

SYNOD COUNCIL MEETING

**Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Jerusalem Lutheran Church, Schuylkill Haven, Pennsylvania**

October 19, 2019

ATTENDANCE. Synod Council Members Present: Pr. June Bair, Pr. Lauren Blatt, Dr. Donald Boyer, Donald Dillman, Pr. Samantha Drennan, Pr. Chris Druckenmiller, Thomas Engle, Kristen Edelman-Weiner, Thomas Engle, Linda Eroh, Martin Everhart, Pr. Charles Grube, Lenna Harris, Ruth Major, Louise McCloughan, Jeanette Richardson, Pr. Deborah Scheffey, Pr. Carl Shankweiler, Victor Unks, Bishop Samuel Zeiser.

Synod Council Members Excused: Pr. Cheryl Meinschein, Teresa Fry.

Synod Council Members Absent: Karrison Dubbs, Andrew Hottenstein, Elizabeth Leibenguth.

Since the June meeting, Pr. Oliver Brown resigned from the synod council, effective October 18.

Other Persons Present: James Jennings, member of the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Pr. Michael Bennethum, Executive Associate of the Bishop and Director of Evangelical Mission; Pr. Rebecca Middeke-Conlin; Pr. David Rowe, pastor of the host congregation, Jerusalem Lutheran Church, Schuylkill Haven; Mark Riedel and Richard Grickis, both representing St. John Lutheran Church, Auburn.

CALL TO ORDER. Vice President Kristen Edelman-Weiner called the October 19, 2019, regular meeting of the Synod Council of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to order at 9:08 a.m.

GREETINGS FROM THE HOST CONGREGATION. The Rev. David Rowe of Jerusalem Lutheran Church, Schuylkill Haven, welcomed the council to Jerusalem. He described the congregation as (a) having a stable membership after years of downsizing and (b) anticipating ending 2019 in the black after years of deficits. He explained the recent history of the congregation, beginning with the 1991 fire that destroyed the building of the former Christ Lutheran Church, which paved the way for the coming together of Christ and St. Matthew's, also of Schuylkill Haven, in a new building that is both a "blessing and a burden." The congregation has a good choir and organ, has started a disaster team, participates in the ELCA youth gatherings, built a labyrinth, and will exceed a \$350,000 goal to replace the roof and HVAC system.

OPENING DEVOTIONS. Bishop Samuel R. Zeiser of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod led the opening devotions, speaking of Jerusalem Church as an "important paradigm" of congregational ministries. He noted the recent commemoration of St. Luke and referred to 2 Timothy's statements about the nature of life for followers of Christ and the power of Luke's witness at work: "As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. . . . Only Luke is with me" (2 Timothy 4:5, 11).

GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER ACTIVITY. Victor Unks of the Program Committee led the council in an exercise whereby the members divided into pairs, described themselves to each other, and then introduced one another to the entire council.

MINUTES OF JUNE 22 MEETING. The synod council minutes of June 22, 2019, were approved as distributed on a motion made by Donald Dillman and seconded by Dr. Donald Boyer.

NEW BUSINESS.

The council adopted the following resolution concerning staff housing allowances on a motion by Mr. Dillman, seconded by Dr. Boyer:

(2019.10.01) Resolved, That the portion of the 2020 Executive Staff salary to be designated as housing be as follows:

Samuel Zeiser	\$20,000
Kurt Garbe	\$17,000
Peggy Wuertele	100% of annual salary

The council adopted the following resolution concerning St. John, Auburn, on a motion by the Rev. Carl Shankweiler, seconded by the Rev. Deborah Scheffey. Prior to the vote Mr. Richard Grickis spoke about the proposed “Plan of Agreement for St. John’s Church as a Federated Congregation” and how the Lutheran and United Church of Christ congregations evolved to this point, being two “very separate” congregations when he began worshipping there in 1990. He explained the challenging financial realities of the past and the current role of a significant endowment, which is both a “cross to bear” and a resource that gives the congregations a future. After recent years of working “extremely well” as a union church, the two congregations decided about a year and a half ago to explore federating. Together they have thirty to forty people attending with fewer “really active” members, which does not provide enough people to continue as two congregations with a joint board. The current pastor of both congregations is the Rev. Walter Breiner. Affirmative comments were made by Pr. Shankweiler and Dr. Boyer.

(2019.10.02) Resolved, That in accordance with section 9.81.01.c. of the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, that the plan of agreement for the federation of St. John Church, Auburn, be ratified.

The council adopted the following resolution concerning Salem-Hetzel’s, Pine Grove, on a motion by Mr. Dillman and seconded by Pr. Shankweiler. Bishop Zeiser spoke about this proposal as the culmination of a long effort. Pr. Shankweiler also spoke affirmatively about this development.

(2019.10.03) Resolved, That in accordance with 9.81.02.c. of the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, that the shared ministry agreement between the Lutheran and U.C.C. congregations of Salem-Hetzel’s, Pine Grove, be ratified

The council adopted the following resolution concerning Trinity, Clarks Summit, on a motion by the Rev. Samantha Drennan, seconded by Dr. Boyer. Martin Everhart expressed his sadness at seeing Trinity leave the ELCA. Bishop Zeiser explained that after the retirement of a fine pastor who served Trinity for many years, cohesion within the congregation began to unravel. The issues at Trinity related to the ELCA's decisions regarding sexuality and ministry. The pastor worked to keep the congregation together, but fissures opened. The members who supported remaining in the ELCA began to peel off, with the result that the members who remained and supported the ELCA could not prevent the two-thirds majority vote in favor of leaving the ELCA. The bishop explained that although the synod did not lose many congregations over the ELCA's decisions, there were congregations that lost members. He observed that as pastors retire, the synod may find that other congregations will also consider leaving the ELCA. Jeanette Richardson asked about the difference between the ELCA and the North American Lutheran Church (NALC); the latter group formed since the ELCA's 2009 assembly actions and consists largely of persons who left the ELCA. Dr. Boyer asked whether the 2019 ELCA assembly had an effect, and Bishop Zeiser answered that the 2019's assembly action concerning sanctuary further pushed some members at Trinity to want to leave the ELCA. Pr. Scheffey asked who their current leader is; Bishop Zeiser replied that the pastor who retired from Trinity is still there in that when Trinity's first vote to leave occurred, their transition pastor left and the former pastor was returned to see if, by any chance, he could help the congregation to heal and remain. The Rev. Lauren Blatt recommended saying that the issue is not "2009" but the "vote for LGBT." Jeanette Richardson asked what would happen if the council denied this request to leave; the Rev. Michael Bennethum said that there would be legal expenses for lawyers.

(2019.10.04) Resolved, That in accordance with section *C6.05.g.2. of the Model Constitution for Congregations, that the decision of Trinity Lutheran Church, Clarks Summit, to terminate its relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and affiliate with the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) be approved.

The following resolution concerning a contract for leadership for youth, young adult, and faith formation ministries came to the council from the finance committee and was adopted. Ms. Edelman-Weiner thanked the synod's Youth, Young Adult, and Family Ministry Team and the finance committee for working on this issue.

(2019.10.05) Resolved, That the Synod Council of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA, authorize the synod's Youth, Young Adult, and Family Ministry Team to enter into a contract--subject to review and approval by the Executive Committee of the Synod Council--for the procurement of youth, young adult, and faith formation ministry leadership services;

That to fund this contract the synod council authorize non-budgeted expenditures of up to \$32,000 per year, with the funds raised by designating for this purpose 33% of the special gift to the synod made by Zion (First Hungarian) Lutheran Church, Bethlehem, upon their closing and with the balance of the funds needed coming from the Prosser, Pahse, Mission Fund;

That the contract be based on the synod's paying the equivalent of \$30.00 per hour, not to exceed twenty hours per week, with no further obligations or payments made for health and retirement benefits or mileage reimbursements for the worker(s) secured under the terms of this contract;

That with the concurrence of the Executive Committee of the Synod Council, the Youth, Young Adult, and Family Ministry Team be authorized to advertise for, and select, the individual(s) with whom the synod will contract for these services and enter into said contract;

That this contract begin on or about January 1, 2020, and continue for a period of time not to exceed nineteen months;

That the work completed under the terms of this contract be reported quarterly to the Synod Council of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA; and

That to accomplish this end the synod council, by a two-thirds majority, suspend the relevant Continuing Resolutions and Other Resolutions of Continuing Impact that deal with the use of special gifts and special funds (including, but not limited to, Chapter 2, Items 7 and 8).

In the discussion of this position, the Rev. Rebecca Middeke-Conlin said that the Youth, Young Adult, and Family Ministry Team felt their ministry area was floundering after Deacon Karen Mathias-Long left the synod staff. Therefore, Deacon Kathleen Schaeffer and others brought a resolution concerning staffing to the 2019 synod assembly, which referred the matter to the Youth, Young Adult, and Family Ministry Team, which then developed a proposal for a part-time position, wanting someone who could, for example, improve communications concerning these ministries. The team's proposal went next to the synod's finance committee, which developed the proposal brought to the council.

Dr. Boyer spoke for the finance committee, explaining that the committee agreed to the need for the position but faced the issue of how to get the money to fund it. He stressed that the committee's proposal is for a contract for services, not the creation of a staff position. He pointed out that regular Mission Support income is not sufficient to fund even a part-time position with benefits, which led the committee to seek other funding sources. A major source for this proposal comes from the sale of a church building, from which some of the proceeds were given to the synod. He stated that the new bishop to be elected in 2020 may want to restore this position as part of the synod staff, so the current proposal is for a specific time period that will be sufficient to do the work needed through the next ELCA youth gathering but not so long as to tie the hands of the new bishop.

Discussion ensued concerning contracted services, with Dr. Boyer pointing to the synod's arrangement for cleaning services as being an existing contract. Pr. Shankweiler said that while he supports this proposal, he believes in general that the synod needs to move even further in the direction of volunteers rather than paid staff, due simply to the dramatic decline over the years in the synod's purchasing power from Mission Support; he also expressed concern about using

what might be considered principal from the sale of buildings. Pr. Drennan asserted that this proposal is something that we need to do and that the synod can accomplish this ministry if we are faithful to the vision. The Rev. Charles Grube asked about the use of the Prosser, Pahse, Mission Fund; Dr. Boyer responded that this is a fund that the synod has used in part for start-up ministries, and so the use of this fund is possible, though this expenditure will be an amount beyond what the synod has traditionally authorized. He also spoke of the need to look to the future. Pastor Middeke-Conlin spoke in support of the proposed nineteen-month duration of the contract.

After approving the motion, the synod council took a brief break.

BISHOP'S REPORT. Bishop Zeiser reported about three issues.

1. ELCA CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY SPIRIT AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS. Bishop Zeiser said that *Living Lutheran* reported many of the outcomes from the 2019 churchwide assembly but that he wanted to speak about what gives focus to the spirit of the assembly and what is significant for the future of this church.

(a) The elections of Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton to another term and Deacon Sue E. Rothmeyer as secretary were significant. Bishop Eaton received a powerful affirmation as seen in the applause after her first ballot victory; she is providing leadership in difficult times. Deacon Rothmeyer is the first deacon and the first woman to be elected secretary, giving a new shape and identity to this office.

(b) The “Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent” affirms that they have not always been welcome. It was a powerful moment when a group of persons of African descent responded to the assembly’s action.

(c) The “Emanuel 9 Day of Repentance” was set for June 17 of each year; this action was taken in response to the killing of nine Bible study participants by an ELCA member.

(d) A statement was adopted 893 to 5 condemning white supremacy, an action including an interreligious commitment.

(e) The social statement “Faith, Sexism and Justice: A Call to Action” was adopted.

(f) Three anniversaries were noted.¹

Bishop Zeiser reflected that the church is going through a transition and showing signs of a community of faith different from what it was years ago, and the characteristics will be even more different in fifteen years. There are deep implications for us. We have a deep self-

¹ As 50-40-10: (1) “Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of U.S. Lutheran Churches’ Decision to Ordain Women to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament,” (2) “Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the First Women of Color Ordained in U.S. Lutheran Churches,” and (3) “Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the ELCA’s Decision to Remove the Barrier to Ordination for LGBTQIA+ Individuals.”

understanding, with our German roots influencing us in many ways. This self-understanding will be confronted in many ways.

Bishop Zeiser explained that he hears defensiveness about issues and a feeling that the church is leaving people. He pointed to the two congregations whose federating or engaging in shared ministry is something to be magnified, and he affirmed that we continue to encourage cooperation.

He said that he was asked in the ice cream tours held in fall, “Are we talking to congregations about cooperating?” Yes, of course. He spoke about the way the church is addressing social issues, saying that “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” could “light fires” in a bad sense. During the ice cream stops he was also asked about sanctuary and said that we need to be conscious of the challenges congregations will be facing. Whatever visions are adopted will put under siege the self-understanding of most of the congregations of this synod.

We will need to face hardship in order to discover how Lutheran congregations can be faithful, and the faithfulness called for will be the daily dying in Christ that Martin Luther talked about. As congregations decline, that decline should not be seen as a defeat or a lack of capacity to be faithful to the Gospel. Instead, it will be a case of going forward in real time to hearing God calling Lutherans to a new witness in the Gospel. “We have what this world needs, but we will endure pain until we are right-sized for witness.” He concluded by saying that he hopes these points do not sound defeatist or negative, but they are where he sees God leading this church.

2. ADDRESSING IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEES. Bishop Zeiser indicated that an event is being planned by Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Moravians to deal with immigration and refugees. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services will be drawn upon concerning how we understand the church’s role in these matters.

3. 2020 ASSEMBLY PLANNING. Bishop Zeiser reported that 2020 assembly planning is continuing. The assembly will open with eucharist and at the end will mark the anniversaries of allowing the ordination of women (50th), ordaining women people of color (40th), and allowing persons in same-gender relationships to be ordained (10th).

VICE PRESIDENT’S REPORT. Vice President Edelman-Wiener spoke about the “fantastic” feedback received during the synod ice cream tour and about how she was heartened by the turnout. She reflected upon how people were still talking on the porch of an ice cream store after the store had closed. One problem is that some of the ice cream stores chosen for stops changed their hours after the publicity went out, and she found two events cancelled as a result. She said that she is planning a few more stops in Allentown, West Berks, the Poconos, and Lehighton.

She reported that a home school group is looking for a place to meet. The group had been meeting in a church in downtown Bethlehem, but the congregation’s new pastor is not sympathetic to this use of the facilities. Therefore, the group is looking for a new place to meet, ideally in the Lehigh Valley. The group draws from New Jersey. They are a large group and meet about thirty times a year. They are looking for a congregation willing to host them.

SECRETARY’S REPORT. Pastor Shankweiler distributed a written report, “Report of the Secretary and Archivist, October 19, 2019,” dealing with various matters including constitution changes and the letter he sent to the Williams Valley Ministerium. He reported that the Rev. Oliver Brown resigned his position on the synod council “effective immediately,” with his email of resignation dated October 18, 2019.²

TREASURER’S REPORT. Treasurer Donald Dillman gave a written report about all of the synod’s funds. He said that he will be reviewing the audit report for 2018. He also said that the ELCA, Portico, and various utilities prefer wire transfers over written checks.

DIRECTOR OF EVANGELICAL MISSION REPORT. Pastor Bennethum reported that at one point 80% of the ELCA’s funding came from Mission Support; now that percentage is 60%. In our synod, forms have been sent to congregations so that they can report congregational commitments for 2020; some congregations are being offered face-to-face meetings.

He spoke as well about the Synod Vitality Strategy Team. In 2013 the Vitality Project was a pilot project; in 2014 it began to be offered generally as a resource for congregations. At this point 25 percent of our synod’s congregations have used this resource. Every synod is urged to have a synod vitality strategy team focused on mission. Our mission strategy, from 1999, is now out of date in some ways; in 2020 there will be an effort to update this strategy.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE. The executive committee reported that they agreed to honor part-time support staff employee Debbie Skinner’s request for vacation time, made by email on October 1, 2019, to Pastor Bennethum and saying in part, “it would be nice to have some time I could count as paid vacation days.” The committee also received a building use request by the Metropolitan Community Church of the Lehigh Valley and is doing the background work to prepare a synod policy concerning building use requests.

FINANCE COMMITTEE. Dr. Boyer referred to the child care program at Jerusalem Church, about which Pastor Rowe spoke in his welcome to the council. Dr. Boyer said that this is an important ministry, now fifty years in operation, with a budget of \$600,000 to \$700,000 a year. Work is being done to make the child care and congregation a more cohesive unit. There is a lengthy waiting list to get a child into the program.

He reported that the finance committee has a full agenda for the next few months: (a) possibly amending the 2020 synod budget in January if anticipated receipts are deemed too low to support the currently approved budget; (b) preparing a salary package for a new bishop so that candidates know what that position will pay; (c) reviewing and revising the synod policy concerning the disposition of funds from the sale of church properties owned by the synod; and (d) considering developing a policy concerning the renting out of space at the Lutheran Center. He expressed

²Pastor Brown wrote, “I am quite happy to serve the Church in my present capacity as parish pastor, and in filling in as needed when vacancies in other churches arise. I think it best at this time to seat someone else in my chairs at the Synod Council and the Disciplinary Committee. Therefore, please accept this note as my resignation from those bodies, effective immediately.”

the view that Mission Support should not be used to pay for unusual maintenance related to the Schoenersville property. Where should such funds come from?

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE. Pastor Drennan presented a written report, “Report of the Administration Committee, October 19, 2019.” Included in the report is information concerning the “symbols of the office” of bishop as currently owned by the synod. She stated that the committee’s main issue is the transition team for the new administration. The date of the installation service for the new bishop will be October 11, 2020.

PROGRAM COMMITTEE. Linda Eroh reported that she attended a meeting of the planning committee for the 2020 synod assembly. The assembly itself will be June 4 through 6 at Kalahari. A double room will be \$139 on Thursday and \$229 on Friday. The theme will be “We Are Church Together.” Each mission district is asked to have a banner. At the assembly the plenary and worship sessions will all be held in the same room. Possibly nine break-out rooms will be needed for mission district meetings, though Bishop Zeiser added that this matter is still in flux. She added that the use of WIFI should be good. Consideration is being given to “Guidebook” and its use, such as in elections, though all thoughts are preliminary at this point. The next assembly planning meeting will take place on October 29, 10:00 a.m. at the Lutheran Center.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE. The forms for the 2020 elections are being revised and will be sent out in advance. The committee’s goal is to have as many nominations made in advance as possible so that the names can be listed on the ballots.

EN BLOC ITEMS. Pastor Shankweiler, seconded by Mr. Dillman, moved that the *en bloc* resolutions be approved as presented. The motion carried.

(2019.10.06) Resolved, That Hope’s Table, housed at Hope Lutheran Church, 601 N. Front Street, Reading 19601, be reauthorized as a Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community (SAWC) of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

(2019.10.07) Resolved, That Common Ground Recovery Community—Downtown Reading Campus, meeting at Trinity Lutheran Church, 527 Washington Street, Reading 19601, be reauthorized as a Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community (SAWC) of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

(2019.10.08) Resolved, That a call to special service be issued to the Rev. Rashion Santiago to serve as pastor of Heidelberg Lutheran Church, Slatington, effective August 1, 2019.

(2019.10.09) Resolved, That a call to special service be issued to the Rev. Jeffrey Odgren to serve as transitional pastor at Faith United Lutheran Church, Nescopeck, effective October 15, 2019.

(2019.10.10) Resolved, That a call to special service be issued to the Rev. Susan Horst to serve as staff chaplain, Penn State Health: St. Joseph Medical Center, Reading, effective April 16, 2018.

(2019.10.11) 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:

Clergy (first year): The Rev. Stephen Weisser

Clergy (second year): The Rev. Elizabeth Haines

(2019.10.12) 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. Thomas Cvammen (September 1, 2019)

The Rev. Russell Haab (October 1, 2019)

Deacon Ramona Daily (June 3, 2015)

WELCA REPORT. Lenna Harris reported that the synodical unit of the Women of the ELCA is planning to centralize its archives at the Lutheran Center. The Women of the ELCA had a successful 31-woman event at Kirby House with the oldest participant being 99 years old. The spring justice event will be held on March 28 at Breinigsville. Looking ahead to 2020, the Women of the ELCA’s Eleventh Triennial Convention will be held in Arizona, July 14-16.

ADJOURNMENT. Council members were asked to review the contact information listed for them in the membership handout. Vice President Edelman-Wiener declared the meeting adjourned at 12:05 p.m. on a motion by the Rev. Chris Druckenmiller, seconded by Ms. Harris. The next council meeting will be held January 18, 2019, 9:00 a.m. at Christ (Mertz), Dryville. The March 14, 2020 meeting (with a snow date of March 21) will be held at St. John, Mahoning.

Respectfully submitted,

Carl D. Shankweiler, Secretary