

## *A Letter to the Congregation from Patrick Lafferty*

When I introduced myself to the woman who would later become my wife (a story I look forward to telling you), it took everything in me not to stammer. I knew only a little about her, but I knew enough to want to get my first words properly across.

In my first words to you as your lead pastor I'm feeling something of the same apprehension!

You'll be hearing enough from me in due course, so let me keep this short.

I want to tell you first how joyous we are at the thought of coming to shepherd and serve alongside you. We know you've been in a long season of waiting and wondering (and praying), but part of what has endeared you to us has been your faithfulness in that season—and how you've been faithfully led by the session, and Brian, and the whole staff. So we hold with proper reverence the ministry of Grace Mills River, both in this most recent stretch and in its “long obedience in the same direction.” You have manifested a habit of holy risk for twenty-five years.

With that history firmly in mind, my desire is to put myself into the slipstream of the work the Spirit's been doing through you all this time, and then, where I'm led, add whatever unique voice and effort that I can. Therefore in this early season of my shepherding there I see mine as a simple three-fold mandate: to listen, to learn, and to love. I'd like to share more about my sojourn; I hope you'll be willing to share with me parts of yours. As we learn from one another, I think we'll discover what we might next do together for the sake of the Kingdom.

I also write to thank you. I know we've only just met, and our face-to-face encounters have been substantive but brief. But let me express our unqualified gratitude for how welcoming—how kind—you've been to my family and me already. Any apprehensions we've had at the prospect of entering a new life have been swallowed up by your abundant warmth and disarming candor. (And to those of you who came out to witness my examination last week, I don't think I've experienced a more gratifying moment in a presbytery meeting—thank you for your palpably encouraging presence!)

Lastly, I write with a request. We hope to see you soon—by early to mid-September. Until then, as we pack our things, say our goodbyes, visit our favorite honky-tonk one last time, and moreover give thanks for the manifold blessings we've been privileged to experience here in Texas, I'd ask your prayers--in particular for our children. You have already given them several reasons to look forward to returning, but in this moment they are learning to trust their parents, they are at the same time learning to trust the Lord's ability to bring good things out of new and unfamiliar circumstances.

So much for being brief. Let me end this with a moment from literature both dear to me and, I think, applicable to the life of faith.

When the Council of Elrond in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* starts to get sideways with each other over how best to see the One Ring destroyed, the little hobbit Frodo silences the lot of them with his brave and naïve utterance, “I will take the ring, though I do not know the way.” He knew what must be done. He just didn't know how. In that he was not alone, which is why the Council began shouting at each other (thus establishing an early precursor to session meetings). But in expressing what he was willing to do, he was also making an implicit appeal—a plea regarding who might accompany him in that momentous task.

The apostle Paul makes plain the mandate of those who've been captivated by the Gospel of grace, forgiveness, and renewal: “to live for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

So what we're to do is clear. How precisely we will in the season ahead remains to be seen. That we will be in fellowship together for its sake, though, is for me a most encouraging thought.

See you soon,

Patrick