



2017 Synod Assembly

DAILY UPDATE

Central States Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Thursday, June 8

Today Central States Synod Bishop Roger Gustafson welcomed more than 375 members of ELCA congregations from Missouri and Kansas attending the 2017 Synod Assembly at the Adam's Mark Hotel in Kansas City.

Under the banner, "Growing in Hope" they gathered to observe the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation inspired by Martin Luther. Marking the observance was Team 500, a group led by Rev. Brian Hiortdahl of Atonement Lutheran Church in Overland Park, KS who said the group focused on conversation, the point of the 95 theses; celebration, because God is good, and Hope in Action that functions as the theme of several workshops and service projects at the Assembly and among local congregations.

Team 500 oversaw the creation of time capsules for each congregation in the Synod that included memorabilia of this time and place for future generations. The metal boxes include small water bottles which can be used to carry water from the closing worship service to each congregation for inclusion in their baptismal fountains. The team is also encouraging the planting of 500 trees in prominent places on each parish grounds. And each congregation that plants a tree is eligible to receive compensation from an ELCA grant to purchase a second tree which can be donated to a local community resource.

Team 500 has organized two trips to places in Germany that are significant in Luther's life story. Another trip is planned in December for which places are still available. One other trip may be offered in 2019.

Additionally, the Team conducted a hymn-writing contest that was won by the Rev. Paul D. Weber. His entry, "Founded on Faith," was sung during the opening of the assembly.

The Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, drew on her experiences and observations as a child raised in the Lutheran tradition, as a parish pastor in Ohio and as synod bishop in Northeast Ohio to explore Martin Luther's revolutionary idea of creating a Small Catechism to be used in teaching the Christian life. She explained Luther was deeply disturbed by the poor quality of theological understanding in Middle Europe half a millennia ago, a circumstance not unlike that which prevails today.

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The hope Luther invested in writing the Small Catechism was to tell the Gospel story in a particular way and it is this theology that helps define who we Lutherans are today. People in Luther's Middle-European world were terrified by what they were told they had to do to gain life everlasting and by the likelihood that wouldn't happen.

Their preoccupation – their vocation – was to find out what they had to do to escape condemnation to hell through their bondage to sin. But Luther found that understanding the Gospel's Good News meant they – and we – are set free for lives of service, not serving to get something. We each, she explained, find our vocation in our baptism. Even today, many of us maintain an emphasis on good works, rather than trusting grace.

Luther wrote the Small Catechism so households, children and parents, could understand the Christian faith based on the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed. But, she argued, he did not mean to confine study of the small catechism to seventh, eighth and ninth graders, but open it to life-long study. And this, she said, happens in a culture in which most quit going to Sunday School sometime in the third grade. For evidence, Bishop Eaton cited the growth of the Lutheran Church in Asia and Africa, very much centered on studies of Luther's small catechism.

Bishop Roger followed a similar theme in his sermon at the worship service backed by a jazz band. He noted the Synod is in the third of a four-year cycle of growth with this year centered on discipleship. He centered his sermon on the example Jesus gave of how growth involves change; how a grain of wheat must die so a new shaft of wheat can emerge bearing 50 grains. While we mostly try to avoid thinking or speaking of death, there are times when that becomes impossible. Growth, he argues, mostly involves change if not death.

He posed two questions: 1. *What needs to die in my congregation in order for us to be a more faithful church?* And, 2. *What has to die in me that I might be a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ?* He invited those in the meeting to discuss those questions and write down their answers on cards that were collected to be used in workshops Friday morning.

Making progress can be hard, he said, "If you think it's too hard: *We're stuck with Easter.*"

And to close this report, a bit of Luther trivia to ponder. The question was asked, *What did Luther's father do for a living?* The answer is he was a miner and a smelter.

That leads to a second question; what does a smelter do?