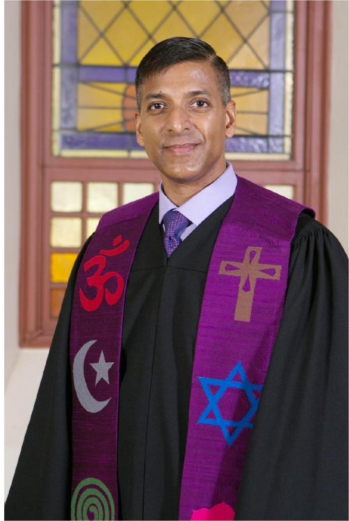




First Unitarian Universalist CONGREGATION OF ANN ARBOR

Creativity, Depth, and Sustainability in This Pandemic Era

From Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti, Senior Minister



Dear beloveds,

As our time together in this pandemic era continues and deepens, so do our understandings of the longer time horizons we are all navigating toward a restored sense of public health. Back in mid-March as our First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor (UUAA) transitioned to virtual operations, our best collective thinking pointed toward a 'temporary' mode of virtual existence that might last eight, ten, or twelve weeks.

The [virtual Sunday services](#) that we, your UUAA staff team, began crafting last spring were intended to support this kind of temporary mode of operations, and to replicate, to the best of our ability, the high caliber of excellence and multi-vocal, multi-perspective spiritual depth that we routinely experience together in person on a Sunday morning. Realizing that the lives of our congregants were in upheaval, we consciously did this to provide continuity: a reassuring link to what was and what we hoped would soon again be. **We now know that a full return to pre-pandemic activities is still quite some time away, as the dissemination of any eventual vaccine will take many, many months.**

For a combination of operational and spiritual-ethical reasons, the time has come to evolve our initial take at virtual Sunday services. Operationally, the attempt to create virtually what we would experience together in person has proven to be unsustainably resource intensive in ways that are not publicly visible. For example, some of you may have seen, and been deeply moved by, [our recent virtual choir piece](#), and/or [the beautiful 'river' photo collage](#) that was a part of our Water Communion Sunday.

A single three to four minute clip like those can require sound mixing, video editing, light correction, and the technical 'stitching together' of many individual video/photo contributions, among other needs. What we experience in three to four minutes can take the equivalent of at least a week's worth of full-time work on the part of someone who has the required technical expertise. In addition, routine Sunday morning elements, like a welcome or chalice lighting, something that happens in five minutes or less in person, takes substantially longer for a virtual service, as equipment must be set up, lighting and microphone needs figured out, and multiple 'takes' potentially required. The five minute in-person element can take over an hour of collective staff time to first film and then put through video production. **This raises important questions**

of what is sustainable for a meaningful, deep, and rich virtual Sunday service experience, as this pandemic time continues.

Side-by-side with that reality, we know that there are limitless opportunities for fostering profound depth, connection, and meaning, in ways that transcend the frame-by-frame replication of what we might do together in person. We are already discovering this on multiple fronts: the development of an innovative virtual Welcome UU Back Week, which has already garnered national attention within our denomination; the development of a virtual 'sibling congregation' relationship with the UU Church of the River in Memphis; our ability to host multiple virtual (long distance) student interns, drawing on expertise from across our nation; opportunities to bring into our community virtual guest speakers, musicians, and teachers in a way that would otherwise require significant travel and expense; our shared discovery that our UUAA virtual offerings regularly reach hundreds of more people per week, from across North America and the globe, than our in person offerings were capable of. **We are inherently in a time of dynamic creativity, exploration, and building, one that holds opportunities that we are still discovering.** Our practical resources may have limitations but our generous spirit, embracing love, and beautiful connection to siblings-in-faith throughout all of Unitarian Universalism knows no limit.

Holding dear our community's commitment to excellence and shining our UUAA beacon brightly, we will be engaging in a variety of creative 'experiments' in the upcoming weeks and months, enlisting a variety of approaches that we believe will nurture both a depth of meaningful experience and point us toward what may be sustainably resourced in this virtual era. This creative experimentation may include, for example:

- Slimming down the number of elements (video clips) that are a part of a pre-produced Sunday service. This may involve virtual Sunday service experiences that are just as deep and meaningful as what we have had to-date, but are less 'complex' in the range of images, voices, and needs that are included on any given Sunday.
- Continuing and deepening our 'sibling congregation' relationship with the UU Church of the River in Memphis, mutually supporting each of our communities during this pandemic.
- Re-directing our community to another UU congregation's Sunday service (providing our community a link, date, and time for such), as a way to create greater technical bandwidth for other needs in our community, such as creating virtual choir segments for future services.
- Trying out 'live' formats on a Sunday morning. This might be a very 'simple' experience, one without technically supported bells and whistles. (Those of you who attended mid-week meditation with me last spring have an idea of what a simple, live spiritual experience like that might look and feel like.) This kind of a live format might expand in a variety of ways, gradually over time, supporting our ability to eventually offer 'hybrid' live + livestreamed Sunday services.

I wanted, in this communication, to give you a 'head's up' as to why some things in the weeks and months ahead might look or feel different. **Please know that any such choices are being made strategically, and in the best interests of our community, with the goal of serving creativity, depth, and sustainability.** If you have questions

about a new or different approach that we might try, please know that I, and our whole staff team, will always welcome hearing from you.

This pandemic time has been, and continues to be, profoundly unsettling and stressful for us all. In the spirit of tenderness and care, I hope that you might lend everyone serving and guiding our UUAA community right now, volunteer and professional alike, a bit of your love, gratitude, and goodwill. **We will get through this pandemic era together: love will guide us, and community will hold us.**

Please stay safe, and as well as possible. You are each very dear to me.

In the spirit of love and care,

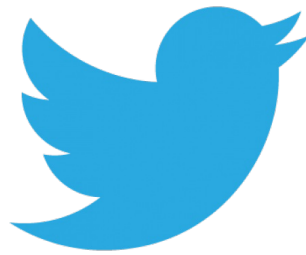
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