

A Statement on COVID-19  
from the Leadership Team  
of Presbytery of Great Rivers  
May 19, 2020

We celebrate how seriously the community of churches of Presbytery of Great Rivers has practiced safe distancing and alternate means of ministry as we continue to endure this pandemic. That, at the time of this statement, we have had no reports of infections of the coronavirus within our congregations tells us that our combined efforts to limit the spread of the disease is working, and we see your diligence to boldly refuse to be transmission vectors for the disease for the sake of our communities. As we now cross the threshold of two months of sheltering in place, reopening has become a hot topic in our national dialogue. Let us remind ourselves in good faith that our operation is different than the many services at the center of our cultural debates, for our primary trade is not in goods and services, but rather in relationships and community. As such, churches have unique practices of proximity, sharing, and communicating that makes the easy transference of disease a much different challenge than other sectors.

While the decision on how, when, and where to conduct worship remains the faithful discernment of the local session, the Leadership Team of Great Rivers Presbytery encourages everyone to:

- Abide by the CDC's, the governor's, and local health department's orders and recommendations for in-person gatherings, as well as the guidance of your insurance company.
- Exemplify leadership in containing this disease to an anxious culture struggling to endure today's challenges.
- Articulate clear and (literally) healthy boundaries for ourselves and our elderly and vulnerable populations.
- Facilitate open, loving dialogue with employed staff and pastoral leaders that prioritizes their needs with compassion and safety. (While there are many who may welcome the opportunity to return to office spaces, remember too that we have many pastors and staff who are

susceptible to the disease that may not feel safe returning sooner than others).

- Center our theology of interconnection and community care, how we are ONE BODY with many parts, seeking to safeguard the health of the entire body.
- Exercise grace for each other and ourselves to adjust plans in response to changing circumstances, including changing our own minds when necessary, knowing that providing safe space for others to listen and to speak is at the heart of our theology of discernment.
- Encourage patience with and self-care for pastors and church leaders experiencing work fatigue (see 5/7/20 blog post by our Lead Presbyter on "[Top Ten Reasons Why Your Pastor Needs a Break](#)," and three minute pastoral video by our PC(USA) Stated Clerk on "[Practicing Self-Care during COVID-19](#)" posted to Spirit of GA on Facebook, 5/18/20).
- Be anchored in the Word of God and its responsible application, making space for healthy lament consistent with the Biblical tradition of the Wisdom Literature of Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations.
- Be affirmed that you have permission to continue suspending in-person gatherings; may we challenge ourselves to be blameless in our responsibility to each other.
- Continue being creative in making adaptive accommodations for the safe pursuit of God's mission in your context, centered in the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor. One does not need a church building in order to build the church!

Even as we face challenges we have never imagined, we trust the Scriptures that God is with us in exile and wilderness, in crucifixion and resurrection, in death and in life.

*"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another...Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in*

*showing honor."*  
*Romans 12:2a,5,10*

The Leadership Team of Great Rivers Presbytery:

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Elder Julio Garcia, First Presbyterian Church of Milan

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Rev. Maura McGrath Nagle, Moderator of Great Rivers Presbytery, Rio Presbyterian Church and Sunbeam Presbyterian Church

Elder Bill Strawbridge, Treasurer of Great Rivers Presbytery, Washington Presbyterian Church

Elder Gary Terpstra, Hope Presbyterian Church of Springfield

Rev. Ann Elyse Van Winkle, First Presbyterian Church of Galesburg

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