



2017 Synod Assembly

DAILY UPDATE

Central States Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Friday, June 9

What is God calling us to be and to do? That was the question Presiding ELCA Bishop Elizabeth Eaton posed to the representatives of churches in the Central States Synod meeting in their annual assembly at the Adam's Mark Hotel in Kansas City. "What should the mission of our church be?" she asked, outlining the powerful changes coursing through the world.

Our church has become highly diverse and multi-cultural. The World Lutheran Federation recently held its meeting in Namibia where Lutheranism is growing quickly as it is in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. That's a large change for members of a denomination that many still think of as Norwegian because "that's what they like to eat."

She observed ELCA is focused on being a church first, "we are not the American Cancer Society, we are Lutheran." At this time, there are 65 synods in the ELCA joined with more than 78 million Lutherans around the world, each focused not on what they get from being Lutheran but rather what they get to do. And ELCA congregations are active in the world. More than 90 per cent of our congregations conduct hunger relief ministries.

Foremost among her concerns are building up the resources to adjust to an anticipated shortage of 1,000 pastors by 2019, while right-sizing the churchwide staff in Chicago. At the same time, it has become apparent that new approaches are needed to deliver Christian education more efficiently to relieve the growing education debt load associated with training rostered clergy.

Following the presentation by Bishop Eaton, Kansas City Mayor Sly James welcomed the more than 350 assembly attendees to the city, urging them to "give special help to the children of our world. They are 100% of the future and you should remember who will choose your nursing home."

Following the Mayor, Central States Bishop Roger Gustafson delivered his report to the Assembly focusing on issues of leadership, the launching of the Parish Ministry Associates program, the oncoming wave of retirements in the St. Louis area aggravated by a shortage of interim pastors to serve in the transition periods between called pastors, leadership training received by Synod staff from the Kansas Leadership Center that assists them in coaching church councils and staffs, the start of development of a Rural Ministry Table in partnership with the Parish Ministry Table to study how rural congregations and continue their vital ministries. Bishop Roger noted a round of Area Ministry visits focusing on stewardship drew larger-than-expected turnouts and the conduct of several Open Door visits in the synod which invited open-ended conversation with rostered staff, PMAs and congregation members, conversations which he termed "humbling, inspiring and confidential."

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“We live in anxious times in our church and our culture,” he said noting high tensions around issues of race, immigration and political partisanship. The population of our country and our synod are aging at the same time we are moving quickly on a path to become a majority non-white population. Studies indicate these changes are resulting in younger and older Americans increasingly becoming more unlike in how they act and think. In the end, he said, we’re held together by the Gospel, each of us equally loved and forgiven and claimed by God.

On Thursday evening, Bishop Roger asked those attending 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. Rev. Keith Hohly and Rev. Donna Simon compiled the responses and created a Top Ten list of stumbling blocks:

10. Negative attitudes toward children
9. Over-valuing tradition
8. Being inwardly focused
7. Self-centered individuals
6. Unable to make time for the spiritual
5. Pastor
4. Unhealthy sense of ownership
3. Fear of the other – strangers
2. Excessive focus on money and finances
1. Fear of and resistance to change

“Donna and I have a hunch. We think all these things prevent us from living into our call to discipleship because we tend to treat discipleship as a set of obligations, actions we must take to be worthy to be called Christ’s body,” Hohly said. But if viewed from the perspective of the Gospel, discipleship is no longer something we must do, it is something we invited to do. What kind of experiments can we do in our congregations to grow as disciples? they asked.