



**First** JUSTICE WITH  
LOVE AND JOY,  
OPEN TO AWE  
**Unitarian  
Universalist**  
SOCIETY OF SYRACUSE

June 16, 2021

Dear Members of First UU Society of Syracuse

Finally, we are at a place and time in this pandemic where we at First UU, as a community, can think about how it is that we might come back together in person.

As more and more people in our community are getting vaccinated (hooray!), there have been more inquiries about when First UU will be opening our campus for in-person worship and activities again. This is not an easy answer and there are a lot of considerations to consider: operational processes, community health, and how those things reflect our vision and values.

We had little choice about shutting down—it needed to be done immediately and completely. We were thoughtful but we did not have a lot of time. We made some mistakes and you all were and are so patient and grace giving. But we have the opportunity to open with intention and thought. One of our roles as a religious community is to use it as a practice ground for how we want to be in the wider world; I think reopening is an opportunity to practice inclusion in a real and meaningful way

Here are several things to consider (in no particular order) from me and with input from your staff and Trustees:

- While we value the democratic process and consensus, the decision to re-open belongs with the Board of Trustees, in consultation with the Minister and the staff.
- We have a long history of being a welcoming and inclusive congregation. Re-opening is an opportunity to continue that welcome and inclusion. We were not 100% accessible before the pandemic and we won't be afterwards, but we should not open when we know that we would be excluding an important part of our congregation.

- To be very explicit, children under 12 are not currently eligible for vaccinations. We should not say anything close to “everyone is getting vaccinated” when we know that our children—a critical part of our vibrant congregation—are not. Re-opening without our children would be far, far from our practice of being radically inclusive, and would make a strong statement that we don’t value the children in our congregation. And in my conversations with folks it is families with children who have been stretched the most. Zoom has probably been the least accessible for families with children, not because they did not have the technology, not because they did not know how to work it. But rather after parents working at least 40 hours a week on their computers, and children spending 8 hours a day on computers for school (really it would be like an 8-hour committee meeting egads!) families just aren't up for more zoom on the weekends. Let's make sure that when we come back together we remember to do it in a way that is deeply caring for our families.

- While coming back in-person will feel good for some who would want to do it sooner, we must look at it from the perspective of who will be left out. In as many situations as possible, we should shift our perspective to who is being excluded from our community by our decisions. This is a great mindset to have overall if we are to be justice-centered.

- In re-opening, we will be making our best judgements based on the science available. And we will be looking at it for the state of New York and Onondaga County, not just the individual members of the congregation. We must look at the overall community, not just our individual vaccination status, to determine when it is “safe.”

There are still too many things we don’t know about the virus and COVID as a disease Here are a few as yet not fully answered questions:

- When it may be safe to sing together in a group, although the CDC has said it’s safe for vaccinated to sing in a choir unmasked

- The severity of long-haul symptoms for those who were asymptomatic and for our children and teens.

- The impact of the variant strains of the virus.

- Whether and how much the virus can be transmitted by vaccinated people, although the risk looks low.

- Do we really want to gather before we can sing? Hug? Sit next to each other? Open up without a reservation system?

No matter when we return, we will have an online component from this point forward. We have seen too many benefits of that in regards to inclusion, participation outside of the Syracuse area, people watching the service how/where they want. We are a congregation for our time, in all places analog and digital! This means that we are working now to find out what updates to our sanctuary's technologies we need to make in order to have a multi-platform church, meaning both online and in person.

We are making decisions with our staff members' needs and safety in the forefront. Our decisions have implications for our staff members. We will not be making decisions for staff without their input. We will not have a work environment where they do not feel safe. That goes against everything we value.

Our worship and activities have historically been offered not just to members but to anyone who wishes to attend or visit. Limiting worship to any subset of members or "vaccinated members only" would not only exclude non-vaccinated members, but also visitors (or anyone who didn't want to share their vaccination status). We have a lot of intentional work to do before we open—logistical, structural and spiritual:

A group of folks have been meeting to try to plan out how we might best come back together in person. Those people are Heidi Hart-Gorman, Matt Irish, Joe Pawletko, Sue Wadley, Rev. Jennifer, Tina Lesley-Fox, and Sara Jo Brandt. We have been discussing all the intricacies of coming back together.

Here are some things to keep in mind.

- When we went online in March of 2020 we had the equivalent of 3 full time staff, 120 staff hours per week, because we had a full-time intern, Sky Williams-Tao. From July 1, 2020 - June 30, 2021 we have the equivalent of 1.75 full time staff, 70 staff hours per week. Starting July 1 when Rev Jennifer returns to  $\frac{3}{4}$  time we will have the equivalent of 2 full time staff, or 80 hours per week of staff time.
- Sara Jo and Tina are contracted to work 10 months out of the year. They do not work for us during the summer and we cannot expect or ask them to work during the summer.
- In order to come back together we will need to upgrade our technology in our sanctuary. We will need to train volunteers how to run the equipment because staff cannot lead worship in the sanctuary and run tech at the same time.
- Rev. Jennifer in her contract is given sabbatical time. She delayed her sabbatical which was supposed to happen this past

year. She will be taking some sabbatical time October 11, 2021 - January 11, 2022.

As with all plans during this pandemic we need to be flexible. We don't know what September will look like. Our hope is that our numbers continue to improve and we have fewer cases. With all this here is the plan that our working team drafted and the Board approved. Assuming the science and numbers support this plan:

- Summer of 2021 Sunday morning service will still be online. Our summer services are led by lay folk and they have been clear that this is what they have the capacity to do.

- During the summer we will continue our tailgate picnics on Friday evenings. And during the summer if folks want to gather in person, outdoors, while masked for meetings or discussion groups that would be fine.

- Our hope is that in June we will be able to get some quotes for tech upgrades in our sanctuary. Once a system is decided upon equipment will be bought and installed, possibly during the summer but most likely in September

- September 2021 services will be online.

- In September, we will be able to gather together in small groups in person. We will be able to have small group gatherings at church for folks who are comfortable gathering together. If folks want it, Rev Jennifer is open to offering a non-Sunday morning worship service (without singing).

- In October, staff will start to stream Sunday morning service from the sanctuary. Folks will be able to sit in the sanctuary and experience service from there if they choose. You might consider this something like attending a dress rehearsal or a soft opening of a restaurant. It will not be the full Sunday morning service.

- While Rev Jennifer is on sabbatical, services streamed from the sanctuary will continue, live or pre-recorded, with some folks able to attend in person. If numbers are good and young children are able to get vaccinated, it is possible that we could restart our Sunday morning service for everyone before Rev Jennifer returns. This is where we need to be flexible in our planning.

- When Rev Jennifer returns from sabbatical, it is our hope that young children have access to the vaccine and we will be able to have our grand reopening for our Sunday services.

As we live through this summer and see how the pandemic continues or does not, and how it is for folks to gather, this plan is very likely to change. What won't change is our commitment to inclusion and care.

Finally thank you to the group of folks who got together to work on this plan, Heidi Hart-Gorman, Matt Irish, Joe Pawletko, Susan Wadley, Tina Lesley-Fox, Sara Jo Brandt, and Rev Jennifer.

If you have any questions please feel free to reach out to Rev Jennifer, our staff, or Heidi Hart-Gorman our president.

And thank you to each of you members and friends of First UU for your continued support, patience and love.

Sincerely

Heidi Hart-Gorman, President

Rev. Jennifer Hamlin-Navias, Pastor