

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

June 2008

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**Rank by rank again we stand**  
from the four winds gathered  
hither/Loud the hallowed  
walls demand whence we  
come and how and whither.

—Unitarian Universalist hymn

## Small Congregations at General Assembly

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

**G**eneral Assembly is now over—if you're at home and reading this you can find out what's been going on by reading the reports posted on the Unitarian Universalist Association website ([www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org)). Fort Lauderdale, Florida, at the end of June is a steamy, hot, and muggy place, but inside the Convention Center it's the usual, exciting gathering of Unitarian Universalists (UUs) from all over the world.

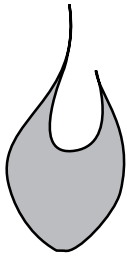
I co-led two workshops, Big Ideas for Small Congregations, with my co-author Ellen Germann-Melosh. We had a great time speaking to over 150 UUs from all over—UUs with the same concerns and challenges that you probably have. Some great ideas came up, too, so here's a smattering of thoughts based on what was discussed.

The usual challenges of money, volunteer burnout, and how to provide the right religious experience for our children came up in both workshops. I loved hearing the stories from individual congregations regarding these challenges.

### Children

There seemed to be a great debate about whether or not to have children during the worship service—for the whole time, or for part of the time. In at least two congregations there has been a rebellion by the children—they wanted to go off to their own religious exploration (RE) program and not stay for the whole service (even one designed with them in mind!). I love it that our children, too, know how to speak their minds and ask for what they want. As always, the right answer to this question is different for every congregation—yours will have to figure out what's best for 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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If technology isn't your thing, you can receive *Small Talk* as a **paper copy** by sending \$10 per year to the above address.

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## Burnout

In regards to volunteer burnout, my suggestion is still the same—if your congregation is experiencing this you either have the wrong organization structure for your size, your leaders are not training new leaders to take their place (with terms limits!), or you're trying to do too much for your size. Remember, the right organizational structure (centering), quality worship and RE (connecting), and one social action mission (creating change), is all you need to have a strong, healthy, small congregation, especially if you are a very small group.

## Money

As for the perennial lament, “we don't have enough money,” there's two ways out of this—do less or pledge more! Many small congregations are spending too much money on staff and/or buildings with little left over to ensure quality worship and RE, and mission. On the other hand, many UUs—from any size congregation—are not giving enough to support the life and good works of their church. Even in these uncertain economic times, we must not forget the importance of congregational life and the things your group does to support those less fortunate in your area.

One gentleman proudly stood up at one of the workshops to say, “Our congregation has conviction.” What he meant was that his congregation knew that Unitarian Universalism was a saving faith, they were not afraid to reach out and let their community know this, and they supported their conviction with money—an average \$3,000 pledge per person! I don't know of a congregation of any size that has this level of giving and commitment. Think of what you could accomplish with generous pledging. (Unfortunately, I did not find out what part of the country he was from.)

Here's some great new ideas that were shared:

## Music

Many small congregations are challenged by not having an instrument on location, or not having strong voices in the congregation, yet want to have music—singing and instrumental—as an important part of worship. This question came up: what can we do? There were some great answers.

The answers boil down to this: with today's technology, you can use a musician in the congregation (or hire a professional musician) to create your own CD or mp3 files of your favorite selections from *Singing the Living Tradition* or *Singing the Journey* that can be played whenever you worship. Automatic musician! You can sing along or use them as meditation pieces. What a wonderful idea. My thanks to the folks who shared this idea at the workshop.

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## Mission (social action)

Many small congregations wonder what they can do to practice their faith beyond the four walls of their meeting place. They worry that they don't have enough people to do something important. But you can! Check out the 10 Tree Challenge at [www.cuucsa.org/10tree](http://www.cuucsa.org/10tree). The folks from Community Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio, Texas, are asking every congregation to commit to planting 10 trees every year. These can be trees on your property, on the property of church members, or you can plant them anywhere where people would like a tree. Help our planet, and help your neighbors—it's a great way to put our Seventh Principle into practice. Check it out if you're searching for a mission.

## Intentional growth

The small congregation of the South Jersey Shore ([www.uucsjs.org](http://www.uucsjs.org)) is excited about spreading the good news of Unitarian Universalism. They draw people from several counties—and, in many cases, at least an hour's drive to attend worship. They know that's unsustainable, so they plan to divide their congregation as it grows.

### Small Congregation Youth Wanted

The Unitarian Universalist Association's new Youth Ministry Working Group seeks six more youth (ages 14–20) and two more youth advisors. They are especially seeking a diversity of membership and are looking for youth or advisors from small congregations.

Full information and application materials will be available on the Web by July 7 at [www.uua.org/aboutus/professionalstaff/lifespanfaith/youthministries/implementation/index.shtml](http://www.uua.org/aboutus/professionalstaff/lifespanfaith/youthministries/implementation/index.shtml)

For questions, contact Mara Dowdell, the Interim Youth Ministry Director at 617.948.4359. Applications are due by July 18, 2008.

One gentleman proudly stood up at one of the workshops to say, "Our congregation has conviction."

This is a fabulous idea. If you love your small congregation, you can keep that intimacy by dividing in two (or three or four) when you reach the 100–125-member mark. In our economic climate with high gas prices, and with our commitment to environmentalism, it only makes sense to have more small congregations within a geographic area, so no one has to drive more than 15 minutes or a half hour to reach a UU congregation. Check out the UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore's website—it's great.

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There were many more wonderful General Assembly gatherings. With the miracle of the Internet you can download streaming videos from [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org)

and watch many of the worship services, lectures and events that took place during these five days in Fort Lauderdale. I especially recommend the Service of the Living Tradition and the Sunday Morning Worship Service. Put speakers on your computer and sing along!

Most especially, I recommend the Ware Lecture. Van Jones was astounding. His message of eco-justice is so important for our times. By creating "green" jobs for the inner city unemployed we can solve several problems at once—full employment for those who have a hard time finding decent work, businesses that can move us away from an economy based on fossil fuels, and as a society, have less need for prisons, social welfare, child welfare, and a life without hope. We as Unitarian Universalists are called to offer hope, not hell—and with a green economy we can do both. But Van Jones is far more eloquent than I am—watch his lecture and share it with others.

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For those of you who attended, let me know your experience of General Assembly. For those of you who didn't attend, see you next year in Salt Lake City!

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# Rebuild

### Send your congregation's pledge to:

GNOUU, c/o Gay DiGiovanni  
1290 7th St.  
Slidell, LA 70455

Email or call Gay with your questions at [partners@gnouu.org](mailto:partners@gnouu.org) or 985-707-3980.