



10 November 2020

Dear OCCers,

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers,  
nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.*

**Romans 8:37-39**

After several difficult months, it looks like we are going to be facing a challenging winter. Many of the measurements for COVID-19 are moving in the wrong direction. There are more restrictions, more challenges to our health, more threats to our economy and way of life, and more challenges for Orillia and OCC. At the same time:

- we thank God for the ministry of so many who have worked to sustain worship gatherings, both on-line and now back in our building;
- we thank God for the love and care extended out to the community, in partnership with many others through different ministries; and,
- we thank God for our schools and chaplains in every place which are channels of God's grace.

Over the last number of months we have been reminded of the need for grace and imagination. And while we have seen creativity and renewal, there seems to be a tiredness or weariness creeping in. As the announcements of the last few weeks foreshadow more difficulties, we ask:

- How do we live well as Christians, as disciples, as followers of Jesus, in these times?

We want to shepherd all who are part of OCC safely through these COVID-19 days, and we also want to extend love and care to our neighbours, here in Orillia and area, as well as overseas, in what is sure to be months of acute spiritual, physical and social need. We want to be the Body of Christ in the world. This is the call of every disciple to everyday faith.

These COVID-19 days are wearing us down. Many are weary. We would like to pretend this was all over and wish that that would get rid of this virus with all its restrictions and relearning and physical distancing. The truth is – it is not going away soon. This is going to be a hard winter for many.

Let me suggest that we set ourselves a focus, a goal, on this journey, set ourselves a purpose. In Philippians 3 Paul talks about his faith in Christ. He reminds us that he was an arrogant, religious person who thought he had it all together but then he threw all of his self righteousness out and gave in to the grace of a loving God. The work of Jesus brought him a righteousness that his own work at keeping the law couldn't compete with. From there, Paul says that he hasn't obtained perfection but presses on towards the prize to which God calls us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

So... what if?

- What if for the next six months we set ourselves a spiritual purpose?
- What if we give ourselves some direction of spiritual formation to concentrate our minds, heart and souls during **these next 6 months towards Easter?**

**Six months is the new horizon**

We need a horizon for our hope and for our lives. I want to suggest that we set that horizon on Easter, not Christmas. The spring will likely bring better news after a difficult winter. We know that our journey through COVID-19 will be a marathon, not a sprint.

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**ORILLIA COMMUNITY CHURCH**

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Within this six month horizon, we will lean back into the great themes of the church year.

- In **November**, we dwell deeply on the themes of remembrance, grief, human mortality and the hope of resurrection.
- In **December**, we celebrate God's kingdom of justice and peace and the coming of Jesus. We will mark his coming at Christmas in a different way but with creativity and joy.
- In **January**, we will dwell on Christ the light shining in the darkness and never overwhelmed.
- In **February**, we will celebrate the gift of daily renewal in everyday faith.
- In **March**, we look forward to Easter, remembering our salvation, and looking forward to resurrection.
- In **April**, we look forward to spring, celebrate the beauty of creation and remember our responsibilities to care for the earth as we learn to practice resurrection.

Our focused worship, both on-line and in-person, will be vital for OCC and for our city in this time.

### **Six days to work and a Sabbath to rest**

This will continue to be a demanding season. It is vital to watch over ourselves and to rest. Make sure you plan a Sabbath, a rest and restoring day, and keep it. Rediscover the gift of one day each week for re-creation, not just work and chores. Plan it well. Eat well. Exercise. Care for yourself.

Days off and holidays will be vital for our OCC staff but also vital for all who serve and are working hard with dedication and skill. Please ensure you encourage one another. Spread the load wherever you can. We all need to set a pace which will be sustainable.

### **Six people to journey with**

The early church began with a small group of disciples. This is a time for all of us to rediscover Church as a small group of people who

- support one another;
- pray for one another;
- care for each other;
- serve together; and,
- explore everyday faith together.

We all need a group we can pray for and with regularly; who we can encourage in the Word, and grow together in living out faith; a small group of people you can call, text, email, facebook message, do driveway visits with, and connect via platforms like zoom, skype, or facetime, making sure they are doing OK in all the areas of life in this time of COVID-19 restrictions. Maybe you can help with shopping and other errands.

Many seasons of renewal in the church have begun with the renewal of small communities:

- think of the early churches in the book of Acts;
- the early Franciscans;
- the classes and bands of early Methodism;
- or the underground churches behind the Iron Curtain or in China.

Let me encourage you to read the scripture regularly and systematically. During November we are reading the Gospel of John together. Follow along on [occweb.org](http://occweb.org). Let me encourage you to get connected on-line with one of our LIFEGroups, or gather a group of friends.

### **Six ways to be salt and light**

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This will be a demanding winter for the city we serve in so many ways. It's a good time to ask one another, who are the people and organisations we are supporting in the wider community?

- What plans will be needed to strengthen foodbanks [Sharing Place, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul], and the shelters [Greenhaven, Lighthouse] and other organizations that support and encourage people? Watch for some ways you can be involved with donating and serving this fall and winter.
- How will you connect with and serve those who will feel isolated over Christmas?
- How can you encourage and support schools and teachers and health care workers?
- Who is on the margins, who has slipped away and who is in danger of being forgotten?
- Let's not forget our brothers and sisters overseas, many of whom are struggling even more than we are.

This is a season to remember that we as OCC and as individuals need to be salt and light and to bring courage to others.

### **Six people to pray for**

All around us, people are searching for faith and meaning in these times. As Christians we must not be silent witnesses to the wonders of our faith when there is so much strength and healing in the Jesus way.

- Are there two or three or six people you can pray for, invite into community and encourage to discover more of Christian faith during this season?
- Can you accompany them to an on-line Alpha group?
- We want to be creative in finding ways of teaching and sharing faith online over these next six months and see what God will do.

And finally...

This is God's Church and God's mission. The final responsibility does not rest with us. But daily, we offer what we can – like the child bringing five loaves and two fish to Jesus – and we discover that God takes this and uses it to make an immense difference to the lives of those around us.

So, let us continue in this uncertain season. Let us press on towards a goal. Six may indeed turn out to be a rich number. The sign of completeness in the scriptures is seven. And so, by the grace of God, while we do all we can to make the most of these days, let us remember that our ultimate hope and assurance is in the God who will one day bring all things to completion, in Christ who is the beginning and the end.

Together we are called to be a more Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world: contemplative, compassionate and courageous. It is such a privilege and joy to serve with you in this season. May God bless each of us richly in the months ahead.

In Christ,

Michael Bells

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