

How First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh Is Addressing and Reducing the Risk of COVID-19 During Reopening

August 4, 2021

Executive Summary

The Board of Trustees, informed by multiple forms of input from the congregation, and supported by scientifically sound information and values-consistent guidance from the UUA, has set a policy for how church spaces will be reopened as the COVID-19 pandemic recedes.

For gatherings in which all attendees are vaccinated, any space may be used in the church at 100% capacity, except for services. The person organizing the event is responsible for

- Ensuring that only vaccinated individuals attend,
- Ensuring that masks are available and encouraging their use for all attendees, and
- Collecting needed information for contact tracing in the event of a later-identified positive case.

The remaining guidance pertains to mixed-vaccination gatherings or any gathering for which vaccination is not required. As explained below, the Board has identified thresholds of local (Allegheny County) daily new cases below which different spaces within the church can be opened at 50% or 100% capacity. Specifically:

- Once average daily cases are sustained below 25 for 14 days, all rooms except the Sanctuary and Undercroft Gallery are permitted to reopen at 50% capacity without vaccination requirements. (See attached matrix for allowed capacity for each room.)
- Once average daily cases are sustained below 7 for 14 days, the Sanctuary and Undercroft Gallery will be permitted to reopen at 50% capacity and all other rooms at 100% capacity.
- Finally, once average daily cases are sustained below 2 for 14 days, all rooms will be permitted to reopen at 100% capacity.
- A decision on in-person services has not yet been made. Information on services will be shared as soon as it is available.

While COVID-19 remains a threat, all attendees are encouraged but not required to wear masks and maintain 3 feet of distance from other attendees at all times while inside the church building.

Background

In March 2021, the Board of Trustees appointed a Safe Reopening Task Force (SRTF) to recommend potential timelines, procedures, and protocols for reopening the church for Sunday services and other activities. The SRTF's mandate was limited to the safety of reopening. The task force reported to the Board on three occasions.

- 1) In April they contributed to the decision not to host any in-person events with Rev. Kate during candidating week, based on low vaccination and high local infection rates at that time.
- 2) In May they recommended extending the closure date of the church through the summer based on the same information, as well as the lack of ministerial presence.
- 3) Later in May they presented a model and tools for approaching in-person gatherings based on benefits, community case rates, the congregation's vulnerable members, and available mitigation measures.

In May 2021, the Board of Trustees designated the Reopening Implementation Working Group (RIWG), consisting of current, incoming, and outgoing Board members, to incorporate input from the SRTF and other constituencies into our decisions about when and how to resume in-person gatherings. This group has been meeting weekly and has set up multiple avenues to gather input from the community about concerns and priorities, including a dedicated email address and a town hall event held on June 27.

The congregation has been very forthcoming in sharing hopes and concerns, making it clear that there is a range of views about how the benefits of gathering in person weigh against the risks to ourselves and our congregation of the virus that causes COVID-19. The Board of Trustees has stated that reopening safely in an intentional and organized way is more critical than opening as soon as possible. At the same time, it has also made clear that reopening is the ultimate goal.

Current Environment

We make decisions about whether to gather in person in light of the evolving pandemic. In March 2020, even though absolute numbers of cases locally were relatively low, we strove to comply with guidance to help combat a public health emergency driven by exponential spread of a new infection. In those days, with little known about how to prevent or fight COVID-19, we knew that any single infection was likely to lead to many more, which in turn would lead to even more, increasing exponentially. Conversely, each single infection that we could prevent would have an outsized impact in curbing spread of the new virus.

It is always important to act as a community, supporting efforts to stop the spread of the virus, even at great cost to social and economic outcomes. We are proud that our church acted quickly to close the building and worked hard to keep our community connected and engaged while we could not be together physically, through meaningful online services, continuing meeting of the Board of Trustees and many other church committees and affinity groups, continuing to serve the EECM meal one Sunday a month, and conducting our search for a new minister entirely remotely.

Much has changed since March 2020. After multiple surges of infection, Allegheny County experienced a dramatic decline in the numbers of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths being reported locally, due both to the availability of highly effective vaccines and to mitigation practices such as masking and social distancing. Unfortunately, due to the emergence of a new, more contagious variant of the virus, in recent weeks case rates have again begun to rise fairly

rapidly. As we consider steps to reopen the church, we will continue to be vigilant in monitoring local and national case rates.

Acting in Accordance with our Principles and Values

The UUA recommends basing decisions to reopen for in-person gathering on “good science, coupled with our UU values” (<https://www.uua.org/safe/pandemics/gathering-guidance>), recognizing that as part of an interdependent web we must consider risks to others in addition to risks to ourselves. In particular, we recognize that our community includes people at varying levels of vulnerability to the novel coronavirus. Our children under age 12 are not yet eligible to be vaccinated, and some members of our community remain vulnerable due to suppressed immune systems or other medical challenges, irrespective of their vaccination status. We express our values by striving to be inclusive to all, caring for one another, and working to protect ourselves and each other.

Taking all these factors into consideration, the Board of Trustees authorized stages of reopening based on both individual risk and collective risk to our church community. Within that framework, individual members of our church community can make their own decisions about acceptable risk and assume personal responsibility for reducing risk to themselves and others, while the Board sets guidelines to help protect our community by circumscribing group interactions to keep the risk of transmission low within any physical gathering. The RIWG aims to support the Board’s decision making with guidance and up-to-date information.

Risk Communication

With this document and accompanying tools, we hope to help church members make informed decisions about their own behavior, in light of the risks in the environment and the protections we can practice to reduce those risks while obtaining the benefits of gathering in person. As the Board approves in-person gatherings of different constituencies and sizes, individual members of our community can consider their own comfort level with the associated risk of attending those gatherings and choose accordingly whether or not to attend.

To support all such decisions, the Board will continue to support individuals’ decisions to wear masks and keep distant from others, and asks all members of our community to show the same respect to one another in these decisions. Furthermore, while the risk of COVID-19 continues to unfold as a threat in the community, **the Board recommends that those arranging services and other gatherings continue to offer online alternatives for individuals whose medical vulnerability remains high or who are not yet comfortable with in-person gathering.**

Safety Goals

Because discussions of risk may raise the question of when it will be “safe” to reopen our church building, it is worth briefly considering what the word “safe” means and how we assess safety. In particular, it is important to understand that it is not possible to reduce any life risks to zero. **Our task both as individuals and as a community is to determine what conditions**

and precautions render it “safe enough” to engage in behaviors that provide benefits while also exposing us to an acceptable degree of risk.

The RIWG has considered several possible benchmarks of risk to determine the threshold at which we recommend allowing in-person gathering. We have done some calculations to estimate rough probabilities of exposure and transmission, setting a target of a 1/1,000 probability of transmission within a single group gathering, assuming a 75% vaccination rate, which we hope is a conservative estimate for our congregation.

It is worth noting that the risk associated with COVID-19 varies greatly across the population. People who have been vaccinated and have had a vigorous antibody response will experience much less risk than those who have not been able to get vaccinated yet or who have a health condition or vulnerability that undermines their immune response. Furthermore, different people will have different thresholds of risk that they are comfortable with. **Although the Board will make recommendations based on overall levels of risk, individuals may choose to exercise greater caution and either refrain from attending some in-person gatherings or add additional protective measures such as wearing N-95 masks.** Again, the Board will continue to support everyone’s decision to adopt such further protective measures.

Benefits and Risk-Benefit Trade-offs

Gathering in person offers numerous benefits both to the community and to individuals. Such gatherings may include worship services, small-group meetings, events open to the public or outside groups that rent space in our building, weddings, and other events. We will not make any specific effort to quantify the benefits associated with different types of gatherings. Rather, having heard loud and clear from our church community that there is benefit associated with gathering, we will allow each person to weigh the benefit of their own in-person attendance against other factors, including risk to themselves and to others. **We will focus our efforts instead on helping people to understand and reduce these risks.**

Personal and Communal Risk Mitigation

As we transition toward emphasizing personal responsibility and individual assessment of risk tolerance, it is important to keep in mind that **gathering in person entails not only risk to oneself but also the potential of exposing others to risk**, in the event that we bring the virus into a gathering. We must consider both the degree of risk that we accept for ourselves and that we impose on others. **For this reason, while COVID-19 remains a threat to the community, the Board encourage individuals to wear masks and maintain a distance of at least 3 feet from others (consistent with the latest CDC guidance) when gathering with potentially unvaccinated others inside our church building**, as recommended by UUA guidance (<https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/masking-guidelines>). Additionally, the Board asks that all members of our community respect others’ decisions to adopt additional precautions, and that we fully support one another’s risk-reduction strategies without asking for justification or probing for personal information that may lie behind these decisions.

Scientific Foundation

Using an external model of transmission probabilities to both guide our decision to reopen and provide a benchmark for possible future re-closing if necessary, we have assembled available information about exposure risk to roughly estimate the risks of gathering in person. Although not precise, these numbers provide an estimate of the degree of risk that an unvaccinated person would face in a given setting in our building.

We are using a chance of transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19 at 1/1,000 (to anyone in a given group size) as a target for determining the threshold case count, and requiring a sustained level of risk at or below that threshold to be necessary for the church building to remain open. Using this target, we identify case counts at which we can re-open spaces of two different sizes in the church at 50% and 100% capacity levels.

- For **larger meeting spaces** (the Sanctuary and the Undercroft Gallery), we recommend opening at **50% capacity** only once county case rates average below 7 daily cases for 14 days, and at **100% capacity** only after county case rates average below 2 daily cases for 14 days.
- For **all other indoor meeting rooms**, we recommend opening at **50% capacity** only once county case rates average below 25 daily cases for a period of 14 days, and at **100% capacity** only after county case rates average below 7 daily cases for 14 days.

Note that this level of risk is associated with a single event (e.g., attending one meeting) and that risk accumulates with multiple events, so although this number may seem like a conservative threshold, the cumulative risk from attending weekly gatherings would increase considerably.

Also keep in mind that individuals may be able to reduce their own risk through such practices as vaccination, and that **we are basing our estimates on the risk to an unvaccinated person**, to reflect the reality that some individuals may be unable to be vaccinated or may have an insufficient immune response to the vaccine to protect them from the virus. We also present the cumulative risk for such a person attending 10 gatherings in a group of that size, as an indication of how risks mount with repeated exposure.

Factors contributing to risk are both **environmental** (e.g., the number of square feet per person in a room) and **epidemiological** (e.g., the case rate in the local community). The Board's decisions about what gatherings are permissible on church grounds are pegged to these variables so that changes to these inputs will trigger revised recommendations without the need to revisit the underlying assumptions or calculations. Please see the accompanying capacity matrix, which communicates the number of daily new cases in Allegheny County below which each room can be used at each capacity level.

What Does This Information Mean to You?

The risk numbers we have used for these calculations pertain to the individual risk to a single person attending a single event. We used this standard to enable comparable decisions to be made across room sizes and meeting capacities.

Please keep in mind the implications of extrapolating these numbers to other situations. For example, the chance of any one individual within a gathering contracting the virus is a function of how many people attend that gathering (so that although any individual's risk may be lower, the chance that at least one person in the group becomes infected will be higher). Also consider that risk mounts as a person attends more than one gathering, such as attending weekly or monthly meetings. Thus, **one way to reduce one's overall risk is to attend fewer in-person gatherings**, perhaps choosing to attend only the events that provide the greatest benefit from being in community.

Although we are not using numbers associated with cumulative risk across multiple gatherings as the basis for our determination of opening (because they are too complicated and interdependent), people making individual decisions may wish to consider these cumulative risks and reduce the number of in-person gatherings that they attend as a method to reduce risk.

Smaller Rooms	Capacity	Schweitzer room	Youth Room	RE room by Undercroft	Library	Priestly Room	Fahs Rom	Gandhi Room	Eliot Room
Max cases: 7	100%	30 people	39 people	21 people	19 people	29 people	29 people	17 people	17 people
Risk of any member of the group contracting SARS-CoV-2	100%	0.104%	0.158%	0.082%	0.071%	0.116%	0.116%	0.073%	0.073%
Risk to an unvaccinated person of contracting SARS-CoV-2	100%	0.010%	0.011%	0.011%	0.011%	0.011%	0.011%	0.013%	0.013%
Risk to unvaccinated person after 10 gatherings	100%	0.096%	0.113%	0.112%	0.107%	0.112%	0.112%	0.126%	0.126%
Max cases: 25	50%	15 people	19 people	10 people	10 people	14 people	14 people	8 people	8 people
Risk of any member of the group contracting SARS-CoV-2	50%	0.091%	0.133%	0.062%	0.067%	0.094%	0.094%	0.058%	0.058%
Risk to an unvaccinated person of contracting SARS-CoV-2	50%	0.017%	0.019%	0.018%	0.019%	0.019%	0.019%	0.045%	0.045%
Risk to unvaccinated person after 10 gatherings	50%	0.165%	0.190%	0.179%	0.191%	0.186%	0.186%	0.196%	0.196%

Larger Rooms	Capacity	Sanctuary	Undercroft Gallery
Max cases: 2	100%	200 people	102 people
Risk of any member of the group contracting SARS-CoV-2	100%	0.114%	0.123%
Risk to an unvaccinated person of contracting SARS-CoV-2	100%	0.001%	0.003%
Risk to unvaccinated person after 10 gatherings	100%	0.015%	0.033%
Max cases: 7	50%	100 people	51 people
Risk of any member of the group contracting SARS-CoV-2	50%	0.102	0.110%
Risk to an unvaccinated person of contracting SARS-CoV-2	50%	0.003%	0.006%
Risk to unvaccinated person after 10 gatherings	50%	0.026%	0.057%