

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

February 2009

As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to seek the sea, our kindred hearts and minds unite to build a church that shall be free.

—Marion Franklin Ham
#145, Singing the Living Tradition

How to Hold a Meeting

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

It seems that you can never get away from meetings in a religious community and, more often than not, people aren't that enthusiastic about attending them! Some meetings are a fact of life, so it's a good idea if you're the leader to know how to lead. Here are some tips on running a meeting that people will enjoy attending.

Remember that you are leading a spiritual community

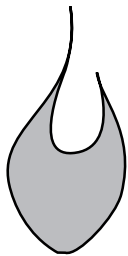
Start each meeting with a short, inspirational reading (no more than one minute) and light a chalice. This will be a sign to the members that this is church business, not the work of any old Acme Nonprofit. If things get tense, you can stop the meeting, point to the chalice, and remind everyone to consider the organization they are responsible for, and what it means in the larger world.

Have an agenda, and stick to it

List the short-and-sweet items first—approval of the minutes, and various questions arising from your reports. Take care of any old business items next. Put the items that require greatest discussion last. Some people like to list times for specific agenda items, while others may group the short items together and say 15 minutes for all of them, with longer discussions taking 20, 30, or 60 minutes. As the leader you need to keep track of the time (or have a designated time-keeper if you prefer) and give people a two- or five-minute warning when the time is nearing an end. It is important to keep your governing board meeting two hours or shorter, start and finish on time, and respect people's commitment to the congregation by making sure the meeting doesn't go on forever.

Choose consensus or the democratic process

Most governing boards like to achieve consensus on a matter (in an informal, not formal, way), but others prefer to vote. It's up to you. You



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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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may decide that most items can be dealt with by mutual agreement, and others may require a vote. Whatever process you use, stick with it. Don't go back and forth randomly between voting and not voting. Simple things like reports can simply be "accepted" and not even voted upon. Whether you run your meetings by Robert's Rules of Order or more informally is up to your group. Beware of overly complicated and rigid ways to run a meeting (for example, everyone has to speak once before anyone can speak twice, and that is done by going clockwise around the table). You are a small group (remember: six or seven governing board members is all any small congregation needs), so such formality should not be necessary.

Have written reports

Make sure these written reports—from staff, committees, and task forces—are distributed to the board prior to the meeting so everyone has a chance to look them over at their leisure. You can use email or paper reports—just give everyone a day or two to read and digest them. Have a time at the beginning of the meeting for questions regarding the reports. People who need to answer the questions can plan to be there and then leave if they're not needed for further business. Make sure the written reports are included with the minutes of the meeting so future readers will know what the minutes refer to.

Don't micromanage

One of the most common challenges for governing boards of small congregations is remembering that their job is to oversee the work of the congregation, not to plan and handle every last detail. If you give a committee, task force, or individual a specific job and budget—with some general guidance in the beginning—then your only responsibility is to get continuing reports about the project. It's not up to the governing board to decide what curricula to use, how to organize the yard sale, or what to serve at the canvass dinner. Have a specific task generally laid out, for example, "Mary, we'd like you, and the group you put together, to organize the canvass dinner. It's scheduled for March 1st at 6 p.m. here at the parish hall, your budget is \$300, and we'd appreciate it if there could be a vegetarian and a non-vegetarian entrée, as well as non-alcoholic beverages. You'll need to coordinate with the canvass task force about the invitations, and the youth group has volunteered to help." Then give Mary a contact person on the board if she has further questions, and ask for a report of her progress at the next board meeting.

Create a board covenant

Many of these items can be put into a board covenant: whether you work by consensus or the democratic process, for example, and how soon before the meeting you will get reports and the agenda. You can also include how people will behave (“one person speaks at a time,” or “be respectful of differing viewpoints,” for example). It helps to include something about doing your best to show up for every meeting, starting and ending on time, keeping an open mind, remembering that you’ve been entrusted by the congregation to do your job well, and not talking behind people’s backs.

There are many examples out there of board covenants. Take time at your next retreat to craft one that works for your group.

Don’t have too many meetings

A governing board can usually get their work done in a monthly, two-hour meeting. Committees and task forces will need to set their own schedules—some task forces may need to meet weekly if they have a pressing project, but some committees may be able to meet just once or twice a year. Don’t feel

} **Your governing board’s job is to oversee the work of the congregation, not to plan and handle every last detail.**

you have to have monthly meetings if there’s a more efficient way to handle your responsibilities.

Be a good follower

If you’re not in charge of running the meeting, be respectful of the leader. Keep your comments brief and to the point, and don’t argue relentlessly with others. If you see the leader tiring or trying to regain control of a rowdy meeting, help out by speaking up.

Remember to have fun.

Schedule your meetings at a time that’s most convenient for people—maybe that time is after social hour, or in the early evening. If your meeting coincides with mealtime, send out for pizza, sandwiches, or Chinese food. If everyone chips in a couple of dollars for some food, it makes the meetings more fun (you can eat and work at the same time). Hold your meetings in a comfortable place that creates a relaxed atmosphere. Be sure to thank each other (and thank volunteers in the congregation by writing them thank you notes at every meeting). And don’t forget to laugh. All church business doesn’t have to be serious—there is much joy in this work, too!

New, Free Curriculum

The Quest of the Rainbow Dragons: A UU Hero’s Journey

A fun adventure for the whole family. Two children set out on a quest to bring peace to the world; along the way, they learn about the UU principles. In addition to the story (written in 28 installments, four on each principle) there are weekly ‘Dragon Tasks’ for you to do together with your children.

This program can be found free online at

<http://groups.google.com/group/PNWDDRE/web/quest-of-the-rainbow-dragons-family-worship>

Or contact Rev. Elizabeth Stevens at the Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Washington State at 360-377-4724.

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Great Book for Sale!

Give your congregational leaders the best hands-on guide to the small congregation: *Big Ideas for Small Congregations: a friendly guide for leaders, by*

Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh.

\$20 each • \$15 each for 10+

Available exclusively from www.spiritoflifepublishing.com