

The Way Things Look From Here "A Discernment Process About Same-Gender Weddings"

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This is the fourth in a series of five weekly articles leading up to our annual meeting on February 8. We're in a discernment process about same-gender weddings. In August of 2009 the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American (ELCA) opened the door to the blessing of same-gender unions. This was not a requirement, of course. Each congregation would have to decide its own particular practice. Over the past five years, some of the congregations in the ELCA have said *yes*, some have said *no*, and many have said *wait*.

The decision about same-gender weddings is difficult for any congregation, and we are no exception. People approach the matter from a variety of perspectives. Life experiences and relationships shape us. Church backgrounds and teachings form our thoughts. We try to be faithful to Scripture, but yet end up interpreting it in different ways. In the process, good people end up on different sides of the fence.

Let me remind you of something I've said before: **Whether or not to do same gender weddings is *not* a central matter of our faith.** That doesn't mean it's unimportant; people care deeply about this issue. What it does mean is that **our lives are centered first and foremost in our common faith in Jesus Christ and in our common mission to share Christ with the world.** To put it another way: Our unity is in Christ and not in whether we happen to think alike about a particular social issue.

This is a crucial point. The church is always in danger of being pulled apart by social issues –everything from war, to abortion, to race relations. When we're in the middle of one of these issues, it tends to get magnified many times over. We have trouble remembering that our unity is in Christ and not in our like-mindedness.

As we engage in this process at Zumbro, it is important to affirm our unity, even as we head out on a "venture of which we cannot see the ending." If we were to do a quick survey of ELCA congregations concerning same-gender marriage, we would find a wide variety of efforts to come to a decision: 1) *some choose not to deal with the issue at all*, tacitly agreeing to disagree; 2) *some leave it up to the pastors to make the decision*; the thinking is that in pastoral care situations, congregations generally don't tell a pastor whom to marry; 3) *some take a congregational vote*; and finally, 4) *some entrust the decision to the church council*.

Certainly there are many factors involved in making the decision: church size, organizational structure, the degree of conflict over the issue. In Zumbro's case, I would suggest a combination of numbers 3 and 4 above. My thinking is this: Congregational votes on social issues, while potentially satisfying for some, tend to create "winners" and "losers"; we need to avoid them if at all possible. In place of a congregational vote, the church council could work to gather widespread input from the congregation and then consider the information at a later time.

You may recall that this was the process we used at last year's annual meeting. We were considering Zumbro's proposed welcome statement. At the beginning of the discussion, the congregation voted to entrust the decision to the church council. Then we engaged in a respectful and spirited conversation about the welcome statement. Finally, we participated in a non-binding spectrum ballot. At a later date, the church council – after much conversation and prayer – made the decision to affirm the welcome statement and become a Reconciling in Christ congregation.

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There is at least one additional reason to consider a non-binding spectrum ballot as part our discernment. That is, this process simply won't work if we were to take a congregational vote and have it pass by – say – a 51-49% margin. As I see it, **we need some sort of significant majority to go forward**. What do I mean by that? Clearly 60% is better than 51%. 70% is better than 60%. Beyond a simple percentage, the council might consider how many *dark greens* were checked, how many *dark reds*, and how many people were in the middle? Still further, the council would want to explore: Who came to the meeting, and what was the tenor of the conversation? At its core, this decision-making process is not about one side getting its way. It's about trying to discern what is best for the congregation at this point in time.

This brings me to one final thought: Many at Zumbro are ready for some sort of decision to be made about same-gender weddings. People have been waiting a long time. While we wait just a little longer, I **pray for God to guide us, and for a spirit of unity to be at the center of our efforts. I also pray for God to make our next steps as clear as possible, because I know how hard it would be to go forward without clarity and direction.**

I invite you to join me in praying for this important work of discernment. Come to the meetings. Participate in the conversations. Build bridges with members of our own church family. And trust that God will be with us every step of the way.

Upcoming article in *The Way Things Look from Here*:

February 1 – What the Bible Has to Say about Homosexuality