



Richmond First United Methodist Church

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...growing disciples who make a difference

October 7, 2024

Dear Church Family,

Let me preface this letter with a small apology. I realize that the tone of the letter itself is a little somber. One member of our leadership team who helped me by proof-reading this letter told me that they were sure all the way up to the final sentence that this was my letter of resignation. I hate to disappoint anybody, but... well... NO. It's not a resignation letter. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. I've never been happier to be the pastor of this particular congregation. The moment we are passing through, however, needs to be acknowledged. There is a bittersweetness to it that we need to recognize up front, so that it does not sneak up and ambush us later.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep"* (Romans 12:15). On the face of it, this is a very straightforward and tender sentiment, the very essence of human compassion. In most circumstances, Paul's advice in this case would be pretty easy to follow. When I find a friend suffering loss, I make myself present to hold hands in gentle silence. When my friend gets the longed-for promotion, I offer up a high five. I offer a joyful hug of gratitude when the test results come back from the doctor and everything is okay. This is the simple yet profound stuff of humans doing life together.

I suspect, though, that even as Paul pens this platitude about rejoicing and grieving he is painfully aware that there are times in life that human compassion is a challenge. Sometimes joy and grief dance together. We don't know exactly what we ought to be feeling. Sometimes, my joy holds hands with your pain. The very thing that you want to celebrate brings me deep sorrow. Or my act of celebration can appear callous in the face of your sense of loss. Here, then, is the moment when Paul's advice is most difficult to receive. For this reason, this is also the time when his advice is most needed.

In May of 2024, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church voted to remove traditional language from the discipline that had previously forbidden the ordination of homosexual individuals. In the same session, the General Conference also removed the traditional prohibition against United Methodist pastors and churches from taking part in weddings which would join two persons of the same sex. The changes in this language created space in which each individual church and clergy person must come to terms with their own theology on these issues.

Our church began a four-part discernment process in the wake of these General Conference actions.

1. A congregational meeting, held on August 10, 2024. This meeting was attended by 102 interested members of our church family. At that meeting, we talked about the decisions before us, and committed ourselves to values of inclusion and unity.
2. A church-wide survey was made available both online and in paper-and-pencil formats. The survey gave church leadership a snapshot of the church's conscience around issues stemming from the practice of same-sex marriage and the possibility of receiving a homosexual clergy appointment.
3. A second congregational meeting, which took place on September 14. About 65 attended this meeting, where we reviewed the data collected from the survey. We also talked a good deal about what promises we would need to make to each other to maintain the unity of our church in a climate where theological opinions are so diverse.

4. The Administrative Council met on September 30 to discuss and place in writing policies around same-sex weddings and receiving homosexual clergy. For those of you that participated in any facet of this process, the outcome should not be surprising. Our congregation clearly expressed an openness to both same-sex marriages and homosexual clergy. The language for those two policies is included with this letter, as a separate document.

Which brings us back to *“Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.”* While our survey of the congregation was conclusive enough to make our path forward in setting policy clear, the results were by no means unanimous. Many of us will be ready to celebrate, but others of us equally committed to the fellowship of our church will also be grieving. Learning to hold hands in this awkward space will test us.

I’m not sure that, as a pastor, I have any real insight into what life together in the days ahead is going to look like and feel like, or what sorts of guardrails we need to put in place to make it all work. I do, however, claim with confidence that what we have set out to do is not only possible, but what the Lord requires of us in this moment. This unity is our witness to the surpassing love of Christ.

The book of Romans (our jumping off place at the beginning of this letter) has long been a favorite source of wisdom for the Church. At some point in its history, the Church seems to have decided that this letter is mostly about what I need to know and believe in order to go to Heaven when I die.

That’s fair, in one sense. Much of the book does deal in the mechanics of salvation. Oddly, though, a thoughtful rereading of the book (and many of Paul’s other letters) might show that Paul is carrying a far greater burden for his readers than whether or not they have a sound theory of atonement. Paul is a pastor trying gamely to hold a congregation together in spite of an almost unimaginable theological chasm that seeks to tear them apart; former Jew and former pagan gathered at the same altar of worship. In Paul’s theology, it is precisely this unlikely unity that stands as evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in our midst.

It is against this messy backdrop of clashing values that Paul drops his *“Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.”* He knows that what he is asking is hard.

As for me, in this moment, I choose *rejoicing*. My rejoicing stems not so much from the particular policies which we have shaped together touching on the issues on human sexuality. I find that landscape over-crowded, noisy, and confusing at the moment. I choose rejoicing because we have, first and foremost, arrived at this place TOGETHER, clinging to the blood-bought unity we have come to know in Christ Jesus.

In closing, how about a little more wisdom from Romans?

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6)

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Bruce Nettleton