

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

October 2006

Q. How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb?

A. An undetermined number. We choose not to make a statement either in favor of, or against, the need for a light bulb. However, if on your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that's fine.

Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout Or, How to Get the Work Done, Welcome Newcomers, and Have Fun!

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

Time after time, people in small congregations complain about how tired they are, how there aren't enough people to do the work, and how the visitors don't seem to stick around. All these things are related! When a visitor comes to call, checking out your congregation and Unitarian Universalism, they are looking for a meaningful spiritual experience. Sometimes all they hear and feel is the congregation's pleas for help—and they're out the door.

Why is everyone burned out?

Burnout comes from many things—an inappropriate organizational structure for the size of the congregation, forgetting to thank the leaders and the workers, taking people for granted, leftover (or current) unresolved conflict, trying to do too much, members who are having personal stress of some kind, people who do the same task (expected or not) year after year after year... and forgetting to have fun!

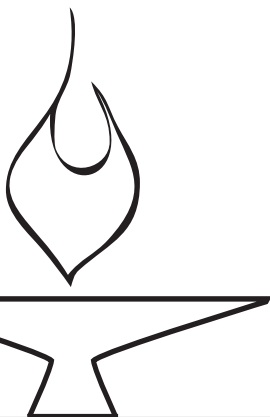
Work toward a vision

Why does your congregation exist? Certainly not to be just another organization that's looking for volunteers! If you don't know why your congregation exists and who you are as a gathered community, then ask your District Staff to provide you with a consultant that can help you discern this. Once you know who you are and why you exist, then you can plan all your activities toward fulfilling that vision. People may be happier to volunteer to weed the flowerbed, pledge a generous amount, or talk to visitors if they are working toward a vision.

Keep it simple!

Small congregations often make the mistake

Burnout
continued on page 2...



Inside...

About Small Talk.....pg 2

More on Bunout.....pg 3

Resources.....pg 4

About Small Talk

Small Talk is a newsletter 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,
Editor

Dana Dwinell-Yardley,
Graphic Design

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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...

Please contact  
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Sign up to receive Small Talk via email (as a PDF) at
<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalknewsletter>.

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of trying to do too much. We Unitarian Universalists want to save the world—while we're planning worship, leading religious education (RE) classes, painting the church, fixing the toilet, making the coffee, and serving on the governing board. Oh, and trying to have a personal and professional life as well. It's too much.

## **Leadership and burnout at different sizes**

If you're in a congregation with less than 50 members, plan to do nothing else but quality Sunday morning—worship, social hour, and religious education—plus one social action project per year. Have a governing board of no more than seven people and use task forces instead of committees to get things done. Don't ask members to do more than one thing at a time. So if you're on the governing board, don't run the social action project and plan RE as well. Don't tire people out by asking folks to mow the lawn, shovel the walk, and clean the building. Hire these tasks out—or have members who are unable to offer much of a financial pledge do these tasks as their contribution to the community.

If you're in a congregation larger than 50 members, you can consider having a governing board plus an RE committee and a worship committee. Limit the committee size to 2-3 members, with more if people are desperate to join. Put together task forces for your other needs. And try to stick with people serving in one capacity at a time. Spread the activities out over the course of the year so that those who want to do more than one thing will have the opportunity.

## **Leadership planning for the future**

Anyone who is “in charge” of a project, or an aspect of congregational life, needs to be training their replacement from the beginning. If at least two people work on a project together—planning the flea market, organizing the holiday pageant, creating the budget—then one person will feel they can “retire” (or be sick, or take a vacation) and the project will be left in good hands. Becoming a “trainee” can be a good thing for a newcomer to do—if they're looking to get involved in a hands-on way.

The leadership should be on the lookout for folks who would be good at certain tasks—newcomers and long-time members alike—and ask people to volunteer. Don't just have a request in the newsletter or a pulpit announcement (“We need someone to organize the holiday fair, please please please”)—if you get any volunteers at all, they may just be the wrong ones. Better to cancel an event or activity than to have it poorly planned and carried out. People are often flattered

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to be asked, and are more likely to say yes and be successful. They will feel more connected to the community, and will be likely to say yes again in the future.

### **Don't forget to thank people!**

While many of us would say we are happy to volunteer for our church community and we don't expect thanks, thank people anyway. A handwritten note from the governing board, a special acknowledgment during worship, or a thank you cake at social hour are all simple ways to express your appreciation. And if the leadership is good at thanking people, then people are bound to thank the leadership. We learn by example, and we're trying to create the beloved community, so say thank you over and over and over again. There can never be too many acknowledgements for good work done.

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### **Clean up your conflicts**

Visitors are skilled at picking up bad vibes. If there is some kind of issue—past or present—that is lingering in your building and among your members, now's the time to face it and deal with it. Every congregation has conflict—just like any relationship—and it's important to face it head on and not just sweep it under the rug and hope it will go away. It won't. And it will affect everything that you do—with or without newcomers.

Depending on the level of the disagreement, who is involved and whether or not you have a minister, you may need to bring in outside help to process and learn from your conflict. We all react to conflict in different ways, so not everyone is going to feel comfortable airing everything out in the open. But our religious community is there to help us grow, and by finding a safe place—and a safe facilitator—those who are involved in the conflict can have an opportunity to clear the air and move on.

The leadership and the other volunteers are bound to get burned out very fast if conflict is allowed to escalate and linger. And remember—the children (and the visitors) are watching. Be grown-ups, and deal with it. It may be uncomfortable, but you'll be glad you did.






### **Don't forget to have fun!**

Just like there can never be too many thank yous, there can never be too many celebrations. A congregation that plays together stays together. Have a once-a-month potluck and game night. Order out pizza. Have a hymn sing. Be silly. Tell jokes. Light candles. Have a sleepover in the church with the kids. Find ways that your group likes to have fun together. Remember, laughter is good medicine. Taking yourselves seriously all the time isn't good for anybody. If a newcomer feels that lively energy, they're more likely to stick around. We all need more fun in our lives.

*Next month: What to do with a minister (once you thank them and tell them a good joke).*

## **About this issue**

*This issue is the second in a series of Small Talks addressing the five greatest issues facing small congregations, as voiced by visitors to the small congregation booth at General Assembly 2006. The top five, in no particular order, are:*

-  **Growth**
-  **Member retention and burnout**
-  **Ministry**
-  **Finances**
-  **Conflict and change**

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## A note from the editor

Thanks for subscribing to *Small Talk*, the monthly newsletter designed to strengthen the small Unitarian Universalist congregation!

I am no longer co-employed by the Northeast District and the Unitarian Universalist Association as Small Church Specialist and a member of District staff. I am now an independent small congregation consultant, available to help you and your congregation via email, phone, and in person—as long as your congregation is not in Maine, New Hampshire, or Vermont.

The Rev. Karen Brammer is now the Small Church Specialist and District staff member, in that position. Please contact her at [kbrammer@uua.org](mailto:kbrammer@uua.org) with any of your needs. Otherwise, feel free to contact me at [sky@vtlink.net](mailto:sky@vtlink.net).

—the Rev. Jane Dwinell

## Resources for Small Congregations

### Email discussion list

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

### Email list for ministers of small congregations

[lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/  
smallchurch-min](http://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  
[uumetrony.org/misc/materials](http://uumetrony.org/misc/materials)

## The Issue Index

To download these back issues of *Small Talk*, visit [nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm](http://nhvt.uua.org/publications.htm)!



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|                                         |                |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| <b>What is a Small Congregation?</b>    | December 2003  |
| <b>Governance Structure</b>             | January 2004   |
| <b>Numbers (statistics to keep)</b>     | February 2004  |
| <b>Social Action</b>                    | March 2004     |
| <b>Growth: Part One</b>                 | April 2004     |
| <b>Growth: Part Two</b>                 | May 2004       |
| <b>A Roadmap to Change</b>              | June 2004      |
| <b>Small is Beautiful Report</b>        | September 2004 |
| <b>The Small Church of the Future</b>   | October 2004   |
| <b>Publications: Part One (layout)</b>  | November 2004  |
| <b>Publications: Part Two (content)</b> | December 2004  |
| <b>Conflict</b>                         | January 2005   |
| <b>Creative Worship</b>                 | February 2005  |
| <b>The Annual Canvass</b>               | March 2005     |
| <b>Small Group Ministry</b>             | April 2005     |
| <b>Knowing and Telling Our Stories</b>  | May 2005       |
| <b>Summer Worship—Yes or No?</b>        | June 2005      |
| <b>Small Congregations Speak Out</b>    | September 2005 |
| <b>Building a Music Program</b>         | October 2005   |
| <b>Technology: Help or Hindrance?</b>   | November 2005  |
| <b>Celebrating December Holidays</b>    | December 2005  |
| <b>Transformational Congregations</b>   | January 2006   |
| <b>Committee on Ministry</b>            | February 2006  |
| <b>Welcoming Congregation Work</b>      | March 2006     |
| <b>Greening the Small Congregation</b>  | April 2006     |
| <b>Religious Education for Children</b> | May 2006       |
| <b>So You're Looking for a Minister</b> | June 2006      |
| <b>Greatest Challenge #1: Growth</b>    | September 2006 |
| <b>Greatest Challenge #2: Burnout</b>   | October 2006   |