

July 14, 2016

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Bethany's session and congregation have completed the four phased communal discernment process, *Listening for God's Leading*. Session has heard God speak through this process and is now ready to move forward. Here is what we have done through these four phases.

- **Phase One:** On March 5th, over 130 Bethany members were equipped in the practices of *lectio divina* and communal spiritual discernment.
- **Phase Two:** On April 30th, Session met and heard God give us a question to bring before the Lord:
“Given our diversity of positions on the issues of gay marriage and leadership standards, Lord God, what do you have to say to us about being united in Christ, providing a sanctuary (safe place) for all people, and learning to love each other across our differences with the same abundant love you continually give to us?”
- **Phase Three:** On May 14th, over 110 people gathered to bring this question before Jesus. We heard God speak to this question through individual prayer, group listening and then through a communal distilling of what we were hearing.
- **Phase Four, Part One:** On June 18th, Session took what was heard by the congregation in phase three and distilled even more the WHAT. That is, Session prayed through the themes identified on May 14th and through them heard *what* God was saying to Bethany. Here is what Session heard:
We believe God is saying to us:
 - **Be centered on and united in Christ.**
 - **Open my sanctuary to all in a way that is both safe and holy.¹**
 - **Be courageous in loving one another across differences.**
- **Phase Four, Part Two:** On July 12th, Session continued to ask of God, “Given *what* you have said to us, Lord, *how* do you want us to proceed?” From what we heard individually and in our small group process it became clear we should begin with two steps. Here are the actions we will take this fall:

¹ There is a paradox to a sanctuary as both a safe place and yet also holy, that is, set apart, for God's purposes. We heard the word “open my sanctuary,” but other words we heard were “tend my sanctuary,” “steward my sanctuary” and “grow my sanctuary.”

Equip the congregation and the Session with tools for engaging this issue further

Tools to help us listen to God:

- Scripture study
- Awareness of the lenses we bring to Scripture (hermeneutics)
- Prayer and discernment

Tools for engaging with each other:

- Opportunities to listen to each other's stories across our differences and across generations
- Communication and relationship building in areas of disagreement
- Continue the conversation with the LGBT community within Bethany and through some of our outreach partners

We have assigned a team of elders to lead Session in this task

Revisit the Holiness and Leadership Statement

We have assigned a team of elders to lead Session in this task.²

Details on these first two steps are still to be worked out, but it is a start to help us be a church united and centered in Christ, courageously loving each other across our differences, and committed to being sanctuary to all.

If you want to hear more or have questions, there will be a forum on Sunday, July 31st, 12:15 – 1:00 p.m. in the Fellowship Hall. Please feel free to contact me, make an appointment, or drop by during my open office hours (no appointment necessary) on Mondays, 3:30 – 5:30 p.m. You can also contact an elder on Session.

Finally, let me say something to you I have never said before in any context, partly because I have never experienced a process quite like this season of communal discernment. Here is what I want to say: It is clear to me and every fiber of my being that God has spoken to Session. We have slowed, we have prayed, we have bathed ourselves in Scripture, we have been silent in solitude and we have listened to what each other is hearing. We are confident that we have heard from the Holy Spirit, and we are trusting that God will continue to guide us. We covet your prayers.

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you,

Pastor Doug

² In our small group discernment time, almost all our groups voiced this need, but in various ways. One group heard "Reword the statement, without changing content." Another group reported they were hearing "Rescind the H & L statement." Still other groups heard the word "rewrite" or "revisit."