

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

March 2010

These are hard times

in which a genius would wish to live. Great necessities call for great leaders.

—Abigail Adams

Advice for Leaders

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

The biggest challenge for small congregations seems to be around leadership. “We don’t have enough people to do the work.” “The board doesn’t listen to us.” “We can’t get anyone to volunteer for tasks.” “The leaders are all burned out — and the congregation, too.”

All congregations need their leaders (as well as their followers), but not everyone is cut out to be a leader. It takes a certain balance of skills to lead without being bossy and to remember that you are leading a religious community, not a business.

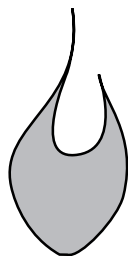
Here is some advice for congregational leaders.

Keep the big picture in mind

It’s all too easy for leaders to get caught up in the minutia of congregational life. As a board member, it’s not up to you to change the order of service, the time of worship, the color of the bathroom, or the kind of coffee that is served at social hour — unless the congregation has specifically asked you to. It is up to you to watch over the assets of the congregation — the budget, the building, the staff — and to always remember why the church exists: to serve both the congregation and the larger community. As you make decisions, keep these factors in mind.

Listen

You have been asked and have agreed to be a leader in your congregation. That means you need to listen to the congregation, their concerns, their dreams, and their hopes. You also need to listen to your coleaders (lay and professional). Everyone has different ideas: some will work for your group, others won’t. But before you dismiss an idea, you need to hear it. Learn to listen.



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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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Learn to compromise

You and the other leaders will not always be in agreement. A congregation, even one with a minister, does not have one boss. Always share your opinion with other leaders and listen to theirs. Look for the places where there is agreement and the places where compromise is in order. Perhaps you all agree that the restrooms need to be handicapped accessible, but you disagree on how to accomplish that. Keep the “what” and the “why” in mind as you seek a solution to the “how.” Once a decision about how to move forward is agreed on, support it, even if you didn't initially. There is nothing more destructive to congregational life than a leader (or a follower) continuing to lobby for their idea when that idea has been voted down.

Be faithful

This means that you will show up for meetings, get your agenda items in on time, read the minutes and reports, and keep yourself informed about what is going on. It also means that you will do what you say you will do. If you are assigned or volunteer for a task, accomplish it by the given date or find someone else to do it if you can't. More than that, being faithful means that you show up every week for worship, that you participate fully in congregational life, and that you take your faith seriously. Your church is not a social club, but an organization that exists to help you become a better person and to help make the world a better place. That takes work on everyone's part. Sometimes hard work. So, be faithful and show up.

Keep it simple, and learn to say no

Sam wants an adult religious exploration program. Chris wants a choir. Alex wants to organize a protest against the war. Rowan wants a small group ministry program. Jamie wants to set up a soup kitchen. These are all great ideas, but as a small congregation you can only do so much. Remember to keep it simple: focus on a quality Sunday time together (worship, religious exploration for children, social hour, welcoming for visitors), pastoral care for those in need, and a mission in the larger world. If you have extra time and energy for other things, fine. If Chris is willing to run the choir and has the talent to do so, then it's fine to say OK. But if Chris wants to you hire a choir director, you may have to say no. Know your limits — as leaders, as a congregation, and financially.

As leaders, you need to keep your own involvement in the congregation simple as well. Just because you're on the board, it doesn't mean that you are automatically a worship leader, social hour host, newsletter editor, web guru, plumber, or copy machine repair person. No one

person can — or should — try and do it all. And if serving as a leader of your congregation is interfering with your health or your personal life, feel free to step down.

Train your successors

Just because you're in a leadership position in your small congregation doesn't mean you have to (or should) serve forever. Respect whatever term limits are in your bylaws — and be sure to train your successor. Too many congregational leaders think that no one but them is capable of doing such a good job. That attitude will surely cause burnout, yours or others. The congregation belongs to everyone, not just to you.

By mentoring the next generation of leaders, you will have an opportunity to take a break from board meetings and financial reports and do other things for the church. If you don't get burned out first, you'll have the energy to work with the children, offer music for worship, or tend the flower beds. Our congregations need many different skills to keep

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them going, and many different kinds of leaders. Give the gift of your experience to someone else.

Keep up the morale

So often, we get bogged down in the day-to-day running of the congregation and forget to have fun. Constant complaining never got anyone anywhere.

If you're trying to do too much, it will show in the energy level of the congregation.

Keep it simple, celebrate your successes often, and remember to thank people. Take the time to write a thank-you note, make a phone call, bring a special cake to social hour, or send flowers to honor accomplishment, hard work, commitment, patience,

and integrity. It is challenging to be part of a religious community, to be called upon to be our best selves, and to serve others. We need to remember to laugh, to throw a party, to make fun of ourselves, to cry, to play with the kids, and to be grateful. Gratitude is a spiritual practice. Make it one of yours.

Next month: advice for followers!

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

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

Order now at www.spiritoflifepublishing.com

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for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations

<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smalltalk>

Email list for ministers of small congregations

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