Get the Work Done	December 2007

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