

SYNOD COUNCIL MEETING
Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Hoffman House, Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania
July 9, 2016

ATTENDANCE. Synod Council Members Present: Barbara Belón, Dr. Donald Boyer, Stacie Bray, David Derr, Marlane Druckenmiller, Thomas Engle, Pr. Charles Grube, David Hinrichs, Ruth Major, M. Jeannette Richardson, Pr. Deborah Scheffey, Pr. Carl Shankweiler, Donald F. Smith Jr., Pr. Suzanne Trump, Victor Unks, Bishop Samuel Zeiser.

Synod Council Members Excused: Pr. Oliver Brown, Madeline Deegan, Linda Eroh, Pr. Gary Walbert.

Synod Council Members Absent: Pr. June Bair, Jessica Kingsborough, Elizabeth Leibenguth, Ethan Melber, Martin Milne. Marilyn Mazsa, representing the Women of the ELCA, was absent; she is not a member of the synod council but is welcome to attend and report about that ministry.

Synod Staff Member Present: Pr. D. Michael Bennethum, Executive Associate of the Bishop and Director of Evangelical Mission.

Guests: Jim Carey, Pr. Callista Isabelle.

OPENING ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCTIONS. Vice President Donald Smith opened the meeting at 9:15 a.m., asking all persons present to introduce themselves.

EUCCHARIST. Bishop Samuel Zeiser presided at an opening Eucharist. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation in the United States, he read relevant passages from the Psalms, Nehemiah, Matthew, and a sermon preached in 1530 at Coburg by Martin Luther. Luther said, “No matter how deep the water may be, we will go through it with Christ. . . . [Christ said,] ‘In me you have peace.’”

ICE BREAKER. Jim Carey led the council in an activity titled, “Synod Council Scavenger Hunt.”

ORGANIZATION AND ROLE OF THE SYNOD COUNCIL. Mr. Smith led a discussion about the role of a synod council, especially constitutional provision S10.03.a and the issue of “trusteeship.” Related to this discussion, he distributed a paper, “Major Constitutional Duties of the Synod Council.” He spoke about three foundational duties: (1) care—the need to be informed, to show independent judgment in voting, and to be responsible for acting in the best interests of the synod as a reasonable person would do; (2) loyalty—the need to be loyal to the greater church and synod, not acting like representatives of specific congregations or mission districts;

(3) obedience—the need to obey the constitution, continuing resolutions, and Scriptures. He pointed out that the word *synod* is based on two Greek words meaning “to walk together.”

Bishop Zeiser explained that the work done by the synod council is focused on the synod, but the synod is really composed of congregations. We need to talk about the good of all, i.e., the capacity to do ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. How do we help congregations carry out their ministries, and how do we empower the churchwide ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, so that congregations realize that they are involved in something beyond themselves and are part of a church that cares about them? He encouraged the council members (1) to visit the websites of the synod and ELCA to learn about their ministries and (2) to ask God to “give you the vision to serve the church in a new place.” He added, “We are about being church together.”

The specific task of conducting elections of rostered persons was discussed, with persons new to the council being given an information sheet. Mr. Smith also distributed a list of the standing committees and their duties, “Responsibilities of NEPS Synod Council Standing Committees.”

After a break, time was provided for the individual committees to meet. Some membership adjustments were made to the committee assignments as printed at the bottom of “Synod Council: 2016-2017,” which is a list of all members with their contact information.

CONSTITUTION S13.24. Mr. Smith led the council in a continued conversation about constitutional provision S13.24, which was first discussed at length on March 31, 2016. To that end he distributed a sheet, “Synod Constitution S13.24,” which included both the text of that provision as well as “thoughts for a continuing resolution in support of Section S13.24.”

Mr. Smith opened the discussion, saying that the synod council has the power to close congregations but that at the March 31 meeting there was no consensus about using that power. He indicated that he had spoken about this issue at the 2016 synod assembly, where some people told him that it was about time we discussed this issue but at which there was a failed attempt to consider a resolution to require the synod to close a congregation only when the congregation’s council asks for it to be closed. Mr. Smith related this issue to remarks made by several assembly speakers.

Pastor Michael Bennethum reviewed the Congregational Vitality Survey and its two versions, a quick check and a longer instrument. On page 3 of the longer instrument there is information about the life cycle of an organization, with organizations being able to go back to previous stages in order to deal with issues such as their core identity or a redevelopment process. If congregations are at the point where they are about to “fall off the cliff,” the best option is a rebirth in a new ministry. Pastor Bennethum also drew attention to what is said about looking at what is possible in ministry as compared to simply surviving.

David Hinrichs spoke about the need to focus on the congregations that can realistically be helped because, given the synod’s limited resources, not every congregation can be saved. To

fight to close congregations not willing to close would consume resources that are needed elsewhere. “We cannot do everything, so we need to pick our battles.”

Barbara Belón spoke about the opportunity to be very creative. For example, the dignity of a dying congregation could be maintained by using its building for one service a month while still supporting the wider church with the available resources. “We can be more creative than simply saying, ‘You’re done.’”

Mr. Smith spoke about the checklist on page 4 of the Vitality Survey instrument, which can assist a congregation in identifying its current stage in the life cycle of a congregation. That insight will show the synod staff and organization when to step in. This relates to steps one and two on the handout sheet, “Synod Constitution S13.24.” S13.24 could be used simply to force the issue.

Other observations were that it does not make sense for a church to remain open for only two or three people and that it is possible to partner with other congregations, even of different denominations. The example of Minersville with its two Lutheran congregations (English and Zion) was discussed.

A quick categorization by the staff of the synod’s congregations identified 51% as mission-focused congregations and the remainder as self-focused congregations, with another issue being that of the availability of resources: for example, a congregation can be mission focused yet lack the resources needed to undergird that mission, or a congregation can be focused on itself and still command considerable financial resources. Pastor Bennethum said that in the same process sixty-two congregations were considered to be at risk.

The question that “cries out” (Mr. Smith) is how far the synod is willing to go in pressing for closures or other major adjustments. In answer to a question by Stacie Bray, Mr. Smith observed that S13.24 does allow the appointment of trustees but that he would prefer first to introduce a resource person who could provide pastoral care. “S13.24 gives us an arrow in our quiver to use only rarely.” He then gave the example of St. John, Shenandoah, which is engaged in community ministry but has very few resources, which is why the synod assisted St. John in the past and is seeking to assist them with the help of ecumenical partners. Support is possible, but “show us that you are doing ministry.”

Mr. Smith asked if we can get our 275 congregations to complete the Vitality Survey, to which Pastor Bennethum replied that we can only ask. At this point about six percent of the congregations have gone as far as having Vitality Survey reports generated, though more congregations have used the process in their own way.

Bishop Zeiser spoke about the July 6 meeting of the synod’s officers to deal with the 2017 deficit and ongoing decline in mission support. He raised the issue of how the synod can provide support to congregations when the synod structures receive less funding. Currently we can sustain a part-time associate of the bishop in each mission district; the reality in the future

may be that congregations will be more on their own because the synod no longer has the capacity to serve 270 congregations. The synod council will need to help to shape how synodical ministry with congregations is carried out in the future.

GREETINGS FROM MUHLENBERG COLLEGE. Pastor Callista Isabelle, Chaplain for Muhlenberg College, welcomed the council and affirmed that the college wants to be the synod's "close partner." She explained that Muhlenberg is part of a network of twenty-six colleges and universities related to the ELCA. The college does not try to proselytize, nor does it want the absence of religion. There is a "third way" which is in keeping with the Lutheran tradition to welcome all people, provide a ministry of Word and Sacrament, encourage interfaith dialogue, and be a gift to society by providing education. She distributed a sheet, "Welcome to Religious Life at Muhlenberg College: How Can You Connect?" which explains how students can engage persons of various religious backgrounds. Bishop Zeiser and two other bishops are currently on the college's board of trustees, and the college is presently in the process of articulating what it means to be part of the ELCA. In reply to a question, she also spoke about student involvement in service to the community. Bishop Zeiser added that the ministry of Muhlenberg College is something our congregations are part of.

Pastor Bennethum offered prayer, and the council took a break for lunch.

REGULAR BUSINESS

CALL TO ORDER. Mr. Smith called the regular business meeting of the Synod Council to order at 12:55 p.m.

MINUTES OF THE MARCH 31 AND MAY 10 MEETINGS. The minutes of the March 31, 2016, and May 10, 2016, meetings were distributed and approved with one correction: the location of the May 10 meeting was the Lutheran Center, Schoenersville, and not Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Emanuelsville.

BISHOP'S REPORT. Bishop Zeiser reported that the ELCA churchwide staff held a prayer service on June 13 concerning the June 12 shooting that claimed the lives of 49 people at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida; this service can be found on the ELCA website.

He summarized the evaluations of the synod's 2016 assembly, which are available for any synod council members wishing to see them. There are many different kinds of responses. One suggestion was the need for more interaction in the "playground." Mr. Hinrichs said that there seemed to be many new assembly participants this year, which is good. Next year will be the third year of the "unleashed" theme.

Bishop Zeiser reported that he is seeking to involve Beth Lewis, President & CEO of 1517 Media (Augsburg Fortress, Fortress Press, Sparkhouse), in helping our synod move forward in looking at our values as a synod so that our ministries reflect those values. This contact is to be made in preparation for a discussion with the synod's officers.

Looking forward to the 2016 churchwide assembly, August 8-13 in New Orleans, Bishop Zeiser said that two major items of business will be the election of a new vice president and the consolidation of all lay rosters into one. Meeting at the same time as the assembly will be "Grace Gathering," an event open to everyone. Our synod's 28 voting members will meet on July 17; still needed for our synod are a lay male member and a lay female member.

Concerning theological education in the Northeast, Bishop Zeiser reported that he and David Hinrichs will be part of a joint meeting of the Philadelphia and Gettysburg seminary boards on July 15 and that another meeting will be held in August.

He announced that the synod will no longer have support staff working at the Lutheran Center, Schoenersville, between Christmas and New Year's Day. The building will be closed.

He also announced that two of our synod's congregations recently had break-ins: (1) Christ Mertz Lutheran Church, Dryville, and (2) Maiden creek Lutheran and UCC, Blandon.

VICE PRESIDENT'S REPORT. Mr. Smith reported with regret that he will not be attending the 2016 ELCA assembly because of an accident he suffered.

SECRETARY'S REPORT. Pastor Carl Shankweiler reported that all official letters related to actions taken at the March 31 and May 10, 2016, council meetings have been sent. He also indicated that minutes of the June 29, 2016, Executive Committee are available.

TREASURER'S REPORT. Mr. Hinrichs distributed a report concerning (a) "Revenues and Expenses, All Funds" for 1995 through 2016 and (b) "Budget Performance 2007-2015." The trend is that income is down. The report of the auditors will appear in the 2016 synod minutes book.

DIRECTOR FOR EVANGELICAL MISSION REPORT. Pastor Michael Bennethum reported that in September our synod will be hosting an event for the synods of ELCA Region 7 at Christ, Allentown, concerning coaching.

He said that Common Ground, Reading, has been very effective and grown to the point that its relational nature is in danger. Therefore, Common Ground will be birthing two satellite campuses, one at Trinity, Reading, with Pastor Thomas Scornavacchi and the other at St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church, Douglassville, with a leader who is an Episcopalian.

Pastor Bennethum spoke about the conclusion of the exploration phase in the Susquehanna County initiative and the current need to consider what should be done next.

Another ministry that may be coming to a time for change is Iglesia Christiana La Hermosa, Easton, which has been a joint ministry exploration with the United Methodist Church and which may be moving towards the need for a more formal arrangement.

He also pointed to Hope's Table, Reading, a ministry for the homeless and urban poor, which is part of the ELCA network.

FINANCE COMMITTEE. David Derr explained the current experience using the MIF accounting function. Our synod is one of seven involved in this pilot project. There are "growing pains" even though in general the MIF system is working well. Reporting is lacking, so some work is being done in the Schoenersville office.

He reported that the Finance Committee recommends that the council act affirmatively on a request for a grant:

(2016.07.01) Resolved, that a grant of \$5,000 be given from the Prosser, Pahse, Mission Fund as seed money for the creation of a second campus of the Common Ground Recovery Ministry Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community in downtown Reading. The resolution was adopted.

PROGRAM COMMITTEE. Mrs. Belón stated that the committee will have a report each quarter. A short-term task is to create a task force to deal with social justice. Another immediate task is to determine what needs to be done for the next synod assembly. Mr. Smith added that the synod council will try to establish a social justice task force at its October 2016 meeting.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE. Marlane Druckenmiller thanked those persons present who were on the ballot at the 2016 synod assembly and indicated that she will thank those who were willing to stand for election but were not elected. The committee has begun looking at the needs for 2017 and meets before the regular synod council meetings.

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE. Mrs. Bray, currently a committee of one, will work to have a report in October.

EN BLOCK RESOLUTIONS. The following resolutions were presented for consideration en block. Because the Pocono and East Berks Mission District budgets have not actually been reviewed by the synod council, Mrs. Belón asked that they be removed from en block consideration, which was done. The item concerning the Minersville-Buck Run Pastoral Charge, which was presented to the council as being dissolved in 2016, was corrected to read 2015 (as printed below). For the Good Shepherd nominees, biographical information was given to the council in a printed handout. Items 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 were then approved unanimously.

1. **(2016.07.02)** Resolved, that the 2017 budget of the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Mission District be approved.

2. Resolved, that the 2016-2017 budget of the Pocono Mission District be approved. (Not acted upon.)

3. Resolved, that the 2017 budget of the East Berks Mission District be approved. (Not acted upon.)
4. **(2016.07.03)** Resolved, that future meeting dates for the council be established as follows:
 - October 12, 2016, 3:00 p.m.
 - January 18, 2017, 3:00 p.m. (snow date, January 31)
 - March 23, 2017, 3:00 p.m.
5. **(2016.07.04)** Resolved, that in accordance with section S13.21 of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Constitution, that the Minersville-Buck Run Pastoral Charge be dissolved, effective May 14, 2015.
6. **(2016.07.05)** Resolved, that in accordance with ELCA bylaw 7.41.17. and upon endorsement by the bishop, the following rostered leaders be granted the roster status of retired:
 - The Rev. Christian Matthy (May 1, 2016)
 - The Rev. Frank Terhune (June 30, 2016)
 - The Rev. Linda Bonfiglio (August 31, 2016)
 - Diaconal Minister Jane Mason (July 12, 2016)
7. **(2016.07.06)** Resolved, that Jaan Naktin, Peter Quinn, and Donald Snyder be elected to three-year terms on the Board of Trustees of the Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Network, terms commencing in 2016; and that Steven Morrison be elected to a three-year term, 2016-2019, to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of Rosalin Petrucci.

NEW BUSINESS.

1. Bear Creek Camp Director Dan Scharnhorst sent to the council a memorandum explaining the fundraising campaign desired by the camp's board of directors. The campaign would include a "quiet phase" (with Mr. Scharnhorst asking that this matter indeed be kept quiet for the present) for the camp's board members and major donors followed by a "public phase" for broader contact with potential donors. In reply to this request for approval for the campaign, the following resolution was moved by Mrs. Belón, seconded by Ms. Druckenmiller, and was adopted:

(2016.07.07) Resolved, that in accordance with S15.21 of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod's constitution, Bear Creek Camp be granted permission to enter into a fundraising campaign to raise up to \$240,000 for the purpose of replacing the current army-style tents with permanent cabins.

2. Pastor Charles Grube, seconded by Mr. Hinrichs, moved the following resolution, which was adopted. This resolution became necessary because there were no remaining alternatives in the lay male category for service at the 2016 ELCA assembly.

(2016.07.08) Resolved, that Mark Stana be appointed to serve as a voting member at the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, replacing Brandon Wood who is unable to fulfill the responsibility to which he was elected.

3. Mrs. Bray, seconded by Ruth Major, made the following resolution concerning the Northampton Lutheran Joint Parish. In response to a question from Mr. Hinrichs concerning whether this action can be taken at so late a date, Pastor Bennethum explained that the congregations involved in this action have been “living into” this relationship and are now ready to take action, so this would be their first actual act since creating a covenant in 2013. It is necessary to take this retroactive action now, since it was not done at the time the two congregations voted to create a pastoral charge. The resolution was then adopted.

(2016.07.09) Resolved, that in accordance with section S13.21 of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Constitution, that the Northampton Lutheran Joint Parish, consisting of the congregations of Zion, Northampton, and Holy Trinity Slovak, Northampton, be created, effective October 1, 2013.

4. Copies of the 2016-2017 budget for the Schuylkill Mission District as approved by that district’s council on June 30, 2016, were distributed. Donald Boyer, seconded by Mr. Hinrichs, moved the following resolution, which was adopted.

(2016.07.10) Resolved, that the 2016-2017 budget of the Schuylkill Mission District be approved.

5. **(2016.07.11)** Resolved, that effective June 1, 2016, a call to special service be issued to the Rev. Richard B. Baumann to provide pastoral services to Christ Church (Old Swedes), Upper Merion, a congregation of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. This motion was made by Pastor Deborah Scheffey, seconded by Mr. Derr, and was adopted.

OTHER REPORTS.

Bishop Zeiser reported that Shana Rose will be unable to serve as a voting member of the 2016 ELCA assembly and that the first alternate lay female elected at the 2015 synod assembly, Linda Eroh, will serve in her place.

Pastor Shankweiler reported about the work of the constitution committee and the compilation being presented of continuing resolutions and other resolutions with ongoing impact in the life of the synod. The members of the council were asked to read the report of the committee, which was distributed to them, in anticipation of action being taken at the October 2016 council meeting.

He also offered an update on the attempted sale of two church properties that currently belong to the synod: (1) Ascension, Quakake, and (2) St. Mark, Lackawaxen.

DEBRIEFING.

Bishop Zeiser led a discussion about the nature of the meeting. Among the persons making comments, Thomas Engle said that he felt welcomed but overwhelmed, while Jeannette Richardson found the meeting to be informative. Mr. Smith said that he welcomes an engaged board. Council members were invited to correct the contact information included in the list of members.

ADJOURNMENT. Mr. Smith declared the meeting adjourned at 2:07 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Carl D. Shankweiler, Secretary