

Essay Title: The Small Church of the Future

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Author: The Reverend Jane Dwinell

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IF YOU'RE IN A SMALL CHURCH, you're probably busy thinking about the here and now—the canvass, the Religious Education program, who's going to do what and where the money is going to come from. But what about the future? Ten, twenty, thirty, one hundred years from now? What of the small church then?

Here's what one church consultant sees for the future:

The church will be “unrecognizable.” It will “draw on sources we have not considered.” There will be “no steeples, pews or organs” but congregations will meet in “warehouses and commercial sites.” The congregants will be of all ages, the worship participatory and the music of all kinds, live and professional, the theology “multi-faceted.” Worship will not only be on Sunday, but at other times, convenient times, for the people who will meet together, sometimes even in living rooms.

This will be a “high demand faith” with a “significant commitment of time and money,” civic-minded, and mission-centered. People will want to be involved, and this church will “change their lives in some fundamental way.”

Here's what another church consultant has to say about the future:

The church will be “more experimental and experiential and less conventional” and will “meet in places that don't look like ‘churches.’” It will be “mission-driven,” “counter-cultural,” and “community-centered.” The “churches which have not adapted will have withered and died.” There will be “greater church diversity in personality, form, and function.”

Consultant Number 1 sees the future church as large churches. . . churches that, when they reach 900 members or more, divide in two—and that some of these large UU churches will eventually reach 2500 members plus. That vision belongs to Mike Durall, Unitarian Universalist and author of *The Almost Church* and *Beyond The Collection Plate*.

Consultant Number 2 is David Ray, United Church of Christ Associate in Small Church Development and author of *The Indispensable Guide For Smaller Churches*. He sees the future of the church in the small church, many and varied, of all religions, and working together with interfaith cooperation.

What is YOUR vision? Do you believe, as these two men believe, that whatever you're doing now will need to change and evolve for your church to survive, and thrive?

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I am a firm believer in the power, intimacy, and strength of the small congregation. A small group can experiment with worship, can include their children in everything they do, can care for one another in times of need, can push one another to spiritual growth, and can find a mission that will make a difference in their community. They don't need to move through layers of bureaucracy to implement change.

Change is hard. It's scary. It's different. We HAVE changed, and we will continue to change. Where do you and your congregation fit into this picture of the future? Are you ready to experiment, or are you stuck in old ways? Will you save some meaningful rituals, and create new ones? Will you try something new and challenging? Or do the same old thing? Will you be creating the small church of the future?

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Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108 617.742.2100 uua.org