**Elder Update on September 6, 2020**

**Mike Willoughby**

 Good morning, church! It is such a blessing to begin the month of September worshipping together. Whether we are gathered together virtually or physically, we are gathered together in Spirit and in truth. To God be the glory for his providence and protection during these trying times.

 We also give God the glory for the many positive things going on within our congregation. I will only touch on a few of those items this morning, but God’s blessings are many. Last weekend, almost 200 of our members participated in 24 hours of prayer. It was a powerful experience for those who participated, and God has already acted on some of the requests and we know he heard each of our many petitions. The list of prayer requests included submissions from members of our church family and from many people outside our congregation. In order to extend the opportunity for continued prayer beyond that 24-hour period and those 200 individuals, the list has been made available to you via the recent Connections emails.

 We also continue to be encouraged by the opportunities to gather together physically for worship at our outdoor worship service – weather permitting of course! We had an excellent turn out for the first two events with about 275 people at the first service and over 280 at the second one. We have also added a Wednesday evening outdoor class for our youth group, and we were thrilled to have over 60 students at the event on August 26th and over 45 at the most recent class on September 2nd.

 We continue to proceed with prudence evaluating options to add more opportunities for physical gatherings at the building and we have decided to tentatively plan for the resumption of our Preschool program in the month of October with about 60 students already enrolled for the Monday and Wednesday sessions. As you might imagine, significant work is going into the planning process to work to keep all participants as safe as possible.

 We look forward to learning from the planning process and the operation of the program as we evaluate other events, classes and services at the building. We should also remind you that conditions could change in way that would alter our plans to resume the Preschool program in October. This is the unfortunate “COVID caveat” that accompanies many of our plans at this time. If you are interested in more information about the Preschool program, please contact Kathy Aljian.

 With the success of our outdoor worship service, we are also planning for resumption of indoor worship services with significant limitations in place to try to keep all participants as safe as possible while also creating a good worship experience. With that in mind, we will be sending out a short survey this week to help us with our planning process. Look for that survey in your email inbox and please take a few minutes to respond. Your input is invaluable to our planning process. The survey results will help us target an appropriate start date and also make the appropriate plans for that first service.

 Our plans for future activities including future indoor services and the resumption of the preschool program depend on the evolving COVID-19 situation and a consistent and substantial downward trend in area cases and hospitalizations. Consistent with our last announcement, reported COVID data has continued to be difficult to accurately interpret and efforts are under way to address that. As best we can determine, it appears Dallas County remains in a flat or plateaued phase without substantial increase in hospitalizations. The data from Collin County is more challenging to interpret, but it appears that hospitalizations have not significantly increased.

 Of course, on-line school has begun for many local school districts with many now holding in-person classes. As schools look towards the rest of September, many districts will be reporting on their COVID-19 cases, so we’ll need to follow that data closely.

 In the meantime, we will continue to hold our outdoor Sunday morning service and youth Wednesday evening outdoor class while we plan for further re-opening contingent upon improvements in the COVID-19 situation. We advise everyone to continue taking the recommended precautions to do our part to create that consistent and substantial downward trend in our area.

 Despite the trying times, we have been very blessed by all of the recent happenings. Let us now go to our Father and thank Him for His wonderful love for us and for how He continues to walk with us through difficult times.

 Please pray with me father we are so thankful for the love that you have for us. We feel it in your protection for us. We feel your presence in our lives and with our church family. Father help us to show that same love for those around us. Help us to be your presence in this world to provide comfort and love. Father we also thank you for your protection of us. We feel your protection at this time. Help us to also seek the protection of others by making good choices in the way that we live out our lives and by doing our best to not only look after our own self-interest and safety but look after the self-interest and safety of others. Father we're so thankful for your guidance at this time. Guidance that we find in your word. The guidance that we feel through prayer. And father at this time we pray for not only your guidance but an extra measure of wisdom as we make difficult decisions. Difficult decisions as a church family and difficult decisions as individual families or individual members of this church family. And father at this time as we all face these kinds of difficult decisions, we just ask for an extra measure of wisdom and an extra measure of your spirit. Father we thank you for bringing us together today whether that's virtually or in a physical worship service. We ask you to continue to bless us with opportunities to be together. The father this morning I'm even more thankful for the way you bring us together as a church family, in unity within your spirit. And we know father that's because of your son, Jesus Christ, that we have that opportunity to live together as family within this community. And we also have the opportunity to live as family with you for eternity. Father we so much look forward to that day. If it be your will, we ask you to send your son quickly, but until that time we wait patiently for that day. And we offer this prayer in your son's name, amen.