

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

January 2008

## Come into the circle of love

and justice. Come into the community of mercy, holiness, and health. Come and you shall know peace and joy.

—adapted from Israel Zangwill

## What Should We Do With Our Visitors?

by The Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

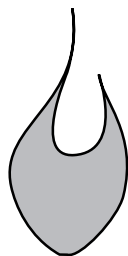
Time and again, I am asked about being welcoming and about visitors — what to do with them and how to get them to return and become an active part of the congregation. If they can find you (how's your signage?) and there's a relevant and meaningful worship service once they're there, you're over the first hump. But the worship service is not always enough. Here's what you can do:

### Put yourself in their shoes

Take the time to remember when *you* first walked into your congregation. (If you're a lifelong member, reflect on your early memories of your church.) Why did you come? What did you like? What didn't you like? Why did you return, and eventually become an active member?

The first time you came, were you able to find the church, find the right door, find the restroom, understand the order of service, and feel welcomed? How did that happen? Did you find what you were seeking?

Remember that no one walks through your doors for no reason at all. Keep that in the back of your mind, and be sensitive to it. Someone may be having a stressful time in their life — a divorce, job loss, death or serious illness, for example. Someone may be in a joyful time — getting married, starting a family. Someone may be seeking a religious community and friends. Perhaps they're new to town, or they're just on a quest to find something more meaningful. They didn't just wake up early on Sunday, get out of bed, get dressed up, and find their way to a new and strange place for no reason at all.



### Inside...

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

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

**New Book!.....pg 4**

**Visitors**

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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## Treat them as if they are a guest in your home

In other words, be hospitable. Show them where to put their coat, and where the restrooms are. Offer them an order of service and visitor information (a brochure about your congregation, your latest newsletter, and some information about Unitarian Universalism). Tell them about social hour, point out the location, and say you are looking forward to talking with them more after the service. Make sure that the sanctuary, fellowship hall, restrooms, and religious exploration (RE) space is clean, safe, and pleasing to the eye. Don't forget your nametag!

At social hour, offer them food and drink. Serve a selection of beverages — not just coffee — and use milk or half-and-half (no powdered creamer!) and real cups (no paper or Styrofoam!). You don't have to go overboard. Your refreshments can be simple — just serve them attractively. Talk with the visitor to find out how they enjoyed the service, if they have any questions, and to find out a little bit about them so that you can introduce them to other people. Asking about where they live, what they do for work or hobbies, and if they have children will give you a sense of who they might enjoy meeting in your congregation. Ask them how they heard about your congregation. If it seems like a good time, ask them specifically what brought them to the church.

## Be happy to see them, but not too happy

Your role as a member of a congregation is to be warm and polite to newcomers, but don't be too effusive or nosy. Some people are introverts, and may be uncomfortable talking too much to people they don't know. The extroverts, on the other hand, may be happy to talk, yet still may feel uncomfortable in an unfamiliar place. Even though being welcoming and cordial to newcomers is the job of everyone in the congregation — not just the greeters or the membership committee — if you yourself are uncomfortable talking to strangers, don't do it. Have the folks in your congregation who are good “people” people talk to guests. There are many different kinds of work to do in a church — it's important to match up skills and interests with tasks. But everyone should make it a point to at least smile and say “hello” to newcomers.

## Follow up with visitors during the week

A handwritten note or a phone call is important! (No emails, please.) Whoever “meets and greets” on a particular Sunday should do the follow-up. It can be as simple as “It was nice to meet you, I look forward to getting to know you better,” or more in depth (“Do you have any questions about our church?” or “What brought you to us?”). If a visitor indicates that they are having a rough time personally, ask

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if they would like a phone call from the minister or a member of the pastoral care team. You can also give each visitor a “buddy” — someone who can answer questions about your congregation in particular and UUism in general. (This is a good time to match people by their interests, geographical location, or family constellation.) When the visitor returns, they know they can sit with their buddy and talk with them at social hour — and that their buddy will help open the doors to congregational life.

**Your role as a member of a congregation is to be warm and polite to newcomers, but don't be too effusive or nosy.**

hour. Maybe they have musical gifts and would like to offer a meditation piece for worship. If your group is forming a task force to decide what things need to be done to your building, and the newcomer has an interest in carpentry or interior design, ask if they'd like to participate. (Don't ask them to take on a leadership position or teach RE for at least a year or two.) As someone participates more and more, have the minister or a lay leader ask if they're interested in membership (more on the meaning of membership in another issue!).

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### **Integrate a regular, repeat guest into congregation life**

After a few months of attendance at worship, a newcomer (who is no longer new!) may be ready to participate in another congregational activity. They may be interested in joining a Small Group Ministry group or attending an adult RE class — but may be waiting to be asked. Perhaps they like to cook and would like to help with your congregation's evening of serving dinner at the homeless shelter, or simply bring a dish to a potluck or social

Many small congregations make the mistake of clinging to each and every visitor, often with the side effect of chasing them away. Conversely, many small congregations ignore their visitors — for whatever reason — also driving them away. Remember that you were once a visitor — if not in your current congregation, than in other congregations you have visited over the years. Learn to be welcoming, gracious, and hospitable! Our visitors are the future of our faith — in our congregations, and in our world.

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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

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