

## Summary of June 2021 Focus Groups

Church Family,

I want to thank the 18 members of Cornerstone Church who provided feedback during the Covid-19 Pandemic Focus Groups hosted June 1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup>. Below is my attempt to summarize the discoveries and discussions that transpired during our times together. This *is not* a complete summation of all opinions held by our church family throughout the pandemic. It *is* a helpful snapshot of older and younger, married and single saints who walked with God and our church family these past 16 months.

Individuals and households had a variety of experiences. For some, the isolation was devastating, particularly for those in the midst of sickness, suffering, and death. Others appreciated the lighter calendar and chance to work from home (especially the families of young children). Those who stayed connected to their small group valued having Christian community. Those new to our church found it challenging to get to know people and to stay in the know with the quickly changing landscape. Some in our church faced economic challenges because of the lockdown as well as forced layoffs or part-time schedules. For most, navigating extended family opinions, holidays and birthdays caused turmoil, anxiety, and disunity. Many carry regrets that they didn't reach out to more neighbors and fellow church members. Others lament they spent too much time on the internet and television. Surprisingly for most, the *derecho* provided needed relief from the pandemic to serve neighbors and one another.

On the greater church front, nearly everyone expressed a strong appreciation that the church leaders listened and weighed the contrasting viewpoints among the church family. Some of the church leaders articulated their own discouragement in having so many Covid-19 conversations and meetings. "Decision fatigue" set in early. So too, leaders were discouraged that some people would not express their opinions to the church family. But online or among friends these same people would grumble, disengage from the Christian community, or some even leave the church amid the pandemic. On one hand, many thanked the church for communicating as much as they did and as quickly as they did (videos, newsletter, etc.). A few said they felt in the dark on different occasions, especially when they were serving in volunteer ministry positions.

People thanked the church for developing an online service as soon as they did. One woman expressed her thanks for those willing to come in and put the online service together long before we knew just how serious Covid-19 might be. Some uttered discouragement that more people and the church as a whole didn't wear or require masks. Others expressed frustration that the church made any decisions at all related to masks. One person provided a helpful summary remark, "the level of grace seemed surprisingly thin on the differing perspectives throughout the pandemic." Still others were so thankful for being served by the church after the *derecho*, after the arrival of new babies, and in the final days and weeks of loved ones.

Regarding Cornerstone's future, there was a common desire that civility, listening, and compassion for one another would guide us through any future challenges. Several focus group members declared, "Never close the church doors again." So too, there was a common sentiment that we hope outside political opinions play in much less than clear Biblical teaching. Many hoped that we would do better at engaging in dialogue with people from different tribes. A few expressed a desire for the leaders to be the gatekeepers for civility in order to protect the greater church body from aggressive opinions and strong personalities.

As I close this summary, let me speak a pastoral word. If you sinned against a brother or sister in thought or attitude, go to the LORD and seek His forgiveness. If you sinned against a brother or sister in word or deed, go and seek their forgiveness. I suspect we have a few relationships that still need mending. The pressure of the pandemic brought out the best and the worst in us. Praise God for the best; praise God for His grace amid our worst. Still, it behooves us to make right where we went wrong. We will be stronger with reconciled relationships. If a brother or sister sinned against you, would you approach them gently for restoration? God will be pleased; our body will be holier and healthier.

Brothers and sisters, to close, I ask your forgiveness. I did not pray enough for you this past year. I often hid from challenges and avoided tough people. I was too long on the internet and too little in my prayer closet. I could have done better; I should have done better. I ask your grace; I covet your forgiveness.

John Newton captures my angst and my hope: "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am"

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Matt