

UUA Guidance on Gathering In-Person When COVID-19 Subsides

Gathering Guidance

UUA Guidance on Gathering In-Person When COVID-19 Subsides

Safe Congregations

By [UUA Safe Congregations Team](#)

May 14, 2020

Because of the re-opening of some in-person spaces around us, and because of our strong desire to connect once again in the sacred spaces of our congregational buildings, many congregational leaders have begun asking the UUA for guidance in decision-making about when and how to resume in-person programs and services.

As your UUA leaders, who always serve in partnership with your own congregational leadership, we have articulated the following principles for thinking about when and how to go back. They are grounded in Unitarian Universalism's deep values.

- Our abiding care and concern for the most vulnerable, inside and outside our congregation.
- Accessibility and inclusion for all of our members and friends to participate in our congregation, regardless of health status, health vulnerability, or ability.
- Recognition that we are part of an interdependent web and, as such, our risk-taking and our protective actions affect far more than just ourselves.
- Ethical treatment and expectations for our leaders and staff, minimizing the risks to their own health and well-being.
- Our affirmation that good science, coupled with our UU values, must be the basis upon which we make decisions about in-person gathering.
- Commitment to our mission, community, and theology more than ever, mindful of the spiritual demands of this transition.
- Our deep hope that we as a country, and as a world, will not return to "normal" when the pandemic is over. We seek to live into "a new normal" of more justice, more love, more equity, more sustainability, and more peace.

In this difficult and extraordinary time, we invite you to engage with us in ongoing creativity as we all minister to one another and the world.

UUA Recommendations

In the midst of uncertainty, it is the UUA's strong recommendation that congregations plan for ongoing virtual gathering and operations through May 2021. This applies to worship, events, committee meetings, staff meetings, one-on-one visits, rites of passage, and more. While

smaller gatherings may be able to resume sooner if conditions improve, planning for virtual operations that could continue for a full year is advisable.

Our highest values and commitments call us to refrain from in-person gathering until the COVID-19 pandemic is controlled. We invite you to think of your congregation as primarily digitally-connected, with small in-person nodes that can grow as the pandemic subsides.

We are guided by science and our deepest values, not politics, when we urge congregations to not resume full in-person operations until concrete public health criteria are met. The criteria we encourage you to adopt will likely be more stringent than schools and businesses around you, for the following reasons:

1. The membership of most UU congregations is an older, more vulnerable population than the general public.
2. We do not want congregational staff and ministers to be put at risk.
3. A normally-operating congregation presents too many opportunities to spread a highly contagious respiratory virus like COVID-19.

Some of the public health criteria we'd look to for shifting our congregations' primary focus from online to in-person are:

- multiple weeks of reduction in infections,
- adequate testing,
- sufficient personal protective equipment available,
- contact tracing programs in place throughout your county and state, and/or
- a widely-available vaccine.

Implications of Ongoing Virtual Gathering

Many of our congregations have done an incredible amount of work to bring people together for virtual worship, and did so on very short notice as the virus spread across the US and world. We applaud and share gratitude for all you have done to create meaningful and connective spaces of words and music and love in this extraordinary time.

Planning to worship and gather online for a year or more calls our congregations to invest in expanding their skill base and fluency with online worship, religious education, and meetings. If you've been relying on one or two people who know how to manage the technology, it's time to expand that base for the long haul. If you don't have quite the right equipment or computers for your staff and worship leaders, it's time to invest. If your key lay leaders don't have webcams or smartphone technology, perhaps you can give or lend them the equipment they need to lead the congregation during this time. If your people need training in how to connect online, it's a good time to schedule some training sessions.

Now that it's not just an emergency stop-gap way of doing things, congregational leaders are called to ask one another:

- How can we expand our level of inclusion and engagement in virtual congregational life?
- What additional equipment or training or assistance do our staff and volunteers need for continuing online-only worship?
- What do we need to invest in, with technology, equipment, or people-power, to keep this going until it is safe for everyone to return to in-person worship/programs?
- How can we imagine broader and more inclusive ministries, worship, and programming in a *post*-COVID-19 world given what we've been learning and implementing?

We invite you to think creatively in partnership with other congregations about how to minister to the needs of your communities—we know that many meaningful cross-congregational collaborations, forged in the time of COVID-19, are already underway. It is a time for joining together in mutual support. That is how we will make it through.

Considerations for Outdoor Gathering

We have created an additional resource in response to questions about gathering with two or more people outdoors on the congregation's property. Please review our June 19th, 2020 [Guidance for Outdoor Gatherings During COVID-19](#).

Questions to Guide Congregational Thinking About Online or In-Person Gathering

As you start to imagine a return to in-person programming at the core of your congregation's offerings, you may wish to consider the following questions. Though we do not anticipate a return to full in-person programming until the pandemic has subsided, we anticipate that there will, in the next year, be a time when planning for some in-person programming may make sense.

1. Questions about authority:

- Who will be involved in the decision-making process about resuming limited or total in-person operations? And who will make that final decision?
- If in-person programs resume, but then guidance or circumstances change, who will be involved in the decision to cease, or put new limitations on, in-person gatherings?

2. Questions related to identity:

- Who are we as a congregation called to be right now?
- Acknowledging that every person in our congregation might have contact with many people outside of our congregation, who is part of the "we" we are considering in our decision-making?
- If we are legally permitted to gather in person before the pandemic subsides, what would be the social/emotional/spiritual costs of gathering? Who would we exclude? How would this fit with our mission and identity?

3. Questions related to health and vulnerability of:

- The local population—what are the trends in infection, treatment, recovery and death in our immediate community? How might our resumption of in-person services contribute to, or detract from, a safer world for everyone?
- The members and friends of the congregation—what proportion of our population may have underlying conditions that exacerbate the effects of COVID-19, if they are to contract it?
- The staff and minister(s), their household members—what are their vulnerabilities, and what risks are we asking them to take?
- Renters, unhoused guests being housed in the congregation’s building, guests in immigration sanctuary, and others who share the building—would they be put at risk by the congregation’s in-person operations?

4. Questions related to the staff/volunteer and technological capacity of the congregation:

- What kind of special training will staff need for safe in-person gatherings? Are staff responsible for ensuring that participants are following health and safety protocol? If not staff, who holds this responsibility?
- If we start to phase in in-person worship and programs, do we have the staff and volunteer capacity to offer two tracks of robust participation (in-person and digital) for a year or more? What might our staff and volunteers need to continue both?
- If we judge that we are one of the rare congregations that has capacity for two robust tracks of programming: when community health criteria are met, how will we ensure maximum safety for those who gather in person? And how will we carry forward the inclusiveness we fostered while we were virtual-only? How will we ensure that virtual-only participants don’t unintentionally become marginalized?

5. Questions related to the building and grounds:

- Were it permitted by local authorities, is it possible to navigate the building and participate in worship/events/meetings while practicing at least 6’ of social distancing? Does this change if someone is navigating the building with a walker, a wheelchair, or a stroller?
- What kind of space do we have for religious education programs, and how will we maintain appropriate distance? How might we need to change how we do these programs?
- What kind of ventilation does the building have in the hotter season and in the colder season, as well as in between? How often is the air exchanged in each of the frequently-used spaces?
- Do we have the capacity for 20 seconds of handwashing and/or hand-sanitizing by every person in the building at least twice per visit to the building? Dividing our usual attendance by our number of sinks (and accounting for gender and ability-restricted sinks), then multiplying by 20 seconds, how long will this take? (Some congregations have a very high member to sink ratio.)

- Do our toilets have lids that can be closed during flushing to minimize the spread of germs?
- How are we cleaning our building, both before we return, and while we are back in the building? To what extent and level?
- Would we consider screening people for symptoms before they are admitted to the building, or might we ask people to check their own symptoms prior to attending any event at the congregation?

6. Questions related to music, children’s programs, worship, and social hour:

- Will it feel strange to gather in person while communal singing (even with masks) is still not considered a safe thing to do? What could take the place of hymns and choir in our in-person services?
- What will be required to keep children off of playground equipment? To sanitize all the toys and surfaces they touch? What are local schools, preschools, and daycare centers doing?
- While worship and programs are taking place, who will enforce protocols around cleaning, face-masks, social distancing, food, and such? What kinds of consequences will there be for failure to engage in safe practices? How will this be different with children?
- Can we project the order of service and song lyrics so that we don’t touch hymnals and orders of service? Do we have the necessary technological hardware and software?
- How do we take the collection/offering in a way that minimizes physical contact?
- What means do we have in place for hard-of-hearing people to hear others’ speaking, especially when they can’t see lips moving (because of facemasks and/or distance)?
- If our building does not have space for its usual number of people to attend worship and maintain physical distance, how will we decide who comes when? Alphabetically? Neighborhoods? Other methods?
- What will be necessary in order to host receptions and coffee hours with food and drink safely?

7. Questions related to liability:

- What does the congregation’s insurer advise about gathering in person? What do they consider to be a reasonable provision of safety on the congregation’s part?
- What does the congregation’s attorney say about any legal liability the congregation might take on in allowing in-person gatherings?
- If it turns out that known COVID-19 transmission occurs in our building, how will we respond to that? Will we be able to say that we did everything we could to prevent transmission and protect the most vulnerable?

8. Questions about renters and other users of the building space:

- Could rental groups’ operations put the congregation or its guests at risk?
- Is it possible to ensure a safe environment for groups that use our space?
- Are some of the groups that use our space true lifesavers for people in distress (such as groups for people in recovery or people who are survivors of violence)? Do we have the

capacity to make additional efforts to ensure that they can use the space safely as soon as local regulations allow?

- Might any of the operations of the groups that use our building pose additional risk to the congregation and other users? How might those risks be minimized?
- What restrictions ought we put in place on short- and long-term renters' use of the building and their operations?
- How will we ensure that users of the space are following appropriate guidelines, and cleaning/disinfecting the spaces for which they are responsible?

Conclusion

As the pandemic continues to play out, we as Unitarian Universalists and we as UU congregations will continue to face uncertainty. The best we can do at any given time is to lean in to our values as well as draw on the gifts and wisdom of our own people. Know that, whatever comes, we as your UUA staff are your partners. We will be here to help you think through tough situations and find a way forward. We will help connect you with others so we can all learn together. We will be there, as your partners, working alongside you for health, love, spiritual connection, and justice in your communities and beyond.

Publications That Informed Our Recommendations

A sampling of the online literature and research that helped our team develop these recommendations:

- [Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations](#)
- [The Risks – Know Them – Avoid Them](#) by Dr. Erin Bromage
- ['I would do anything for a do-over': Calgary church hopes others learn from their tragic COVID-19 experience](#) by Chris Epp, CTV Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- [Webinar: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near-Term Future of Singing?](#) Co-hosted on May 5th by the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), Chorus America, Barbershop Harmony Society, and Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA)
- [Guidance for Community- and Faith-Based Organizations](#) from the US Centers for Disease Control

About the Author

- [UUA Safe Congregations Team](#)

The UUA Safe Congregations Team includes Congregational Life staff from each region of the UUA, and from the UUA Office of Ethics and Safety. The team in May 2020 is: ...

For more information contact safecongregations@uua.org.