

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

April 2011

God, help us to turn – from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith.

—Jack Riemer

Welcoming – or Not? My Pet Peeves

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small church consultant

I like to visit many different Unitarian Universalist congregations (of all sizes!), both as a guest speaker and when I travel. Our congregations are so varied. I learn so much when I visit, seeing interesting new ways to do things, meeting new people, hearing great music and sermons, and, unfortunately, discovering things that are, well, annoying.

Here are some of my pet peeves:

Greeters that only say hello at the front door

OK, having greeters to say “welcome” is certainly a good thing. But if your greeters don’t take the time to speak with the newcomer further as they come in (if it’s an appropriate time) or after the service at social hour, there really is no point. Greeting is not just about saying hello; anyone can—and should—do that. Greeting is about understanding why a new person came to your church and what information you could give them that would be helpful to their particular situation.

So, plan to take the time to speak with a visitor at some length. Start with, “What brought you here today?” and give the person time to answer. They could be going through a rough period and may not be ready to spill their guts to you. But they could also simply be new to town and looking for a way to meet people and to get involved in a community. They could be on a spiritual quest and church-hopping. They could be looking for a religious exploration program for their kids and want to check things out first. You won’t know how to help them, who to have them talk with, etc., unless you find out why they came.

Don’t forget to ask them if this is their first visit to a Unitarian Universalist church. That newcomer at your door could have been a UU for years, ready to jump in right away at a new congregation. That newcomer could have been UU in their youth or 30 years ago when they

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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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Volume Eight, Issue Eight.
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were newly married, or that newcomer could simply be a visitor to your area who wanted come to church on Sunday. Find out. You'll say different things to someone who has never been to a UU church before, someone who has been to a UU church a long time ago, or someone who is just passing through town.

Be prepared with a handout or brochure if someone expresses a desire to meet people, find support, or join a social action activity. Tell the person about the activities available at your church, but also make sure the document you're giving them has the activities listed, with a contact person, phone, and e-mail. Offer to introduce the newcomer to the person who handles the small group ministry program, the children's RE program, or the monthly dinner at the homeless shelter.

You can also introduce the newcomer to other folks from their neighborhood, other people who are dealing with the declining health of a loved one, or other people who have kids the same age.

All this could take you a while. So, it's important to have several people available to speak to newcomers if you have more than one or two visitors on a Sunday. These folks do not have to be at the door each week, but simply available to talk with someone at social hour. It's up to the greeter at the door to ask for help.

To make sure that everyone feels welcome, please have consistent, legible name tag use. It's disconcerting for a visitor to see some people with name tags and other people without. Be sure to make name tags for the visitors as well.

No, I don't know where everything or who everyone is!

So often there are announcements during worship where people say something like, "Contact Chris if you have something to donate to the flea market," or "Join us after the service in the Mary Smith Memorial Room for coffee and conversation," or "The minister will be holding a new UU class in the library at 11:30." OK. Who is Chris? Where is the Mary Smith Memorial Room? Where is the library?

And, for heaven's sake, where are the restrooms?

The person making the announcements should have Chris stand up, and the announcement should include Chris' last name. They should point to or explain where the Mary Smith Memorial Room or the library is. Include this information in your order of service or announcement handouts, along with the location of the restrooms, the children's religious exploration area, the church office, the nursery, "quiet room," or other space where there may be speakers broadcasting the service, and any other public rooms you may have. Be sure there is

also a sign marking the door to these rooms or areas, and signage for your restrooms (don't forget to make it gender neutral!). If it isn't obvious, also have a sign on your restroom indicating where another facility can be found. If you have a large or complicated physical plant, perhaps a map would be in order.

Along this vein, please indicate in the order of service and verbally when it is time to sit or stand during worship. Include in your order of service all the words to affirmations, covenants, the song to sing the kids out, the doxology, etc. Don't expect visitors to look these up in the hymnal, especially if it's a short song or reading. It's easier and more friendly to type four lines of text into the order of service than to give a page number that has people scurrying for their hymnals for the fifth or sixth time.

There's nothing for me to eat or drink at social hour

Not everyone drinks coffee or tea. Not everyone eats cookies or bread. Not that you need to provide a full spread of food at social hour, but it's nice to offer something that a wide range of people can eat or drink. Be sure to have herbal tea as well as black tea and coffee. It's also welcoming to have a cold beverage as well as warm ones. Apple cider, lemonade,

sparkling water, or pure fruit juice are good choices. Don't forget real half-and-half (no powdered creamer!) and real mugs and plates, not disposable ones: it's both more welcoming and more environmentally friendly. Don't forget to indicate to people where to leave their dirty dishes.

As for food, there's no need to get into complicated menus to make sure there's something for everyone.

If you tend to offer sweet things at social hour, have a bowl of fruit available along with the cookies or cake. If your group goes for savory treats, it's easy to pop some popcorn, put out a plate of cheese and crackers, or have bowls of plain corn or potato chips and raw veggies with salsa or other dips.

If your church provides heartier fare (every week or just now and then), be sure that folks bring labels for their main dish, salad or dessert that list the ingredients. Lots of people have food intolerances or allergies, others are vegan or vegetarian, and many are simply trying to avoid salt or dairy or some other ingredient. Since eating and drinking together is important for building community, it's even more important to be welcoming of different food needs.

Take some time to assess how welcoming your congregation is. Slip away some Sunday and visit another congregation—put yourself in the newcomer shoes. You'll learn a lot!

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New Book by Jane Dwinell!

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