



New Life in Harm Reduction

Erica Poellot

the Minister for Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Ministries

Last Sunday, the Harm Reduction Family Love Feast formally re-launched our monthly worship service and community meal for the first time since COVID shut down New York City in March of 2020. In the assembly hall of Judson Memorial Church, we gather to co-create sacred community, celebrate our shared call to be love and build justice with our most endangered neighbors, and craft liturgies and rituals that honor the wholeness of who we are as individuals and as part of the beloved community. We proudly proclaim that we are a congregation formed and led by people with lived and living experience of substance use, sex work, and criminal legal system involvement, ministers, community organizers, and Harm Reductionists. We recognize that for many of us these are overlapping and evolving identities.

We begin the evening by gathering around a table for a shared meal that is open to all, including our many members who live in Washington Square Park across the street from the church. We have connected with these newer members as part of our drug checking and overdose prevention ministry, which we host in partnership with the city and state health departments. We are building relationships with people who sell drugs who are accessing our drug checking services to better understand what adulterants might be in their products so they can make decisions about what they sell to the people they know and care for, New York University students and staff who are interested in safer-use education and access to harm reduction supplies such as safer smoking kits and emergency contraception, as well as an increasing number of people who love people who use drugs and who are looking for spiritual care and community of their own.

integrated part of the larger Judson community, as well as a gathering space for people who have struggled to find a spiritual community that embraces them where and as they are, is a powerful testament to the gospel of Harm Reduction. When the Harm Reduction Family Love Feast first began gathering in 2017, organizers were in deep discussion about where we wanted to grow our congregation, recognizing that for many of us, places of worship—and Christian churches in particular—had been sites of deep harm and wounding. After exploring a range of possible sites, a majority of those of us gathered voted to root our congregation at Judson, specifically because it was a church, and specifically because it was Judson. Judson has a robust legacy as a community of faith seeped in transformative justice, rooted in relationship with our most endangered neighbors, and committed to standing on the right side of history, even if it is risky. We discerned that this was an opportunity to take our unapologetic and rightful place within the institutional church and to also take our rightful place as trusted leaders and ministers of this particular congregation, in this particular church.

At the inaugural service last Sunday, our friend, colleague, and co-accomplice in the founding of the Harm Reduction Family Love Feast, Terrell, asked to be baptized by our minister, in our congregation, in our church. Everyone gathered welcomed Terrell into beloved community, committing to support him in this new life in Christ, followed by a Harm Reduction communion, at which Terrell presided. In our shared meal, in our reunion as a worshipping community, through the sacrament of baptism, and in the ritual of communion, all gathered had the opportunity to partake in the celebration of new life—Terrell's, ours as a congregation, and Judson's.

If your congregation is interested in breathing new life into your community and introducing harm reduction and overdose prevention ministries, please access our Spirit of Harm Reduction Toolkit [here](#), our Harm Reduction Worship Planning Guide [here](#), visit the [Multifaith Alliance for Harm Reduction site](#) for pathways to become an alliance member congregation, or reach out to the Minister of Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Ministries at poellote@ucc.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Erica Poellot serves as the Minister for Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Ministries in the national setting of the United

Church of Christ.

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