

The Way Things Look From Here "Following Up on the Annual Meeting "

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February 15, 2015

Pastor Vern Christopherson

We had our annual meeting on Sunday, Feb. 8. The main item on the agenda was a conversation about whether or not to do same-gender weddings at Zumbro. Despite the icy conditions, a large crowd turned out for the meeting. From my vantage point, people came with a mixture of interest and concern over possible next steps for Zumbro.

The conversation was deeply emotional. People chose their words carefully. Some were grateful that we were finally having this conversation. Some were concerned that we weren't being true to scripture. Some talked openly about gay family members and whether our circle was wide enough to include them. Some were worried that the church is mirroring the culture, and not necessarily in a good way. Some were grateful for the welcoming place that Zumbro has been in a wide variety of ways over the years. And finally, some were anxious about the unity of our church and were hoping this issue would not divide us.

This brief summary can't possibly do justice to the complexities and depth of the conversation. After it was over, I told the congregation that I was proud of them for the way they expressed themselves, and also for the way they listened. There were times when we openly disagreed with each other, but it felt like we were disagreeing in love, and with a good deal of concern for the thoughts and feelings of others. I shared that I had heard plenty of horror stories from other congregations who've been working on this issue, and in those stories, the conversations often ended badly.

I'm sure this comes as no surprise, but we at Zumbro are not of one mind on this issue. We weren't of one mind before the meeting and we weren't afterward. The various comments helped us to see that we come at this from a variety of perspectives. Some start and end with the Bible. Others are thinking of a gay family member. Still others are mindful of a time when they felt excluded and thus are determined to welcome everyone.

What do we do about these differences? It would be easy to pretend they don't exist—better to keep our mouths shut than create a stir. Still, deep down we know that our differences are real and sometimes painful. Even though it can be difficult for us to talk about them, I think it's important to try. When you think about it, almost nowhere in our culture—politics, media, work, even our families—are we able to engage in frank and open dialog with each other, and especially with those who think differently. Call me naïve, but I'd like to believe that we in the church can regularly practice civil discourse and, in the process, we can learn how to agree—and disagree—in love.

At the end of the conversation, we further expressed our opinions through a non-binding spectrum ballot. Just to reiterate, we used a spectrum ballot because a yes-no vote tends to be divisive, creating winners and losers. On top of that, we said that we needed some sort of "significant majority" in this balloting process if we were going to be able to move forward. When the ballots were tallied, 146 people said they were "strongly in favor" of having same-gender weddings at Zumbro; 34 were "generally in favor"; 11 were "neutral or undecided"; 22 were "generally not in favor"; and 31 were "strongly not in favor."

So where do we go from here? The decision is now in the hands of the church council. The council has scheduled **Listening Posts for Thursday, Mar. 5, at 9:30am and 6:30pm**. Your participation is encouraged and welcomed. There is room for your voice. If you can't make it to one of the Listening Posts,

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you are invited to send an email to council president Mark Larson at larson.mark2@mayo.edu or to Pastor Vern at pastorvern@zumbrolutheran.org. The council plans to explore the topic further at its March meeting. Please pray for them as they seek to discern next steps for Zumbro.

As the annual meeting came to a close, I echoed the thoughts of those who were concerned about church unity. I hadn't expected us to come to a complete agreement on this issue, but I did hope we could act like the body of Christ. And that is what we did. As I understand the church, there is room for honest and heartfelt disagreement about this or any number of issues. Unity in the church comes from our commitment to Christ and from Christ alone.

In the Gospel of John, on the night when he's betrayed, Jesus prays for his disciples *to be one*. Is Jesus expecting them always to think alike or act alike? I doubt it. The oneness about which he prays has everything to do with them being sent into the world in witness to Christ's love. It's about mission. It's about going forth in Jesus' name and being the church he calls them to be.

That is the task—and the challenge—facing Zumbro at this point in time: to focus on that which unites us and not on that which divides us. We have our mission. Indeed, we are called to go out into the world *to build bridges of understanding and peace*.