



Welcome to the Wonderful World of the Small Congregation

by Rev. Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh, small church consultants

You are a leader of your small congregation, chosen by others—entrusted by them—to do the right thing. You have been asked to keep things running smoothly, to see that there is quality worship, the budget is balanced, the children are learning, the elders are well cared for, well-informed decisions are made, and your congregation is working for social justice in your community.

Congratulations!

Now, before you run in the other direction, we are here to assure you that this job can be done—and is being done—by countless other lay and professional leaders across North America and around the world. Most of them had no idea where to start. What they did know, however, was that their religious community was important to them, and that they wanted their congregation to survive—and thrive—so it could impact others in an equally important way. They arrived at leadership with a deep commitment to their faith and with the best intentions to help the community that helps them live out that faith.

Being part of the leadership team of a small congregation can be a challenge. Life in a small congregation is different than in a mid-size or large congregation. There are not the numbers of members and friends to call on for tasks of all kinds. There is not usually the professional staff support—a full-time minister, director of religious exploration, administrator, sexton, or music director. Some small congregations may not even own a building, or they may be challenged by owning a large, historic, and expensive-to-keep-up structure. People may travel forty-five minutes or an hour to attend worship. In many cases, their small congregation is closest faith community for miles around.

Because of these challenges, many leaders of small congregations are leaders seemingly forever, stressed by burnout and feelings of having to do it all, wondering if they're really doing the right thing.

But first, just what is a small congregation? Different experts choose different definitions, but the general rule is that to be a small congregation you need to have fewer than 150 members or fewer than

125 people in worship. Some of you may be saying, “Small? That’s not small! That sounds enormous!” and you’d be right. Just like people, congregations come in all sizes and types of small.

Small congregations are different in other ways than numbers. Some are made up of a handful of people who meet in someone’s home. Some gather in two-hundred-year-old buildings that used to house a larger congregation back when it was the only church in the community. Some rent space in libraries, schools, and community centers, and some newer, less “churchy looking” buildings. Some small congregations have no one younger than 60, and others have a couple of dozen youngsters running around. There are small congregations in large urban areas, in small towns, in the country, and in the suburbs. Some claim many denominational ties, and others are unsure that they have any denominational ties at all.

Small congregations come in all sizes and shapes—all kinds of small. They are challenged, and blessed, by the same things. Challenged by numbers, and money, and burnout. Blessed by a deep and intimate community. Challenged by low self-esteem, and wondering—will we ever grow? Should we try and grow? Are there even enough people out there to allow us to grow? Blessed by congregational silence, great music, meaningful words, and tasty social hours. Challenged by change, and blessed by the personal and congregational growth that comes from successfully handling change.

Whether we are Unitarian Universalist or not, our small congregations—our religious communities—are here to call us to become better people, to care for others, and to bring our light into the world. It’s a big job, and it’s a satisfying one. Being a leader to such a group is also a big job, and satisfying when done well, with respect and love. We’re sure you’re up to the task.

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