

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

May 2008

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**And I'll bring you hope when**  
hope is hard to find, and I'll  
bring a song of love and a  
rose in the wintertime.

—Carolyn McDade

## New Orleans

### A New Life for Three Small Congregations

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

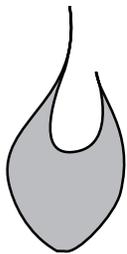
Imagine losing your home, your church building, and half your congregation all at the same time. It's inconceivable, but it happened to the Unitarian Universalists of the Gulf Coast region after Hurricane Katrina.

I have spent the last five weeks in the Gulf Coast helping to build and rebuild homes in the aftermath of "The Flood," as folks around here call it. If you haven't been to see the devastation firsthand — still here after nearly three years — it's hard to believe. Barely a quarter of local businesses have returned, and, in some areas, almost no homes have been rebuilt. Other neighborhoods appear to have full occupancy, but most seem to linger around 50 percent. There are empty and broken shopping malls, apartment buildings, and single-family homes. There are bare lots, abandoned slabs, and lonely front steps to nowhere.

I have worshipped with the folks at First Church and Community Church in New Orleans, and the group in Gulfport, Mississippi. I haven't yet made it to the North Shore congregation in Lacombe, Louisiana.

All that's left of the First Church sanctuary are the massive stone walls, and the stained glass windows. Worshippers sit on folding chairs and look at 2"x4"s and ladders as the front of the sanctuary is slowly being rebuilt. At Community Church — whose building was completely flooded — worshippers gather in the living room of the house next door that was purchased post-Katrina and fixed up for use by the congregation.

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New Orleans
continued on page 2...



Inside...

About Small Talk.....pg 2

GA Workshop.....pg 3

New Book.....pg 4

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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This is Volume Five, Issue Nine.
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In the wake of the damage and the devastation, the three New Orleans area congregations — First Church, Community Church, and North Shore — banded together to form the Greater New Orleans Unitarian Universalists (GNOUUs), and now they're raising money to rebuild their church homes and revitalize the work they are doing in their communities.

And they're asking for your help. They hope to raise 2.7 million dollars to help all three congregations — \$700,000 locally (of which \$560,000 had been raised by the end of April), and two million from the rest of us Unitarian Universalists scattered throughout the country and the world.

This is from their Capital Campaign brochure entitled, "It's Not Over Yet!"

First UU of New Orleans, founded in 1833, took on between three and five feet of water, which sat in the large church complex for three weeks. Insurance compensation was received for the damaged roof, but not for the damage caused to the structure or contents by the floodwaters.

Located three blocks from the infamous breach in the 17th St. Canal, Community Church drowned in water up to its roof. Almost everything inside the church was lost. CCUU had flood insurance, but the coverage was insufficient.

Across the lake, Katrina damaged the roof of the North Shore UU Society building, but the real impact was felt in the great reduction in membership.

Besides the church buildings, Katrina and the flood wreaked even more havoc among our people. We lost members and friends, and most people who were able to stay suffered extensive damage to their homes. Some are still displaced. 40–50 percent of our members chose or were forced to leave the area permanently.

We are hardy souls. Almost immediately following the storm, we started to regroup and rebuild our congregations, physically, spiritually, and in human capital. Hurricane Katrina's destruction was vast, 90,000 plus square miles (roughly the size of Great Britain). Over two years later, most of the area is still virtually uninhabited. We still face years of government red tape, time-consuming and expensive infrastructure repair, and slow, economic revitalization.

Still, New Orleans and the North Shore are home to a committed community of UUs and a larger community in great need. There is much work to be done to rebuild and revitalize this unique region in a just and sustainable way. The members and friends of all three UU churches are deeply committed to playing a key role in these efforts.

Many of you may be asking — as I did — what happened to all the money UUs donated in the immediate aftermath of the storm: three million dollars?

Two-thirds of that money went to local programs to help the low-income people of the area rebuild. One-third went to all the Gulf Coast UU congregations to help them survive the first year after the storm — to pay staff salaries, mortgages, and other ongoing budgetary expenses. None of that initial money was earmarked for rebuilding the churches.

In talking with local people about the GNOUU Capital Campaign for Rebuilding and Revitalization, I learned that several prominent UU ministers are headed out to our large congregations to ask all of them to pledge money for this rebuilding effort.

I thought, “Somebody needs to ask the small congregations, too, and that somebody is me!”

There are over 500 subscribers to *Small Talk*, and if each one of you represents one of our 700 small congregations, you all can help a great deal in this effort.

If each of you can raise \$1000 in your congregation, that would be one-quarter of the two million dollar goal. One thousand dollars pledged per year over the next three years (the time period of the

expected donations), would raise three-quarters of the needed money. Let’s do it! Let’s help our fellow small congregations rebuild!

The GNOUU Capital Campaign is able to collect money from your checking account or credit card, or through a transfer of stock or other appreciated securities. They can simply cash your check, as well. Talk to members of your congregations, read them this newsletter, go on the websites of each of the congregations, and see what you can do to help out.

Then send your congregation’s pledge to GNOUU, c/o Gay DiGiovanni, 1290 7th St., Slidell, LA 70455. You can email or call Gay with your questions at partners@gnouu.org or 985-707-3980.

And let me know what your congregation decides to do. We need to stand together as Unitarian Universalists in the face of such devastation and horror. But beyond the sadness and grief, there is great hope here, too, for the good work that can be done in this community so in need of good work. Please do your part to help New Orleans rebuild and revitalize!

**Let’s do it! Let’s help our fellow small congregations rebuild!
We need to stand together as Unitarian Universalists in the face of devastation and horror.**

Big Ideas for Small Congregations: The GA Workshop

Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh will share their wisdom, advice, and enthusiasm for the small congregation at General Assembly. Their workshop will be offered twice, so you just can’t miss it!

1. *Thursday, 3:15 pm– 4:30 pm*
Convention Center Grand Floridian D
2. *Friday, 11 am–12:15 pm*
Convention Center 315

Visit www.uua.org/ga for more General Assembly info.

HELP THE GULF COAST

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 or 985-707-3980.

The Issue Index



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VOLUME 1

What is a Small Congregation?	December 2003
Governance Structure	January 2004
Numbers (statistics to keep)	February 2004
Social Action	March 2004
Growth: Part One	April 2004
Growth: Part Two	May 2004
A Roadmap to Change	June 2004

VOLUME 2

Small is Beautiful Report	September 2004
The Small Church of the Future	October 2004
Publications: Part One (layout)	November 2004
Publications: Part Two (content)	December 2004
Conflict	January 2005
Creative Worship	February 2005
The Annual Canvass	March 2005
Small Group Ministry	April 2005
Knowing and Telling Our Stories	May 2005
Summer Worship—Yes or No?	June 2005

VOLUME 3

Small Congregations Speak Out	September 2005
Building a Music Program	October 2005
Technology: Help or Hindrance?	November 2005
Celebrating December Holidays	December 2005
Transformational Congregations	January 2006
Committee on Ministry	February 2006
Welcoming Congregation Work	March 2006
Greening the Small Congregation	April 2006
Religious Education for Children	May 2006
So You're Looking for a Minister	June 2006

VOLUME 4

Greatest Challenges #1: Growth	September 2006
Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout	October 2006
Greatest Challenges #3: Ministry	November 2006
Greatest Challenges #4: Money	December 2006
Greatest Challenges #5: Conflict	January 2007
The Small Congregation in Transylvania	February 2007
Buildings: Pros and Cons	March 2007

Capital Campaigns	April 2007
Going to Two Worship Services	May 2007
Wrapping Up the Church Year	June 2007

VOLUME 5

Integrating Children	September 2007
Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change	October 2007
Another Look at Social Action	November 2007
How to Get the Work Done	December 2007
What Should We Do With Our Visitors?	January 2008
The Meaning of Membership	February 2008
The Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches	March 2008
How to Help Your Building Pay for Itself	April 2008
New Orleans: New Life for Small Congregations	May 2008

from the people who bring you *Small Talk*...

The new #1 resource for small congregations!

Big Ideas for Small Congregations: a friendly guide for leaders

by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh

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