

Unitarian Universalists Gathering in the Time of COVID

The delivery of not one, but two very high tech, highly effective COVID 19 vaccines is refreshingly good news over the last few weeks. It is a glimmer of real hope in a worrisome saga of real danger, isolation and despair. A logical question on the minds of many is: When can friends and groups gather without fear of contagion of this threatening virus?

Like most of life's big questions there is no easy answer. The answer will be based mostly on herd immunity. Herd immunity is the idea that if enough people are immune to an infection such as COVID 19 then the virus cannot be transmitted to enough unprotected people to be maintained in the population. If herd immunity is reached, the disease would eventually die out because it can't find new susceptible hosts.

Experts tell us that herd immunity against COVID-19 will be achieved when the total number of Americans recovering from the infection plus those immunized reaches at least 200,000,000 people. Since both the vaccines in use require two shots, 400,000,000 doses will be needed.

If we aspire to reach herd immunity by July, that target requires giving about 2.2 million doses per day, every day until the fireworks erupt on July 4th. This lofty goal is more than any of us can expect.

Even with a successful vaccination program, infectious disease experts, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, note that low tech tools will remain an essential component of the toolbox against the spread of COVID-19. This includes common CDC advised practices, such as wearing masks, social distancing, minimizing large gatherings, following state and local guidance around testing and travel, and of course, hand hygiene. The vaccine will be added to the toolbox, but not replace it for some time to come.

Until we reach herd immunity and the curve begins to flatten, socializing as we have in the past seems unrealistic and ill advised. As we hope and dream it seems best to assume joyful, large celebratory gatherings are not likely to be safe until the end of 2021 or perhaps early 2022. Smaller gatherings with social distancing and masks may become possible earlier in 2021. The Covid Preparation and Response (CPR) Ministry Team has been meeting to discuss what would be needed for that auspicious day, when we can safely gather together.

This outlook may seem discouraging. And we certainly could be underestimating the vaccination capabilities of the current delivery systems. As Unitarian Universalists, we value science and the

truth. So, let us face the truth of what science is saying and build up our resilience using the online technologies and techniques that we've been creating and exploring. Let us continue to faithfully hold one another in care, even as we struggle to maintain the best practices to keep us all safer. We want all of us to reach that day when we can indeed gather to worship and celebrate and engage in the responsible search for truth and meaning in-person. Until then, gratitude for vaccines, gratitude for zoom, gratitude for discovering new ways of connecting in community.

In faith,

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Kim and David have both served various roles in public health leadership and communicable disease control in New York State and beyond. They are both intimately involved in the COVID-19 response efforts in their respective professional roles and are on the COVID Preparation and Response Ministry Team at UU Society of Schenectady.