

Minutes of the New Age (19May19) Acts15:1-19

A confession to start: I have never willingly volunteered to take meeting minutes, and I might never even have unwillingly agreed.

Scott Bauer, on the other hand—an Associated Press reporter by vocation—makes minutes come alive. The best I’ve ever had the semi-pleasure of reading, even with colorful quotations. Here are excerpts from the MCC annual meeting minutes in January, the reality of church details, with some Scott touch:

1. Steve Sellwood and Candi Bloedow of the Leadership Team called the 2019 annual meeting to order
2. Pastor Sonja Ingebritsen led the congregation in an opening prayer
3. Karen Schwarz moved approval of the agenda, Lucetta Kanetzke seconded.
5. MCC Reports that had been posted online were open for discussion.
7. Spending Plans and Funds: John Rowe said, “We had a very good year at the MCC. Pledges and gifts have been growing. We had more income than expected and expenses have been less than expected.”
8. Other Business: Steve discussed several “big ticket” capital items, including replacing the siding, repaving the parking lot, replacing lights and redesigning basement bathrooms. Don Tubesing asked what MCC’s philosophy was for building maintenance. A task force was approved by a voice vote with no opposition.
In another piece of new business, the 50th anniversary of the MCC this year was discussed. “It’s definitely something we want to celebrate,” Steve said.
Hildy McGown thanked everyone who decorates the sanctuaries.

With a few Scott flourishes, there are abridged ins-and-outs of a church meeting here at the MCC.

Since you’re wondering why I’m reading bland business details instead of preaching the sort of thrilling, thought-provoking, hilarious,

spiritually-resonant and culturally-competent, sermon you’ve come to expect (that got a rather large chuckle!), I better explain.

Sure, that was to celebrate Scott, and anybody who agrees to take minutes.

It also involved reminders on the ministry of the MCC this year.

But mainly it was to set the strange Bible reading in some context. Whether you consider MCC meeting details exciting or boring, small potatoes or blockbuster, relevant or off the main mark, maybe it resonates with what in our reading from Acts were essentially church meeting minutes, complete with Scott Bauer-esque stylings of key quotes. No matter how well it’s been recorded, you might share my feeling that it can suck the life out of really vibrant stuff of being the church.

To clarify: I love our annual meetings. They celebrate our community. I also am an odd duck who has been sitting contentedly in church council meetings since I was in high school. I know, pretty warped.

But still I regularly say I get frustrated if I’ve been in a meeting too long and Jesus hasn’t shown up. Even in good meetings, Jesus can seem more propped in a corner than alive and shaping and inspiring us. It’s like we think we’ve got something better to do, to focus on.

But how can we ignore this vibrant celebrative faith that keeps shouting: Alleluia! Christ is risen! This is joy. Jesus on the loose in our world, life on the loose. Unstoppable love, unfathomable love. Salvation spreading for all. God in our lives. This is good news, good news, good news!

So it’s so striking and disheartening that 15 chapters into the book of Acts we’re stuck in the middle of a church council meeting, with deliberations and legalese stifling the good news and sucking the life out of church, putting the body of Christ onto life support.

Earlier stories had rampaging abundance: of everyone fired up! Hearing the good news in their own tongue! Sharing everything they had! Making sure nobody went hungry! Of facing death fearlessly! Of even an Ethiopian eunuch

from the ends of the earth incorporated, baptized into this party by one who had no business to be baptizing to begin with! It seemed like nobody would be left out. This was catching hold of people's hearts and lives and souls and sweeping them—and us—up into God's exciting goodness.

Then comes this episode of Roberts Rules of Order. Parliamentary procedure. With "no small dissension and debate." Someone taking the floor to testify in favor of an amendment. All to determine whether outsiders would be allowed in, and how many hoops they'd have to jump through to be permitted.

Now, I don't want to belittle circumcision in Jewish practice. From twelve chapters into the start of the Bible, God had promised that all peoples would be blessed, all nations welcomed through Abraham, and the sign of this relationship would be circumcision. Abraham went through it as an old, old man. But what's definitive isn't just that he could manage it so others should put up with it, too.

So I don't want to get into details of circumcision's trauma for infant boys. I also don't want to poo-poo this church decision as affecting the recruiting strategy of the early church: "Would you like to join us as followers of Jesus? Oh, I should mention, there's just one little thing you have to do first..."

We probably need to admit that this decision of not troubling men about what they do with their body parts isn't how it goes when it's about women's body parts. Even this week some who call themselves Christians were all-too content to impose ridiculously excessive demands to trouble women's bodies.

Holding dumb human deliberations in perspective, though, we notice God was way out in front of the church in Acts. The Holy Spirit had already been surely finding a place for outsiders for half the book at this point. Even the central leaders were slowly getting dragged along to God's abundant way, as Peter's speech testifies. Paul had had his life turned around and was excitedly spreading that reconciling and forgiving good news where it was technically not allowed

by peoples' policies. Humans keep slowing it up and get stuck in meetings, but God goes with us still striving for good. God is with us even in church meetings.

With all of that, I love a line a few verses later. After more bureaucracy, saying "we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them," then it gets to a dynamo line, conveying radical reorientations for us, too. Ready? "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials." It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us! They don't know, but suppose and move ahead to follow God's lead. They dig into their founding documents, for the purposes of figuring how to welcome and include and be community together.

Maybe to take seriously this reading about what it meant to become part of an essentially Jewish community that used to be defined by circumcision, we could ask what it means for people to become part of church now, including this Madison Christian Community. How can people fit in? What's essential?

For our founding documents, the Community of Hope bylaws begin with a declaration: "We welcome all people to join us on our faith journey, affirming our common humanity and reconciling our differences." There are participation suggestions members are "encouraged to covenant" to do. Then comes one sort of definitional stipulation: "Membership in the Christian Church is begun by baptism."

Advent follows a more formal ELCA format and says "Members of this congregation shall be those baptized persons" etc. etc. and "all persons, irrespective of [this and that] shall be welcome for membership" and membership includes the so-called "privileges and duties" of worship, moral living, and stewardship.

That hits the big stuff as far as being allowed in to the MCC.

Since both zeroed in on baptism, I'd mention there's serious discussion in the church these days, at least in my Lutheran circles, about whether it's permissible to receive communion

without having been baptized. Is it a requirement? In a culture where infant baptism is no longer a given, what do we do? While they debate and deliberate who All is or what Welcome might mean, at the MCC we don't believe our job is needing to sort it out, but just declare "All are welcome at Jesus' table." We trust he means it.

For entrance rites here, we don't have rigorous coursework of new member classes. Even Confirmation is more about an experience. Is it helpful that we don't instruct right beliefs? There are also churches where it's about behavior, where a strict morality is the gateway to entry, these days often about sexuality, but even here with an element of presumed politics.

Beyond that more official theology, what about de facto practice: Do you feel welcome? Is it confusing or enchanting? Can you tell something exciting is happening, or does it feel stodgy? Does church mostly serve to make you feel even worse about your life, or do you know that God is here for you?

Where are barriers to inclusion when a person doesn't know our rhythms and routines or the "that's just the way we do it here" or why we do what we do and say what we say? We've got generations of the amazingly deep and dense relationships of support, but before that how does one newly integrate into this community?

How does it work for small children, or for those with dementia, or for people who are differently abled, or don't speak our language? Or what about people like you? Again, what's welcome for both victims and perpetrators? How do we practice love in broken and sinful lives? If inclusion involves our reconciling, how are our differences okay and not needing to be flattened out or homogenized, that we say you're welcome but it really means "as long as you're like me."

I hope this doesn't come across as head-scratching conundrums of church polity, but as exciting questions of God's mission, not the obstacles we erect to entry, but how we help incorporate each other into the body of Christ, into the church that Jesus intended as a gathering to be life-sharing and life-giving. Sure, it may

involve an agenda to make it work, but it's God's work. This is where the gospel happens, in the nuts and bolts, minute by minute details of our real lives. It seems good to the Holy Spirit. How about us?

So what's our bottom line? What's essential? Not for a quicker adjournment to our meeting, but more because it's our life-blood, in the biggest picture, I believe it's pretty well summed up by this: Alleluia! Christ is risen!