

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

December 2008

**Sorrow will one day turn to joy. All that breaks the heart and oppresses the soul will one day give place to peace and understanding and everyone will be free.**

—Paul Robeson

## Anti-Racism Work in the Small Congregation

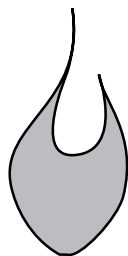
by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

No matter how you voted in the November presidential election, I'm sure we can all agree that the election of Barack Obama, as a mixed race man, was an historic event. For all the work done over the years by people of all kinds to lessen the sting of racism, we, as a country and a world, still have a long way to go. While I have been heartened by knowing friends and family members who transcended their racism to vote for Mr. Obama, I also know people who could not bring themselves to vote for him simply because of his race.

We as Unitarian Universalists are also of a mixed mind when it comes to issues of race. Some congregations — small and large — have deliberately looked at this ever-present topic as a congregational, and personal, issue. Just as with the study and reflection on the lives of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender (BGLT) people through *The Welcoming Congregation* curriculum, looking at racism can be done by any congregation, of any size, in any geographic location. Whether or not there are people of color in your area (and there are — even in the whitest of states), we deepen and enrich ourselves by taking the time to look at the lives of people not like us — whoever they are.

As a pure White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (with a Mayflower ancestor, no less) and growing up in the second whitest state in the nation (Vermont), I have struggled over the years with my racist thoughts, prejudices, and assumptions. I imagine most of you have also — no matter your race or cultural background. It can be challenging, embarrassing, painful, and thought-provoking to face these issues — alone or in a group. There can be misunderstandings. There can be faux pas. But, I have found that I have grown spiritually, and personally, by this work — accidental or intentional. And my work is far from being done.

Many small congregations feel they don't have the time or energy to work deeply on race, class, ageism, BGLT issues, religious prejudice, or



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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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any of the similar topics concerning our differences. But you can — if you can move past some of the real, or assumed, barriers to this kind of challenging work.

Here are a few perceived barriers:

### **The “social club” nature of some small congregations**

If a small congregation does not have a clear mission, they may tend to focus mainly on the church community and the enjoyment of being in company of people with similar interests. There may be huge resistance to change, particularly if it is likely to bring in people congregants feel uncomfortable with. If this sounds like your congregation, it is important to find your mission before you take on anti-racism work (but consider this — you may want this as your mission!).

### **Dependence on leadership**

Anti-racism cannot occur without solid leadership, including support from the minister. In a small church this is especially true, and if you have a minister who does not recognize the importance of this work, it is almost doomed to fail. If you don't have a minister, you may be challenged in finding the right leader(s) for this task. Some people may take it on as a “crusade” and inadvertently cause unnecessary conflict. Choose your leaders carefully, and make sure there is a strong core group that will support these leaders and this work.

### **The few people of color take a lot of the burden**

A small congregation that has not actively engaged in anti-racism work (or is in a very white area) will have only a very few people of color. Especially without strong ministerial involvement and white allies, these people of color will end up with all the burden of educating and ministering to white people. It is exhausting. This can be overcome with congregational collaboration — see if you can partner with other congregations in your cluster, city, or state that have experience in this area. At the very least, don't expect the one or two people of color in your congregation to take the lead alone.

### **Lack of financial resources**

Programs through the Unitarian Universalist Association, like Jubilee Two or JUUST Change Consultancy, are not cheap, and congregations struggling with budgets or capital campaigns will be less likely to allocate money for such programs. However, the curriculum *Building the World We Dream About* is currently being field-tested and will be perfect for congregations of any size. You may also be able to reach out to other resources in your community, such as courses taught at colleges,

organizations working on these issues, or congregations of other faiths who may have experience. Don't let money stop you.

## **"No time" for social justice work**

This excuse is certainly not limited to anti-racism work, but leaders in small congregations tend to get overloaded with administrative-type stuff and be less likely to want to participate in other programs. This depends hugely on the congregation and minister, but it is something I hear quite often. There are several ways to "find the time." One is by cleaning up your organizational structure and must-do activities to something simple and basic. Another is to incorporate this work into worship or your Small Group Ministry program. A third way, mentioned above, is to have this as your mission (or to incorporate it into the mission you do have). Issues of poverty, health care, environmentalism, hunger, homelessness, and family abuse (among some of your missions) all relate in some way to is-

**Issues of poverty, health care, environmentalism, hunger, homelessness, and family abuse all relate in some way to issues of race.**

issues of race. See how you can find the time to fit this important work into your congregational life.

...

I fear that many people (UUs and non-UUs alike) may feel that the election of Barack Obama means that our work on issues of race is over. Not so. I

think it has just begun. It is too easy to sweep our concerns under the rug if they aren't right in our face. With the Obama family front and center, we won't be able to turn from it. I hope that your small congregation can find the time and energy to work on this issue that's vital to our

society as we move forward. It's an exciting time for all of us.

*For more information and support, contact Taquiena Boston (tboston@uua.org) of the UUA Office of Racial and Ethnic Concerns. Thanks to Karin Lin for help with this article.*

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**Happy  
Holidays  
to all our  
readers!**



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