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On Our Discernment: A Pastoral Letter

Since 1876, this congregation has seen wars and storms, societal changes and cultural revolutions. Together, for 147 years, we have prayerfully fought bouts of cancer, we have comforted each other when one mourns the death of a loved one, we have celebrated anniversaries and graduations, and we have rejoiced with every baptism. Through it all, we've worshipped together, served our community together, studied scripture together, sung hymns and praise songs together, and regularly come to the Lord's Table, together.

Entering this discernment time exposes our differences of opinion regarding human sexuality, the challenging witness of the lives of gay and lesbian persons, and the church's ministries of marriage and ordained leadership.

Our discernment is about whether our beliefs about same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian persons serving as clergy are "essential" or "non-essential." Is this something in which we must all unanimously believe, or can we continue with one heart, as the church, while allowing differences of opinion on this as a non-essential?

Since the time of John Wesley, Methodists have understood that there are "essentials," upon which unity was necessary, and there are "non-essentials" or "opinions," upon which disagreement was allowed. Professing Jesus Christ as our Savior is an essential. The divinity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the trinitarian Godhead, and Scripture containing all things necessary to salvation are all essentials of doctrine. John Wesley knew about the essentials and non-essentials. In his sermon on "Catholic Spirit," he said, "'If thine heart is as my heart,' if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: 'give me thine hand.'"

We already worship, serve, and grow together at La Vernia UMC while holding different opinions. Our congregation includes people who support these changes and people who do not. While it is true that the United Methodist Church may very well adopt policies next year that allow for same-sex marriage and for gay and lesbian persons to serve as clergy, the decision before us is whether we remain at the table together as a congregation, allowing for each other's opinions.

As your pastor, I love and care about you, whatever your opinions. I also care about this congregation's witness for Christ and effective ministry in our community. How we love each other during our discernment affects our ability to do ministry together, now and in the future. For example, the uncertainty of our discernment has already caused the postponement of building a new building for Twice Blest. Without recognizing the importance of the ministry we do together, learning and growing together despite our opinions, I fear that we will divide ourselves into two tribes, each one lacking in effectiveness for the kingdom of God.

Therefore, let us bear with one another in love and with all who profess Christ as Savior and Lord.

Yours in the Body of Christ,

Pastor Michael