

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

February 2010

**We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**

—Seventh Principle  
of Unitarian Universalism

## Climate Change and the Small Congregation

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

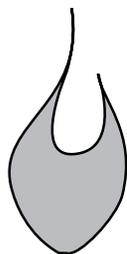
Many people ask what they can really do to help stem the effects of climate change. As individuals, and as congregations, we can't do much to stop the ice caps melting, the ozone layer leaving, the hurricanes and earthquakes from causing devastation, or creatures from going extinct. But we can do some things to prepare for the day when life could get challenging — things that will also help us now to weather economic ups and downs and build stronger religious communities.

### Grow food

What? A congregation growing food? Yes, that's right. We may face in the future a limited amount of fresh food, so learning to raise food ourselves will be important. Not everyone has gardening skills, but within every congregation there are most likely at least a few people who do.

Does your congregation have a big yard or even several acres of land? Put in a community garden (saves on landscaping and lawn-mowing bills!) and offer space to the people of your area. It would be simple to prepare the soil and divide it up into small plots. If no one in your congregation has the equipment or the skills to do this, you can probably find someone who does who would be glad to do the work in exchange for garden space. You could also make your garden a larger mission project and plan to donate all the food grown to your local food shelf.

If your congregation doesn't have garden space, you are probably near an empty lot that could be turned into a garden. This will require more work — getting permission from the owner, possibly having to clean it up and then bring in topsoil or manure, maybe needing to build a fence. It has been proven, however, that turning empty city lots into gardens brings down the crime rate and increases the well-being of the residents in the area. So whether you have a garden on your own



### Inside...

**About Small Talk.....pg 2**

**Resources.....pg 3**

**Issue Index.....pg 4**

continued on page 2

## 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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continued from page 1

property or in a nearby empty lot, you are also creating a perfect social action project/mission for your congregation.

Having a vegetable and fruit garden is a wonderful intergenerational activity as well. The children could learn about food production, the relationship of food to religious rituals and holidays, and have an opportunity to get their hands dirty (and serve up the harvest at social hour!). One or two worship services a year could focus around food. Many of the older folks probably remember the Victory Gardens of World War II; many churches at that time opened up their yards to grow vegetables for the cause.

We all need to eat. In times of economic instability, a congregational garden can provide food for hungry members and friends or for the local food shelf. In time of increasing oil prices (which cause increasing food prices, and perhaps some shortages), having local food at your fingertips will ensure that no one in your area goes hungry.

And, besides, vegetable gardens are beautiful. People will admire them — and admire your congregation for giving such a wonderful gift to the community.

### Drive less

We all understand the environmental impact of driving. Many of us have chosen to drive hybrid or high-mileage cars. Some of us have chosen to ride bikes or walk more often than drive. But many of our small congregations are in areas where driving some distance to church is a necessity. How can we cut down on driving?

For those congregations that serve a large geographic area, figure out how you can carpool. Set up a challenge for the congregation — have everyone keep track of how many miles they drive to and from church, add them up, and then try and reduce those miles by half. Those who can walk or bike should. Others can carpool, maybe several people meeting at a convenient location and then driving that last several miles to church together. This is a great way for people to get to know one another better and learn who is in their neighborhood — and save money, wear and tear on your vehicle, and the environmental consequences of driving at the same time.

For those congregations in cities or in an area with public transportation, encourage people to get to church that way (and bike, walk, and carpool as well). Because Sunday public transit schedules are often reduced from weekday schedules, consider changing the time of the service if it would help people get there by bus or subway.

You can get the kids involved with this project as well. Have them record and chart each Sunday's mileage to keep track of your progress. Have them learn about people of other faiths who routinely walk to services, do walking meditation, or go on walking pilgrimages. When they learn about Unitarian Universalist history and origins, remind them that people in those days either walked or rode horses (or traveled in carriages or wagons) to get to church. When my family was in Transylvania three years ago, we walked the two miles to church on a very cold and snowy morning. It can be done!

If your town or city does not have public transportation, bike paths, or safe sidewalks, the congregation can take on lobbying for these as a social action/mission project. It will be important to *everyone's* future to have good ways to get around that don't rely on the individual vehicle. And, once again, the good will engendered by taking this on will be wonderful publicity for your group.

## Build community

Like many of you are experiencing now, our congregations become even more important in times of trouble. When things are rough for individuals, it's wonderful to know that they can rely on members and friends of the congregation to look in on them, bring them food, take them out for lunch, offer to babysit, or give them a ride to church. Whether the rough times are from national or international problems, or simply a death or serious family illness, we need to care for one another. That is one of the central purposes for a religious congregation.

So take the time now to build up your "caring committee," those folks who are the central eyes and ears of the congregation, the people who know when a family or an individual needs a bit of extra TLC. If your congregation does not yet have such a group, form one. They can learn from your minister, if you have one, or from the caring committee from a

neighboring congregation, or be trained at a District conference or meeting.

Besides learning how to care for another another, this is also a good time to learn how to handle conflict. Create a behavioral covenant, a dispute resolution policy, and a safe congregation policy (templates of these are available through your District office). Bring in a mediator to teach basic conflict resolution skills (another great activity for the kids!). Learn to talk about your problems and challenges before they escalate.

And learn to celebrate! Every strong congregation knows how to have fun together. Whether times are good or times are hard, it helps to remember to pat yourselves on the back for a job well done now and then. (A little cake and ice cream is generally guaranteed to lift the spirits.) Thank one another, love one another, worship together, and help make the world a better place.

**Vegetable gardens are beautiful. People will admire them – and admire your congregation for giving such a wonderful gift to the community.**

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# The Issue Index



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## VOLUME 1

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

## VOLUME 2

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

## VOLUME 3

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

## VOLUME 4

<b>Greatest Challenges #1: Growth</b>	September 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout</b>	October 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #3: Ministry</b>	November 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #4: Money</b>	December 2006
<b>Greatest Challenges #5: Conflict</b>	January 2007
<b>The Small Congregation in Transylvania</b>	February 2007
<b>Buildings: Pros and Cons</b>	March 2007

<b>Capital Campaigns</b>	April 2007
<b>Going to Two Worship Services</b>	May 2007
<b>Wrapping Up the Church Year</b>	June 2007

## VOLUME 5

<b>Integrating Children</b>	September 2007
<b>Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change</b>	October 2007
<b>Another Look at Social Action</b>	November 2007
<b>How to Get the Work Done</b>	December 2007
<b>What Should We Do With Our Visitors?</b>	January 2008
<b>The Meaning of Membership</b>	February 2008
<b>The Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches</b>	March 2008
<b>How to Help Your Building Pay for Itself</b>	April 2008
<b>New Orleans: New Life for Small Congregations</b>	May 2008
<b>Small Congregations at General Assembly</b>	June 2008

## VOLUME 6

<b>The Living Room Church, Part One</b>	September 2008
<b>The Living Room Church, Part Two</b>	October 2008
<b>The Living Room Church, Part Three</b>	November 2008
<b>Anti-Racism Work in the Small Congregation</b>	December 2008
<b>Sharing Staff in the Small Congregation</b>	January 2009
<b>How to Run a Meeting</b>	February 2009
<b>Peter Morales for UUA President</b>	March 2009
<b>The Care and Feeding of Your Part-Time Minister</b>	April 2009
<b>The World of the British Unitarians</b>	May 2009
<b>Some Good Ideas from the British Unitarians</b>	June 2009

## VOLUME 7

<b>The Financial Crisis and Your Congregation</b>	January 2010
<b>Climate Change and the Small Congregation</b>	February 2010

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