

2017 Central States Synod Assembly

Summary Report

June 20, 2017

Central States Synod Bishop Roger Gustafson welcomed more than 375 members of ELCA congregations in Missouri and Kansas to the 2017 Synod Assembly at Adam's Mark Hotel in Kansas City, Thursday, June 8 through Saturday, June 10. Meeting under the banner "Growing in Hope/Discipleship," they observed the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. "We are held together by the Gospel, which says that we are, each of us, equally loved and forgiven and claimed by God for eternity through the reconciling work of Jesus," proclaimed Bishop Gustafson.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Rev. Elizabeth Eaton lifted up Luther's creation of the Small Catechism, which was written so children and parents could better understand the Christian faith based on the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed. Luther meant the Small Catechism to be open to life-long study, not confined to a few adolescent years, she said, recalling her own years growing up and then raising her own family in Ohio.

Bishop Gustafson, presiding over communion that evening backed by a jazz band, followed a similar theme in his sermon, noting the example Jesus gave of how growth involves change; how a grain of wheat dies to emerge bearing 50 new grains. "Growth mostly involves change, if not death," he said, asking those attending "What needs to die in my congregation in order for us to be a more faithful church? And, what has to die in me that I might be a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ?" Making progress can be hard, he said. "If we think it's too hard. . . We're stuck with Easter."

Opening the session Friday, June 9, Presiding Bishop Eaton asked, "What is God calling us to be and to do? What should the mission of our church be?" Answering her question, she said, "First, we are a church; we are not the American Cancer Society. We are Lutheran." She said there are more than 78 million Lutherans around the world, focused not on what they get from being Lutheran, but rather on what they get to do. Like Lutherans worldwide, ELCA congregations are active in the world with more than 90 percent conducting hunger relief ministries.

In his annual report to the Synod, Bishop Roger emphasized issues of leadership; the importance of the Parish Ministry Associates program; the oncoming wave of clergy retirements, a particular concern in the St. Louis area where a shortage of interim pastors aggravates transitions between called pastors; training received by synod staff at the Kansas Leadership Center that allows them to better assist church councils and staff; and the development of a Rural Ministry Table in partnership with the Parish Ministry Table to study how rural congregations can continue their vital ministries.

Synod staff members Rev. Donna Simon and Rev. Keith Hohly observed the theme of Discipleship is not only the focus of 2017's Assembly, but also the focus of the synod for the coming year. They itemized a list of "stumbling blocks" to discipleship: negative attitudes toward children, over-valuing tradition, being inwardly focused, self-centeredness, inability to make time for the spiritual, the pastor, an unhealthy sense of ownership, fear of the other—strangers, and fear of and resistance to change.

"Donna and I have a hunch," Rev. Hohly said. "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. But if viewed from the perspective of the Gospel, discipleship is no longer something we must do, it is something we are invited to do."

(continued on pg. 2)

Among notable workshops held Friday afternoon, Rev. Michael Malone, leader for Team 500 of several trips to key sites in Luther's Germany, proposed new thinking about the consequences of the Reformation Luther triggered, suggesting it began the process of globalization still underway today. Dr. Sofia Khan, a Muslim physician and Founder of KC for Refugees in Kansas City, gave a passionate, objective overview of Islam and its practices. She was among representatives from the Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Baptist congregations participating in closing worship at Atonement Lutheran Church in Overland Park, KS.

In synod business, with Bishop Gustafson presiding, the Assembly elected Rev. David Strommen, Jeanie Schuler, Susan Boxberger, Grace Vannoy and Kristin Koch to the Synod Council.

Synod Treasurer Scott Schulte reported the Synod ended 2016 by spending \$90,500 less than budgeted. The Assembly adopted a budget of \$1,753,806 for 2018.

Synod Vice President Dennis Allerheiligen reported the Synod Council is actively addressing the study of ways to reduce the operating costs of the Synod, including a proposal to hold the annual assembly in the same location each year.

Among notable resolutions, the Assembly amended the resolution on Environmental Stewardship to change the term "climate change" to "climate damage." Following extended discussion of proposed amendments, the Assembly approved a resolution on refugees and immigrants that the Synod explore becoming a "Sanctuary Synod" of the ELCA and to report back on that proposal at the 2018 Assembly. A proposal to schedule next year's Assembly to begin on a Friday was rejected.

Please note this is a summary and more detailed information is posted at www.css-elca.org/synod-assembly.