

from Rev. Christine Dance, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix  
**Re-Opening As An Act of Radical Inclusion** **March 2021**

As more and more people in our community are getting vaccinated (hooray!), there have been more inquiries about when UUCP 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 take into account: 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, done with an abundance of caution and care. 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 re-opening is the most concrete opportunity to exercise that since Arizona's SB 1070. Here are several things to consider (in no particular order) from me and with input from your Board of Trustees:

While we value the democratic process and consensus, the decision to re-open belongs solely with the Board of Trustees, in consultation with the Minister and the staff. Until otherwise noted, we are not supporting or sanctioning any in-person gatherings for congregational activities.

Radical Inclusion are beloved words of our Vision Statement. This is who we aspire to be. Re-opening is an opportunity to live into that vision. We should not return until it is safe to do so for as many people as conceivably possible. 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 a large part of our congregation.

To be very explicit, our children 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 vision of being radically inclusive, and would make a strong statement that we don't value the children in our congregation.

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 looking at SCIENCE. And we will be looking at it for the state of Arizona and Maricopa County, not just the individual members of the congregation. While the numbers of vaccinated people in our congregation are increasing, the number of cases, positive tests, hospitalizations, and deaths in the county, state and country are still dangerously high—higher than they were during many months when we were clear that we should be closed. 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:

Whether and how much the virus can be transmitted by vaccinated people.

When it may be safe to sing together in a group.

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.

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 always have an online component from this point forward. We have seen too many benefits of that in regards to inclusion, participation outside of the Phoenix area, people watching the service when/how/where they want. We are a congregation for our time, in all places analog and digital!

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:

How to create a multi-platform/hybrid worship experience

How to make the building safe (from nametags to hymnals to bathrooms to air flow and seating).

What programming to do besides worship—and how.

While online worship and programming is not perfect, we have done an amazing job at making it as inclusive, spiritually filling and impactful as possible. Until we know how to do in-person gathering AT LEAST as inclusively and impactfully as what we offer right now, we should not do so.