

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

February 2010

We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

—*Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism*

Climate Change and the Small Congregation

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

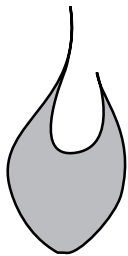
Many people ask what they can really do to help stem the effects of climate change. As individuals, and as congregations, we can't do much to stop the ice caps melting, the ozone layer leaving, the hurricanes and earthquakes from causing devastation, or creatures from going extinct. But we can do some things to prepare for the day when life could get challenging — things that will also help us now to weather economic ups and downs and build stronger religious communities.

Grow food

What? A congregation growing food? Yes, that's right. We may face in the future a limited amount of fresh food, so learning to raise food ourselves will be important. Not everyone has gardening skills, but within every congregation there are most likely at least a few people who do.

Does your congregation have a big yard or even several acres of land? Put in a community garden (saves on landscaping and lawn-mowing bills!) and offer space to the people of your area. It would be simple to prepare the soil and divide it up into small plots. If no one in your congregation has the equipment or the skills to do this, you can probably find someone who does who would be glad to do the work in exchange for garden space. You could also make your garden a larger mission project and plan to donate all the food grown to your local food shelf.

If your congregation doesn't have garden space, you are probably near an empty lot that could be turned into a garden. This will require more work — getting permission from the owner, possibly having to clean it up and then bring in topsoil or manure, maybe needing to build a fence. It has been proven, however, that turning empty city lots into gardens brings down the crime rate and increases the well-being of the residents in the area. So whether you have a garden on your own



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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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property or in a nearby empty lot, you are also creating a perfect social action project/mission for your congregation.

Having a vegetable and fruit garden is a wonderful intergenerational activity as well. The children could learn about food production, the relationship of food to religious rituals and holidays, and have an opportunity to get their hands dirty (and serve up the harvest at social hour!). One or two worship services a year could focus around food. Many of the older folks probably remember the Victory Gardens of World War II; many churches at that time opened up their yards to grow vegetables for the cause.

We all need to eat. In times of economic instability, a congregational garden can provide food for hungry members and friends or for the local food shelf. In time of increasing oil prices (which cause increasing food prices, and perhaps some shortages), having local food at your fingertips will ensure that no one in your area goes hungry.

And, besides, vegetable gardens are beautiful. People will admire them — and admire your congregation for giving such a wonderful gift to the community.

Drive less

We all understand the environmental impact of driving. Many of us have chosen to drive hybrid or high-mileage cars. Some of us have chosen to ride bikes or walk more often than drive. But many of our small congregations are in areas where driving some distance to church is a necessity. How can we cut down on driving?

For those congregations that serve a large geographic area, figure out how you can carpool. Set up a challenge for the congregation — have everyone keep track of how many miles they drive to and from church, add them up, and then try and reduce those miles by half. Those who can walk or bike should. Others can carpool, maybe several people meeting at a convenient location and then driving that last several miles to church together. This is a great way for people to get to know one another better and learn who is in their neighborhood — and save money, wear and tear on your vehicle, and the environmental consequences of driving at the same time.

For those congregations in cities or in an area with public transportation, encourage people to get to church that way (and bike, walk, and carpool as well). Because Sunday public transit schedules are often reduced from weekday schedules, consider changing the time of the service if it would help people get there by bus or subway.

You can get the kids involved with this project as well. Have them record and chart each Sunday's mileage to keep track of your progress. Have them learn about people of other faiths who routinely walk to services, do walking meditation, or go on walking pilgrimages. When they learn about Unitarian Universalist history and origins, remind them that people in those days either walked or rode horses (or traveled in carriages or wagons) to get to church. When my family was in Transylvania three years ago, we walked the two miles to church on a very cold and snowy morning. It can be done!

If your town or city does not have public transportation, bike paths, or safe sidewalks, the congregation can take on lobbying for these as a social action/mission project. It will be important to *everyone's* future to have good ways to get around that don't rely on the individual vehicle. And, once again, the good will engendered by taking this on will be wonderful publicity for your group.

Build community

Like many of you are experiencing now, our congregations become even more important in times of trouble. When things are rough for individuals, it's wonderful to know that they can rely on members and friends of the congregation to look in on them, bring them food, take them out for lunch, offer to babysit, or give them a ride to church. Whether the rough times are from national or international problems, or simply a death or serious family illness, we need to care for one another. That is one of the central purposes for a religious congregation.

So take the time now to build up your "caring committee," those folks who are the central eyes and ears of the congregation, the people who know when a family or an individual needs a bit of extra TLC. If your congregation does not yet have such a group, form one. They can learn from your minister, if you have one, or from the caring committee from a

neighboring congregation, or be trained at a District conference or meeting.

Besides learning how to care for another another, this is also a good time to learn how to handle conflict. Create a behavioral covenant, a dispute resolution policy, and a safe congregation policy (templates of these are available through your District office). Bring in a mediator to teach basic conflict resolution skills (another great activity for the kids!). Learn to talk about your problems and challenges before they escalate.

And learn to celebrate! Every strong congregation knows how to have fun together. Whether times are good or times are hard, it helps to remember to pat yourselves on the back for a job well done now and then. (A little cake and ice cream is generally guaranteed to lift the spirits.) Thank one another, love one another, worship together, and help make the world a better place.

Vegetable gardens are beautiful. People will admire them – and admire your congregation for giving such a wonderful gift to the community.

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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