

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

Dec. 2010–Jan. 2011

We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.

—Marian Wright Edelman,
activist for children's rights

Special Double Issue: Pastoral Care in Tough Times

by the Rev. Jane Dwinell, small congregation consultant

As our recession drags on, more and more people are under stress — both financial and emotional. Even without a recession, people run into stressful situations and are in need of a kind word, a hot meal, or an hour or two of babysitting or respite care. One of the roles of the religious community is to care for their own in times of need, and to care for people in the larger community.

It is often difficult for the small congregation to know how to handle pastoral care, especially if they don't have a full-time minister. But even in a congregation with professional staff, the vast majority of pastoral care can and should be done by lay folk.

Here are some things for you and your congregation to consider:

What is pastoral care?

People have different ideas about what defines “pastoral care.” There are many things that can be done to help others in need, depending on the particular situation; all these things are pastoral care. Pastoral care is not just visiting the elderly and homebound, providing counseling in times of stress, or sitting by the bedside of a seriously ill or dying person. Pastoral care is also simply sending a condolence or get-well card, giving someone a ride to the doctor, or making a phone call to see how someone is doing. It can be referring someone to professional services that are beyond the skills of the minister and the congregation — a psychiatrist, a battered women's shelter, or legal aid, for example. Pastoral care is also needed for happy events such as the additional of a new family member or a move to a new home.

Create a pastoral care team

Even if you have part- or full-time ministerial help, your congregation still needs a pastoral care team. All non-emergency pastoral needs can be directed to the team, who can then find the appropriate help.

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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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The purpose of the team is to refer, not to provide all that is needed. The team — two or three people is enough — can create resource lists (see below), provide a listening ear, and know when and to whom to refer people with more serious problems. The team can also be the first contact, especially if you have no minister, for people outside your congregation who are seeking help.

It helps to choose people for the team who have good listening skills and good boundaries. They do not have to work in a helping profession, but that's a good place to start looking. Then they need to be trained, professional or not. Look to or your District staff or a nearby congregation of any faith that has a pastoral care team for help with this. Many Districts offer periodic trainings on this important topic.

The team should meet periodically to check in with each other and see how things are going. They can support each other and figure out what is working and not working with their particular system. Team members should also be on the lookout for their replacements and see that these folks are trained as well.

Find out what resources you have in your congregation

Everyone in the congregation can do something to help others in a time of need. Find out what skills people have, what they are interested in doing, and what time of day or day of the week they are available to help. You can create a short checklist of possible needs such as providing child care or elder care, visiting the homebound, sending cards, making how-are-you-doing phone calls, providing meals, doing small home repairs, running errands, moving furniture, tending a garden, mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, or giving rides to church, the hospital, the grocery store, or the hairdresser.

Have people fill out this checklist at social hour over several weeks. Have the pastoral care team call the remaining members and friends to assess their skills and interests. Even your youngest and oldest members can do something. Children can make and send cards, bake cookies, have another child over for a play date, or give away toys, books, and games they no longer use to bring happiness to another child in need. The elderly and housebound can probably send cards, make phone calls, or prepare a casserole. Find a role for everyone.

Once this information is gathered, the pastoral care team can create a list of helpers in each area of interest. The team can also create a brochure to be available in the pews and on the welcome table that explains the services available and how to contact team members.

Find out what resources are available in your community

Most communities have a food bank and a soup kitchen. Others also may have homeless and battered women's shelters, a free clothing and household goods site, job transition counseling, alcohol and drug treatment facilities, help with home weatherization and heating bills, community mental health treatment, and a low-cost or free clinic for the uninsured. If you have a community action agency or other group that serves people in need, give them a call or check their website for the services they offer. Your local home health organization and your hospital's social work department will also know what is available.

The pastoral care team (or a task force) can do the research and then create a document listing these resources with current contact information. Have this flyer available in your foyer and fellowship hall so that visitors and members alike have access to it. Consider adding it to your website. For congregations without a permanent space, be sure it put this

Find out what skills people have . . . Even your youngest and oldest members can do something.

list of resources out with hymnals and orders of service each time you meet. None of us know exactly when we may be in need of any of these services.

Consider providing a service that is not available in your community

As you gather this information, you may discover that some important services are missing. If your congregation does not already have a mission (not a mission statement, but a justice-oriented mission in your community), providing one of these services may be perfect for your group. It is not that difficult to set up a food shelf, a hot meal once a week or once a month, or provide a free handyman service. It all depends on the skills and interests of your congregational members and friends.

If you plan to start a new service, coordinate with the current service providers in your community. Let them know what you'd like to do, and see if they have suggestions or other help for you. There could be seed money available, for example, or they could put you in touch with another group that provided this service previously.

If a need seems too large for your group to handle alone, consider teaming up with another congregation or two in your area. Mission work lends itself well to interfaith work. Ask around. Perhaps you can coordinate with another congregation that already has a food shelf or a thrift shop. They would probably be happy for your help.

A needed, simple service that is often lacking in a community is a personal-hygiene shelf. You can't purchase these products with food stamps, and food shelves usually limit themselves to food. A facility that offers toilet paper, shampoo, soap, shaving supplies, disposable diapers, laundry and dish soap, feminine hygiene products, dental care products, underwear, and socks would be most welcome.

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

The hands-on guide for leaders, by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh!

Order now at www.spiritoflifepublishing.com

Email discussion list

for all leaders in small congregations

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

Email list for small-congregation ministers

<http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/smallchurch-min>

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The role of the minister

Many small congregations feel they have to hire a minister to provide pastoral care services. Unless your congregation is made up of mostly elderly people, or you're in a very isolated area with few professional services, this is not absolutely necessary. If you have part-time ministerial services of any kind, your minister will not have much time to spend on pastoral care. Even a full-time minister is too busy for much pastoral care. Your minister's pastoral care time should be saved for critical and emergency situations such as serious accidents, end-of-life care, and other life-changing situations. The pastoral care team and congregational members and friends are the ones to have tea with the housebound, bring meals to the family with the new baby, or check up on someone after they've had surgery.

Pastoral care is about the little stuff, knowing that people care, that they are thinking of you, and that they are willing to help.

Your minister can be used as the first point of contact, and then he or she can decide what is the best plan of action for the particular situation. Your minister can also be used to train and support the pastoral care team. If your congregation feels you are in critical need of ministerial services, you can also consider hiring a part-time chaplain or a minister just for pastoral care, especially if your group handles your worship and organizational needs well. Speak to someone in the chaplaincy department at your closest medical center, a nearby mid-size or large Unitarian Universalist congregation, your District office, or a local liberal congregation of another faith for ideas about how to find someone.

Having a minister is not the cure-all for pastoral care needs. Everyone needs to support everyone else. That's what a religious community is for.

What about financial needs?

Sometimes people are in need of something beyond a hot meal and a hug. Sometimes they need to get

their car fixed so they can get to their job. Sometimes they need to pay an overdue electric or gas bill in order to stay warm or cool. Sometimes they need to get to a dying relative in a faraway town. Sometimes they need a tank of gas. All these things require money. That's when a pastoral care fund comes in handy, both for people in your congregation and for people in the larger community.

A pastoral care fund can be created with money from the annual budget, from periodic special offerings, from donations from financially secure members and friends, and from money that is left to the congregation in someone's will for this specific purpose. You need to have a fund administrator. This person can be the minister, a member of the pastoral care team, or the treasurer — it's up to you. It is important that the fund administrator is trustworthy, can keep confidentiality, and is accountable to the governing body.

Because there are people who like to scam churches, the person asking for money should be referred to a local agency who knows how to screen people, unless the minister, the pastoral care team, or the fund administrator knows the person personally. Find out what agency that is in your community. Discerning who deserves the money and who's making up a sob story is important.

As an added precaution, checks should only be written to the utility company, the service station, or the transportation company, not to the individual. This helps with keeping confidentiality, as well as helping the fund administrator report to the governing body that they have paid out X dollars to the electric company, the gas company, the phone company, or the local department store, not X dollars to Chris Smith, Robin Jones, and Pat Russell. You can also consider purchasing vouchers for a local supermarket or gas station and passing them out as needed.

When you are researching what resources are available in your area, check for financial resources

as well. Often there is money available in your community for weatherization, utility bills, heating oil and firewood, legal help, and transportation. By knowing about these resources and referring people as needed, you can save your cash for situations that have no other source of funding. I once paid for a small, room-size air conditioner for a family who had an ill child who was suffering in the heat. You never know what need may arise.

Give until it helps

If someone comes to you for gas money, a bag of groceries or a check for the phone company will not necessarily help. Make sure the service you provide is what the person actually needs. If you can't provide the service, be sure to direct the person to where they can get help.

Remember that someone who seeks help may have a one-time need — or an ongoing need. Be sure to find out. Someone may ask for help with bills when the real problem is that they have lost their job and are too ashamed to tell anyone. This is when a well-trained pastoral care team is invaluable.

Always ask how you can help, and don't make assumptions. The family with the new baby may not need casseroles; they may have a freezer full of food and your casserole may only be a burden. Before you bring a casserole, find out if it's needed and if the family has any special dietary needs. Before you make repeated phone calls, find out what time of day is best to call. Before you offer to run errands, ask the person if they'd rather you stay with their ill loved one so that the caregiver has a chance to get out of the house.

* * *

I'd like to end with a personal story. Several years ago, my husband and daughter were seriously injured in a freak accident. Their injuries were not life-threatening, but they would take several weeks to heal. In the meantime, it was up to me to do most of the housework, driving, personal care for the injured, and other activities, along with keeping my job. I was getting very little sleep and was pretty stressed by the whole thing.

The day after the accident happened, I called our minister to let her know. I asked her to let the congregation know. A few days later we received a get-well card from the church's matriarch. And then . . . nothing. Nothing. A couple of weeks later, I received a phone call from an out-of-state colleague asking me how I was doing. We were on the phone no more than five or ten minutes, but I felt so much better after our call. I knew I was not alone and that someone was thinking of me. What a difference it made.

We didn't need casseroles or rides to the doctor. We needed get-well cards, someone to drop by to play cards with the injured, a little light housecleaning, and periodic phone calls or emails to see how we were holding up. That did not happen. I learned then, very clearly, how pastoral care is not about doing the big stuff for someone — it's about the little stuff, knowing that people care, that they are thinking of you, and that they are willing to help in small but important ways.

Pastoral care can be done by anyone. Remember the biblical story of the Good Samaritan? It may be a stranger who helps us, or it may be members of our beloved congregation. What are you doing to help?

New Book by Jane Dwinell!

Freedom Through Frugality: Spend Less, Have More

Are you worried about money? Feel that you don't have enough, or don't know where it's going? Do you yearn to have the freedom to pursue your dreams, whatever they are? Then it's time to embrace frugality: the art of living the way you want, within your means. Frugality will bring you so much — peace of mind, time with your loved ones, a good night's sleep, and no bill collectors. But, most of all, it will bring you the precious gift of freedom.

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