

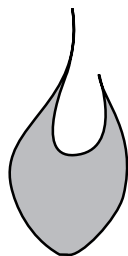
# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

October 2008

The real competition comes from within the small church itself. It is the smallness of its vision, the smallness of its inclusivity, and the smallness of its heart. . . The small church at-large is free from the fear of the future and released from any sense of inadequacy.

—Robin Trebilcock,  
from *The Small Church At-Large*



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## Inside-Out, Upside-Down, Large-Small Church World *The Story of the Living Room Church, Part Two*

*Editor's note: Last month we learned about the Living Room Church and the good work they do. This month we learn more about how they made the change from a "regular" small church and how they function as a small congregation in a new way. Next month in Part Three, you will get Ron's suggestions on how to make your congregation more missional.*

**by the Rev. Ron Robinson, Turley, Oklahoma**

At first we tried to be a smallish, niche church in a very conservative, fast-growing suburb of Tulsa, steadily moving toward that "magical" number, 125, that seemed to be what it would take to have a full-time pastor. We hoped that by renting a space, putting up a sign, advertising our message of a progressive free church, and holding programs a couple of times a week we would draw in the numbers of people necessary to sustain this vision of church.

We began as a Sunday-morning-meeting, order-of-service-sermon-and-music driven, program-oriented church. In other words, our motto was the old one of "act bigger so you can grow bigger"—a sure path to burnout and a treadmill of anxiety. We were trying to attract people to come in and become like us so we could go back out and do more in the community.

You know the scene. On Sunday morning, buildings all over our country come to life for anywhere from an hour to maybe three or four, maybe all day. But everything in and with those churches happens inside those buildings. Most church buildings here have boarded-up windows because the old stained glass has been broken over the years and not replaced. You can't even see what goes on inside them if you wanted to. Then the other six days of the week the buildings and the rented spaces remain empty or virtually so. The churches have little connection with the community immediately around them.

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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**  
*Editor*

**Dana Dwinell-Yardley**  
*Graphic Designer*

If you have questions, comments, or ideas for future issues of *Small Talk*, please **contact** The Rev. Jane Dwinell at:

jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com  
802.229.4008  
1 Bingham Street  
Montpelier, VT 05602

Jane is also available to consult with your small congregation.

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They offer no corridors or open community spaces, perpetuating an “us” and “them” world. For all our efforts to be missional, to start community groups that met in our small rented church space, and for all our efforts to hold events and projects outside, we weren't much different from them. Oh, the Living Room Church, another “small church.”

(One of our first steps toward change was to change our name from the sacred-sounding Epiphany Church to the Living Room Church when we were still in our small rented space. Now in our new incarnation, we are beginning to move away from that name, too, as it seems too safe for the edgy spiritual adventure we are on and in the place we are. We have talked about becoming the Salvage Church because we have salvage yards nearby and we are all about salvaging lives and our community. The point is that we might change our name often, as we might change where and how we gather, in response to our changing environment and not to the authority of “we can't change that.” Everything is up for changing—except that we are a people of God who make Jesus visible in the world, and we are free to make that happen in diverse ways, times, places, and with diverse people without being stymied by organizational bylaws, structure, budget or people who seek to control turf and mission.)

Between 2003 and 2007 we failed to sustain our seed growth in that first soil (for lots of reasons that you can read on my blog, [www.progressivechurchplanting.blogspot.com](http://www.progressivechurchplanting.blogspot.com)). So we moved from suburban to an urban-rural-small-town mix, or “edge” area, one of the spots described as “an abandoned place of Empire.” In other words, we moved to a place where coolness, money, and the usual investments of Empire, would not and do not go.

Then, one of the storefront churches nearby moved into a bigger building. The vacated storefront was between two busy (at the time) places—post office and laundromat, across from the local bank. At the same time I was envisioning a new way of being church in the world, away from the traditional, attractional church model, to an organic, incarnational, emerging church. I envisioned turning the empty, larger space into a space not for those of us in the church, but for our community (in all the ways mentioned in Part One). We would then meet within it, as a guest in our own place, a place given away to the community. It meant living out the truth that the church was not the worship service, not the building, not the identity, not the programs we put on for other people.

And so we did. We made the move. And we are still moving, still incarnating, and even now imagining ways to take all that we do inside the community center itself beyond these walls and into other public

spaces. We have formed a local community foundation to run the A Third Place Community Center and its activities (with church members as the starting members of the board but with others as well).

This will allow it to continue to take on a life of its own while the church is free to become more underground, to seed more such churches, to become more the “leaven” in the world.

We might still become a wholly different church. We talk about being a kind of urban monastery in which we might meet in homes and in abandoned lots and in old burned out shells that were often used as meth labs. We are looking at moving the Center into an old church building (the church building where I grew up) which is more than ten thousand square feet, abandoned, and decaying. We might find ways to be more communal, more sustainable, helping us to live more freely.

Here’s how we handle the practicalities of this kind of church.

First, finances. Our current income comes partially from the pledges of the six active members, and a small amount of rent from the UU Christian Fellowship which has its offices here. But—here’s the most radical and important point—most of our funding comes from the people we partner with and serve who are not, or are not yet, or never will be “members” of our church. It’s enough to break even. Like the people we live amidst, the congregation members live from paycheck to paycheck, and do so intentionally because we want to end each month at zero, knowing we have spent all on mission. We are not afraid of the future, of uncertainty, and of failure. When we ask, we receive, because we have created relationships.

What do we expect from those who join with us as leaders, and engage with us in our weekly leadership worship still open to all? First (speaking of finances), we hold out the vision of ultimately reaching the point where, individually, we give eighty percent of our own money away to the church, the Center, and

causes local and global—however we can find ways to change a life—give ten percent to our savings, and live on the remaining ten percent. It is a vision we may not all achieve, but it is a part of the way we

live our values and embody a God that turns the world upside down.

Trying to get people to achieve the nearly-impossible dream of the “ten percent tithe” to church and other good causes, and then spend the other ninety percent of their resources on themselves and their own kind seems at odds with the spirit of the one

who said to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Our 80/10/10 goal becomes more doable when we make the leap to live in the “abandoned places of Empire.” It also becomes more doable when relationships are created and communities within the community are formed for sustainable living, tool-sharing, food gardens, free clothes, sharing services, etc. At our church/Center we say we are a “giveaway/giveback” place. People often come to get something and find here ways to give back.

What about our spiritual life? We hold out a covenant that we will:

- ✦ pray and/or meditate daily,
- ✦ worship weekly,
- ✦ have monthly spiritual check-in,
- ✦ go on spiritual retreat annually,
- ✦ aim toward a once-in-a-lifetime spiritual pilgrimage, and
- ✦ constantly be open to opportunities to do random acts of kindness and beauty.

Notice there is nothing about serving on a committee!

When you move, though, as we have in the past few years, away from a sermon-centered worship approach to a liturgy-based, intimate worship approach with conversation, it is easier to exist and thrive as a small group and not always be trying

**When you move away from a sermon-centered worship approach to a liturgy-based, intimate worship approach with conversation, it is easier to exist and thrive.**

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to survive just to get and keep a minister. This is a growing edge for us—we will need to grow “the priesthood of all believers” along with “the prophethood of all believers,” to use a phrase from our Radical Reformation, Unitarian Universalist tradition.

And what of visitors? Doesn't this all seem exclusive to attracting visitors? Yes and no. Though our Wednesday gathering is open to all, and we hold it right in the middle of the Community Center while it is open, it isn't geared to attracting visitors, but to feeding the spirit of our leaders so we can better serve others. Our focus is in attracting visitors first to us in mission, working with us in one of our many community projects.

Right now we don't focus on getting new members,

but on growing three areas of relationships with people:

- ✦ Participants in mission with us,
- ✦ Partners who become leaders of different missions with us, at the Center or out in the community, and
- ✦ Leaders in the church.

By developing relationships and living out our mission, those who eventually choose to join us as “members” will be people who need and desire a particular faith community. In our world today, and particularly—but not exclusively—among younger generations, people are not looking to be members of institutions but missionaries of movements. Churches will thrive to the degree they are able to make such moves.

*Next month: Part Three of the Living Room Church's story.*

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