

**SYNOD COUNCIL MEETING**  
**Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
**St. Luke Lutheran Church, 449 N. 9<sup>th</sup> St., Reading, Pennsylvania**  
**March 15, 2018**

**ATTENDANCE.** Synod Council Members Present: Dr. Barbara Belón, Dr. Donald Boyer, Pr. Oliver Brown, David Derr, Donald Dillman, Marlane Druckenmiller, Thomas Engle, Linda Eroh, Pr. Charles Grube, Elizabeth Leibenguth, Louise McCloughan, Pr. Nelson Quiñones, Jeannette Richardson, Larry Rissmiller, Pr. Deborah Scheffey, Pr. Carl Shankweiler, Pr. Suzanne Trump, Victor Unks, Bishop Samuel Zeiser.

Synod Council Members Excused: Ruth Major, Ethan Melber, Pr. Gary Walbert

Synod Council Members Absent: Pr. June Bair, Pr. Jessica Kingsborough

Other Persons Present: Pr. D. Michael Bennethum, Executive Associate of the Bishop and Director of Evangelical Mission; Kathy Walter, representative of the Women of the ELCA

**CALL TO ORDER.** Vice President Barbara Belón called the meeting to order at 3:04 p.m.

**OPENING DEVOTIONS.** Bishop Samuel Zeiser read Colossians 1:1-14 and offered prayer.

**WOMEN OF THE ELCA.** Dr. Belón reported that the opening experience that Pastor Oliver Brown was prepared to lead could not be held because he needed to conduct a funeral and will arrive late. She then invited Kathy Walter, representative of the Women of the ELCA, to make her report.

Ms. Walter spoke about the justice event that the Women of the ELCA held at St. Paul, Summer Hill, with Tracey DePasquale, Director of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania (LAMPa), as the speaker. The 2018 Women of the ELCA convention will take place June 2 at Schwartzwald Lutheran Church, Jacksonwald, with the theme being “Love One Another.” There was a discussion about the ways in which Women of the ELCA can take part in the 2018 synod assembly.

**GREETINGS FROM THE HOST CONGREGATION.** Marlane Druckenmiller, a former staff member for Christian education (1980-1988) at the host congregation of St. Luke’s, Reading, and current volunteer, spoke about the present state of the congregation and pointed to an article in the Reading Eagle (March 10, 2018, “How Churches Can Heal During Hard Times”) concerning her providing hospice care for the congregation as an organization in that the average attendance is now 29 as compared to a 1946 membership peak of 3,400 baptized members and 2,700 confirmed members. Ms. Druckenmiller reviewed the history of the congregation from its beginnings in the 1860s with 15 members, through its growth (by 1910 St. Luke’s was the largest congregation in Pennsylvania), through the 1926 construction of its current worship space with a capacity of up to 1,600 persons, and to the 1968 building of the current Christian education facility. Even in 1986 there were still 1,434 members, and St. Luke’s was the largest Protestant congregation in Reading. Now the 2017 Christmas Eve attendance

was 42 from a baptized membership of 294, with most members being 53 to 107 years of age. Ms. Druckenmiller explained two mission adjustment strategies that did not work: starting a Spanish-speaking congregation and trying to merge with another congregation.

**MINUTES OF JANUARY 24.** After Ms. Druckenmiller pointed to an extra letter in the spelling of her name on the last page of the minutes of January 24, 2018, those synod council minutes were approved as distributed and corrected on a motion by Dr. Donald Boyer, seconded by Pr. Nelson Quiñones.

**BISHOP'S REPORT.** Bishop Zeiser reported that since the last council meeting he performed two ordinations, one of which was for the Metropolitan New York Synod following the resignation of Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo. He also conducted two installations of Word and Sacrament pastors and one installation of a Word and Service deacon.

Bishop Zeiser explained the results of the February ELCA process concerning first call candidates. With 118 candidates available (109 for Word and Sacrament and 9 for Word and Service), 68 were available for the 65 synods after the candidates who were restricted or administratively assigned were removed from the pool. Our region (Region 7) received five of those 68 candidates (in contract to 27 requests submitted for actual openings) and already had three candidates by restriction and administrative assignment. The Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod itself received one candidate. In general, the number of candidates is diminishing, though the number of new students at the United Seminary (Philadelphia and Gettysburg) has shown an increase.

He reported about (a) the February 17 Mission Support Symposium with Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) staff member Nick Kiger and (b) the three preliminary meetings held throughout the synod before that event. In all, approximately 200 persons attended. The ELCA's desire was to build relationships with the synod concerning Mission Support, and Bishop Zeiser explained his desire that Mr. Kiger hear from the people of the synod. Bishop Zeiser thanked the members of the synod council who were able to attend the symposium, and he distributed information collected at the various meetings. He reported that additional materials have been received from ELCA staff member Victoria Flood, a colleague of Mr. Kiger. Mr. Kiger will be the ELCA representative at our 2018 assembly.

Bishop Zeiser spoke about the synod's progress in the ELCA's "Always Being Made New" campaign with our involvement standing at 85% of our synod's congregations (the goal being 100%). We are in our final year with the possibility of our extending that deadline.

He reported about the United Lutheran Seminary's being in "chaos" over the controversy surrounding the widening awareness that the new—and now outgoing—president, the Rev. Dr. Theresa F. Latini, was once involved in a Presbyterian organization that was attempting to reorient persons who are gays/lesbians. This is an involvement that Dr. Latini long ago repudiated; and yet, when this former involvement came to light, it became very upsetting to some persons, including the issue that this matter was not as widely disclosed as it might have been. Now several board members have resigned, including the Rev. Cheryl Meinschein from our synod.

Bishop Zeiser raised the issue of closing congregations, including St. Paul, Allentown, a congregation with a history of being strong and continuing to house significant ministries. St. Paul is using \$20,000 of its endowment every month to pay basic bills and has a Sunday attendance of about 35 to 40 persons. Bishop Zeiser observed, “As we go forward, we need to redefine what it means to be doing ministry and how it involves congregations.” Also in Allentown, both Grace Lutheran and San Martine de Porres will be closing. “We need to think about what it means to be a Lutheran presence in this part of Pennsylvania. The number of viable congregations will be smaller. What is God calling us to in all of this?” He observed that we cannot afford to support as many congregations as we have (now down to 264 plus 3 authorized worshipping communities).

Dr. Boyer responded with comments about the need to find ways to get Lutherans to work with other Lutherans. Pastor Suzanne Trump spoke to our addiction to buildings, and Pastor Quiñones expanded that concern to include church organs and other physical things. Other comments included our need to be in a leadership position and to encourage the giving away of assets intentionally to help others.

**VICE PRESIDENT’S REPORT.** Dr. Belón spoke about the congregations she has been visiting (up to ten with nine more scheduled); her reception has been good and given her hope. She expressed her personal thanks to those council members who were able to attend the February 17 meeting with Mr. Kiger.

She then continued the discussion about what discourages people from attending synod assemblies, asking each council member to first write on a card and then state publicly what he or she would make as an “elevator pitch” as to why people should attend the annual assembly.

Why should congregational members want to send persons from their congregations to the assembly? These are some of the answers that were offered: (1) to be educated, (2) to have the experience, (3) to have voice in what takes place in the synod, (4) to share, (5) to see options, (6) because “we are the synod,” (7) it is important to be there and your voice matters, (8) it is rejuvenating, (9) it makes the synod stronger, (10) to better understand what the synod is and does, (11) to gather information and know how to help, (12) because you have voice to make changes, (13) to build relationships, (14) to gain in understanding and make connections, (15) to express the opinion of your congregation, (16) to be part of the business of the church and experience worship in an assembly with a lot of people, (17) to express and experience unity, recharging your spiritual batteries, (18) because you can’t coordinate if you are not on the same page, and (19) for all the same reasons you want the inactive members of your own congregation to come to your church.

**SECRETARY’S REPORT.** Pastor Carl Shankweiler reported that there were no email votes since the last council meeting and no significant matters of correspondence. He did talk about English, Minersville, which is closing on April 15 and will be giving the synod another church building to sell. He also reported that progress is being made in altering the deed for the church in Lackawaxen; the surveyor was to represent us before the local township on March 7 but the

weather was bad and we are not yet certain if the meeting was held. Another church building that will be coming to the synod in 2019 is Advent, Tuscarora.

Pastor Shankweiler then submitted his written resignation in response to a letter signed by the Rev. Becca Middeke-Conlin and sixteen other rostered leaders, dated June 11, 2017, in which they objected to the number of males in worship and other leadership roles at the 2017 assembly, including the “jarring sight” of having all of the leaders “on the stage” for plenary sessions being “older white males.” Pastor Shankweiler said that he did not agree with their complaint, making such points as the complainants’ failure to nominate other kinds of persons when he was the last of the four “on stage” persons to be elected and ran unopposed, it being clear that there is no barrier to the election of females as synod secretary since his three immediate predecessors in office were female. With reference to verbal remarks made from the floor at the 2017 assembly, he asserted that Paul tells us in Galatians that we are not to look at one another as males/females, free/slave, but as Christians. Why then his resignation? He explained that he was resigning, not because he agreed with the letter writers, but in order to relieve the political pressure on the remaining “older white males” and in order to be free from self-interest in writing a response to the persons making the protest.

There was a lengthy discussion about this resignation with the general consensus being that it should not be necessary, that this protest is a kind of discrimination as well against older persons, that Pastor Shankweiler should fulfill his term, but that he also needed to do what his prayerful consideration allowed. A motion was made by Donald Boyer, seconded by Jeannette Richardson, as follows:

(2018.03.01) Resolved, that the synod council request Secretary Shankweiler to rescind his letter of resignation as part of his response to a June 11, 2018, letter of protest from 17 assembly participants concerning, in part, the number of “older white males” “on the stage” at the 2017 synod assembly. The motion was adopted.

Bishop Zeiser asked the Rev. Deborah Scheffey to offer prayer before the vote on this resignation, after which the motion was adopted. Pastor Shankweiler acceded to the council’s request to withdraw his resignation but indicated that he would still respond to the writers of the protest letter and would again resign if his reply caused an embarrassment to the synod. Earlier, council members did offer to prepare a council response to the letter if necessary.

**HMONG CONGREGATION.** Pastor Michael Bennethum introduced three representatives of the Hmong community who have been worshipping at Allegheny, Knaurs: Pastor Shongchai Hang, Ms. Kai Lee (vice president of the council), and Ms. Choua Hang (a member of the congregation council). Pastor Bennethum stated that the congregation’s president was unable to attend because of his work schedule.

Pastor Hang explained the background of the Hmong people in Laos and the way their region and people were affected by the Vietnam War. His community of Hmong refugees was sponsored through the American Lutheran Church to come to the Philadelphia region, though some of them have now moved to other locations. He himself attended the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and was ordained in 1995. The Hmong community looked for a place

to meet for worship and was welcomed to Allegheny, Knauers, which is located between their original location in Philadelphia and Lancaster, to which some of their members had moved. The community has prepared a new constitution, and now they use English as well as Hmong in their life as a congregation. They thanked the synod for its support of their work.

Dr. Boyer, seconded by Pr. Quinones, then moved the following resolution:

(2018.03.02) Resolved, in accordance with \*S13.01.c. of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod constitution and pending confirmation at the 2018 synod assembly, that the Hmong Community Evangelical Lutheran Church, Knauers, Pennsylvania., be received as a congregation of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

On the suggestion of Bishop Zeiser, the council registered its approval of the resolution by means of a rising vote of applause, which was done enthusiastically.

**TREASURER'S REPORT.** Donald Dillman reported that he and Diane Hemerly met with an ELCA representative and the audit firm. Most of the issues raised in regard to the audit of the 2016 finances have been resolved, and so the audit of 2017 should be completed by May at the latest. He said that Diane Hemerly is again taking care of the synod's bookkeeping, using Quickbooks, and all is going well.

**DIRECTOR FOR EVANGELICAL MISSION REPORT.** Pastor Michael Bennethum stated that Mission Support is the "lifeblood of the church." In 2017 in our synod, 120 congregations gave 100% or more than projected in their statements of intent while 23 congregations gave nothing. For 2018, 177 congregations have submitted statements of intention. Compared to what those congregations committed for 2017, there is a decrease of \$25,000. Pastor Bennethum asked the council to encourage congregations to make known to the synod their intentions for 2018.

He reported that eight persons from the synod attended the recent missional training event in Chicago, with two going as coaches. Common Ground now has four expressions with the newest being at Caron Pennsylvania, 243 N Galen Hall Rd, Wernersville. This expansion has resulted in the Rev. Thomas Scornavacci's requesting an intern, who will be coming from Brazil. For this purpose \$26,000 has been committed by the ELCA with local persons looking for housing and a car for the intern. The synod may have some expenses as well. Pastor Bennethum added that he is energized by his contact with new ministries such as this.

**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.** Pastor Shankweiler reported that the Executive Committee did not have any matters to bring before the council.

**FINANCE COMMITTEE.** David Derr, committee chairperson, reported that he cannot provide an actual spending report for 2017 because of the way MIF handled our bookkeeping but that his committee can provide a comparison in the budgeted amounts for 2018 and 2019. Indeed, his committee submitted to the council a spending proposal for 2019 which did not change the percentages going to the ELCA or to the synod-related agencies. The overall spending proposal is reduced, however, by \$200,000. The anticipated deficit is only \$9,000.

The amounts for committees are “flat” while the costs for staff are lower because of the staffing changes being phased in. The committee presented the following resolution, which was adopted and which is recommended to the 2018 synod assembly:

**(2018.03.03) Resolved, that the 2018 program proposal (February 1, 2019, to January 31, 2020) be adopted. The synod council is hereby authorized to establish the 2019 spending program no later than its January, 2019 meeting, making any necessary adjustments to the budget proposal in light of both realistic anticipation of receipts and synod priorities (in consultation with the ELCA treasurer with respect to the ELCA portion thereof).**

**PROGRAM COMMITTEE.** Arriving late because of a funeral, Pastor Brown asked that the activity he was to lead be postponed to the July meeting. Linda Eroh reported for the committee. She spoke in detail about the plans being made for the 2018 assembly, such as the service projects that will be available for member participation. She also explained that some housing at low cost will be available at Bear Creek Camp. One issue requiring council action are the anticipated displays related to some of the agencies involved in the volunteer opportunities, and so Pr. Shankweiler, seconded by Dr. Boyer, moved the following resolution, which was adopted:

(2018.03.04) Resolved, that exceptions to the synod’s policy concerning displays at annual assemblies be granted for this specific year to the following organizations so that they may provide displays at the 2018 synod assembly: the American Red Cross, the SPCA, Headstart, CEO (Commission for Economic Opportunity), Orphan Grain Train, and the Alzheimer’s Organization.

Other topics discussed included the establishing of a URL site for sending pictures of the service projects to the assembly, the anticipated participation by a Lutheran bishop from Argentina, and the welcoming of the Hmong congregation. The second vote on a proposed constitutional amendment will occur.

**ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE.** Because of a recent injury, Pastor Gary Walbert was not able to be present to presented the proposed sabbatical policy for the bishop of the synod. The proposed policy itself was distributed to the council, but the supporting documents were not available. It was decided to wait until the council’s July meeting to act upon the recommended policy.

The committee is also looking into procedures related to the 2020 election of a new bishop. Dr. Belon reported that she has documents from other synods to show what they are doing, such as to make potential candidates known prior to the electing assembly. She pointed out that the synod will have additional expenses in 2020 related to the election.

**NOMINATING COMMITTEE.** Marlane Druckenmiller reported about the categories of persons for which nominees are still being sought. It was agreed that she should circulate the complete list to the members of the council, which would be more timely than including them in the minutes. She and the council spoke about the issue of electing to the synod council persons who need to work during the day, especially younger persons who do not yet have the seniority that might allow them to be absent from work to attend such a meeting. Concerning the

Discipline Committee, which is being formed, Ms. Druckenmiller reported that three clergy nominees have completed their paperwork, that three more clergy are needed, and that six lay nominees are needed.

**EN BLOC ITEMS.** Pastor Bennethum indicated two adjustments needed to the proposed 2018 assembly agenda as it had been distributed to the council. Pastor Shankweiler, seconded by Ms. Druckenmiller, moved that the following items be approved en bloc. The resolutions were all adopted.

(2018.03.05) Resolved, that the following resolution be recommended to the 2018 Synod Assembly: Resolved, that the 2018 assembly program (as printed in the bulletin of reports) be adopted.

(2018.03.06) Resolved, that in accordance with Section 7.31.16. and 7.52.22. of the ELCA Constitution, “on leave from call” status be approved as follows:

Clergy (second year): Lisa Borrell

(2018.03.07) Resolved, that in accordance with ELCA bylaw 7.41.08. and upon endorsement by the bishop, that the roster status of Pastor Kenneth L. Buckwalter be changed from “on leave from call” to “disability.”

(2018.03.08) 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. Wayne Dreyman—May 26, 2018

## **NEW BUSINESS**

It was noted that the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of women is approaching (approved at the 1970 convention of the Lutheran Church in America). Possible actions might be adopting an appropriate resolution and inviting this synod’s first female pastor, the Rev. Patricia Criste, to the 2020 assembly.

Dr. Belón raised the question of the synod’s making a gift to the new Hmong congregation. This issue will be considered in the future.

**ADJOURNMENT.** Dr. Belón declared the meeting adjourned at 6:16 p.m.

Carl D. Shankweiler, Secretary