

November 14, 2016

Good day, good friends:

As promised, I am writing to inform you of the results of our important congregational vote that concluded yesterday. The motion to affirm that the church bylaws recognize a single class of membership, which would allow for all members to be treated equally, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, with respect to leadership, ordination, baby dedications and marriage, PASSED by a 61% favorable vote.

This result culminates a 14-month process of discernment in our church that included intense study, fervent prayer, vigorous conversation, sincere disagreement and record participation. Here is a rundown on the numbers: 948 ballots cast, 577 in favor, 367 not in favor, 4 abstentions.

This is the largest voter participation in recent memory. By comparison, when the church voted in 1991 to allow for the ordination of women, there were fewer than 450 votes cast, and the motion passed by a 67% majority. The vote to call me as pastor of Wilshire in 1989 totaled 901 ballots cast (with a 92% majority). This unprecedented level of engagement is heartening in that it demonstrates at the most basic level the interest of members in seeking God's will for the church.

We owe appreciation to many who gave themselves tirelessly to the Lord and to the church during these months. The deacon officers of the past two years—Kathy Alverson, Jill Granberry, Charles Yarbrough, Sam Tinsley and Pat Austin, along with the deacon secretary, Jeff Hampton—as well as all our deacons deserve great thanks. We are indebted to James Perry, who chaired the deacon officer-appointed Inclusion and Diversity Study Group, along with the other 18 members of that group, for countless hours of study and prayer. The church staff, especially associate pastor Mark Wingfield, has been faithful in ministry service throughout.

When Wilshire adopted its vision and values statements during our Vision 20/20 strategic planning process, INCLUSION was the highest value listed by church respondents. Many wondered what that meant and whether it extended to the full participation of members who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). The answer to that is now YES, and LGBT Christian friends inside and outside our church will see this as a sign of deep acceptance by the people of God.

“Acceptance” is a key word. The truth is that Wilshire already was an accepting church of LGBT Christians before this vote. While I cannot read the minds of all who voted against the motion, I believe I know their hearts. Their greatest concern in voting NO was that they be falsely cast as being unloving toward gay persons. It will be important going forward now to make clear that we trust each other's hearts and believe the best about each other. Those who

voted NO did so, I believe, out of sincere concern for the church and for their conscience before God about the scope of participation of LGBT members, not about the salvation or membership or even character of Christians because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Those who voted YES also did so from equal concerns for these things, but they believed that while acceptance does not have to mean affirmation, it should not come with qualifications on participation that do not apply equally to all.

Wilshire next Sunday will look much like Wilshire last Sunday. We will still worship, learn, give and serve together as we build a community of faith shaped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Extending full privileges and equal responsibilities to LGBT Christians does not mean restricting or marginalizing anyone else, including those who disagree. Wilshire's history shows that being found in Christ is the chief way we look upon one another in the church. All other modifiers come after that. We will not allow our church to become focused on this one issue. We will continue to pursue our whole mission together, along with our vision to be a bold witness for the way of Christ in our time.

The outcome of this vote puts our church's historic 65-year partnership with the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) in question. The BGCT has made public what we have sought to keep a church matter out of respect for them and for those who have struggled with the process within our church. We will take up the matter of our relationship to the BGCT on our own terms in the near future, as cooperation with such bodies is voluntary and springs primarily from the church to the convention, rather than the other way round.

Because of the now public nature of the church's decision, we will be responding publicly as well. We would prefer to bear witness in our own words instead of simply having others talk about us. Among the things we will acknowledge is that we are not alone in taking this direction. Baptist churches all over the country, many affiliated as we are with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, others that are former BGCT-related churches, and several local Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and United Church of Christ churches, to name a few, have preceded us in this journey. We are grateful for their partnership in witness to the gospel that is open to all and closed to none.

I received an email from someone in the community today whom I do not know. His message read: "When I see Wilshire Baptist Church, I see the face of Jesus! I am not a member of Wilshire, nor a Baptist. I am a Christian. I have seen over the past couple of years your outreach to God's children, whether they be gay, grieving, displaced, sick (Ebola), etc. You are what I believe the Bible expects of the Christian Church." Admittedly, not all reviews will be as charitable as this, but we should be grateful if this were to characterize for many our witness in the community at large.

There is work yet to be done among us. The Apostle Paul gives us good counsel for this moment: Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). The news of

this decision will bring great joy to many. Some will share it among us and beyond us through social media as an expression of enormous gratitude. The same news will be a cause for grief among other members. They may also choose to express themselves in similar venues, albeit with opposite emotions. My encouragement to all is to remember each other as you do, to be sensitive to your sisters and brothers in all things. In another place, Paul told us to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32).

Some of our cherished friends and longtime members have made or will now make the decision to leave our church. Others will struggle with how they will find their place among us in the future, while holding a different view. Still others will be coming to us, eager to participate in a church that welcomes them and their family members or friends who are LGBT Christians. The challenge before us is what it has always been: to love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10).

Unity, harmony, healing: these are good words to guide us in the days ahead. #OneWilshire is the hashtag I keep repeating to myself. Let's make that more than a virtual reality. We can begin by showing up next Sunday for worship, a Sunday of Thanksgiving for all of God's blessings to us. And we are so very blessed to share this beloved community with one another.

Gratefully and expectantly,

George Mason