

2025 Churchwide Assembly Reflections

We invited our voting members to reflect on the 2025 Churchwide Assembly.

Here are their responses:

Bishop Candea

Central States Synod

“For the Life of the World.” That was the theme of the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. It was a theme that resonated with my understanding of what it means to be church, a theme I saw enacted in the discussions, presentations, and decisions made at that assembly.

Throughout my preaching and teaching, I have often commented, “Faith is not about us. It is about God and God’s activity in this world.” Yes, it is a relationship between us and God, but a relationship that begins with God and is intended to equip us to participate in God’s mission for the life of the world. The gospel is not our private message designed to make us feel good within our own community (although, yes, the gospel is incredibly comforting and healing for us). Rather, it is the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news that God’s reign of mercy, justice, and love has broken into this world, the good news incarnate in Jesus, and in us as the body of Christ. The gospel is for the **world**, to bring life to the world.

The assembly overwhelmingly adopted the latest social statement entitled [*Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*](#). The introduction reads:

“Your will be done on earth as in heaven.” These familiar words from the Lord’s Prayer remind Christians that God is at work caring for all creation and call us to strive to understand and join in that work. This social statement provides a comprehensive Lutheran view of civic life toward that purpose.”

The first implementing resolution urges members of this church to pray, participate, and advocate for civic life in the United States that reflects God’s activity and call, which seeks both the well-being of all people and a creation marked by justice and peace.

This social statement and the actions taken by the assembly embody the truth that the church exists for the sake of the world. We cannot be silent, as some would suggest, arguing that the church should stay out of “politics.” This is a misunderstanding of the separation of church and state. (Read the social statement.) It was inspiring and challenging to engage in this work, to see the larger picture of what the church is about, not only in this country, but throughout the world, to embrace the diversity of God’s people, to be bold in our proclamation, to worship with passion, trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For it really is about relationships – our relationship with God, with one another, with the whole of creation – all for the life of the world.

Melodee Blobaum

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Kansas City, MO

When people have asked me about the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I have generally responded with the to-do list actions we checked off:

- Participated in not one, but two historic elections.
- Passed a memorial relating to the Palestinian people.
- Changed the ELCA Constitution.
- Passed the social statement on Faith and Civic Life.

All those actions are important, but they might have been accomplished by any gathering of 1,000 people with a heart for diversity, inclusion, and social justice. And for sure, a heart for Robert's Rules of Order as it relates to the Constitution discussion. For me, it was the care and attentiveness with which those actions were shaped that helped me see, and maybe helped the world see, how our church acts for the life of the world.

This work was not done by a random group of Lutherans. The makeup of the assembly reflected who we want the church to be: young and old, lay and clergy, people of color and people with a straight genealogical line to Scandinavian and German ancestors. In a world that is more likely to draw a circle that keeps people out instead of letting them in, the ELCA's determination to welcome everyone was a powerful message. That was made clear in the two final candidates for Presiding Bishop, a man who is black and a man who is gay, either of whom would be history-making.

Our daily worship was also the product of careful attention. Singing was accompanied by a traditional organ as well as brass, woodwinds, strings, and percussion, not as a performance, but to convey the deeper meaning of each song. Every piece of the liturgy was carefully chosen for its imagery and ability to open hearts to the Holy Spirit. Even now, I find myself pausing occasionally to hum "Come Holy Spirit," the a cappella chant that preceded the prayers and silence just before the major votes.

Throughout the assembly, I was struck by how carefully words were chosen and how attentively they were heard. When words or actions missed the mark and wounded someone present, that harm was called out to the assembly, and work was done to make the assembly whole. When the Memorial titled "Toward Ending the Occupation of Palestine" was passed, a round of cheers was cut short by Bishop Eaton, who reminded those gathered that not all in the chamber were rejoicing in the outcome. Also, with that resolution, I was moved by the care taken to hear all points of view, not just the ones in line with ELCA positions on the Middle East.

I pray that as a voting member of the Central States Synod, I will carry that careful attention into my work in the church and in the world.

Vickie Donnell

Messiah Lutheran Church, Springfield, MO

I want to start by saying I was truly blessed to have been elected to attend the Churchwide Assembly as a voting member. It is simply not possible for everyone to have that experience—so I encourage you to do the next best thing. Please take time and go to [Churchwide Assembly 2025 - YouTube](#). As I write this, there are 42 videos posted covering each day of the Assembly with additional pieces showing how the ELCA is living out the theme, “For the life of the world.” I particularly recommend [Bp. Vashti Murphy McKenzie’s sermon from July 31](#). What I share in this summary are a few of the highlights that will always remain with me.

Most importantly, the work we do is hard, and we take it very seriously. The assembly was five days packed full of discussion and debate on difficult issues. With the division we are experiencing in our country, it was immensely gratifying to adopt, with minimal amendment, a new Social Statement for our Church: [Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All](#). Throughout the week, we were repeatedly reminded that ‘words matter.’ We are blessed to be part of a Church with this statement, and all the others, we are in debt to those who do the hard study and put the words in place.

While in the midst of many outstanding speakers, there were two who broadened my thinking beyond the ELCA to the Church in the world. Rev. Susan Johnson, National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, spoke emotionally about the realities of the Church in Canada and the difficult decisions before them as they consider their mission going forward. Another, Bishop-Elect of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, shared the challenges of daily living in the small Christian minority in the Holy Land. He brought what we see in the nightly news to stark reality. While we pray for our own church, we must remember the Church around the world.

Finally, I can never put into this limited space the joy of giving thanks to Bishop Eaton for her two terms of service and voting in an ecclesiastical process that led to the election of Bishop-Elect Yehiel Curry and Secretary Lucille “Ce Cee” Mills. If you haven’t heard the story of our new leaders, please go to the link above. I am grateful to all who were behind the details of the Assembly. Putting something like this together that ran without a blip, took herculean effort. I was blessed to make new friends within our Synod and throughout the ELCA. I am honored to be part of this Church in such a time as this and I give thanks to God for that!

Rev. Austin English

Peace Lutheran Church, Manhattan, KS

“For the life of the world.” What a beautiful and deep theme for this year's Churchwide Assembly. The week was long, exhausting, HOT, and totally worth attending. I would do it all over again if I were so blessed in the future. If you are on the fence about whether you should attend in the future, I strongly urge you to consider doing so.

There has been a lot of talk about statistics in our denomination; namely, attendance numbers and financial giving are down. On top of that, numerous congregations have left the ELCA. One could see all these things and believe that dark times and difficult conversations, or decisions are ahead of us. However, God is not done. In fact, God has never and will never abandon the Church. God never leaves because, as our theme suggests, “For the life of the world.” While we are focused on the negative statistics of membership and how red our budget is, God is doing so much more for the world. For example, in the past three years, ELCA World Hunger has distributed over 73 million dollars. Likewise, they have given out 650 million dollars in the last 50 years. In the same fashion, Lutheran Disaster Relief has given out 51 million dollars to 62 different countries. God is moving, working, and thriving in the world, and as a result, lives are being changed. While we focus on the negative, God is bringing forth new life, new beginnings all around us.

Friends, that is only the beginning. At this Churchwide Assembly, we voted, with a vast majority, to approve a new social statement focused on faith and civic life of the ELCA. It was proclaimed that it is God through the sacraments that empowers all people to seek the well-being of their neighbor. God worked through the assembly to loudly and boldly proclaim that all people from all backgrounds are one, loved, and redeemed people. As such, we should use not only our hands and feet but our voices to lift each other up. When the world is divided, God unites, all for the life and benefit of the world.

I cannot properly sum up a week in Phoenix in this short message. I encourage you to read as much as you can about what was done. Thank you for allowing me to go to my first and hopefully not last Churchwide Assembly.

Dr. Terrence L. Freeman

For the Life of the World: The Space In-Between

Spoken Word Reflection for the ELCA Churchwide Assembly

St. Philips Lutheran Church, St. Louis, MO

There is a space
between the shout and the whisper,
between the open hand
and the clenched fist,
between the altar and the street
where holy tension lives.
We gather in **that** space.
Not as tourists in suffering,
but as travelers in **truth**
torn between *now* and *not yet*,
between what justice demands,
and what patience requires.
We want to get it right.
But some are still waiting
for us to simply get it **done**.

This is the space in-between
where the gospel isn't just preached,
it is **risked**.
Where reconciliation
is not the absence of conflict,
but the presence of **courage**,
in rooms that remember pain
and still dare to speak.
Where accountability
is not punishment,
but a **promise** to walk differently,
to step where we once stumbled,
to lift what we once ignored.
Where grace is not permission to stall,
but fuel for **transformation**.

Where DEI is not branding,
but **belonging**.
Where intersectionality
is not complication,
but **clarity**.
The realization that we are braided,
not broken.

We live here,
between ancient scroll and the scroll bar,
between tradition and translation,
between the Exodus and Acts,
between what we inherited,
and what we *must* pass on better.

Jesus walked in this space,
between power and powerlessness,
between synagogue and wilderness,
between calling out
and calling in.
He did not wait
for **consensus** to heal.
He **breathed** in broken places.
He **sat** with the undeserving.
He **named** what others denied.
And now,
if we dare,
He lives in **us**.
Not as mascot.
Not as symbol.
But as **movement**,
as **mirror**,
as message

with muddy feet
and holy scars.

So we listen.

We lament.

We rise.

We stumble.

We keep showing up.

Because the in-between
is not indecision.

It is **incarnation**.

It is **becoming**.

A space where the Spirit stretches us
toward something not yet visible,
but undeniably **real**.

We prayed.

We listened.

We chose.

And in that thermometer-hot Phoenix air
the Spirit breathed cooler truth,
and it was **Christ that rose**.

Yes!

Christ that rose

from the ashes
of despair
and conflict.

This is sacred ground,
where grace meets gravity,
and tradition holds hands with tomorrow.

And we must remember,

We are not only disciples.

We are **future ancestors**.

What we do now

plants trees we may never sit beneath.

But someone will.

And under that shade,

a child may find rest,

a stranger may find welcome,

a community may find fruit

from the seeds we dared to sow.

And in the space between prayer,
discernment,

and answer

history may reveal

that it was never ours

to get it all right,

but to **set the table**

and include the guests

who will.

Let us walk it **boldly**.

Let us walk it **together**.

Let us walk it with Jesus!

Not beside us,

but **in us**.

Richard Gates

Peace Lutheran Church, Joplin, MO

Being named onto the ballot for Secretary of the ELCA opened me to both unexpected experience and new perspective. Not among individuals pre-identified as being open to the position, I received two votes on the first ballot. With support from other Central States voting members, I allowed my name to remain on the ballot and received 16 votes on the second vote, which was enough to place me at number 12 in the results. While not among the top seven who carried on to the third ballot, I am very grateful to all those who encouraged me to be open to the Spirit in this process of discernment. One result of this was that I remained keenly attentive to the candidates who moved forward as they had the opportunity to share more about themselves and what they would bring to the position.

The duties of the Secretary of the ELCA and the Secretary's Office are vast, and many of these were demonstrated first-hand throughout the assembly — everything from management of assembly arrangements to coordination of constitutional amendments to statistical reports to archival research currently underway to publication of official documents to interpretation of the constitutions of the church. Since many of these activities align with my role as Central States Synod Administrator, I listened especially carefully as the top three people proceeding to the fourth ballot answered a question about what kind of lens they would bring to the position. I can only imagine how I might have answered that question if I were at the podium; but, in my own thoughts, I found myself drawn to the assembly's theme. Statistics, archives, rosters, amendments, resolutions, memorials, and votes from the assembly floor all must inevitably acknowledge death: a term ends, a congregation disbands, history of a past injustice must be recognized for effects continuing today, a memorial's well-intended but less-than-collaborative "resolve" statement damages a relationship, a vote's outcome is "no." But our faith is that death is not the end, and that, too, was also evident in many ways throughout the assembly, albeit sometimes subtly and, upon occasion, even slyly!

Which brings me to this point: I believe the interpretative lens to place upon bylaws, memorials, reports, and even parliamentary rules is actually very well-stated in these words: *For the Life of the World*. Picture it: Instead of viewing and using such documents as instruments of ending or "getting what I want," what if we first "look to Jesus" (as Hebrews 12:2 invites us this coming Sunday) and then encounter them as opportunities toward life? In other words, that through all the types of death that we might experience as church together — procedurally ("we will now proceed to debate whether we will close debate"), apologetically (in the Book of Concord sort of way), distrustfully (sometimes evident on the assembly floor in Phoenix), or otherwise — Christ continues to call us out from any such death and back into life for one another, for neighbor, and for the world as a whole. This is the gospel lens I carry forward from this churchwide assembly and which will now brighten in a fresh way my view of constitutions, *Robert's Rules of Order*, governance policies, and perhaps even annual reports!

Rev. Kaylie Ines

Olsburg Lutheran Church, Olsburg, KS

Walsburg Lutheran Church, Walsburg, KS

When Bishop Eaton was first elected as Presiding Bishop, she outlined four convictions for the Church: we are church. We are Lutheran. We are church together. We are church for the sake of the world. So we gathered under the theme, “For the Life of the World.” Under this theme, we were invited into our calling to be the church for the sake of others, for the sake of the world, for the sake of life and life abundantly.

In his address to the Assembly Bishop-Elect Rev. Imad Haddad (Jordan and the Holy Land) told the Assembly, “But the time for prayers alone has passed. We need prayers and action.” These words echoed the hunger for justice as memorial D4 was up for debate. Memorial D4 is a resolution that calls on U.S. leaders to end military aid used in the destruction of Gaza and to recognize the genocide of Palestinians. This wasn’t political posturing, it was the church living into its vocation—for the life of the world.

The Assembly also set a goal for 20% youth and young adult representation in churchwide leadership. Too often, we speak about young people as the future while refusing to trust them with the present, failing to realize that youth and young adults are not only the future, they are the present. Another vote the Assembly made was to strike the phrase “marriage is between a man and a woman” from the social statement [Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust](#). Again, removing this language wasn’t just policy; it was about the life of the world.

Such amendments and memorials represent how we are church for the world, not of the world. There, of course, is policy and procedure that the ELCA is legally bound to follow. However, the Churchwide Assembly showed us that there are times when we as Church must sacrifice the risk of policy and procedures and remember that at the end of all of this, we aren’t discussing rules; we are discussing actual living people. Procedures, policies, and prayers are no longer enough; we must take strong action for the sake of our neighbors experiencing life and life abundantly.

In these changes and elections, the ELCA grew roots for the life of the world and took monumental steps in loving our neighbors and God. This gathering was an overwhelming sign of hope for so many.

Megan Mong

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Salina, KS

This was my fourth assembly as a voting member, and I am truly so blessed to have been able to go to so many while still so young. I love seeing our theology in action in how we conduct business and interact with people from other synods and guests from other denominations. Churchwide assemblies always make me so proud of the work we have done, while also becoming even more aware of just how much more work we have to do. This year was no exception. Churchwide assembly is a great example of grace in action. We got to witness how easily we can inflict harm with our words, a careless joke, or a bad biblical interpretation, but also how to take accountability and work together to bring justice.

One of my favorite parts of assemblies is getting to meet with some of our global partners in ministry. This year, one of our special guests was Bishop-elect Imad Haddad of the Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). We were able to hear a moving message from him during our Wednesday service about what living under occupation is like, and later he was able to address the entire assembly about the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Later, the assembly discussed the memorials addressing Palestine and Israel. I am proud of our denomination's response and our commitment to our Lutheran theology to call a thing what it actually is. While we still have a long way to go, I am especially excited to connect with the ELCA's Sumud initiative. Sumud is the ELCA's response to occupation and injustice in the Holy Land by accompanying the ELCJHL and advocating and raising awareness with them in the United States.

Rev. Chris Naig

Trinity Lutheran Church, Chesterfield, MO

It was an honor to be selected to attend the ELCA Churchwide Assembly for the first time. I very much appreciated the opportunity to attend, experience, and learn side by side with others from the ELCA.

Thank you.

Here are some takeaways from this experience that I would like to share:

- Attending this assembly meant a lot to digest and discern – the large amount of information being discussed at once took more out of me than I had anticipated.
- As a first-time attendee, trying to stay on track with the discussion points: what memorial, an amendment to an amendment with a different version, etc., caused more confusion than understanding and being able to engage in the information.
- I was disheartened that we took such a Palestine-only stand in [memorial D4](#). However, some hope was brought about as representatives of the Sumud initiative – the ELCA's response to occupation and injustice in Palestine and Israel – and its partners presented on their work and ministry in both

Palestine and Israel. The Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) stated at the ELCA Assembly, “the death of every citizen of Gaza is a tragedy, full stop.” Rick Jacobs, President of the URJ, expressed that the memorial the Assembly passed on [day 3](#) will make Jewish people feel less safe. Bishop Eaton acknowledged the nature of the ELCA’s history of being a “both-and” church in an “either-or” world. Bishop Eaton went on to say, “The things we face in our own country and in our own church and all that’s going on in Israel and Palestine are just not that simple.” Amen!

Being a first-time attendee brought some fabulous highlights for me.

- The election of Bishop Yehiel Curry. His apprentice style of leadership, his explanation, and authentic Holy Spirit-driven proclamation of the Gospel are incredible.
- The election of Secretary Lucille “CeCee” Mills. Her talk about the ELCA constitution as a living document, a mission statement that lives beyond people, was enjoyable.
- Impressed that Justice fatigue was a discussion point.
- Overjoyed to hear Imran Siddiqui, ELCA Vice President, say, “something near to my heart is the systemic devaluation of lay leadership in our church.”
- The passage of the social statement: “Faith and Civic Life; Seeking the Wellbeing of All.”
- Great to hear that worship attendance has grown by 130,000 since 2021. Synod Secretary, Sue Rothmeyer’s positive statement: “we are seeing signs of renewed engagement.”

Throughout the week, I often echoed back to Bishop Elizabeth Eaton words from our opening worship: “The world wants to divide us, but the eucharist brings us together,” and “In the eucharist, we are ‘re-membered,’ and in God, nothing is lost.”

Re-membered. Our ELCA is not a hierarchy with a chain of command. Our three expressions of the ELCA: congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization came together at this assembly to discuss and act upon what God is calling us to be.

This assembly had a strong youth presence, and many stood to share their thoughts and feelings, which I believe positively impacted the votes and the direction that our church is moving.

There is a lot of discernment and work of the Holy Spirit before us all!

“What are we going to do now for the sake of the world?” was the refrain of the sending worship service... reminding us that we are called to action just like Peter when Jesus told him to “feed my sheep.”

Thank you for being part of this journey with us. Thank you for your prayers for all of your voting members of the 2025 Churchwide Assembly.

Carol R. Swenson

Trinity Lutheran Church, McPherson, KS

Meeting under the theme “For the Life of the World,” this was my first time at a Churchwide Assembly, and what an experience it was! There was inspiring worship, elections of a new Presiding Bishop and Secretary, discussion, and votes on memorials and constitution changes. We saw the worldwide outreach of our Mission Support gifts and met ELCA Lutherans from across the USA and around the world! A total of 865 registered voting members from 65 synods, plus special guests and visitors attended! There were eleven plenary sessions plus worship and meals over six long, intense days, in a very hot Phoenix, AZ. It was an amazing experience I wish every ELCA member could have!

Having attended our Central States Synod Assembly multiple times, I thought Lutherans from Kansas and Missouri could sing, but the combined voices of over 800 Lutherans from across the ELCA and several foreign countries, both in worship as well as during the plenary sessions, were even more amazing, as was the accompaniment by the multi-talented musicians!

Watching the Holy Spirit work through the ecclesiastical selection process as we discerned each vote was inspiring! With 77 candidates for Bishop and 104 candidates for Secretary cast on each of the first ballots, both elections saw an amazing cross-section of our churchwide body put forth as worthy candidates and required the maximum five ballots to see Yehiel Curry (currently Bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod) elected as the next Presiding Bishop and The Rev. Lucille “CeCee” Mills (currently Assistant to the Bishop of the North Carolina Synod) elected as Secretary. As the first black Bishop of the ELCA, Curry said, “I’m what a return on your investment looks like. I never saw myself as good enough, so for two years, I said no. When I said yes, your support, this church’s support of that ministry, meant everything. So, if you want to know what your benevolence dollars look like, it looks like me. Thank you for your investment.”

Assembly business covered a wide variety of topics: “Civic Life and Faith” social statement; Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery; Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church (CRLC); the importance of lay leadership; and a revision of the “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” social statement. Memorials included: “Indian Boarding School Remembrance,” a celebration of the church’s ecumenical partnerships and the 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed; recognition of its federal chaplains; and a memorial for “Palestinian Rights and End to Occupation of Palestine.”

The assembly was noticeably “less gray” than years past, with an increased number of younger voting members present and speaking. An amendment to the Constitution to increase the percentage goal of youth and young adult voting membership of Churchwide Assembly, Church Council, and churchwide boards and committees from 10% to 20% generated considerable discussion before ultimately passing. While it was disturbing to hear our denomination has been losing approximately 1% of its congregations and 4% of its membership annually since prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, since 2021, on-site weekly attendance has increased by 130,000.

The 2028 ELCA Churchwide Assembly will be held in Des Moines, Iowa, August 7-11. If you have an opportunity to attend, do so! It’s an experience you’ll never forget!