

May 17, 2016

We officially began our Marriage Conversation on April 12, with these words addressed to the congregation: *One of the comments regularly voiced about why people love Mt. Bethel is, "We are a family."* Since October 2014, following more than a year of periodic conversation and thought about our denomination's decision permitting local congregations to choose whether or not to allow weddings of two people of any gender, listening to voices from the congregation, and prayer, your session invited the Mt. Bethel family to participate in a time of prayer, learning and discernment together.

On our website and in printed materials compiled into handbooks located in the office, your session listed resources that we had studied. We invited and encouraged every member to write the session, sharing your thoughts for session's consideration. Session is so very thankful to each of you who took the time to share, which has greatly helped in the discernment process.

On May 7, we held a combined officers' retreat, as your session believed it important to hear from the deacons who are charged with the care and feeding of the congregation. It was a morning of sharing stories from the lives of your elected leaders, and how these stories impacted their lives, the lives of their family, and their personal and theological views. Session is grateful to work alongside a deeply caring and compassionate group of deacons, who love God and neighbor.

Along the way, session reminded you that our Wedding Policy only allows weddings of Mt. Bethel members, their families, children and grandchildren, and that this decision would not change that part of our policy. Marriage of two people in our sanctuary would only pertain to the members, adults, youth, and children that we have baptized and nurtured here, or their family members.

On May 17 at our regular meeting, session approved the following motion:  
The Session approves the use of Mt. Bethel's facilities for weddings of two people of any gender, using the guidelines established in our church's Wedding Policy.

Just one example of the Holy Spirit's presence throughout session's discernment is the love and respect that we continued to have for one another, even in disagreement. Session's decision was not unanimous, but our prayers afterward for each other and for you, our congregation, were as compassionate, loving, and harmonious as ever. We understand that even in the closest of families like our congregation, we will never be uniform in all of our beliefs and understandings. And that, we believe, is a very good thing, a blessing from God, and one way that we learn and grow from each other.

As we closed our meeting, here are a few of the phrases offered up in prayer by your elders:

"Living in harmony, still one family, agreeing to disagree"

“Given that this decision was a majority, but not unanimous, I hope that our congregation will deal with this in the same way we have, as a session together.”

“I had tremendous regard for you all at the beginning of this discernment process, and I still do....I love and respect each of you.”

“I hope we stay together as a church, continue to grow with each other, getting to know people better, and bringing us closer together.”

“Today there are so many snap judgments made in the world. Through this process, I recognized the value in all opinions and our showing respect toward each other.”

“I hope that we continue to be a family together and live under the Big Tent as one.”

“I hope that God will bless us as session and church and say, ‘Well-done.’”

“We really kind of love each other, and we have made the decision together.”

In humble thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Jadie Rogers, Anne Neill, Joe Wilson, Steve Mihaich,  
Beth Wickham, Pete Henderson, Meg Piszczek, Ken Jones  
Kristen Pormann, Clerk  
Ingram Hedgpeth, Pastor