

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

September 2010

We gather with hearts and minds open to the wisdom in every voice among us. In our gathering, may we dream and design a bold future. May we bring our best selves to this service. And may we dream these dreams and do this work with love.

—excerpted from
“Annual Meeting Invocation,”
by Heather K. Janules

Welcoming, Supporting, and Encouraging Youth Leadership in Your Small Congregation

Editor’s note: The youth in our congregations are often overlooked as potential board, task force or committee members, religious exploration leaders, or as members of the worship team. Here are some ideas about how to welcome young people into a more active role in your small congregation — sometimes good leaders (for all of you complaining about leadership burnout!) are right in front of you.

by **Dana Dwinell-Yardley, guest author**

Welcoming youth is much the same as other anti-oppression work, I believe. Doing this work well will involve some personal change, some exploration of your own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs around age (or race, gender, etc). You have to know yourself and your own prejudices before you can tackle your congregation’s prejudices.

That being said, we can often spend way too much time on this self-awareness process piece and forget to make any actual organizational changes. So, here are my suggestions for your congregation.

Ask why

Before you even start thinking about how to welcome people, think about why you want them. Don’t have youth (or people of color, or bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, etc) because it’ll make your congregation look good. Have these people involved because you genuinely want their voice and their energy, and because you think your congregation is genuinely open to all people.

Have the same expectations of youth as your congregational leaders and members . . .

Ask of your youth what you ask of your adults: that they show up to meetings on time, that they take on real work, that they follow through

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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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with what they say they'll do, etc. Do ask real work of your youth, important — even vital — work, work that's challenging and encourages personal and congregational growth.

... while being aware of differences on a personal level

A young person's life situation and structures may be very different than an adult's. Make sure they are supported financially, that meetings are scheduled at a time that works for their lives, that they have transportation if they need it, etc.

Staff and leaders in your congregation should be aware of more introverted youth (and adults too!), who may need extra encouragement or space to speak up, or may prefer to share their thoughts in another way. Make sure all the voices in the group are being heard.

Also, explain things — budgets, mission statements, agendas, whatever — simply and clearly. Adults will also appreciate not having to communicate in the organizational- or business-speak lingo that we think makes us sound important but is unnecessarily complex.

Get to know your youth as people

Not all youth have the same life situation and personality, just as not all adults do. Being welcoming to all means really getting to know people and being aware of all the differences and diversity in your group — which includes diversity of income, personality, upbringing, work, education, culture, geography, likes and dislikes, talents, etc, as well as the more obvious and well-known things we tend to think of, like race, age, gender, and sexual orientation.

It doesn't feel good to be only cared about for how old you are, not who you are. Don't assume that just because someone is between the ages of 13 and 18 that they'll automatically like the same things and think the same way as other teenagers. You wouldn't put a bunch of 40- to 45-year-olds in a room and say "Hey, you all are 40-somethings — you must all think the same way and like the same stuff and want to hang out together." Yet that's exactly what happens when many well-meaning adults create youth groups. ("Oh, they'll want to be with other youth." Well, maybe — but maybe not. Find out!)

Be careful of tokenism, or expecting one youth to speak for youth as a whole. One teenager is not going to be a good representative of all youth any more than one 43-year-old is going to represent all 40-somethings.

I want to feel like a person in a congregation first, not a youth. Get to know your youth as people, and let them get to know you as a person

too. We work together in community best when we know and respect each other as individuals.

Ask youth to participate where their gifts, interests, and skills are

People like being asked to do what they love (wouldn't you?). This will require actually getting to know your youth as people (see above).

Maybe they're writers, cooks, or visionaries; graphic designers, public speakers, or actors; mathematicians, social justice seekers, or carpenters. Maybe they're good at facilitating group discussions, working with young children, talking with people of all ages, or capturing the larger vision of your congregation. Maybe they love teaching others their skills; maybe they'd just like to offer those skills in service of your congregation. Maybe they're interested in any one of these things and would like to learn more about it and be better at it, working in collaboration with an adult with that same talent and passion.

If you ask your youth to do something they really care about or like doing, they are much more likely to participate in and care the life and work of the congregation.

Know that the process is ongoing

Just because your congregation is committed to welcoming and involving youth — and has made some changes in the way it does things — doesn't mean it's always going to happen perfectly from here on out. As with any anti-oppression, welcoming work, it's a continuous process.

There will be individuals who will continue to be averse even when your congregation as a whole is youth-friendly — don't be afraid to call these people on their behavior. There will be new people coming into your congregation who may not know about changes made and work done before their time. Your youth themselves will change, and will have different needs and skills and ways of doing things than your previous youth.

Being in community is a human process. Know yourselves, know each other, embrace what you have in common as people, and love that which is different equally much. Your youth will benefit greatly from it.

People like being asked to do what they love (wouldn't you?). This will require actually getting to know your youth as people.

A Few Useful Resources for Small Congregations

Big Ideas for Small Congregations

The hands-on book by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh!

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for leaders (lay and paid) of small congregations

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