

**Small Power**

by Connie Goodbread, Program Consultant for the Florida District and Education Director for the Mid-South District

I have this radical idea. I think we should worship with our children.

Worship is the time we set aside each week, to celebrate and honor the things that we hold most worthy. It is the time when we uphold our values. I suggest that it is absolutely the best time for us to share our values with everyone. It is the one public offering that we all have in common, regardless of the size of our congregation. We all come together to worship.

We have inherited a model for Faith Development. It is a model of concentric programming, the center hub being Unitarian Universalism. In this model, our Children's Faith Development programs happen at the same time as our worship. In small congregations, under 100 adults, this presents a particularly difficult problem. There simply are not enough people to do two quality programs. But for all of us, small and large, it is the model we know and are comfortable with, so we continue to use it.

Studies tell us that Unitarian Universalism keeps less than 5% of the children who pass through our programs. I must ask, "Has this model served us well?"

Small congregations are trying to do too much. They are struggling to put together a quality meaningful worship service and a Children's Faith Development Program every Sunday. Let's try something different.

I have heard, "Children can't sit through the sermon," and "Children will be restless and noisy during worship." Not every individual will be interested in every portion of every service. There are times when each of us feels disconnected from a message. We need to practice our values, tolerate and accept the

spiritual needs of one another. Worship is like a smorgasbord; some dishes will be our favorites and some dishes will suit others.

However, if what we are really saying is that our service is too long and boring for children to sit through, I say, we should examine if it is just too long and boring, period.

As for restless and noisy, so are adults at times! We must teach worship manners to everyone, insisting on respectful behavior. It is not the children we don't want in the worship, it is disruptive behavior – from anybody. If we covenant to be together in respectful relationship, and we call ourselves and one another back into covenant every time we break our promise, healthy relationships will grow. Could loving people base a marriage or life-long partnership on anything other than respect? Respect for self and respect for other are essential in any relationship.

There are many ways to involve children in worship. Making sure that we greet all guests at the door is important. In other words, greet children too.

Give out Children's Worship Packets as part of the greeting. The packet can contain items that will help children sit quietly, like UU coloring pages, crayons or colored pencils, the children's version of our Seven Principles and Six Sources, something for the child to nibble on, blank sheets of construction paper (which is quieter than regular paper) to create "Worship Art," a pencil, some UU facts and/or the story of our Chalice. Some information about the congregation is also useful and you might have a story that is shared or something about the sermon or service. All of these items should have the name and contact information of the congregation on them. The packet goes home with the child, allowing for discussion at home and providing a reminder of the fabulous time the family had together worshipping at their Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Including older children and youth as Worship Associates is another way to give them a very deep understanding of what it takes to be worshipful and participate in a public worship service. Young people are very capable of being quality Worship Associates; they simply need to be trained along with the adults serving their congregations in this role.

Telling stories in a worship service is another way of speaking to everyone. It is not "dumbing down" the service. I have heard this remark made by several people. Adults need to stretch their thinking. When adults come to me and tell me that they get nothing from a quality story, I ask them, "What was the deepest meaning in the story you heard today?" We grow when we stretch or open ourselves up to the

possibility that there might be a deeper meaning in something seen as simple or familiar. Being more open to possibilities gives us a chance to experience the full richness of all existence.

While there is certainly finite energy in all of our congregations, small congregations feel it the most. Leaders in small congregations can come away from District and Continental gatherings longing for all of the programs that are offered in larger congregations but also knowing how finite the energy is to work toward that possibility. If our small congregations stop trying to do it all, and instead concentrate on quality family ministry and worship, and develop a process that makes sure that each and every guest feels welcomed, they will lead the way to changing our movement.

In many ways, our small Unitarian Universalist congregations are more capable of making this change than our large congregations. This is a powerful place to be. Every small change we make in our system changes everything.

It is easier to turn a small boat than it is a large ship. And therein lie the power and the glory.

For these and more Drive Time Essays, please visit: uua.org/drivetime