To all of us who are Grace Lutheran Church,

For the past nine months, the Vision Board has been on a journey to discern what course of action Grace Lutheran Church should take regarding same sex marriages. To aid in this difficult task, we enlisted the help several members, the Holy Conversations Team, to help organize a number of listening sessions, Bible Study Sessions and an open mic night; 10 sessions in all. Every session was attended by the Holy Conversations Team, the Vision Board, and members of the congregation.

During these sessions we listened attentively to the congregation and staff. The Holy Conversations Team compiled information from these sessions to ensure we had heard all of the points made by those in attendance. We also reviewed email, mail and conversations we had throughout this time. We know the Holy Spirit speaks in the hearts and the minds of those who love, obey and seek to follow God. We value each of the opinions that were shared and we have prayed over all of them to help us discern where the Spirit is leading us. Each session ended with prayer around the cross asking the Holy Spirit for guidance.

From John 14:26 NLV: The Helper is the Holy Spirit. The Father will send Him in My place. He will teach you everything and help you remember everything I have told you.

Through this process we have heard many excellent comments from the people of Grace on all sides of this issue. Everyone spoke with deep conviction and concern about being faithful to Scripture and the mission of our church. We heard you define Grace Lutheran Church as a place that welcomes, accepts, and loves everyone. That our mission... “to be a ministry of grace in the heart of Andover,” is lived out day after day through our people and ministries. We heard some speak in support of same-sex weddings. Many people thanked the vision board, the holy conversations team and our pastors for the opportunity to discuss this issue openly.

We have heard concerns and questions about same-sex weddings and the process we used to discuss this topic. Some disagree with performing same-sex marriages at Grace. Some have expressed concern if this is the right time? Why do we appear to be in such a rush on this topic?

Same-sex unions being blessed in our church has been discussed by the Vision Board several times in the past 5 years. At the time, same sex marriages were not legal in Minnesota, and the Vision Board did not endorse those requests. Once the law was changed, our Bishop Ann Svennungsen requested that each congregation discuss how they would respond to its legalization. Thus began our conversation.

We heard a call for maintaining the status quo, and concerns that we would be the only church in our area to perform same-sex weddings. What might it do to our congregation?

There are churches in our Synod already performing same sex marriages. Some changed their policy without much congregational input. Others are following a process similar to what we have gone through. We are the third congregation in our vicinity to be involved in the discussion.

We heard concern that the sessions were one-sided, favoring same-sex weddings. This was certainly **not** the intention of the Vision Board or the Holy Conversations team. We made an assumption that everyone understood and was well versed in the argument against same-sex weddings. Looking back we can see how it could be viewed as one sided and for that, we apologize.

We also heard that we did not present a positive view of Biblical marriage. With that in mind we are exploring options to allow for study about strong Biblical marriages.

So how do we make a decision like this? We believe that everyone who spoke in favor of and against same-sex marriage is speaking from a place of faith. They all want what is best for our church and above all to follow our Father in heaven. Our challenge was to understand what that is? We all love this church. Many of us consider the people at Grace family. In Romans 12:9-13 we are told; “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”

The Vision Board has taken time to discuss and process much of what was learned over the past year, knowing that above all, we want to do what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do. God made each of us as unique individuals with differing viewpoints, beliefs, personalities, and desires. We have spent many hours praying, listening for God’s voice and trying to understand what scripture says to us on this issue. It is **not** a decision we made lightly.

The Vision Board has reached consensus on this issue. Out of respect for everyone in this room and everyone involved in the process, we ask that you maintain your decorum as the decision is read. We are all part of the same body praying for unity during a challenging time.

The marriage policy at Grace Lutheran Church will be clarified as follows:

* All committed loving couples, in accordance with regulations of the State of Minnesota, will be eligible for marriage at Grace. (This is a change.)
* Only people who are actively involved with Grace, will be eligible to be married at Grace. (This is a change.)
* Marriages will to be subject to the approval of the Pastoral Staff.
* The Pre-Pair Retreat and marriage counseling will continue to be a requirement for all couples accepted to be married at Grace.
* These clarifications will be revisited by the Vision Board in May, 2015.

We may never know this side of heaven if this decision, or any other decision we make as fallible human beings, is correct. However, we do know that we are called to love.

Matthew 22:37-40 says

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

We all want the church to be welcoming, loving, and accepting of all. We all want to be a congregation of individuals that celebrate our differences, yet remain centered on Christ, a “Centered Set” Church.

Paul tells us in Romans 12, For in the same way that one body has so many different parts, each with different functions; we, too—the many—are different parts that form one body in the Anointed One. Each one of us is joined with one another, and we become together what we could not be alone.

Romans 12:4-5 (The Voice)

The Vision Board and I want to express our sincerest thanks to the Staff, the Holy Conversations Team, and everyone who participated in this difficult process. Without your prayers and grace-filled thoughts we could not have reached this difficult decision.

Thank you and God bless you,

Your Vision Board