

# GOOD SAMARITAN LUTHERAN CHURCH PLAN FOR VIRUS-SAFE WORSHIP

Version 6.0: **August 31, 2022**

A function of the Good Samaritan Lutheran Church Council

## Introduction and Purpose

In December 2019, the world became aware of a new coronavirus that causes a respiratory disease now described as COVID-19. This disease is highly contagious and spreads easily between people via exhaled respiratory droplets. Most infected persons exhibit fever, cough, and shortness of breath - but some infected persons never exhibit symptoms, and a period exists in many infected people where they show no symptoms but are still capable of unknowingly spreading the virus.

Good Samaritan Lutheran Church (GSLC) was required to end in-person worship due to the COVID-19 state of emergency in Maryland in March 2020. As the state of emergency was lifted, numerous new state and local regulations were put into place for public gatherings (including worship services). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the parent body to which GSLC belongs, also produced guidance for churches to consider when reopening. The pastor and council of Good Samaritan Lutheran Church authorized the GSLC Task Force to define a plan to resume regular in-person worship, pursuant to applicable state regulation and ELCA guidance, while simultaneously enacting procedures to reduce the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission during worship.

With the reduction of COVID-19 cases in our area, increased resistance to the virus (from vaccines, boosters, and natural immunity through infection), implementation of a stable plan through the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) "Community Levels" metric, and a reduction in the size and retention of the Task Force, GSLC disbanded the COVID-19 Task Force in May of 2022. The GSLC Church Council, along with the Pastors and Sexton, assumed responsibility for reacting to and implementing any further changes to the plan.

## Consideration of God's Word

We emphasize the importance of meeting in person because Christians find significant value in corporate worship, reflecting each Sunday in the tradition of regularly meeting for confession, forgiveness, praise, teaching, communion, and fellowship. Jesus instructed His followers to gather in His name ("For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." [Matthew 18:20]).

The Bible also instructs Christians to be faithful stewards of Creation [Genesis 1:28-30] and to take care of their neighbors - not just their fellow congregants or fellow Christians, but everyone, including the social outcast (the parable of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:25-37]) - a lesson we memorialize in the name of our church.

From these teachings, we take note that we must be careful that our actions do not cause harm to others - a teaching we put into practice by taking positive steps to prevent even inadvertent transmission of this disease, as far as it is in our power to do so. Finally, Jesus specifically instructed us ("Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's..." [Matthew 22:21]) to obey lawful orders from civic authority as part of our duty to our society. Therefore, it is proper that we should obey the instructions of national, state, and local authorities as we worship.

## How to Use This Plan

This plan has been rewritten to serve as a guide for the pastors, staff, and worshippers at GSLC in how to enact typical COVID-19 precautions for worship and other activities. It starts with a "Standard Guidance and Planning" section that includes rules that always apply, and then later sections explain how to adapt to the basic types of COVID-19 prevention precautions that have been seen and developed over the course of the pandemic.

The persons using this plan must acquaint themselves with the current applicable state, local, and synod COVID-19 rules, particularly as they pertain to capacity limits, mask use, and physical (or "social") distancing. The plan requires understanding of these terms in a worship-based context.

If a regulation applies that is not covered in this plan, or if a regulation does not fit the current structure of the plan, a revision will be required by the Church Council. The Church Council may choose to respond to situations rapidly via conversations and meetings, with the inference being that a future plan will be released that covers decisions made and made available as soon as is reasonably possible.

## Standard Guidance and Planning

The pastor is asked to consider selecting worship elements that do not unduly prolong worship, as the duration of the worship service is proportional to the risk of virus exposure to the congregation. The service may include singing and speaking in unison. The GSLC Church Council recognizes that these activities increase risk, but statistically based infection models demonstrate the increased risk due to singing is overwhelmingly reduced by proper mask usage.

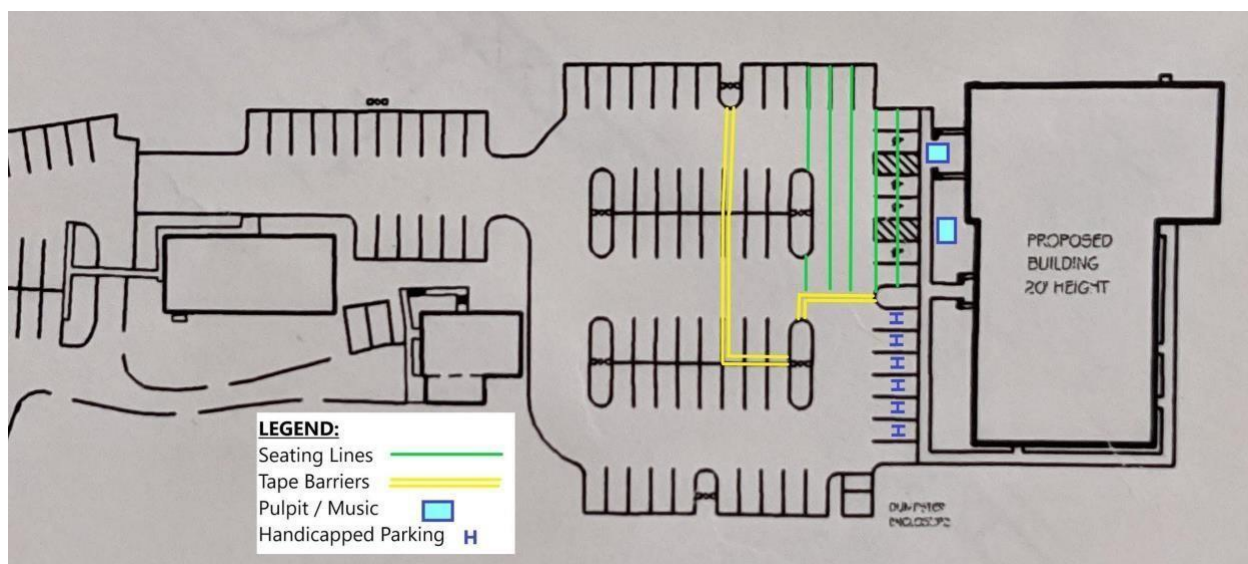
Fellowship (defined, for the purposes of this plan, as time for conversation and socialization among worshippers) is permitted prior to and/or after worship. Fellowship may include beverages and snacks, but the fellowship guidance in this plan is not intended to cover a full meal.

Electronic offerings will be encouraged, but physical offerings will continue to be allowed, as research suggests that the COVID-19 virus has low transmissibility via touch.

## Selection and Management of Worship Venue (Inside or Outside)

The pastor will have the authority to determine whether worship and fellowship will be held outdoors or indoors for each Sunday. Outdoor worship is preferred to indoor worship as the risk of COVID-19 transmission has been shown to be significantly lower outdoors due to the constant air circulation, the sanitizing effects of sunlight, and other factors. The pastor will announce the type of worship service no less than 3 days prior to worship to allow for facility setup and communication (via email and website, at a minimum) to the congregation. To support outdoor worship, the Facility Manager may coordinate with the congregation to form a Setup Team to assist in moving A/V equipment between the sanctuary and the parking lot in support of worship each Sunday morning.

If church is held outdoors, we will meet in the parking lot area closest to the church. The diagram below illustrates how the parking lot will be arranged for worship. Worshippers are encouraged to bring lawn chairs; the church may provide chairs for worshipper use as well. The parking lot will be marked with stripes every 10 feet, parallel with the front of the church, to establish cues for physical distancing (if required).



## Online Streaming

Each worship service, inside or outside, is intended to be broadcast online via live-streaming for the benefit of worshippers who cannot or choose not to attend in person. The congregation will be informed that the service is live-streamed at the beginning of the worship service.

## Determining Limits Based on CDC Community Levels

GSLC will utilize the CDC’s “Community Levels” metric to dictate regulations for worshippers. Activities may be allowed, restricted, or canceled based on the current level of COVID-19 spread in St. Mary’s County, as laid out in the chart below. Community Levels can be viewed by county on the CDC’s website (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/community-levels.html>). The Facility Manager will communicate the current Community Level (and any restrictions or lack thereof) to the congregation in the weekly Worship Invitation email, as well as post signs on the Good Samaritan campus indicating current restrictions.

| CDC Community Level | Masks               | Signups      | Fellowship                              | Faith Formation                              | Worship Planning  | Physical Distancing |
|---------------------|---------------------|--------------|---|--|-------------------|---------------------|
| <b>LOW</b>          | Not required        | Not required | No restrictions                         | No restrictions                              | No restrictions   | None                |
| <b>MEDIUM</b>       | Strongly encouraged | Required     | No self-serve food and drink            | No restrictions                              | Shortened worship | None                |
| <b>HIGH</b>         | Required            | Required     | No indoor Fellowship; outdoor permitted | No indoor Faith Formation; outdoor permitted | Shortened worship | Required            |

### WHEN THE COMMUNITY LEVEL IN ST. MARY’S COUNTY IS “LOW” OR “GREEN”

- Wearing of masks will not be required. Mask usage is still encouraged by all worshippers according to their comfort level, and under no circumstances will mask usage be disallowed or discouraged.
- Sign-up prior to attending worship (as described in “Things to Do to Abide by Indoor Capacity Limits” on page 6 of this document) will not be required.
  - In the event a person who attended worship is found to have tested positive for COVID-19 after attending worship (during a time in which they could have spread the virus to others) alerts the GSLC staff, a message will go out to the entire congregation informing them of a possible exposure.
- Fellowship, Faith Formation/Sunday School, and other group activities will be allowed to resume or continue without restriction, up to and including shared indoor meals.

### WHEN THE COMMUNITY LEVEL IN ST. MARY’S COUNTY IS “MEDIUM” OR “YELLOW”

- Wearing of masks by all worshippers will be *strongly encouraged* as a means to slow the spread of the virus and protect those who are unable to receive a vaccine.
- Sign-up prior to attending worship (as described in “Things to Do to Abide by Indoor Capacity Limits” on page 6 of this document) will be required.

3. Pastors, music directors, and other worship planners will select worship elements to shorten the service length and reduce grouping of people.
4. Fellowship will be allowed with increased restrictions (as described in “Things to Do to Enforce Other Health and Safety Rules” on page 9 of this document).

**WHEN THE COMMUNITY LEVEL IN ST. MARY’S COUNTY IS “HIGH” OR “RED”**

1. Wearing of masks by all worshippers over the age of 2 will be required at all times on the GSLC campus.
2. Sign-up prior to attending worship (as described in “Things to Do to Abide by Indoor Capacity Limits” on page 6 of this document) will be required.
3. Pastors, music directors, and other worship planners will seek to shorten the length of in-person worship gatherings by any feasible means.
4. Faith Formation/Sunday School activities will be canceled.
5. Fellowship and other non-worship in-person gatherings will be canceled.
6. Social distancing protocols will be implemented in the worship space.

## Things to Do to Abide by Indoor Capacity Limits

| Task  | Responsible Party                        |
|---|--|
| <p><b>WHEN A RULE CHANGES:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the indoor capacity limit. This will be the smallest of the following:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A number that is explicitly stated by the state government, federal government, or synod.</li> <li>○ A percentage of our maximum indoor capacity (100% capacity is <b>178 persons</b> for our sanctuary.)</li> <li>○ The maximum number that can be seated without violating physical distancing requirements, if required. (We estimate that number to be <b>60 persons</b>.)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Update the “COVID-19 Rules for Users of GSLC”.</li> <li>• Determine if the fellowship team may use the kitchen and if so, by how many people. Inform the Fellowship Coordinator if the number has changed.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ When capacity limits were originally imposed, a 2-person limit was imposed on kitchen use.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <p>Pastors and Worship Planning Team</p> |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the number of worship services to accommodate the expected number of in-person worshippers for Sunday worship.</li> <li>• Establish and configure a sign-up system to allow worshippers to sign up in advance and to limit worshippers to the indoor capacity limit (if required).               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sign-ups should open on Friday for a given Sunday.</li> <li>○ Notification for sign-up will be via email.</li> <li>○ Church office phone will be the backup method.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>  | <p>Pastors and Worship Planning Team</p> |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ushers will keep count of the seated worshipper count and ensure compliance with state regulations, and direct excess worshippers to alternative means of worshipping (overflow rooms, watching from outside or via live-stream, etc.).</li> </ul>  | <p>Ushers</p>                            |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY WITH FELLOWSHIP:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrange fellowship plan in accordance with the approved kitchen capacity.</li> </ul>  | <p>Fellowship Coordinator</p>            |

## Things to Do to Communicate and Enforce Mask Rules

| Task   | Responsible Party                 |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <p><b>WHEN RULES CHANGE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the current masking rules in place in our plan, by the state of Maryland, and by other regulatory bodies.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Note that mask rules may vary based on vaccination status, whether the activity is indoors or outdoors, or in accordance with other criteria.</li> <li>○ Mask rules may be required or simply “encouraged”.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Update the “COVID-19 Rules for Users of GSLC”.</li> </ul>              | Pastors and Worship Planning Team |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate the masking rules in the worship sign-up email. General guidance:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If masks are required or strongly encouraged for anyone, then we strongly encourage everyone to wear masks to support those who must.</li> <li>○ If a constraint on mask use is in force based on vaccination status or other health status, we will communicate the requirement but use the honor system for enforcement.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | Pastors and Worship Planning Team |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY WITH FELLOWSHIP:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select a fellowship environment (indoors or outdoors).               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Indoor fellowship with food and drink will be permitted if all mask requirements are lifted for all worshippers, regardless of vaccination status.</li> <li>○ Having an inside serving line, arranged such that worshippers take their food and drink outside to eat, is an acceptable way to have outdoor fellowship.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>            | Fellowship Coordinator            |

## Things to Do to Communicate and Enforce Physical Distancing

| Task  | Responsible Party                 |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| <p><b>WHEN RULES CHANGE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the current physical distancing rules in place by the state of Maryland and other regulatory bodies.</li> <li>• Update the “COVID-19 Rules for Users of GSLC”.</li> </ul>   | Pastors and Worship Planning Team |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate the physical distancing rules in the worship signup email. General guidance:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If physical distancing is required OUTDOORS, then we use the 10-foot lines and require 6 feet of separation between households.</li> <li>○ If physical distancing is required INDOORS, then we use ushers to seat families in accordance with the 6-foot separations, and seating is done by alternate pews.</li> <li>○ Carpet squares are useful cues for physical separation for children during the Children’s Sermon but are not required.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | Pastors and Worship Planning Team |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If required to enforce indoor physical distancing regulations, ushers will seat each family, ensuring that selected seating is physically distanced from other worshippers.</li> </ul>  | Ushers                            |



## Things to Do to Enforce Other Health and Safety Rules

| Task  | Responsible Party      |
|---|------------------------|
| <p><b>WHEN RULES CHANGE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review, revise, and create signs for entrances that describe the current guidance for masks, physical separation, hand sanitizer use, and other health and safety guidelines.</li> <li>• Determine if St. Mary's Health Department guidelines permit food and drink to be served at fellowship, if held.</li> </ul>   | Facility Manager       |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open only the specific parts of the church required to support worship in the current Community Level.</li> <li>• Both restrooms in the hallway outside of the office will be available regardless of Community Level.</li> </ul>   | Facility Manager       |
| <p><b>FOR EACH SUNDAY WITH FELLOWSHIP:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If permitted by the health department:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If serving food, pre-packaged items are preferred. No self-service or open containers of food are permitted while the Community Level is at Medium or higher.</li> <li>○ The serving team will wear gloves while serving food and drink.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | Fellowship Coordinator |

## Rules for Worshippers

*Responsibility: All persons present at worship*

We wish to include the most people possible in our worship services each Sunday and we value in-person gatherings as a body of Christ. However, in a spirit of humility and to protect our congregation, guests, and community, no one will attend an event at GSLC if any of the following are true for themselves or anyone in their household:

1. They have been diagnosed with COVID-19 (or suspect a COVID-19 infection) and have not yet completed isolation\* or less than 2 weeks has passed since the cessation of symptoms.
  - a. ISOLATION starts at the commencement of COVID-19 symptoms (or, for asymptomatic cases, the time of the first positive COVID-19 test). Isolation, for GSLC worshippers, lasts a minimum of seven days. The isolation period may end when symptoms improve and at least 24 hours have passed without fever (without the use of fever-reducing medication).
2. They show any of the following symptoms associated with COVID-19 (and not explained by another reason): fever of 100.4 or greater, chills, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, unusual weakness or fatigue, loss of taste or smell.

Questions regarding these restrictions will be posted at every entrance to worship and upon sign-up for worship (whether inside or outside, if required). Worshippers are expected to leave immediately if any of the screening conditions are met.

In addition, should an individual be exposed to the COVID-19 virus but not yet display symptoms as referenced above, they are asked to wear a mask for the duration of their time at GSLC until 5 days have passed since their last exposure and they have received a negative COVID-19 test.

Worshippers are, as always, expected to comply with local regulations, which may include restrictions based on recent travel (see <http://www.smchd.org/coronavirus/> for St. Mary's County health department regulations and <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/> for State of Maryland regulations) or occupancy (total permitted number of worshippers).

When required based on the current Community Level, any of the following rules for worshippers may apply:

1. An optional temperature screening may be offered. If a person submits to an optional temperature screening and a fever of 100.4 degrees or greater is indicated, that person will be asked to leave the worship service.
2. Worshippers will comply with applicable mask rules as communicated by GSLC. Individuals will be encouraged to continue to wear masks at any time that masks are required or encouraged for anyone.
  - a. If required, worshippers over the age of 2 will wear an appropriate face covering (mask) that completely covers their nose and mouth while attending activities (including worship and fellowship) at GSLC. Masks may be removed briefly for communion, as needed for hydration, or when alone in a closed room.
3. If required, worshippers will maintain a 6-foot separation from worshippers outside of their family (or cohabiting group). Worshippers will refrain from physical contact with other worshippers outside of their family (or cohabiting group).
4. For worship in the sanctuary, worshippers may be asked to wait at a designated point to be assisted to seating by an usher, to effectively use the sanctuary space and to establish appropriate physical distancing as required. Worshippers will obey posted signs.
5. If required, all fellowship between persons not cohabitating must abide by any applicable physical distancing requirement.

We hope that worshippers will willingly follow these guidelines to promote the safety of our congregation and our community. If these guidelines cannot be followed by a worshipper, we offer the option to worship remotely via the internet live-stream.

## Rationale for a Pause in In-Person Worship

We hope and pray that COVID-19 transmission rates remain low and that in-person worship may continue unabated. However, medical experts indicate that despite current public health efforts, an increase in virus transmission cannot be ruled out and the possibility that in-person worship will become unsafe to the congregation.

The Church Council may pause in-person worship (either completely, or in a particular environment such as indoors), as warranted. The council will pause in-person worship when any of the following events occur:

1. **If we are directed to cease in-person worship by relevant authorities, or by the ELCA.** The council will consider how to respond to any recommendations (any statement that is not a requirement) from relevant authorities.
2. **If the council or pastors has reason to believe a COVID-19 exposure occurred during GSLC attendance.** In this case, the following steps will be taken:
  - a. The church will send an email to those that signed up to attend worship that week letting them know that someone who was present (not naming specifically who) has been diagnosed, using the email addresses provided as part of the sign-up process.
  - b. The Facility Manager will perform additional sanitization to the campus as needed.
  - c. In-person worship will pause for a minimum of 5 days from the date of the most-recent contact with GSLC. The Church Council may lengthen this pause if warranted by situations such as the characteristics of the currently circulating COVID-19 variant(s), if a particularly widespread outbreak is observed, etc.
  - d. If a congregant reports an exposure to a person with COVID-19 but has not yet tested positive for COVID-19, the council will consider whether continued in-person worship is warranted on a case-by-case basis.

If in-person worship is not possible, worship will be conducted via Zoom.

## Revision and Update Plan

*Responsibility: GSLC Church Council, Facility Manager*

1. This plan may be revised as necessary by the GSLC Church Council. Revisions are expected as the COVID-19 situation is rapidly changing and our knowledge of the virus is incomplete. Changes to the plan or plan cancellation will be communicated to the congregation for comment a minimum of seven days prior to implementation.
2. The Church Council, Facility Manager, and Pastors will attend to changes made by the CDC, Health Departments, and other reasonable entities to ensure the plan continues to adhere to state and local regulations, ELCA guidance, and is appropriate to the level of COVID-19 spread in the local community.
3. The plan may be canceled by the Church Council when the COVID-19 risk to the congregation is deemed to have been sufficiently abated.

## REVISION LOG

| Version | Released  | Notes   |
|---------|-----------|---|
| 1.0     | 7/24/2020 | Initial release.  |
| 1.1     | 8/23/2020 | Prohibitions on singing and unison speaking ("Arranging the Service", sect. 4; "Rules for Worshippers, prev. sect. 5) were removed.   |
| 2.0     | 9/17/2020 | Procedures for fellowship added (new sections "Facility Setup for Fellowship" and "Post-Worship Fellowship"; changed sections "Arranging the Worship", sect. 6; "Rules for Worshippers", sects. 3, 6; "Revision and Update Plan" sect. 2).<br>Communion using pre-packaged elements added ("Arranging the Service", sect. 5).<br>Updated allowable occupancy levels to include Maryland Phase 3 75% capacity limit ("Facility Setup for Worship: Indoor Worship", sect. 2).                 |
| 3.0     | 9/21/2020 | Added "Rationale for Pausing In-Person Worship".<br>Added occupancy limits as an additional limit ("Rules for Worshippers", sect. 1)<br>"Revision and Update Plan": Removed nursery/cry room from the list of deferred worship elements (we won't reintroduce this until after COVID-19 abates). Removed adult education from the list of deferred worship elements (covered by "Facility Setup for Other Activities").<br>Adjusted the Task Force membership.                              |
| 3.1     | 4/18/2021 | Updated limits for in-person worship. Corrected the sign-up schedule for Sunday worship to allow for reliable weather forecast decisions ("Arranging the Service", sections 1 and 2).<br>Adjusted the Task Force membership.  |
| 3.5     | 5/9/2021  | Adjusted section on mask mandate, as recommended by health officials, allowing for vaccinated individuals to unmask outdoors ("Rules for Worshippers", sections 3-5).   |
| 4.0     | 5/31/2021 | Complete rewrite.   |
| 5.0     | 1/28/2022 | Allows task force to assess exposure in context of current variant characteristics to determine whether in-person worship must be suspended (and if so, for how long).<br>Shutdown duration changed from fixed 14-day to minimum 5-day.<br>Masks now required when CDC rates St. Mary's County as community with "substantial" or "high" transmission.<br>Changes isolation from 14 days to (minimum of) 7 days. Changes quarantine for unvaccinated persons exposed to COVID-19 to 7 days. |

|       |           |   |
|-------|-----------|---|
| 5.5   | 3/11/2022 | <p>Allowance for reactive decision making by COVID-19 Task Force without immediate plan change.</p> <p>Updated to allow for physical aspects (rationale that COVID-19 does not travel well on surfaces).</p> <p>Rewrite of “Rules for Worshippers” to utilize CDC’s “Community Levels.”</p>   |
| 5.5.1 | 8/15/2022 | <p>Typo correction, general formatting.</p> <p>Removed team list &amp; added note regarding Church Council.</p>   |
| 6.0   | 8/31/2022 | <p>Reformatted document and added language regarding lasting impact of COVID-19.</p> <p>Removed references to “Task Force” with regards to decision making, replaced with Church Council.</p> <p>Removed the difference between vaccinated &amp; unvaccinated individuals with regards to exposure and worship attendance.</p> <p>Added restriction requiring masks if exposed to COVID-19.</p> <p>Change restrictions on Fellowship food &amp; drink while in “Yellow/Medium” Community Level from “No indoor food &amp; drink” to “No self-service food &amp; drink.”</p> |