

# Small Talk

strengthening the small  
Unitarian Universalist  
congregation

October 2010

**Let me not pray to be**

sheltered from dangers, but  
to be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling  
of my pain, but for the heart  
to conquer it.

—Rabindranath Tagore

## Who You Gonna Call?

### Some Basics About the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry

*Editor's note: It seems that traumatic events are on the rise. We hear about people opening fire in churches, universities, elementary and high schools, places of employment, and military bases. Their reasons are varied, but what is the same is that this could happen anywhere. It also seems that weather-related traumatic events such as flooding, wildfires, hurricanes, and tornadoes are also on the rise. Congregations of any size should have a plan in place in case you are faced with a traumatic event — it will help things go smoother as you put the pieces back together. But the first thing you should do is to contact the UU Trauma Response Ministry. I asked the Rev. Gowdy to write this article to let you know who they are, how they can help, and how to reach them. Let us hope that your congregation does not have to face a traumatic event, but if you do, you can be assured that you will not be alone.*

**by Rev. Nannene Gowdy, director of the  
Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry**

**I** imagine that a man with a gun walks into your sanctuary on Sunday morning as the children are presenting a play and opens fire, killing a man who was trying to protect the children.

Imagine that wildfires force half of your congregation — including the minister — to flee their homes for days at a time. Add to the problem the fact that phone lines have been burned through, making it impossible to call and make sure people are all right.

Imagine that your congregation was in the path of Katrina, your church building is completely flooded with hymnals floating in the sanctuary, and you don't know where all of your members are.

Imagine your church is near a college campus and there is a mass killing. Students running from the shooting run into the closest shelter — your building.



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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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Imagine your church is in Manhattan, you've lost members at the World Trade Center, and everyone else is traumatized.

These are just five of the disasters to which the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry has responded, and are part of the reason the ministry received the 2007 President's Award for Volunteer Service to the UUA.

### What is the UU Trauma Response Ministry?

The UU Trauma Response Ministry is an organization of Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay people who have been trained in trauma response. This includes models of crisis counseling, UU theological understandings of hope, companioning, and suffering, as well as critical incident reporting. Most of us have responded several times. New members join an experienced team until they have achieved the necessary skill levels. All responders come from outside the disaster area. Since trauma tends to make people act irrationally, having help from outside is important.

The congregations the UU Trauma Response Ministry has served are small, medium, and large. Responses have ranged from several teams deployed to a site over months to a one-day event. What these congregations have had in common is that they have suffered a traumatic experience and need help getting back on their feet.

### Responding to trauma

Trauma is an event outside of the usual realm of human experience that makes a group of people feel isolated and fearful. People are often in such a state of shock that they are unable to make even the simplest decision, which would enable them to move forward. They are stuck. This is when the UU Trauma Response Ministry needs to be called, usually by the minister or the district executive.

We send trained responders who offer direct, on-site ministry, crisis counseling, and stress management skills so that the people in the congregation can begin to recover. Some times it is as simple as making a to-do list. In a traumatic situation, people feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start. We help organize recovery. Once people have something to do — a manageable task — they begin to be able to function in a normal range. If needed, we have a follow-up team who will make sure the recovery is progressing.

While many people feel they just "need to get over it", studies have found that as many as 35 percent of people who suffer a mass disaster may develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Getting help immediately following a disaster helps to significantly reduce that statistic.

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## Be prepared

So imagine the unimaginable. Imagine your church caught on fire during Sunday services. Have you practiced a fire drill so that everyone knows how to get out of the building safely? Do you have a designated person each Sunday whose responsibility it is to call 911 if there is an emergency?

Now imagine that even if you've done these things, a disaster happens. Who is responsible for calling your district executive so the UU Trauma Response Ministry can respond? Don't assume the

**In a traumatic situation, people feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start. We help organize recovery.**

minister will do it. He or she is often overwhelmed taking care of parishioners. Time is important. The quicker the response, the more likely it is that recovery will happen. UU Trauma Response Ministry was called quickly in the above disasters and we were able to be there before the fires were out, before the funerals happened, before the water subsided, and before the building dust had completely settled. Our ability to respond quickly has significantly helped these congregations on the road to recovery.

## Who You Gonna Call?

**UU Trauma Response Ministry: 888-760-3332**

**Make sure your district executive and your minister know how to contact the UU Trauma Response Ministry. They should know who to call when disaster strikes so that you and your congregation have the best chance of recovery.**

**Check out [www.traumaministry.org](http://www.traumaministry.org) for more information.**

## 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](http://www.spiritoflifepublishing.com)

### **Email discussion list**

for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations

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

### **Email list for ministers of small congregations**

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

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