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August 27, 2021

Friends,

I'm writing to you from the OFC office after three weeks of driving west and back east, squeezing five children into small hotel rooms, seeing some of the most incredible natural wonders our country has to offer, eating more turkey and cheese sandwiches than I hope to ever eat again, and generally treasuring the chance to rejuvenate and focus on my relationship with Christ and with my family. Thank you for allowing the great blessing this sabbatical has been for us. I hope to be a better pastor because of it.

I'm very thankful for those who have stepped in to help in many ways while we have been gone. As I've been listening to our worship services on Sunday mornings, I've been praising God for members of our worship team, those who have helped organize and lead services, our guest speakers who have fearlessly preached the Word, and all the behind-the-scenes volunteers we have helping make sure we can join together in worship in person and from afar. I'm also thankful for those who have been helping with everything that happens here during the week – farmers' markets, prayer meetings, discipleship classes, keeping the building looking good, and much more. Thanks to all of you who make a difference at OFC. I know that our church was in very good hands while the Bohlers were away (some might even call it an improvement!).

I also wanted to let you know that, even from afar, I've been watching the COVID-19 numbers here in Delaware County rise. The Delta variant that is causing that rise is certainly a concern for us here at OFC. I know that many of you will have read the updated guidance from the [CDC and Delaware Public Health District](#) based on those numbers.

After meeting with our Elder Board last week to discuss where we are and where we go next, here are some things I'd like you to know:

First, a reminder of where we've been as a church: For much of the past year and a half, we asked that our congregation wear masks, social distance, and take other

appropriate measures to combat the spread of the virus. Through that time, our church has demonstrated a great deal of counter-cultural unity in its willingness to lay down our own personal desires and preferred responses to this pandemic for the sake of the Body of Christ. A few months ago, after seeing overall case numbers come down and vaccination rates increase within our congregation, we made it clear that we could exercise a greater degree of liberty in our approach to some of these restrictions.

The elders and I have determined that we will keep our recommendations as they are for now. Please continue to take precautions when it comes to social distancing before and after services, respect and allow masked seating areas for those desiring to have space during worship, and limit shared food and drinks. I will be wearing a mask when not on the platform this Sunday, not because I like masks, but because I want to take every step I can to keep the vulnerable safe and make the uncomfortable joy-filled to be in church with us.

Because this seems to be a delicate moment in this pandemic, the elders will begin to check in with each other weekly on restrictions currently in place and whether changes need to be made. Let's continue to be flexible and prepared to make adjustments because of the fluctuating nature of this situation.

I know that, because of the polarization that exists in our culture, it is guaranteed that some of you will disagree with my decisions and the decisions of our leaders both now and in the future when it comes to this pandemic. That's okay. I'm grateful that God has created us with different perspectives and ways of viewing the world around us. However, I will ask for grace for those taking into their hands the serious responsibility of leading our church through the initial COVID outbreak and everything that has followed. I have had the honor of getting to know each of our elders well since we've been serving together. I can tell you that every one of them has a heart for Jesus, and is seeking to lead the way He would have them lead. They deserve our gratitude for their willingness to steer us and keep us anchored to the Solid Rock through this storm.

One of my greatest blessings as your pastor since the beginning of this pandemic has been bearing witness to your care for each other – not because someone told you that you had to, but because of your love in Christ for your brothers and sisters. I'll ask that you would continue to make that love your highest priority in the weeks and months to come, especially for those who have a different perspective than you.

Our culture has drawn battle lines – liberals against conservatives, maskers against anti-maskers, those who believe in "safety" against those who believe in "liberty" –

and the Church is unfortunately not immune to those divisions. Thankfully, God's Word has something to speak into that milieu. Within a Church featuring vicious divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians, Paul gives a gentle reminder:

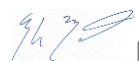
Remember at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations...Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:12-15a, 19-20).

I don't think there are more hope-filled words that have ever been written for our troubled times. Others may put up barriers and walls of division, but in the Church, we know something – Someone – better.

We know Someone who is greater than the Law, more important than our politics, and more powerful than the things that constantly consume our hearts and minds.

We know Jesus. And because we know Him, *we are fellow citizens with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone*. He is the foundation of our church, the reason for our love and concern for each other, destroyer of artificial barriers and the driving force behind our unity.

Let's continue to seek the worship of God and the good of His people. I'm so looking forward to seeing all of you again this Sunday.



Pastor Zach