
Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

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June 2006

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## “Ministry is about

being open hearted, having love that is redemptive and freely given; paying attention to and caring about each other...”

—Anne Odin Heller,  
Unitarian Universalist minister,  
from her book CHURCHWORKS.

## So You’re Looking for a Minister...

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, *Small Church Specialist  
for the Northeast District*

At some point in the life of a small congregation, the question is asked—should we have a minister? Part time or full time? Consulting or called? What would a minister do? Why should we have one? Why shouldn’t we have one?

Just like there are many types of small congregations, there are also many types of ministers, and if your congregation wants a minister to serve you in a professional capacity, there are many things to look at to help ensure a good fit all the way around.

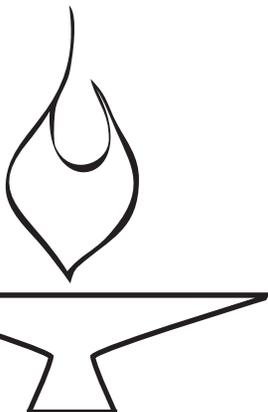
Here are some things to consider.

### Why have a minister?

Some small congregations have always had a minister, and can’t imagine being without one. It’s part of their identity; it’s part of their history. Other small congregations may have had a minister some times, and others times been without—by choice or by necessity. Still others may have started as a fellowship without ever wanting a minister, but the group may have grown enough that people start asking: should we?

A minister is a specially-trained professional that can offer your congregation skills that you may not have within your ranks. A minister is educated in worship and preaching, group dynamics, pastoral counseling, volunteer support, religious education, and leadership, among other things. A minister can be the glue that holds a congregation together. A minister can provide a single face to the larger community. A minister can assist at the critical times of life that call for rites of passage—child dedications, weddings or civil unions, and

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About Small Talk

Small Talk is a newsletter published monthly by the Small Church Specialist of the Northeast District.

SMALL TALK is devoted to strengthening the small Unitarian Universalist congregation through informative articles, resources, and good ideas.

the Rev. Jane Dwinell,
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If you have questions, comments, or ideas for future issues of Small Talk... if you'd like to publicize your small church's events... or if you'd just like to chat about small congregations...

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Sign up to receive Small Talk via email (as a PDF) at
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memorial services. A minister can be a spiritual leader, the person who prods and pokes at assumptions, behaviors, and attitudes, to help guide the congregation to a deeper and richer place.

Not every minister is gifted in all these areas. Ministers are individuals, and one who is a dynamic preacher may have few pastoral care skills. The quiet one in the pulpit may be the person you would most want at your bedside. The one who seems to have the relationship and group dynamics skills down pat may be uncomfortable around children. The social action firebrand may forget to write their newsletter column.

It is important for your congregation to decide what skills are most important to you in a minister—after all, it's a big investment in terms of time and money. The minister and congregation have a give-and-take relationship, and it's important to be upfront from the beginning.

## **What does your congregation want?**

It is helpful to survey the congregation to find out what they want. This can be done in a written form, or through group or individual meetings. Here's some things to be sure to discuss:

**Preaching and Worship.** Some congregations want the same minister in the pulpit three Sundays out of four; others want a diversity of speakers and only want the minister to preach once a month. Obviously you're going to want a minister to lead worship some of the time. The question is: how much?

**Pastoral Care.** Depending on a congregation's demographics, and age, folks may or may not want a minister to call on for pastoral care. An older congregation, in particular, may have more needs in this area, but a younger one has needs as well. The stresses and strains of young families can be just as rough as for those folks entering their final years. How much is this skill needed by your congregation?

**Religious Education.** Some congregations value a strong religious education program for the children, and maybe the adults. A minister can help start a program, support a volunteer or paid Director of Religious Education, can spend time with the kids, or lead adult classes. How important is RE to your group?

**Leadership Development.** A minister can attend Board meetings, give advice regarding governance structure, bylaws, staffing, and

other nuts and bolts of running a volunteer organization. However, you may already have organizational development folks in your congregation that can do this. This may or may not be important depending on how well you think your organization is run—do you need help in this area?

**Community Outreach.** Many congregations want the minister to be the liberal religious voice in the larger community. A minister can do this through attending interfaith clergy meetings, volunteering to be a hospital chaplain, or getting involved in community organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, the homeless shelter, or food shelf. A congregation member can also be chosen to take on this role. Is this area important to your group?

**Growth and Membership Outreach.** A minister can be the one to help the congregation grow by insuring quality worship and programs and good follow-up with visitors. A minister can give advice about advertising or other ways to become more visible. A minister can lead New UU classes for potential members. You don't necessarily need a minister to do these things, but someone should. Is this an arena you want help with?

### What should a minister not do?

Many small congregations, because of past history, few resources, and a host of other reasons, often expect that a minister will do a bunch of other things like pick up the mail, check the phone messages, turn the heat on for meetings and worship, create and copy the Order of Service, and bake cookies for Social Hour. These are not jobs for the minister—these are jobs for volunteers and/or a paid coordinator.

A minister has spent at least three years getting a master's degree, and has had continuing education beyond that. Many ministers have doctoral degrees.

**Ministers are professionals, and it is generally a waste of your money to have their time taken up with clerical and housekeeping activities.**

They are professionals, and it is generally a waste of your money to have their time taken up with clerical and housekeeping activities. If you find that these tasks are not being done in a timely and appropriate manner, you may want to consider hiring a part-time coordinator or administrator. Small congregation volunteers often get burned out or put the church's needs at the end of their priority list beyond family and career. Don't expect your minister to be the church secretary. It's important to get these small—but

important—things taken care of before you bring a new minister in.

A minister can be a wonderful addition to a happy, healthy small congregation. A minister can help you deepen the good work you're already doing. A minister can bring a new perspective to your community. But ministers come and go—the congregation itself is the one that lasts. Take time with this decision, and you'll be sure to have a relationship with your minister that is strong and healthy.

## Small congregation resources online

A series of handouts for the small congregation—written by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, Small Church Specialist, on diverse and practical topics—are available on the web in PDF format, at [www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm](http://www.uumetrony.org/misc/materials.htm).

Many thanks to Andrea Lerner for making them available online! Feel free to copy and distribute to your congregation's leadership—but please make sure that all content and formatting is unchanged.



# Small Congregation Events at General Assembly 2006

Come to St. Louis from June 21 to 25 and find out how your small congregation can be vital and strong!

## Need a new website?

### 🌸 Web Templates for Congregational Growth

Saturday, June 24  
11:00 a.m.–3:30 p.m.  
Room #262

*Congregations needing a website, or needing a better web site, will enjoy seeing the results of a project to develop Web Site Templates that promote congregational growth.*

*This project created a set of templates to be used by various levels of congregations to create or enhance their web site. The templates are free or at minimal cost to the congregation and will be able to be installed and maintained with minimal technical expertise.*

## Small Congregation Workshops

### 🌸 Small is Beautiful

Saturday, June 24  
2:15 p.m.–3:30 p.m.  
Room # 267

### 🌸 Small is Beautiful (repeat)

Sunday, June 25  
1:45 p.m.–3:00 p.m.  
Room # 231

## Exhibit Hall Booth

🌸 **Visit the Small Congregation booth!** Here you can pick up your free “I ♥ My Small Congregation” ribbon, take home helpful handouts and resources, and chat with the Small Church Specialist. We are located with the District Services booth in the Exhibit Hall.

**Register now for GA! Visit [www.uua.org/ga](http://www.uua.org/ga).**

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Go to [www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm](http://www.nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm) to download these back issues of SMALL TALK!



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