

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

March 2007

A church is more than a picturesque building: it is a timeless functional temple that connects millennia and generation. It provides people the sanctity [of ritual]. It offers a place to educate children and to meditate. It is, finally, the last stop for many before their eternal departure. Whatever its style and design, a church always looks special.

—*Ion Grumeza, from This Old Church: The Indispensable Guide for Restoring Church Buildings*



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Buildings: Pros and Cons, New and Old

by **The Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant**

Every congregation needs a place to gather. But do you need a building of your own? What if you already have a building, but it seems wrong, too old, or too big? Is it worth your while to restore, renovate, build, buy, or rent? What can your congregation afford? What does your congregation want in a gathering space, a worship space, a space for the children? Here are some things to consider:

The Ups and Downs of Renting

For very small congregations, renting is a must. Sharing space with another organization or religious community is an efficient use of our resources. Many public buildings are empty for a good part of the week, and the more organizations that can use them, the better. Depending on whether or not you can leave out your visitor materials, or have a sign out all week announcing your congregation's name and time of worship, you may attract people who have picked up the literature or seen the sign when they came to the building for another reason. You don't have to worry about maintenance, upkeep, a mortgage, or the pipes freezing. And the price is usually right.

On the other hand, you can only use your rental space at the specific times you have arranged and paid for. That may require you to hold worship at a time other than Sunday morning, and limit when you can use the space for potlucks and other gatherings. You will have to store and set up hymnals, candles, the chalice, chairs, and other items each time you meet. You may not even have storage at your meeting site, but have to schlep everything home every week. There may be restrictions on the use of candles, incense, music, or food. The shape and size of the room(s) may limit how you set up your wor-

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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.

the Rev. Jane Dwinell

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ship space, and where you hold religious education for the children. You may find yourself moving from space to space, in search of the right one, so often that people lose track of where you are actually meeting. And if you're sharing space with another religious community, there may be symbols and other things that are not conducive to your congregation's sense of the sacred.

If you choose to rent:

- ✿ Try and find a compatible organization from the start so you don't have to move around.
- ✿ Negotiate to be able to leave out your literature, and have a permanent sign and storage space.
- ✿ Look for adaptable space that can grow and change with you as you grow and change—a large enough worship room to eventually hold 50 people, separate space for the children, and access to a kitchen (or at least permission to serve food).

The Ups and Downs of Ownership

Whether you have a new building, or an old, historic one, ownership comes with costs. Owning a building means you have to take care of it. There's the usual upkeep such as snow shoveling, lawn mowing, cleaning, painting, changing light bulbs, stocking up on toilet paper, or having the furnace cleaned. Not only does all this take money, it also takes time—either to do it, or to hire someone else to do it. Then there's the more major maintenance issues like replacing a leaky roof, replacing rotten windowsills or moldy sheetrock, replacing plumbing and wiring, or replacing the leaking oil tank. As any homeowner knows, there's always something to deal with—again, taking time and money. Your congregation will also have to deal personally with city or town officials if you want to install a new sign or exterior lighting, want to do any renovations, need zoning approval, etc.

But, if you own, you can do what you want with your space (pending congregational approval!), use the building when you need to, have office space for an administrator or minister, have all your stuff in place without having to store, schlep, or set up. Your building (if it's on a main street) will be a visible sign of Unitarian Universalism, and may attract people by virtue of being in front of them day after day. You can hold a lawn sale, put up a rainbow flag, have a Wayside Pulpit, or do other things in your yard that will express your faith. You can pass the building down to future generations. You can have the security and pride that comes with ownership.

If you choose to purchase:

- ✿ Make sure your building is on a main thoroughfare with good signage and lighting.
- ✿ Make sure you choose a building (or building design, if you build) that is flexible, environmentally responsible, and is appropriate for the size you want your congregation to be.
- ✿ Make sure you have enough parking, and that everything is handicapped accessible from the start.

If you already own:

- ✿ Take care of your building! Don't put off needed repair and maintenance until it costs even more because you've waited too long. Create a regular building maintenance plan, review it yearly, and stick with it.
- ✿ Make sure you have good signage and exterior lighting, handicap accessibility throughout, adequate parking, and as many environmentally responsible renovations as possible.
- ✿ Share your building. Try and find like-minded organizations, or people offering workshops or classes, to use your space for a freewill donation. It's part of being environmentally responsible, and brings good will, and free advertising, to the community. But beware of getting locked into a day care (or other) rental situation where you become a stranger in your own building, and are unable to use the space the way your congregation wants to.

A word for those of you with old, historic buildings

Some of you have the honor, and the challenge, to own a building that is old, beautiful, too big, falling apart, a landmark in your town, not handicapped accessible, possibly without running water, not insulated, expensive to keep up, and/or inappropriate for your current needs. If you spend a lot of time focusing on your building, some people may

say your congregation has an “edifice complex.” It's hard not to be focused on such a building.

You have two choices. You can care for, and spend the time and money necessary to keep, your building the historic jewel that it is. If you so, you may want to consider ways to use your space differ-

ently to serve the needs of your current congregation (which are probably not the same as the group it was built for). But if your old building is not a historic jewel, and it really has become too much for your congregation to handle, you can sell it and find another property more appropriate to your

needs. This is a decision that you should not make alone. You can enlist the advice of architects, historic preservationists, contractors, and carpenters, as well as your District staff and the Congregational Fundraising Department at the Unitarian Universalist Association (which offers advice in regards to buildings). There may also be legal issues with selling, so be sure to check your deed.

Resources for older buildings:

- ✿ Partners for Sacred Places' “New Dollars/New Partners” program. *Helps congregations assess their building and determine how it can best be used to fulfill their mission. Also gives information about money. Contact them at 215.567.3234 or www.sacredplaces.org.*
- ✿ THIS OLD CHURCH: THE INDISPENSABLE GUIDE FOR RESTORING CHURCH BUILDINGS by Ion Grumeza. *Covers every aspect of renovation and restoration from raising money to creating the perfect Restoration Committee, from dealing with conflict to how to plaster a wall or fix your tin ceiling. Available from Pilgrim Press at 800.537.3394 or www.thepilgrimpress.com.*

Whatever kind of space you use to congregate, worship, express your mission, and do business, be sure to take care of it and honor it for the sacred place that it is.

Share your building. Find other like-minded organizations, or people offering workshops or classes, to use your space for a freewill donation.

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Resources for Small Congregations

Email discussion list

for leaders (lay and paid)
of small congregation
lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk

Email list for ministers of small congregations

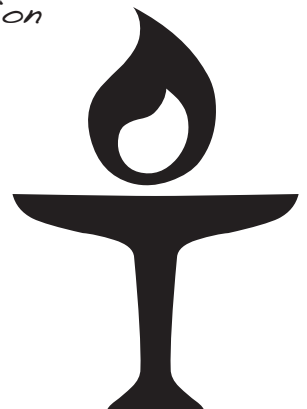
lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min

Handouts by the Rev. Jane Dwinell

1-2 page handouts on: change, finances, governance, leadership, publications, Small Group Ministry, welcoming, and worship
umetry.org/misc/materials

Need a Consultant?

Ellen Germann-Melosh, former District Executive of the Mountain Desert District, is now available as a small congregation consultant to serve congregations west of the Mississippi.



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