

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LOOKING BACK

A Report from the Archives Team and other members of the congregation  
June 2026

Covid 19 began in late November 2019, with cases of an unidentifiable flu-like disease in Wuhan, China. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared it a world-wide pandemic. They officially declared an end to the global health emergency on May 5, 2023. In the United States the Public Health Emergency ended on May 11, 2023.

It is reported that over 7 million people world-wide died from Covid-19 or its variants, with over 1 million of these deaths in the United States. The development of a vaccine proceeded with an unprecedented speed, with the first vaccines appearing by late 2020. Free clinics were established, and people were urged to get vaccinated. There was much heated debate about the efficacy of the vaccines, the need for hospitalizations, closures of schools and public space, and quarantines.

The unknowns about Covid and the ongoing research meant that the guidance from public health authorities changed as the pandemic progressed - creating confusion and uncertainty. During the pandemic years we learned to mask while in public, stay six feet away from everyone, except those in our Covid bubble. Work shifted from office to home, schools closed and students learned remotely, hospitals were crowded and understaffed, and loved ones died. Everyone's life was disrupted. We stayed inside, had our groceries delivered, and stayed 6 feet apart when we saw each other. We could no longer visit family and friends in hospitals, retirement centers, senior centers, and nursing homes. People became creative: we met outside even in the cold weather, on patios, in garages, on decks and under plastic domes. We walked and talked outside, all the while trying to maintain our 6 feet distance.

And some people believed that none of this was true or necessary. People gravitated toward the side they believed contained the truth: vaccine - no vaccine; close schools - keep schools open; shop in stores - order online; see family and friends - remain in quarantine. People wanted life to be simple and straight forward and it wasn't. Despite the wide variety of opinions, the Covid -19 Pandemic changed our lives.

In March 2020, life at First Unitarian Universalist Church changed dramatically. Under Rev. Marian Stewart's direction with a dedicated Audio-Visual team, Sunday worship transformed from in-person to on-line. Initially we met on Zoom, then through our own You Tube channel.

Covid transformed our way of doing Church. Weddings, memorial services, child dedications, ordinations and other rites-of-passage were held with a limited in-person

congregation and a large on-line presence. The newsletter, the calendar, and notices were all sent digitally. Short interest classes were offered via Zoom (cooking, hair cutting, growing orchids, etc.) Groups and committees began to meet on Zoom. Archives met weekly on Zoom just to check in with each other. The Caring Committee set up a weekly phone call to members who wanted phone contact. Book groups, the French group, and the Yoga group learned how easy it was to maintain community via Zoom. The choir socialized regularly on Zoom and twice created a virtual choral performance by technically blending our individually recorded parts. Some groups never went back to in person meetings. The “Old Farts” (retired men) lunch group held their first in-person gathering in Whetstone Park. They were approached by a freelance reporter and photographer and appeared in a New York Times article. On December 24, 2020, our Christmas Eve service was by Zoom. We gathered to sing Silent Night, each holding a candle in our own homes.

Red Oak Community School did not close. They simply spread throughout the building and outside. This was possible because there were no other groups or individuals in the building. During this time there were no Covid cases in their community. School for Young Children closed from March until the fall of 2020. They too, utilized the outdoors for many of their activities. The children and teachers prospered.

Both Amber Scott (our Director of Religious Exploration) and Rev. Kelli McNeal started working at First Unitarian Universalist Church in August 2019. It was a very interesting experience to begin to learn more about this congregation and the community and then have to take all of our training and the little experience we were able to get in person by March 2020, and transition to a fully virtual ministry.

In the early days of the pandemic, as someone with autoimmune conditions myself, it was sometimes difficult to balance my own fears and anxieties while trying to maintain a message of hope when there was so much uncertainty around us. Having an opportunity to hold space with one another, to process our collective grief, confusion, anger, and hope were powerful and moving experiences. As part of Rev. Kelli, offered a once a week Home Alone Together group which brought people who were living alone, and therefore especially isolated, together for a little over an hour over Zoom. We were able to build a community that one participant recently said credits with being the primary resource that got her through the pandemic.

The ways in which we adapted and changed our ministry here at First UU will have lasting, positive impacts for years to come. We are more accessible for those of a variety of abilities, offering more classes online, and ensuring that most of our meetings are hybrid in nature so those who need to stay home are able to still participate. We have some members who feel more comfortable coming into the building because they are able to continue wearing a mask, and that is welcomed

fully. We are more open to trying something new, seeing if it works, and if it doesn't, being okay with that and trying again. While there was a lot of hardship, pain and grief during the Covid years, I'm grateful for the valuable lessons we all learned along the way that continue to help us be a community that truly holds love at the center.

When services and church activities were all moved online, First UU also offered limited online gatherings for children and teens. This included completion of the 2019-2020 church year Coming of Age. The class met weekly via Zoom and presented their spiritual belief statements and received their Walking Sticks from their Mentors in the wooded area beside the church. Our early childhood and elementary aged, Montessori-based "Spirit Play" class, Peace Pals children's choir, and Youth Group for teens. We operated with a very small number of volunteer teachers, who worked creatively to find activities that translated to Zoom (from reading storybooks, to screen-sharing music videos, to playing JackBox games). Many families chose not to participate, as children were already "screened out" from attending school online. Teen attendance was higher due to their desire to remain connected with their peers.

Once vaccines became available, there was a lot of pressure to reopen the church. A small team (Tom Baillieul, David Carr and Brian Hagemann, the Facilities Director) was tasked with determining when it would once again be safe for groups and individuals to gather in the church. The team developed a plan based on the County's metrics for new infections and hospitalizations. In the end, the church eventually reopened, but without using the Covid Team's recommendations.

When we returned to in person church, it was a drastically changed experience. Everyone was required to wear a mask. People started making cloth masks (Willow Otten made many to give to the congregation), instead of handshakes or hugs, we fist bumped and elbow tapped. Seating, except for families and intentional groups, was spaced far apart. Because pediatric vaccines were approved and released much later than the adult ones, when First UU services returned to the building in person, Religious Exploration classes for children and youth were initially held primarily outside and masked. This led to quite a bit of innovation and adaptation on the part of teachers and families, as we had to be ready for all kinds of weather, and further utilized open windows and air purifiers when in a classroom. It was already common practice before the pandemic to ask young children to wash their hands upon arrival to class. After pediatric vaccines were approved, we asked families to submit proof of covid vaccination with class registration for a few years. In recent years we ask whether children / teens are up to date on their vaccinations at registration, but there is no specific requirement to do so. This allows us to monitor general vaccination levels without exerting on any particular family.

Has Covid ended? We do not think so. The virus is still out there. Long-covid issues remain, the digital world is here to stay and the consequences for this generation of children are emerging, and they are mixed. Some children no longer were able to access the free lunch/breakfast at school. In other instances, the community opened centers to provide boxed breakfast and lunch to qualified families. Many children, especially in elementary schools, lost the one-on-one advantage of learning with their teachers help and their peers. Other children were able to adapt to learning by using the Chromebook tablets provided by the Columbus City School Systems. Because many children did not have internet access, buses were turned into hotspots providing access to students and families. Social interactions changed from playing with friends and neighbors to Zoom gathering. There has been a marked decline in social skills, especially at the elementary school level. Daily structure provided by school attendance and reliance on the internet seems to have resulted in reduced attention span. Many schools provided on-line classes, but it was easy for children to ignore them. On the other hand, many parents and families have become more creative in developing new ways of learning. The debate about the wisdom of closing schools continues. But this debate is fueled by hindsight, not the unknown effects of the pandemic itself.

Differences in opinions led to taking sides and an attitude of “you don’t know, so I’ll make my own rules”. In society this is evident as less civility, less tolerance, and an increased determination to be the “right on - and you are wrong!” We see this daily in the lack of adherence to driving rules, rudeness on airplanes and a lack of respect in social relations. Slowly in public life and in politics people are seeing this division and are beginning to express a little more tolerance for our differences.

Here at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, we both suffered and benefitted from the effects of Covid 19. Our long-time music director, Tony McDonald died from Covid before the vaccines were available. Others lost family and friends all too soon. Hand sanitizer and masks continue to be readily available. There is a designated seating area for people who are masked.

We learned how to create community even when we were not together. Several groups found out that Zoom meetings offered more flexibility than in person ones. Meetings and groups often have hybrid gatherings (Zoom and in person). Further advances in technology have improved our hearing assistance and sound system and we now have a You Tube channel. All these improvements are valuable for both in-house and remote access to services.

Cowritten by Sylvia Howe and members of the Archives Team: Deb Baillieul, Linda Royalty, Ohma Willette, Jane Reisman, Debbie Shaw, Marilyn Beerman and Linda

Thompson. Religious Exploration Director, Amber Scott, Rev. Kelli McNeal and Tom Baillieul also contributed to sections of this report.

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## **PERSONAL STATEMENTS:**

### **From Ohma Willette**

During the Covid 19 shutdown, the newsletter of the Care and Share Time Bank requested thank you cards. These cards were for the medical staff at the area hospitals. A nurse who worked at a hospital said that staff morale hand out thank you notes to the discouraged, overwhelmed staff. An unexpected thank you note could be a reminder, and a mental boost, showing that their efforts were indeed appreciated.

Motivated by this request, I got busy. Creating cards and hand-writing messages of gratitude, appreciation, and love. – that I could do. Each month the request for thank you notes showed up in the Care and Share email newsletter – again and again. I created and wrote more cards. When my neighbor– Deonna – learned about writing cards for the hospital staff, she jumped at the chance to help. Together we contributed nearly 500 cards for distribution to worn out medical staff at area hospitals.

I feel proud that I contributed 300 cards to this effort. It lent a positive feeling to an uncertain, threatening time.

### **From Dave Richter**

I think what struck me most about the pandemic was the silence. Everything was so much quieter. The overhead noise of planes almost ceased. Traffic noise was reduced, and many streets remained quiet hour after hour. The noises of the common outdoors, of the urban environment were reduced, and in many cases gone.

The church itself was silent. Because of my work as a volunteer at the church, I was often there during the pandemic. As a member of the building a grounds team, there was always work to do, even though there were no services and activities had ceased.

I remember many times coming to the church and I'd be the only person there in the middle of the day. I'd go inside to take care of the courtyard garden or Asian

garden or maybe make some minor repair that been pointed out, or to solve a problem with the building. Maintenance and repair and that sort of thing had to go on. Often there would be nobody there.

The silence, the quietness, was strange. I'm so used to coming to the church filled with people. Events are going on. People are meeting. The schools are in session and kids are all over. The office and the staff are often there and we talk.

But not during the pandemic. During the pandemic, it was quite strangely, sadly, wistfully quiet. I could be there for hours working and not see or hear a single soul. There was isolation. That struck me as one of the most memorable things about the pandemic. It was lonely and sad to be in that empty building where there had been so much life. The place seemed suspended in time.

I am so glad that is over and the life and the heart and the joy of the church have returned.

### **From Debbie Shaw**

I have been trying to write up a short thing about my time working on the First UU Library which started in Fall 2019, shortly before the Nov 2019 announcements that this disease had appeared in Wuhan, China. When the church (and the nation) shut down to all March 2020 I worked on the catalog at home but returned to the church shortly thereafter since Red Oak was meeting there. I remember the odd feeling of just seeing the children and their teachers occasionally when I masked in the hall to come and go. This was when staff started to come in to work occasionally, but this was before the church was open for anyone else in the congregation. That didn't happen until Sept. 2021- eerie time indeed, but productive too. It felt like a "ghost" church/building but also gave me the opportunity to make a lot of progress on the library.

(The following is excerpted from First UU Library Renovation Summary/ Library History Update 2019-2023 First UU Library Team: Kathleen Boston, Chair; Paula Hook, Sarah Luckay, Susan Vierow. Debbie Shaw: Special Consultant to Library Team and Library Renovator, 2019-2023. submitted by Debbie Shaw 4/25/2023 March 13, 2020)

COVID shut down the church and society. All work stops on site. First UU Library Renovation 1 3 of April 13, 2023 April 2020 and on Worked on catalog from home. Looked up nearly every title on the OCLC Worldcat database and corrected inaccurate information in the catalog. When staff started back in the building I went back and started work again too. Summer 2021 I was told by Brian Hagemann that the wall housing the Belletini collection had to be cleared per Rev. Marian Stewart, who wanted to use the wall for a large screen for hybrid zoom/in person meetings when

church resumed. Weeding of both the Belletini and First UU collections shifted to high gear. Rev. Ritchie returned and took what she wanted from the Belletini collection and advised me on what was worth keeping and what was not. Books kept from the Belletini collection were moved to appropriate category in First UU library's general collection and MB was written on the spine. August 2021 - 2023 I continued assessing every book on catalog list/shelves. Fixed copy numbers for dups, called/emailed people with books checked out pre pandemic, numerous times, and removed the titles from the catalog if not returned/ not found by person or unable to contact individual. Discarded and recycled items in poor condition or were very outdated (some went into Little Free Library boxes around Clintonville!) I gave the professional staff and members of the congregation with special expertise in certain categories the opportunity to share their advice on what to keep or discard during the weeding process, and suggestions for titles to purchase to add to the collection (which I then ordered, entered into the catalog, and processed with the help of the library team).