

VALLEY CARES COVID-19

*“Here is the church, here is the steeple
Open the door and see all the people.”*

No doubt many of you reading this can recall a time when you saw a parent or fellow kid play this little game. Joining our two hands together, we interlock our middle, ring, and pinky fingers, rest our index fingers on their pads to form a “steeple,” and place our thumbs in front of the interlocked fingers and underneath the index finger “steeple” to form “doors.”

Like so much of our childhood, this little game teaches us contrasting details about the Church: Church brings us together, and Church gives us the freedom to go out into the world. We love being intertwined with our community of people that make up our congregation, and that can lead us into thinking that without a building with “steeples” and “doors,” we can’t fully be the Church.

But the past weeks of living in a pandemic have helped us understand that the Holy Spirit creates an intertwined community even outside of our building. Many of us have been surprised to see how close we feel to each other through worship, prayer, timely newsletters, and our own personal communication efforts. The Church dispersed is still the Church.

And yet, we remember what it is like to gather at Valley, to have that triangular stained glass greet us in the parking lot. We remember what it is like to have our Sunday morning greeters say “Hello!” and offer a handshake or a hug. If we settle into the routine of only being a virtually connected community, we risk losing the compelling memories we hold as we recall how wonderful it was to gather in Valley’s building. We risk avoiding the grief of being apart and the yearning we have to return to the communal gathering of our Valley family.

How do we move forward? What will freedom look like? We can choose to embrace the tension of the unknown. We can choose to mourn how we cannot be worshipping shoulder-to-shoulder in the Valley sanctuary. We can choose to feel excitement, calm, and wonder, at how we connect with God during livestreamed worship, as well as in the moments of deep connection we experience with those we see every day and those we’ve reconnected with from across the country since this pandemic started.

There are so many people we never realized we missed so much. We can choose to accept our frustration at not being able to be together in the same place, knowing that safe gathering guidance is an act of radical love which can keep all of our Valley family healthy.

As Valley's staff, Session, committees, and task forces have met over the past two months, we have embraced the wide range of feelings related to this frightening time. And we want our members, friends, and community partners who know and love our building to understand that we are making every effort to consider the common good. We believe that the choice to continue virtual worship until it is safe for all members of our community to gather in our building, is a decision of radical love.

When Valley opens our doors again, we want *“all”* the people to feel that they are welcome and safe. Until then, we will continue to be creative and responsible. We will try to connect in ways that will work, and we know that some ways will work better than others. We will continue to plan and dream and pray and do, and we will trust in the Holy Spirit to, as that spiritual reminds us, *“guide our feet while we run this race, for we don't want to run this race in vain.”*

Where is the church? Where is the steeple? The church, our church, is in Golden Valley, to be sure. But is also in our homes. It is in our hearts. It is in the actions and lives of people we know and don't know. It is in the radical love of this moment that keeps grocery store workers, nurses, doctors, chaplains, and janitors caring for all of us. This document is a carefully-considered effort to balance the gift of our building to be the church among us and for our members to be the faithful witness of the body of Christ in this time of transition, uncertainty, and renewal.

RESOURCES:

[CDC Recommendations](#)

[Wisconsin Council of Churches](#)

[Returning to Public Worship PC\(USA\)](#)

[Presbytery Recommendations](#)

[Osterholm and Walz and the Church](#)

Valley Cares COVID-19

A Proposal of the Re-opening Task Force of Valley Community Presbyterian Church, May 2020

The Valley Cares COVID-19 Task force has found that the details regarding any plan of returning to the church building are dynamic and changing as public health agency guidance and recommendations continue to be presented. As a committee of 7, we found that we had a broad perspective which includes medical practice, family health dynamics, business experience, school parenting, emergency preparedness, legal knowledge, and church connections.

One document that was released in late April was the Wisconsin Council of Churches Guidance In returning to church. Dr. Geoffrey Swain, MD, MPH consulted extensively, and the result was an honest and clear understanding of how to proceed. Many churches of all denominations and locations are using this advice.

A second document was guidance by the University of MN Director for Infectious Disease Research, Dr. Michael Osterholm. He is a graduate of Luther College and very familiar with decisions regarding worshipping congregations as a Lutheran himself.

In a May 11, 2020 article Dr. Osterholm said:

“Churches should embrace virtual worship and be prepared to gather that way for the long haul. COVID-19 is transmitted through aerosols breathed in, so anytime multiple people are gathered in a single space, everyone present is at risk—particularly because symptoms of coronavirus typically don’t show up until several days after someone is infected. Virtual worship is as perfect as you can get right now for what we need. Additionally, all congregations should continue to suspend in-person worship beyond Gov. Walz’s order because COVID-19 will still be spreading—and any indoor gathering, no matter how many precautions we take, will still present a significant exposure risk.”

This document is our effort to present a faithful and responsible recommendation based on science and the knowledge that God gave us the gift of life. Our Task Force responsibilities will also be “for the long haul” as we fine-tune and adjust to the virus’ timeline and not wishful unsubstantiated thinking.

The Session of Valley reviewed this document and unanimously approved it on May 26. We took great care and used an abundance of caution creating milestones to reach four separate stages that will allow us to worship together in our sanctuary again. We are not in a position to predict the future and we will continue to re-evaluate this ever-changing situation.

Task Force Members: Jen Biggs, Katie Decker, Craig Gottschalk, Linda Wold, Phil Romine, Jan Fedora-Clerk of Session, and Richard Buller-Pastor

Stages of Re-opening

Stage 1

Valley will operate in this stage under the following conditions:

1. the church building is closed. The church office is open; and
2. there **has not** been a consistent two-week reduction in the number of reported state-wide COVID-19 cases.

- Maintain communication with local/state authorities, including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Minnesota Department of Health, Presbytery, and Valley Session to determine and implement data-driven, medically recommended virus and disease mitigation strategies in our community.
- Maintain regular communication with members via mail, email, phone, social media, website; be transparent about how decisions are being made and based on what resources.
- Session communicates with Valley's insurance company regarding any decisions about building use and/or creating or resuming in-person mission and ministry during the pandemic.
- Sunday worship will be live streamed from Valley's sanctuary. The Worship Team will be the only ones in the sanctuary. Cloth masks strongly recommended for everyone entering sanctuary, and social distancing protocols followed (remaining at least 6 feet apart if speaking, 20 feet apart if singing).
- Session, Deacon, committee meetings, Bible study and other small group ministries meet virtually.
- Participants utilizing Valley's Community Garden will follow guidelines outlined by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture for community gardens: [Community Garden Guidelines](#)
- Volunteer-led groups of Valley members and friends, meeting at locations other than the church property, are strongly encouraged to follow local/state guidance for group gatherings of any size.
- No outside community groups (12-Step Programming, Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir, Pilgrim Christian Center, etc.) allowed in the building.
- Limit in-person office functions as much as possible. Other than the Office Administrator, church staff are strongly encouraged to work from home. If it is necessary for more than one person to be in the office, cloth masks will be worn by everyone and social distancing protocols will always be followed (remaining at least 6 feet apart). Frequent hand washing and hand sanitizing will be followed. Workspaces will not be shared/touched between employees and/or visitors/volunteers. High-touch surfaces will continue to be cleaned/sanitized regularly.
- No persons except staff allowed in the building Monday-Friday. If necessary, during the week contactless delivery/drop-offs may be arranged by appointment with church staff. On Sundays, only staff and worship leaders allowed in the church building.
- Recommend Valley's clergy and visitation teams to communicate by phone, virtually, or other electronic means.

- No children or youth (grades 12 and under) allowed in the building. Exceptions to this rule may be granted on a case-by-case basis for older youth, only if church staff, youth and the youth's parents agree to participation (e.g. high school senior(s) helping lead worship).

The task force will continue to meet to discuss alternate plans for worship, mission, and ministry that do not involve in-person gatherings in the church building. It will also discuss realistic expectations for returning to in-person worship on Valley's church property.

Stage Two

Valley will operate in this stage under the following conditions:

1. gatherings of 10 or fewer individuals are allowed by the Minnesota Department of Health;
 2. there **has** been a consistent two-week reduction in the number of reported state-wide COVID-19 cases;
 3. adequate testing and contact tracing capacities are reported by state and local health officials; and
 4. healthcare facilities report adequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Maintain communication with local/state authorities, including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Minnesota Department of Health, Presbytery, and Valley Session to determine and implement data-driven, medically recommended virus and disease mitigation strategies in our community.
 - Maintain regular communication with members via mail, email, phone, social media, website; be transparent about how decisions are being made and based on what resources.
 - Session communicates with Valley's insurance company regarding any decisions about building use and/or creating or resuming in-person mission and ministry during the pandemic.
 - Sunday worship will be live streamed from Valley's sanctuary. The Worship Team will be the only ones in the sanctuary. Cloth masks strongly recommended for everyone entering sanctuary, and social distancing protocols followed (remaining at least 6 feet apart if speaking, 20 feet apart if singing).
 - Participants utilizing Valley's Community Garden will follow guidelines outlined by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture for community gardens: [Community Garden Guidelines](#)
 - Volunteer-led groups of Valley members and friends, meeting at locations other than the church property, are strongly encouraged to follow local/state guidance for group gatherings of any size.
 - Session, Deacon, committee meetings, Bible study and other small group ministries are encouraged to live stream, but may be permitted to gather at the church building under the following conditions:
 - if possible, groups of 10 or fewer adults are encouraged to meet outside the church building (in the parking lot; on the church patio; on the lawn areas of the church property, etc.);
 - if it is not possible to meet outdoors:
 - organizers will arrive at the church building ahead of meeting times to prop open building entrance and meeting room doors to minimize contact with doors/door handles;
 - all participants wear cloth masks that cover mouth and nose;

- all participants are able to follow social distancing protocols in their meeting rooms (maintaining at least 6 feet of distance between persons at all times);
 - no singing allowed;
 - windows will be open for the duration of meetings; doors are encouraged to remain open as well; doors and windows closed by the organizer only after all participants have exited the room/building.
 - Participants and organizers agree not to hold Valley Community Presbyterian Church liable for any injury and/or illness (including contracting the novel coronavirus which causes COVID-19) they may incur as a result of participating in events on church property.
- Outside community groups (12-Step Programming, Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir, Pilgrim Christian Center, etc.) may be allowed to meet at the church building ONLY if: Valley's insurance company has been notified of such use; AND the groups agree to the following conditions in writing:
 - If possible, groups of 10 or fewer adults are encouraged to meet outside the church building (in the parking lot; on the church patio area; on the lawn areas of the church property, etc.)
 - If it is not possible to meet outdoors:
 - fewer than 10 adults will meet in a room at a time;
 - all participants wear cloth masks that cover mouth and nose;
 - all participants are able to follow social distancing protocols in their meeting rooms (maintaining at least 6 feet of distance between persons at all times);
 - organizers will arrive at the church building ahead of meeting times to prop open building entrance and meeting room doors to minimize contact with doors/door handles;
 - no singing allowed;
 - windows will be open for the duration of meetings; doors are encouraged to remain open as well; doors and windows closed by the organizer only after all participants have exited the room/building;
 - Participants and organizers agree not to hold Valley Community Presbyterian Church liable for any injury and/or illness (including contracting the novel coronavirus which causes COVID-19) they may incur as a result of participating in events on church property.
- Limit in-person office functions as much as possible. Other than the Office Administrator, church staff are strongly encouraged to work from home. If it is necessary for more than one person to be in the office, cloth masks will be worn by everyone and social distancing protocols will always be followed (remaining at least 6 feet apart). Frequent hand washing and hand sanitizing will be followed. Workspaces will not be shared/touched between employees and/or visitors/volunteers. High-touch surfaces will continue to be cleaned/sanitized regularly.
- No children (grades 6 and under) allowed in the building or gathered for programming. Youth in grades 7-12 may be gathered for outdoor activities in groups fewer than 10, only if church staff, youth and the youth's parents agree to participation (e.g. summer youth projects outside the church building).
- Weddings, funerals, baptisms, and/or other special services of the church will follow the guidelines for in-person gatherings for community and church groups outlined above.
- Direct appropriate church staff to implement risk reduction measures in the church building, such as sanitation/cleaning/hygiene measures, especially for high-touch surfaces (including but not limited to phones, doors/door handles, keyboards, empty table tops, etc.).
- Continue to recommend Valley's clergy and visitation teams to communicate by phone, virtually, or other electronic means.

- Continue to follow reported Minnesota Department of Health guidelines if you are aware of someone infected with the coronavirus which causes COVID-19, and report information to proper authorities, maintaining confidentiality required by ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and/or other applicable laws regarding religious practices.

The task force will continue to meet to discuss alternate plans for worship, mission, and ministry. It will continue to discuss realistic expectations for returning to in-person worship on Valley's church property.

Stage Three

Valley will operate in this stage under the following conditions:

1. gatherings of 50 or fewer individuals are allowed by the Minnesota Department of Health;
 2. schools, daycares, and other child-related gathering spaces allow in-person gatherings/operations with restrictions;
 3. state and local health officials determine that the risk of community transmission of coronavirus in Minnesota is low;
 4. adequate testing and contact tracing capacities are reported by state and local health officials; and
 5. healthcare facilities report adequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Maintain communication with local/state authorities, including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Minnesota Department of Health, Presbytery, and Valley Session to determine and implement data-driven, medically recommended virus and disease mitigation strategies in our community.
 - Maintain regular communication with members via mail, email, phone, social media, website; be transparent about how decisions are being made and based on what resources.
 - Session communicates with Valley's insurance company regarding any decisions about building use and/or creating or resuming in-person mission and ministry during the pandemic.
 - Sunday worship will be live streamed from Valley's sanctuary. The Worship Team will be the only ones in the sanctuary. Cloth masks strongly recommended for everyone entering sanctuary, and social distancing protocols followed (remaining at least 6 feet apart if speaking, 20 feet apart if singing).
 - Participants utilizing Valley's Community Garden will follow guidelines outlined by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture for community gardens: [Community Garden Guidelines](#)
 - Volunteer-led groups of Valley members and friends, meeting at locations other than the church property, are strongly encouraged to follow local/state guidance for group gatherings of any size.
 - Session, Deacon, committee meetings, Bible study and other small group ministries may be permitted to gather at the church building under the following conditions:
 - If possible, groups of 50 or fewer adults are encouraged to meet outside the church building (in the parking lot; on the church patio; on the lawn areas of the church property, etc.);
 - If it is not possible to meet outdoors:

- organizers will arrive at the church building ahead of meeting times to prop open building entrance and meeting room doors to minimize contact with doors/door handles;
 - all participants wear cloth masks that cover mouth and nose;
 - all participants follow social distancing protocols (maintaining at least 6 feet of distance between persons at all times);
 - no singing allowed;
 - windows will be open for the duration of meetings; doors are encouraged to remain open as well; doors and windows closed by the organizer only after all participants have exited the room/building;
 - Participants and organizers agree not to hold Valley Community Presbyterian Church liable for any injury and/or illness (including contracting the novel coronavirus which causes COVID-19) they may incur as a result of participating in events on church property.
- Outside community groups (12-Step Programming, Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir, Pilgrim Christian Center, etc.) may be allowed to meet at the church building ONLY if: Valley's insurance company has been notified of such use; AND the groups agree to the following conditions in writing:
 - If possible, groups of 50 or fewer adults are encouraged to meet outside the church building (in the parking lot; on the church patio area; on the lawn areas of the church property, etc.)
 - If it is not possible to meet outdoors:
 - fewer than 50 adults will meet in a room at a time;
 - all participants wear cloth masks that cover mouth and nose;
 - all participants follow social distancing protocols (maintaining at least 6 feet of distance between persons at all times);
 - organizers will arrive at the church building ahead of meeting times to prop open building entrance and meeting room doors to minimize contact with doors/door handles;
 - no singing allowed;
 - windows will be open for the duration of meetings; doors are encouraged to remain open as well; doors and windows closed by the organizer only after all participants have exited the room/building;
 - Participants and organizers agree not to hold Valley Community Presbyterian Church liable for any injury and/or illness (including contracting the novel coronavirus which causes COVID-19) they may incur as a result of participating in events on church property.
- Church staff are encouraged to work from home if possible but may come into the church building more frequently. If it is necessary for more than one person to be in the office, cloth masks will be worn by everyone and social distancing protocols will always be followed (remaining at least 6 feet apart). Frequent hand washing and hand sanitizing will be followed. Workspaces will not be shared/touched between employees and/or visitors/volunteers. High-touch surfaces will continue to be cleaned/sanitized regularly.
- Church staff and pre-approved visitors (scheduled visits arranged with church staff) are allowed Monday-Friday. During the week, contactless delivery/drop-offs will continue to be encouraged.
- Children and youth (grades 5-12) may be allowed in the building or gathered for programming. Outdoor activities in groups are strongly encouraged, only if church staff, youth and the youth's parents agree to participation. If activities take place indoors, no more than 10 children/youth per room will be permitted, and air exhaust systems utilized. No children grades 4 and under will be permitted in the building.

- Weddings, funerals, baptisms, and/or other special services of the church will follow the guidelines for in-person gatherings for worshipers outlined above.
- Direct appropriate church staff to implement risk reduction measures in the church building, such as sanitation/cleaning/hygiene measures, especially for high-touch surfaces (including but not limited to phones, doors/door handles, keyboards, empty table tops, etc.).
- Valley's clergy and visitation teams are encouraged to communicate by phone, virtually, or other electronic means with members/friends of Valley who are part of vulnerable populations. In-person visits may be made with the consent of all parties involved, while maintaining social distancing protocols and wearing cloth masks.
- Continue to follow reported Minnesota Department of Health guidelines if you are aware of someone infected with the coronavirus which causes COVID-19, and report information to proper authorities, maintaining confidentiality required by ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and/or other applicable laws regarding religious practices.
- Continue to re-evaluate Minnesota data, checking health recommendations from Minnesota Department of Health, about daily transmissions and adjust Valley's operations accordingly.
- Continue to follow state guidelines if you are aware of someone infected with the COVID-19 virus and report information to proper authorities, maintaining confidentiality required by ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) or other applicable laws regarding religious practices.

The task force will continue to meet to discuss alternate plans for worship, mission, and ministry. It will continue to discuss realistic expectations for returning to in-person worship on Valley's church property.

Stage Four

Valley will operate in this stage under the following conditions:

1. gatherings of 50 or more individuals are allowed by the Minnesota Department of Health;
 2. schools, daycares, and other child-related gathering spaces allow in-person gatherings without restrictions;
 3. one of the following criteria has been met to minimize community spread of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19:
 - a. a cure is found and widely available to the public;
 - b. a vaccine is developed and widely available to the public;
 - c. herd immunity is achieved to the extent that local/state health officials determine that the risk to vulnerable community members need not restrict in-person gatherings
- Continue to re-evaluate Minnesota data, checking health recommendations from Minnesota Department of Health, about daily transmissions and adjust Valley's operations accordingly.
 - Continue to follow state guidelines if you are aware of someone infected with the coronavirus which causes COVID-19 and report information to proper authorities, maintaining confidentiality required by ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) or other applicable laws regarding religious practices.

- Participants utilizing Valley's Community Garden will follow guidelines outlined by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture for community gardens: [Community Garden Guidelines](#)
- Volunteer-led groups of Valley members and friends, meeting at locations other than the church property, are strongly encouraged to follow local/state guidance for group gatherings of any size.
- In-person church activities and worship may resume with more than fifty persons for persons of all ages and in all populations (vulnerable and non-vulnerable), with minimal or no restrictions as determined by church leadership (staff and/or Session).
- Continue on-line worship/telephone ministry for members and visitors.
- Outside community groups may resume with more than fifty persons, with minimal or no restrictions as determined by church leadership (staff and/or Session).
- Maintain increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church, including propping open entrance, meeting room, and sanctuary doors as weather permits, and maximizing indoor airflow and introduction of outside air.
- Physical distancing may be relaxed, and masks may become optional.
- Coffee hour may resume depending on the local and state regulations.

The task force may continue to meet to discuss alternate plans for worship, mission, and ministry as directed by the Session. It may also be dissolved by the Session if/when deemed appropriate.

If staff or Valley members test positive for COVID-19 at any stage, Valley would notify local health officials and communicate with staff and congregants about potential exposure while maintaining confidentiality as required by ADA laws and other applicable laws for religious practices. Valley would then follow the guidelines to care for the person and anyone who might have come into contact with that person. Following confirmation of a positive case, all in-person gatherings would be suspended on church property for two weeks, or as indicated/directed by local/state health officials.