**Transcript of Pastor Michael’s Pandemic Update for July 2021**

Thanks for joining me for another pandemic update. There is a lot to consider. And there is nothing easy about decision-making right now. So, with this update, I want to make a few points that you’ve probably heard, and then add some perspective that I hope will be helpful.

Here’s the first point. Covid infections are increasing once again, and we need to be concerned. The anxiety level among us is high. It is also true that vaccines make all the difference. There are virtually no major illnesses or deaths due to this virus among the vaccinated. On the primary site that we use to monitor risk levels, we read this qualification: “Risk is reduced for those vaccinated.” In other words, a red-level risk is for the unvaccinated at this point. Our governor made this point with a red marker during a recent report.

So, here’s the next point. Low vaccination rates are concerning. This reality is keeping all of us in the midst of a pandemic. And yet, here’s some good news about vaccination rates that we don’t seem to hear. In every state, including ours, 75 percent of those age 65 and older have been vaccinated. Those who are most at risk are protected at a much higher level than before. This is good news that can perhaps lower our anxiety.

Next, “breakthrough infections” can occur, meaning that a vaccinated person can get the virus and possibly transmit it. We are seeing headlines meant to induce fear around this possibility. And yet, according to Dr. Fauci and the CDC, in such cases the amount of virus is significantly lower, thus making it less likely to be transmitted to others. This is good news.

Here’s the next big fact. Children under age 12 cannot yet be vaccinated and are vulnerable. Children are getting the virus. The deeper perspective is that children are at a much lower risk level for both illness and death. In Arkansas, for example, among the almost 6,000 deaths where Covid is listed as a cause, there have been no deaths of anyone under age 17. Nationally, less than one tenth of one percent of all deaths comes from this age group, mostly with other conditions as a factor. And still, because of so many unknowns, we want to be vigilant in providing a safe place for all, especially for our children who cannot yet receive this level of protection.

So, here’s the bottom line in terms of protocols. We are not going to suspend in-person worship right now. We will certainly continue to provide our online service as well. Following CDC guidelines, masks are not required for those who are vaccinated – yet as cases increase, in all age groups, I want to add that masks are encouraged, especially as we move from place to place and encounter people directly. We also trust that people who are not vaccinated will wear masks as well – including children. Next, physical distancing of at least 3 feet is also encouraged. And of course, we will continue to keep the buildings sanitized, and will continue to use our new HEPA air purifiers in all rooms. By doing these things we are practicing the call to love one another well.

And that leads me to one more point. We hear a lot about the risks associated with the virus. Here is one more risk -- the risk associated with not being able to gather and cultivate the blessing of living from an eternal perspective rooted in God’s love. Embracing this risk truly enables us to thrive in a world where living is risky, and nothing is permanent, where faith is a key to living fully. I encourage you to make worship and discipleship a part of your commitment – in person and online. Worship is so important for our wellbeing – in mind, body, and spirit.

As we continue to navigate a pandemic, may God be with us and may we all grow in our trust that God will see us through. Friends, until we are able to gather again – in person or online, many blessings.

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And to conclude I want to offer this story, which may serve as a parable for us. The other day a person doing some repair work at a home explained why he wasn’t wearing a mask and wasn’t vaccinated. It was because he was a Christian. In pushing this just a bit, I learned that it was not because he thought God would protect him as much as it was a sense of eternal assurance. His life was in God’s hand. He knew where he was going. So, he didn’t need to be worried. At one level, this is admirable. I hope that all of us can have that kind of peace and assurance about the state of our relationship with God. But there is another dimension to our salvation that is missing here. The fruit of God’s love planted here is made evident in our desire to love others. We can think of the cross – with the vertical dimension being about our personal relationship with God. And this leads to the horizontal dimension which can symbolize our relationship with one another. We need both to be whole – to be faithfulness, to bear good fruit in the world.