



## People Who Use Drugs Are Beloved by God

Erica Poellot

Minister of Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Ministries

I recently moved into the East Office of [Judson Memorial Church](#), overlooking Washington Square Park, in the heart of New York City. Flanked by New York University and other affluent Greenwich village institutions and residences, the park and the historic church are highly trafficked tourist destinations.

While I was setting up my office, I overheard a New York walking tour outside my open window. The guide bellowed at a group gathered on the steps of the church, “just across the street, you might be able to see some homeless people or drug addicts in the park . . . oh yes, right there, you can see a big group of them.”

Fighting the urge to thrust my head out the window and make my protest known, I lowered the window and looked around my office. Shelves of naloxone, fentanyl and xylazine test strips, safer injection, safer sex, and safer smoking supplies, emergency contraception, food, ritual supplies, an altar crafted by organizers who use our space, and a big table for gathering and sharing meals. Every object in this space is a testimony to the worth and dignity of people who use drugs. And still, just outside our window, the wail of stigma signals the inevitability of overdose and [mounting overdose fatalities](#).

We need more than overdose prevention. People who use drugs deserve access to care and justice long before an overdose event.

Earlier this year, we learned that Washington Square Park has the second highest level of overdose fatalities of the 1,700 parks in New York City. In response, we have partnered with the health department to become a New York State [registered opioid overdose prevention program](#), and will soon become

## [community based drug checking pilot program.](#)

We made the careful and thoughtful decision to agree to be a drug checking site, despite the organizational burden, because we heard from people who use drugs that [the stigmatization of drug use, and the criminalization of people who use drugs, limits access to care, connection, and safer use environments and practices.](#) We made the careful and thoughtful decision in partnership with people who use drugs, and in conversation with our neighbors in the park.

As we put plans in place to launch this new ministry, we are thinking about other ways to welcome in, outreach to, and partner with people at risk of overdose, as well as how to transform the culture of stigma into one of compassion and understanding.

We hope you will join us in the process of learning and exploration and are sharing the following as offerings for our collective work towards liberation for all.

- Join us for the [Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention in the Pulpit: Building a Meaningful Harm Reduction Justice Sunday Service webinar](#) Thursday, June 27th at 3:30 pm ET.
- Explore the newest version of the [Spirit of Harm Reduction Toolkit](#) to explore opportunities to grow hospitality, compassionate care, advocacy efforts, and community building in partnership with people who use drugs and people who love people who use drugs.
- Reach out to [Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Ministries](#) to inquire about joining our working group, becoming a regional HROP network member, or to ask how we can support your the first congregation in implementing the [Faithful Advocacy for Intersectional and Transformative Healing in Harm Reduction resolution.](#)
- Visit [UCC Resources](#) to purchase People Who Use Drugs Are Beloved by God buttons, banners, and lawn signs for your congregation and community.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Erica M. Poellot is the Minister of Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Ministries for the United Church of Christ, Executive Director of Faith In Harm Reduction, and Senior Ministry Innovator at Judson Memorial Church in NYC.

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