

January 29, 2019

## Comments on the 2019 Annual Meeting

The Episcopal Mission of Warren County met on Sunday, January 27<sup>th</sup> to fulfill its annual duty to meet, receive reports, nominate leaders for the coming year, and celebrate the common life in Christ we have together. Annual meetings make for odd Sundays in many ways, with scripture and prayer and Eucharist, yes, but also reports, addresses, and just enough formal business meeting, complete with Robert's Rules or Order, to make it feel strangely more important than any other Sunday in our community's life. It isn't more important, really, but it can feel that way.

For the clergy it was an especially anxious day, as each of us had important things we wanted to relay to the community we love. We had new financial policies affecting the budget (and budgets always make for some anxiety), personal and professional issues that we worried about revealing for months prior, and the responsibility for creating a day of celebration that everyone would feel excited to participate in. I felt the weight of the day upon my shoulders.

It was a good day in many ways, but to say everything ran smoothly would not be telling the truth. The morning ran far longer than we planned or intended. Snow and unexpected issues made getting there difficult for many. Moments of clumsiness led to odd moments in the liturgy (who's giving the dismissal? Did I just hear something fall in the music area? When can we fit in a break?). But to my eyes, these were met with smiles and support for each other. These are not things that defeat the people of God.

And then some of the business of the congregation was not handled well. I had been prepared to answer a question regarding pledging and lay leadership, an issue some had raised in previous years both privately and publicly. I was not prepared for a motion from the floor concerning it. I then magnified that unpreparedness by not handling the proceedings as well as I could. Yes I had other things on my mind that morning, but still, it was not my best example of leading a business meeting. As the discussion proceeded, deep hurts were taken by many. It is a great blessing for all of us that wise souls found ways to redirect the issue and it was eventually removed from consideration.

Hurt hearts though are not so easily fixed. And while part of me grieves that the day will be seen as irreparably marred by some, I am humbled and touched by much of what happened after. I've learned from many that while I finished meeting and moved us to celebrate the Eucharist together, many had sought out the hurting to console them. Forgiveness was asked for and granted. I had resigned myself to losing some, I feared not permanently but still at least from the day, and instead found them kneeling at the altar rail, joining together in the celebration of the communion of God. The reception afterwards was joyful and long lasting, too. I was stunned: the community was celebrating.

During my annual address, I talked about how I feel a new sense of calling to help lead our community to add workshop time to our worship time. We have, over the last 8 years, found that we can worship together in a way that is enriching and wonderful. That, in itself, is a great success story, and a central reason why we all should feel proud for our work together so far. But I see more for us now. We dare to be Christ in the world, to not just be weary world travelers who come to worship to refuel our souls but to also let Christ live through us in order for him to

transform the world. We need to build time together to practice this art, and the only time we have now, with an increasing non-Christian world around us, is our time together as a community. Workshop and studio time, for artists of Christ's love and life, will be vital for us as we continue to adapt our lives to the needs of Christ's mission in our world.

Times where our human hearts are made fragile are just the times for the art of practicing Christ's love. There, at the Annual Meeting, right in the midst of our community's time together, artists went to work, and the beauty of what Christ can do when we let him was revealed. I would never plan for such an event, and there's many reasons why groups work to avoid such things, but since they do happen and did happen, I sit today in awe of God who in Jesus takes our mess and makes his love known. I'm so proud of and humbled by those who dared to let love lead. The events were not pretty, but Christ worked through you artists to reveal his beauty.

We play many parts and have much to practice to know this love more in our lives together. One of the first steps for us as artists is to be honest when our actions lead toward others being hurt. I'm sorry for not handling our meeting well. To those that are still carrying hurt or feel in any way negatively affected by the meeting, please know that I want to know. The least I can do, following the wisdom of our conflict resolution policy, is to pray for you and me, but more than this I believe that talking together is a powerful tool for us as artists of Christ's love.

I am grateful to have you on this journey, and look forward to our continuing strides in mission for Christ together.

Yours in Christ,

Matthew