

2019 Western Iowa Synod Assembly Report

Arguably, the most important action taken at this year's synod assembly was the selection of the individual who will be called to the office of Synod Bishop for the next 6 years. Due to the nature of this process, Pastor Scott is providing the following account.

To the people of Underwood Lutheran:

During the weekend of May 5th-7th I was in Sioux City attending the 2019 Western Iowa Synod Assembly, an annual event held at the synod level. In many ways the work of the Assembly mirrors that of our annual meeting, as official business is conducted by delegates representing the various congregations of our synod. Budgets are passed. Council members are elected. Resolutions on various topics are presented and discussed.

Every 6th year, there is an event at Synod Assembly that is, arguably, a little more interesting and important. This is the process of calling the individual who will serve as Bishop of the Synod. I have shared with you the importance of this process and asked for your prayers during the Assembly. The individual chosen as Bishop is tasked with leading the synod, and this is no small task.

I have been anticipating this process for quite some time, but especially over the course of the past year. My election to the Synod Council a year ago has allowed me to see some of the inner workings at the synod level. It has also opened my eyes to see some of the challenges and opportunities that Western Iowa is facing. In short, I entered Synod Assembly with a great deal of interest, as well as some trepidation regarding the eventual outcome of the Bishop selection.

Now I shared some information with the congregation a few months back regarding the actual process, but I'd like to give you a quick overview. Nominees for Bishop must be ordained ELCA Pastors, though there is no restriction on where any particular pastor is from. Individuals can be nominated ahead of time, and their names are submitted to the Election Committee. By the start of Assembly these particular individuals have already agreed to "let their name go forward." Essentially, they have agreed to be nominated and run. There were about 6 or 7 individuals who fell in this category. This included our existing Bishop Rodger Prois and Assistant to the Bishop Pastor Lorna Halaas, along with several other individuals from our Synod, as well as 2 individuals from outside our synod.

At the assembly, the process of selection of Bishop is led by a representative of ELCA Churchwide who is present throughout the process. Often this is the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, though it can be other individuals as well. This year, our selection process was led by ELCA Secretary Chris Boerger, himself a 2-time Synodical Bishop from the Northwest Washington Synod.

The process of selection consists of up to 5 separate ballots. It is possible for a nominee to be chosen on any of these ballots, though the percentage of votes needed is quite high on the earlier ballots. It lowers through the subsequent ballots to a simple majority on the final ballot. The first ballot, which is held Friday night, is known as an Ecclesiastical Ballot. It is best understood as an open nomination. Voting members of the Assembly can write down a vote for any Pastor. At the close of the first ballot, there were a total of 30 names.

Those individuals nominated are contacted and given the opportunity to either "let their name go forward" or decline the nomination. This choice is open overnight, with the deadline set for early the

next morning. Those who allow their names to go forward are now in the process until they are either eliminated or ultimately selected. Essentially, if you say yes to running, you ride it all the way.

Those who do agree to move forward are invited to submit biographical information. This includes who they are, the congregation that they serve, past ministry work, as well as a few questions aimed at their gifts and leadership style and vision for the synod. You might consider this almost "resume-like" information.

The submitted biographical information is given to the voting members, and informs their vote on the second ballot. Of the 30 names brought forward in the first ballot, 11 had allowed their names to go forward. The second ballot narrowed the field to 7. These 7 were allowed to address the assembly with 5-minute speeches. At the conclusion of the speeches, the third ballot narrowed the field from 7 to 3. These 3 were each allowed to answer a question regarding challenges for the synod. Following these questions, the fourth ballot narrowed the field to the final 2. These two candidates each addressed the assembly with a final brief statement before the final ballot, where a simple majority vote would determine the outcome.

Now perhaps you are already aware of the outcome. We announced that Pastor Lorna Halaas, currently an Assistant to the Bishop here in Western Iowa, was selected on the fifth and final ballot, and will succeed Bishop Prois in mid-summer. I'd like to ask for your continued prayers for both as they move through the upcoming time of transition. Likewise, continue to pray for the continued ministry of the greater church of Western Iowa under Bishop-elect Halaas' leadership.

Now you might be wondering just why I'm sharing this information. The surprising aspect of this selection for Bishop, was that I found myself in the mix. It was not my intention to seek the office, or even to be nominated. However, it is quite common for Pastors to receive a vote or two in the initial ballot, and so I knew that it was a possibility. Sure enough, in the first ballot, I received 2 votes and was, therefore, entered into the running.

While I was not actively seeking the office of Bishop, I did see this as an opportunity to help shape the ongoing conversation, and to add a younger voice into the process. Therefore, I submitted my biographical information and allowed my name to go forward. However, I thought that my information would reveal someone a little too young and inexperienced, and that I would fail to move past the second ballot.

I was humbled and surprised when I received 10 votes on the second ballot, enough to put me in 7th place. You'll recall that the top 7 move on to address the assembly. Needless to say that was an incredibly big honor, but it was also quite daunting and scary. With a little preparation, I made my address to the assembly and shared my hopes for the future that God is calling our synod into. In the following third ballot, I received 21 votes. This left me in 5th place and eliminated me from the process.

I fully believe that it was the work of the Holy Spirit to bring me to that particular point and no further. It is truly a Spirit-filled process. Comments from quite a few individuals after the fact confirmed that my message was heard and that it was important. It was a heavy thing, being involved in something at this level. It was not something that I take lightly, but I do try to listen when the Spirit starts nudging.

If not for the work of the Spirit stirring in a council member at First Lutheran in Okoboji to make a joke about seminary 15 years ago, I would not be a pastor at all. If not for the work of the Spirit stirring in

Sandy Sorlein, I would not be the pastor in Underwood. God works in mysterious ways, and it is always my hope to be open to what the Spirit might be doing. Now in hindsight, I'm able to see the Spirit's work in this process. I'm extraordinarily grateful and humbled to have moved as far through the process as I did, and feel that the ministry work that we are doing together at ULC is being strongly affirmed as well.

If you are interested, I can share both my biographical information, as well as a link to the video of my assembly address. Just let me know. And thank you all for the ministry that we share.

P Scott

Additional Work of the Assembly

In addition to the call process of selecting our next synod Bishop, there were a number of resolutions discussed and voted on, which built the rest of the business conducted by the Assembly.

The assembly discussed and passed the budget, which consists of several separate categories. First is an update to the Actual 2019 operational synod budget. This is compared to the proposed 2019 budget which had been approved a year ago. Finally, it includes the proposed budget for the 2020 fiscal year, which will likewise be updated at next year's assembly.

The next resolution was the approval of 2020 Compensation Guidelines. This document, which is updated every year, provides suggestions for the compensation of our synod's rostered leaders. It is a very useful tool provided to congregation to aid in their own budgetary conversations. Both of these first two actions are normal and happen each year.

The next two resolutions were very similar in scope, so I will talk about them together. The aim of these resolutions was a proposal to explore the feasibility of restructuring the existing synod boundaries over the course of the next few years. This could result in the combination of some synods, which would then result in a lower number of synods and their subsequent synod staffs (currently 65 ELCA synods nationwide). The first resolution stated that Western Iowa Synod itself would begin to explore this process. The second resolution stated that Western Iowa Synod supports this idea and is sending it to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly (to be held later this summer) for exploration. In short, they are the same resolution, just moving forward from two different directions.

The first of these resolutions was ultimately tabled until the 2020 Assembly. The basis for this decision was to wait for the outcome of the Bishop selection process, and if a new Bishop was ultimately selected, to give them a year to review this option. The second of these resolutions was passed by the assembly, and will be sent on to Churchwide for further action.

The final resolution which had been presented before the assembly is aimed at the ECLA's response and stance towards the treatment of Palestinian children living under Israeli military occupation. You may be aware that the ELCA has been critical of the way that the Israeli State has treated much of Palestinian territory and people. This particular resolution is aimed at the way that Palestinian children have been treated when detained by Israeli military. The resolution indicates that the Western Iowa Synod supports ELCA Churchwide taking a stance of advocating for the rights of these children.

It is worth noting that critics of the ELCA have tied Palestinian support along with a critical view of the Israeli State's action to the idea of anti-Semitism. This is not the case. It is possible to be critical of political action without being anti-Semitic. The desire of the ELCA, as well as the "Peace Not Walls" initiative of the Western Iowa Synod, is aimed at peaceful solutions to the conflicts which have long plagued the Holy Land.

Finally, there was a resolution raised from the floor, which was considered before the assembly. This resolution was aimed at creating processes for those individuals called to serve as Synodical Bishops to have accountability with a mutual ministry team or committee. Many congregations already have a similar structure for their pastors, but currently no process or committee exists for Bishops. This resolution passed.

In addition to these resolutions, a number of addresses were made by representatives of organizations that partner with the Western Iowa Synod. There was also an ongoing Bible Study aimed at Hope, stemming from the story of the Road to Emmaus in Luke's gospel. A number of Forums were offered covering a wide variety of topics. Participants also joined together in both an opening worship on Friday evening and a closing worship on Sunday morning.

Faithfully submitted,

Pastor Scott Dalen and Assembly Delegate Kim Madsen