

Throughout the history of the church, plagues, wars, and pandemics have forced the church to adjust their ministry practices for the health, safety, and good of others. Currently, we find ourselves in such a season. And it is truly a “season,” not a passing storm. But unlike a long New England winter where we at least know that it will end in March or April, we do not know how long this season will last. This calls for even more patience, camaraderie, and long-suffering from us all. In light of this, I want to touch on three important items in this extensive letter that I believe can help us to move forward with clarity and unity: The virus itself, our ministry approach, and some brief exhortations.

1. First, let me summarize two obvious things we have all witnessed about this virus:

Uncertainty: Because this Coronavirus is new (novel), even the most brilliant health experts around the world are still learning so much about its transmission and treatment. Right now, there are no obvious answers to questions about effective treatments and the availability of vaccines. This explains the varying and often contradictory opinions that we hear in the news. Even as clinical testing seems to bring us closer to a vaccine, we are still living with a high degree of uncertainty surrounding this virus.

Dangerous: The loss of life to date—US (Approx. 144,000), MA (Approx. 8,500), Essex County (Approx. 1,150)—as well as the health setbacks directly linked to this virus have been catastrophic. And we lament the fact that Black and Hispanic residents in Massachusetts have experienced a Coronavirus-positive case rate that is three times higher than White residents. The threat of this virus is not limited to the elderly or people with preconditions.

For example, just this past week, I got news of a dear member of my previous church, who is about my age and in good health. He contracted the virus and had to be rushed to the hospital because his fever and breathing conditions could not be treated at home. Thankfully, he is recovering well, but the toll this has taken on him and his family cannot be overstated. The strict precautions that many of our government and health officials have handed down since the beginning of this outbreak reflect the danger that this virus poses.

2. With these two things in mind, I want to update you about the ministry of our church during this trying and perplexing time:

This virus has tested the capacity of local churches around the world to minister beyond the four walls of a church building. And over the past several months, I believe our church, by God’s grace, has passed the test through our firm commitment to Christ and his ongoing work in and through us. Livestream services/concerts, Zoom meetings, and a drive-through VBS are models of ministry that we probably would never have imagined. As a family, we are amazed and blessed by the creativity, perseverance, and sacrificial service we have observed in just the first month of being with you. It is so encouraging to see that even in the midst of an

unprecedented pandemic, FCCH is abounding in the work of the Lord and we know our labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

The uncertainty and danger of the virus also explains why we have taken an incremental approach to reopening our ministry opportunities. We are very excited to move into our next stage of reconvening with an in-person “Prayer and Reflection” service (see registration link below) which will further prepare us to regather on Sunday mornings. Please know that in every step we take, we want to care for the physical and spiritual health of our church family along with maintaining our loving witness to a watching world.

3. Lastly, let me encourage our church body to continue to faithfully follow Jesus during this time.

In many ways, I/we can't wait for this to be over. We just want to get through it and return to normal as quickly and completely as possible. That is an understandable mindset. But we also want to be thinking about how we live “in” the pandemic and what we can learn “from” it. Let me exhort each of us to walk by faith and to walk in love.

Faith: What does faith look like in a time like this? I keep coming back to this question because “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6). Faith means trusting in God's care. More often than not, God uses ordinary means to provide His extraordinary care. Consequently, we don't throw caution to the wind and ignore the guidelines that are being recommended to us in the name of “faith.” As it says, “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord” (Prov. 21:31). I have faith in God when I drive on the road, but I also “ready my horse” when I buckle my seatbelt, check my tires, abide by the speed limit (okay...most of the time) and try to follow the various recommendations that are handed down to me for my own safety as well as the safety of others.

Faith means trusting in God's sovereignty. We should never walk in fear because we know that God is always with us in the valley (Psalm 23:4) and is using all things—even the Coronavirus—for the good of His people (Rom.8:28). Even in the midst of great loss, we can expect to see several redemptive upturns because of this.

Faith means trusting in God's sufficiency. As Christians, we don't need our circumstances to change in order to be a joyful bunch. God is our “glory and the lifter of our heads” (Ps. 3:3). Knowing God's unchangeable love is what enables us to lift up our heads and have a song, not just in the light, but in the night. Certainly, this pandemic will make a strong impression on our children and non-Christian friends. May we communicate a strong faith in God and love for neighbor.

Love: What does love look like in a time like this? This is another key question that we must continue to ask ourselves. Love means being patient with the process and with one another. Each one of us looks at this virus and the various responses to it in different ways. Some people are by nature quite risk averse. Others, by nature have a higher tolerance for risk. In a time of

uncertainty, and difference of opinion, we could quickly and easily begin to label someone who advocates a different approach from ours as “fearful” or as “foolish.” Let’s avoid these labels and seek to listen and respect the opinions and views of others.

Love also means praying for our civic authorities, medical professionals, schoolteachers, business and church leaders, and needless to say for non-Christians who need the love and grace of Jesus. Like Jesus, let us go about our days doing good and seeking to be a healing presence to all those we meet (Acts 10:38).

I leave you with a verse that has comforted and strengthened me in this foggy and arduous season – “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You” (2 Chron. 20:12).

Looking to Jesus with you!

Pastor Jeremy