

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

February 2008

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature. It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle. . . . This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

—Kenneth Patton

The Meaning of Membership

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

As we talk about congregational growth, most people think we are talking about numerical growth. However, looking at numbers is only one way to look at how a religious community is growing. You can also look at the development of organizational structures, the deepening of spiritual meaning, the generosity of the community, and the way conflict and decision-making are handled.

One way to help the process of growth along — and create more guarantees that new members will stick around for a while — is to have expectations of membership. This is a controversial issue for many Unitarian Universalists who like the fact that in many congregations becoming a member only involves “signing the book” with no promises or expectations whatsoever. Many of us have been wounded by our religious pasts and are unwilling or unable to make any promises that may hurt.

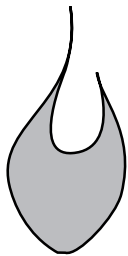
But having expectations of members is not the same as having a religious creed where we all have to agree on certain theological tenets. Expectations that are clear, and expressed prior to someone “signing the book,” make membership more meaningful to both the individual and the community.

Here are some membership expectations to consider for your community:

Members should attend worship regularly

This means attending worship every week (or however often your congregation meets) unless illness or other serious obligations interfere. This means not scheduling sports events for your kids or brunch meetings with your friends at the same time your community holds worship. Especially in small congregations where the majority of church events take place once a week in conjunction with worship, your participation will be limited, and your input will be

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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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missed if you are not there. This is about “encouragement to spiritual growth” and the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Members should pledge regularly and generously

If all Unitarian Universalists pledged five percent of their adjusted gross income, none of our congregations would be lacking for money with which to fulfill their dreams. Members should pledge, period. (If a member is in serious financial trouble, and has shared that with your minister, or a member of the pastoral care team if you don't have a minister, that member can make a token pledge of fifty dollars per year.) Making a financial pledge is making a promise to the gathered community — something everyone should do. Obviously you can choose to make exemptions for elderly or disabled members who are housebound or in a nursing home, but don't make assumptions about their ability to contribute financially. If they can, it may bring them pleasure, and help them feel connected to the community that they used to be active in. (And they may also choose to remember the church in their wills.)

Members should give of their energy as well

Members should be active in their religious community besides attending worship and pledging. Everyone should take a turn with the children and a turn in the kitchen. Not everyone is cut out for being the treasurer or governing board president, but everyone can learn to make coffee, wash dishes, pick up after themselves, and greet visitors at the door. Our small congregations require volunteers to help keep things going. Create a culture where people are happy to participate by making expectations clear and time-limited, by training people or giving them buddies with which to do a task, and by matching the job to a person's gifts and skills. This includes showing up for congregational meetings and practicing the democratic process, not backing away from conflict but engaging in an honest, loving, and upfront way, and following through on any responsibilities you have agreed to. All members should actively participate — in some way — in the mission (social justice work) of your congregation.

Members should understand the history and current practices of their congregation

Every congregation has a different past — and a different present. It is important for everyone to know how, when, and why the congregation was founded, what the founders dreamed of, and what the dreams are of the current congregation. Everyone should understand the finances of their church — how much it costs to rent or own a worship space, what it costs to educate the children, how much is paid in salaries for any staff you may have. Everyone should also

understand about any assets you may have (such as an endowment, Revolutionary-War-era silver, or a Paul Revere bell) and how they fit into the current financial life of the congregation. Everyone should understand the history of Unitarian Universalism, how it came to be, and the significant theological debates that have taken (and are continuing to take) place. Everyone should understand how their congregation is governed and who to go to for what question or concern.

• • •

All these expectations should be made clear before anyone “signs the book.” You can choose to hold “New UU classes” to explain all of this, as well as answer questions. Or you can designate someone — your minister, board president, or a membership team member — to have an individual conversation with potential new members. And if you need to bring current members up to date with new and explicit expectations, you could also do all this as part of a worship service.

When you have new members, be sure to have a membership ceremony as part of worship. You can have new members sign the book then, or simply acknowledge them and welcome them if they have signed the book in private. Take the time to greet

the new members, giving them a small gift if you wish, and having everyone present share in a responsive reading that acknowledges the gifts and expectations of membership. (You can use #728 in *Singing the Living Tradition* or you can write your own.) The ritual will connect everyone, and the reminder about gifts and expectations will remind everyone of their connection to the congregation

— much the way wedding ceremonies remind the couples in the audience of the promises they made to one another years before.

We are all searching for meaning in our lives: this is the main reason that many people are drawn to our congregations. But if we don’t ask anything of our members, they will have to work on their own, and blindly, to create meaning and connection with the community. If they don’t feel they are wanted and needed, and they are not sure their full participation truly matters, they may simply drift away to continue to search on their own. Take the time to decide what membership expectations your congregation will have — and celebrate and honor them on a regular basis.

If your congregation has developed membership guidelines and welcoming rituals that work for you, I’d love to hear about them! Email me at jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com.

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A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

The new book by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh! Order now at www.spiritoflifepublishing.com

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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>

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