

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

June 2010

Bring many names,
beautiful and good;
celebrate in parable
and story.

—Brain Wren

Multicultural Worship in the Small Congregation

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

This year's General Assembly in Minneapolis was fun and invigorating as always. Minneapolis is a wonderful city and very pedestrian- and public transportation-friendly. The downtown was a lively place with a farmers' market, live music, and the Twin Cities Gay Pride Parade. Winona LaDuke's Ware Lecture was inspiring [url to watch it here]. And it was great to catch up with old friends and meet new ones.

Then there were the workshops. I attended many, but was especially inspired by one about multicultural worship. Although the multicultural worship workshop seemed to be aimed at larger urban congregations, here's my small-congregation take on the information presented.

We usually think that "multicultural" means white and nonwhite people worshipping and creating religious community together. While that certainly is true, your congregation is multicultural in other ways as well — and you can create meaningful worship of many varieties, no matter what you look like or how large you are. Here are some suggestions.

Start with where you are

Your congregation may appear solidly — or near-solidly — white, but I'll bet you have many cultures represented within your group. Find out who's there. Those with European ancestry are not all from the same country. The cultures of Ireland, France, Poland, Italy, and Scandinavia are all different. See what countries are represented in your congregation. Find out if anyone has Native American, Asian, South Pacific, Middle Eastern, African, or South American ancestry. Create a list or map of the places your members and friends are from.

Different areas of North America have different cultures as well. New England Yankees, Southern Gulf Coast residents, Hawaiians,

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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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Quebeçois, and Californians all have different ways of being in the world. You have different age groups as well, even if your congregation doesn't have children. Look at other subcultures within your congregation: retirees; parents with young children; young adults; bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender folks; people from the same town or neighborhood. And don't forget the area that your congregation serves. What cultures are represented there? See if your congregation reflects your area's demographics.

Your congregation (and your town, city, or county) has many cultures within it. Find out what they are.

Experiment with different kinds of music

We have traditionally used the music of "dead, white, male Europeans" and many of us enjoy and find meaning in that musical style. But our world is full of many, many musical styles. Bring some new ones into your congregation.

Start with music from the cultures within your congregation. Many European countries have unique forms of traditional music — compare the music of the Balkans with that of Scotland, Greece, or Germany. Add one piece of music each week from countries and cultures represented in your congregation. You can use recorded music, find high school or college students to play, or enlist members of your group (of any age) to provide selections. Perhaps there are pieces of music that were important to members from childhood, family reunions, other religious communities they belonged to, or school.

Share this music with one another. Share why it is important to you. Gradually add music from more and more cultures — from all over the world — and experiment with different instruments and singing styles.

Singing together does not have to be just traditional hymns. Chants, rounds, call-and-response tunes, folk music, Broadway musical hits, and popular songs are all appropriate music for worship. Stretch your edges by trying out different songs — to sing or listen to — as part of your worship experience.

Experiment with different worship formats

If your congregation has used the same worship format for years and years, it's time to try something new. Meet as a group — or in small groups, depending on your size — to talk about the elements of worship that are most important to people. Find out what things need to be kept and what can be experimented with. Many congregations choose to have the first part of the service remain the same, usually in-

cluding the chalice lighting and your version of Joys and Concerns. But the rest of the time — including words, music, and silence — can be done in different ways.

Once a month, instead of the traditional readings-hymns-sermon format, try a play, a series of short readings, an all-music service, a Quaker-style silent meeting, a Small Group Ministry session, liturgical dance, an all-poetry service, or an art-centered, hands-on worship. Have an inter-generational service at least once a month and have the young people be part of the planning group.

And when you do have a sermon-based worship service, don't be afraid of different preaching styles. Not everyone stands at a pulpit and speaks from a manuscript. Some preachers prefer to walk around, interact with the congregation, and speak from notes. Be prepared to be uncomfortable, to be changed, and to be moved.

Experiment with different worship leaders

Not everyone is comfortable with standing up in front of a group of people and saying something (whether they are reading it or speaking it from the heart), but many people are. Make sure you have a variety of worship leaders of different ages and backgrounds. Draw them from your congregation and from the surrounding area. If you have a minister, have them do a pulpit exchange (or two) with another local clergyperson. If you often have guest speakers, look for a variety of styles, as well as topics.

Make sure the people from your congregation who want to lead worship are trained. People who speak too fast or too quietly, who are nervous or disorganized, or who tend to lecture rather than preach simply need time to practice in a safe setting. Have your minister, a minister or trained worship associate from a nearby congregation, or a District staff or volunteer person lead a worship training. Here, future worship leaders can talk about what's important in worship and have an opportunity to practice

following an order of service, reading or speaking in front of a group, and writing short meditations or readings. It's not just what is said in worship that's important: the way it is said is equally important, allowing us to hear and understand it better.

Your congregation may appear solidly — or near-solidly — white, but I'll bet you have many cultures represented within your group.

Worship is central to the life of the small congregation — to any congregation. Making changes can be challenging. As one of the General Assembly workshop leaders said, "Have patience, intention, and stick with it. We come together to be changed. Wor-

ship is as serious as what happens in the emergency room."

Let me know how your experiments with multicultural worship work for your congregation. We can all learn from one another.

And if you attended an inspiring workshop at this year's General Assembly and would like to write a short article about it for *Small Talk*, send it along!

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

The hands-on book by Jane Dwinell
and Ellen Germann-Melosh!

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