

**SYNOD COUNCIL MEETING**  
**Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
**Advent Lutheran Church, West Lawn, Pennsylvania**  
**March 23, 2017**

**ATTENDANCE.** Synod Council Members Present: Pr. June Bair, Barbara Belón, Dr. Donald Boyer, Stacie Bray, Pr. Oliver Brown, David Derr, Marlane Druckenmiller, Pr. Charles Grube, David Hinrichs, Pr. Jessica Kingsborough, Elizabeth Leibenguth, Ruth Major, Ethan Melber, Jeannette Richardson, Larry Rissmiller, Pr. Deborah Scheffey, Pr. Carl Shankweiler, Donald F. Smith Jr., Pr. Suzanne Trump, Victor Unks, Pr. Gary Walbert, Bishop Samuel Zeiser.

Synod Council Members Excused: Madeline Deegan, Thomas Engle, Linda Eroh, Pr. Martin Milne.

Synod Council Members Absent: None.

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

**CALL TO ORDER.** Vice President Donald F. Smith Jr. called the meeting of the Synod Council of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod to order at 3:02 p.m.

**GREETINGS.** Bishop Zeiser introduced Pastor Mark Rigg of Advent Lutheran Church, the host for the meeting, who then introduced Mr. George Freestone, an active member of Advent. They presented a power point program that showed the major renovations recently made to Advent's original 1920s building. The cost for the work was \$1.5 million, with roughly \$500,000 raised so far. These renovations have given the congregation much greater flexibility in carrying out its ministries.

**COUNCIL DEVELOPMENT.** Ruth Major of the Program Committee led the council in a discussion based on the question, "What do you fear for your local congregation and/or the Church as a whole?" Five small groups met and then shared their answers: (1) the separation of church from everyday life, low attendance; (2) being building-focused, the lumping of all Christians together with the groups that are extreme; (3) membership, finances in that money is put into buildings and not people; (4) communication, sustainability, intergenerational relationships, need to focus on basics, and conflict; and (5) listening to and respecting each other, seminary and student issues, worship. When a problem has been identified, then the next steps can be taken and the church can act.

**DWELLING IN THE WORD.** Bishop Samuel Zeiser led the council's devotions based on John 15:1-12 and how that passage speaks to our life together. He asked, "What scares you" in this passage in which Jesus is depicted as the true vine? After the council members shared their answers, he asked, "How would you speak to those fears?" Again, there was a time of sharing.

**MINUTES OF THE JANUARY 18 MEETING.** The minutes of the January 18, 2017, meeting were distributed and approved with the corrections that (a) "Pr." is missing before Jessica Kingsborough's name in the list of attendees and (b) Larry Rissmiller's name is incorrectly spelled as *Rismiller*.

**BISHOP'S REPORT.** Bishop Zeiser made fourteen points.

1. The 2017 ELCA first call process is now almost finished. Our synod received five graduating seminarians. There were fewer candidates in the ELCA than places needing graduates.

2. Planning for the 2017 assembly is going well with registration materials mailed out earlier this week. On February 27 Bishop Zeiser was part of a visit to the 2017 location (Kalahari Resorts and Conventions, Pocono Manor, Pa.) and was also part of a webinar about the assembly and its location.
3. At the end of January the synod staff met on three days to look at how we live out our life as synod leaders and what we do in order to hand on what is worthwhile to our successors. Bishop Zeiser said that he wants to leave the synod in 2020 in the best possible shape and transmit to the next bishop what we have learned. The staff was asked how we should function differently and what we should hold on to. Leading the staff in this discussion was Beth Lewis, President and CEO of 1517 Media. As a result of those days' work, four sub-groups were created within the staff: (1) Big Ideas Group, which is considering how to help big ideas live rather than die for lack of energy; (2) Social Media Group, which is considering how social media can assist congregations and help individuals grow in their spiritual lives; (3) Honest Communication Group, which is considering how we understand circumstances in congregations so as to have honest conversation; and (4) Get Rid of Clutter Group, which is considering forms, policies, and the booklet used in times of parish leadership change so that "new air" can enter the synod as old forms and clutter are gotten rid of.
4. The Mission Support commitments received thus far in regard to 2017 show a "slow but steady decline."
5. Theological education was a topic of the March 1-8, 2017, meeting of the Conference of Bishops. This is a time of tremendous transition in that all eight seminaries now "look different."
6. There is a challenge of congregations not being able to afford full-time pastors. This issue will require change at the churchwide level as adjustments are made in how first call rostered leaders become available.
7. The pilot project whereby the ELCA's Mission Investment Fund (MIF) has been carrying out the synod's bookkeeping requirements will end at the close of the current fiscal year, i.e., at the end of the second year of this trial, not the third year. The cost to MIF has been too great, and MIF cannot accomplish what it would like. The ending of this pilot project is not to "diminish" MIF; they carried out this project at the request of the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
8. At the March 2017 meeting of the Conference of Bishops, one theme was reconciliation on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Evangelical Reformation. Among the Roman Catholics taking part was Bishop Joseph C. Bambera of the Diocese of Scranton.
9. Bishop Zeiser reported that he will attend a March 27-29 meeting in Washington, D.C., concerning the ELCA's national advocacy ministry.
10. April 25-26, 2017, will be the last meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Pastor Cheryl F. Meinschein will serve for this synod on the board of the new United Lutheran Seminary. For a while there will remain a trustee role for the previous board for the Philadelphia property.
11. Bishop Zeiser said that he is receiving a large number of calls for ordinations and installations.
12. The synod has been informed by letter that St. John's, Gibraltar, will hold its first vote on April 23 on whether or not to leave the ELCA.

13. Pastor Kurt Garbe prepared a memorandum concerning the potential cost to the synod for retired rostered persons to attend synod assemblies at synod expense.

14. Bishop Zeiser recommended that the two-day synod assembly for 2018 should be June 8 and 9 with June 7 reserved for setting up the assembly.

**VICE PRESIDENT'S REPORT.** Mr. Smith spoke about what he wants to accomplish before his last day in office (August 31, 2017):

1. Finish action on the sabbatical policy for the bishop.
2. Bring the synod council handbook up to date.
3. Working with Atty. Stephen G. Welz—who handled the legal issues of Calvary, Laureldale, and Epiphany, Temple—and with Pr. Carl Shankweiler, finish preparing materials to deal with the closing of congregations and the specific issue of congregations spending down their endowments.

He indicated that he will be engaged with Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania (LAMPa), in regard to which he urged all council members to respond positively to LAMPa's call. He also reported that he and his wife made a pledge towards the no-tuition scholarship effort at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia/United Lutheran Seminary.

He said that he wants to do a shout-out to the East Berks Mission District on their Katie's Brew project to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Evangelical Reformation.

**SECRETARY'S REPORT.** Pastor Carl Shankweiler reported that an email vote by the Executive Committee was requested on February 24, 2017, to approve the sale of St. Mark's, Lackawaxen, at a reduced price of \$46,000; the request was unanimously approved with all committee members voting in the affirmative.

Concerning the recommended amendments to the synodical constitution, Pastor Shankweiler explained that the constitution committee did not meet yet to formulate a recommendation for action concerning the optional amendments originating in the 2016 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**TREASURER'S REPORT.** David Hinrichs explained that a budget sets forth how we will use our money. Although we speak about the decline in synod income, because of the rise in the stock market the synod's total assets at the end of 2016 were \$280,000 more than at the end of 2015. However, it is true that Mission Support was \$200,000 less than the projection on which the budget was based. Therefore, \$90,000 more was spent than received through Mission Support. By the current formula, 47 percent of all Mission Support dollars go to the ELCA's churchwide ministries. Forty-three percent of the Mission Support income is what the synod has for its direct ministries after the ELCA and the agencies supported by the synod receive their shares.

#### **DIRECTOR FOR EVANGELICAL MISSION REPORT.**

Pastor Michael Bennethum reported that 181 Mission Support intentions for 2017 have been received, with the returns suggesting a \$38,000 decline compared to 2016.

Because MIF cannot tell the synod which January 2017 remittances related to 2016 and which to 2017, it will be impossible to provide congregations with certificates of giving for 2016. Congregations will receive thank-you letters.

Concerning new ministries, clarity should soon be achieved concerning the future and governance of Iglesia Cristiana La Hermosa, the joint Lutheran-Methodist Hispanic ministry in Easton. Also to be clarified is whether Common Ground at Douglassville will be a joint Lutheran-Episcopalian venture or purely Episcopalian.

The Renewing Congregations grant process is being reviewed. More money is available for grants, but the process is being studied. The grants will now be called Congregational Vitality grants.

**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.** Mr. Smith explained that the items related to the Executive Committee were covered elsewhere in the meeting.

**FINANCE COMMITTEE.** David Derr explained that a spending proposal for 2018 is needed, but the committee is not asking for a vote at this time. The latest draft shows a deficit of \$82,000, and so changes will be made. When the proposal is finished, it will be sent to the council members for an electronic vote, which will take place before the proposal is sent to the voting members of the 2017 assembly. The Executive Committee and Finance Committee are wrestling with these issues.

**PROGRAM COMMITTEE.** Barbara Belón explained that the answers given in the day's opening exercise will be considered by the committee. She spoke about God's Playground, which will be part of the 2017 assembly, and the need to encourage persons to attend this interactive experience. She pointed to the evening time for this event as perhaps the best time for visitors to the assembly. She requested the council members' help in promoting God's Playground.

**ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE.** Stacie Bray reported that the sabbatical policy being developed will apply to the bishop only at this point. The committee has raised issues that need to be answered in formulating the policy, such as when a sabbatical will be allowed, the reasons for it, how long a sabbatical can last, and who would perform the work of the bishop during his/her absence. Bishop Zeiser said that this policy will not be for his benefit but for his successors and stated that he will provide input to help answer the committee's issues.

**NOMINATING COMMITTEE.** Marlane Druckenmiller reported that documents for nominating persons to synod offices are now on the website. Still needed are nominees for the offices of vice president and treasurer and for a lay female synod council member at large. She spoke about the need for background checks, which are free for volunteers if done through the state police. For the treasurer, a financial background check is needed, which has to be done by a company that carries out such checks with the cost being determined by the depth of the study. She said that she herself will be the person to receive the reports and that she will only report problems, not general information about the candidates. Anyone nominated from the floor needs to complete the required background checks by September 1.

Mr. Smith explained that the Executive Committee proposes the following resolution, which was adopted:

(2017.03.01) Resolved, that Ms. Marlane Druckenmiller be the person authorized to receive background checks on behalf of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod for nominees to synod offices and other leadership positions.

**EN BLOC ITEMS.** The following resolutions were adopted en bloc:

(2017.03.02) The following resolution is recommended to the 2017 Synod Assembly: Resolved, that the 2017 Assembly program (as printed in the Bulletin of Reports) be adopted.

(2017.03.03) Resolved, that the synod council extend an invitation to the Rev. Melinda Artman, an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Episcopal Church, USA, to serve as pastor of St. John, Sayre, beginning April 2, 2017.

(2017.03.04) Resolved, that a two-year call to special service be issued to the Rev. Jeffrey Bohan to serve as the interim pastor of Trinity, Clarks Summit, beginning March 1, 2017

(2017.03.05) Resolved, that in accordance with sections 7.31.16. and 7.52.22. of the ELCA Constitution, "on leave from call" status be approved as follows:

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| Clergy (third year):                    | The Rev. James Hammond   |
| Clergy (extension beyond family leave): | The Rev. Kim Truebenbach |

(2017.03.06) Resolved, that in accordance with ELCA bylaw 7.41.17. and upon endorsement by the bishop, the following rostered leader be granted the roster status of "retired":

The Rev. Gregory Shreaves, 4/23/2017

**NEW BUSINESS.** Having received a memorandum from Pastor Kurt Garbe, as reported by Bishop Zeiser, concerning the financial exposure faced by the synod because of the longstanding practice of offering to pay the assembly costs of retired rostered leaders, Pastor Shankweiler, seconded by Jeannette Richardson, moved the following resolution, which was adopted:

(2017.03.07). Resolved, that beginning with the 2018 Synod Assembly and for all assemblies thereafter, the synod will no longer offer to cover the room and meal costs for retired rostered leaders not serving congregations or other ministry sites to attend synod assemblies but will waive the registration fees if requested.

The need to set the assembly dates for 2018 was raised, and Ms. Bray, seconded by Pastor Oliver Brown, moved the following resolution, which was adopted:

(2017.03.08). Resolved, that the dates of the 2018 Synod Assembly of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod be established as June 7 to June 9, with June 7 being a day for setting up for the assembly.

Elizabeth Leibenguth requested that council meetings of this length include a break. Although no vote was taken on her suggestion, it was affirmed by those present.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS.** Pr. Bennethum made several housekeeping announcements, and Mr. Hinrichs offered to the council members copies of the 2016 audit report.

**ADJOURNMENT.** Mr. Smith asked for a motion to adjourn, which was made by Ms. Druckenmiller, seconded by Miss Leibenguth, and adopted. He thereby declared the meeting adjourned at 5:43 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Carl D. Shankweiler, Secretary