

ELCA Churchwide Assembly declares ELCA sanctuary denomination

MILWAUKEE (August 7, 2019) — In a key action this afternoon, the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted to approve a memorial that declares the ELCA a sanctuary church. This is the first North American denomination to declare itself a sanctuary church body. As a sanctuary church the ELCA is committed to serving and supporting migrant children and families in communities across the country.

Earlier in the day, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the ELCA, joined more than 700 assembly members and others in a march and prayer vigil to the Milwaukee Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office. The march addressed concerns about the human rights of migrant children and families entering the U.S. along the southern border. Through the ELCA's initiative, Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO), this church is committed to work toward just and humane policies affecting migrants in and outside the U.S.

During morning plenary, the Rev. Chris Boerger, secretary of the ELCA, gave his report to the assembly. Boerger, who is retiring this fall, spent part of his report explaining the role of the secretary and the various responsibilities that come with the office.

"I believe that good structure is necessary for our life together and for the accomplishment of the work that God has given us to do," Boerger said. "I have said often that the primary focus of the church should be the mission that God has given us. The constitutions and policies of the church are to serve that mission. The mission should not be hindered by the constitution or policies of the church."

Boerger also gave updates on actions that were taken during the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, including that the denomination has made "little progress" in moving toward the commitment of authentic diversity. He reported that at the end of 2015, the ELCA was 92% white and at the end of 2018, it was 94% white.

"Until it really is a commitment for the congregations of this church, the prospects of this change are very dim," he said. "As a white church we say the right words. We, the majority population of this church, need to do more than talk."

Boerger's report also included statistics on baptized membership, which continues to decline. There was a 2.8% decrease from 2017, which he said is consistent with the trend the church has seen since its formation.

"We still have 3.4 million members," he said. "We are not an insignificant church."

Boerger closed his report by thanking ELCA members for entrusting him with the role of secretary, adding that he thanks God for this church and the people of this church.

"We are the clay jars that God has chosen to use to proclaim the gospel to this time and in our individual contexts," he said. "Thank you for this opportunity to serve our God, our world and our church. We are church. Thanks be to God."

Following his report, Boerger was presented with the Servus Dei award, which honors and expresses appreciation for ELCA officers as they complete their terms.

In his report, Bill Horne, ELCA vice president, spoke of unity in Christ as he reflected on this church's connection "as Christians, Lutherans, members of the ELCA and our relationship with our neighbors."

Horne stressed the importance of this theme of oneness as the assembly considers the proposals and recommendations before them this week.

“I can be of one mind with you and still disagree with you on an issue. When we focus on the word, the meaning of our baptism and the eucharist, our life as Christians and our service to our neighbor, being of one mind helps us to navigate through the rough spots in living with each other,” Horne said. “The distinctions that I may make in our relationship and interactions won’t ever overshadow the oneness we share in Christ Jesus.”

The assembly also received greetings from the Rev. Susan C. Johnson, national bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and the Rev. Panti Filibus Musa, archbishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria and president of the Lutheran World Federation. Dr. Philip Johnson, president of Finlandia University, Hancock, Mich., and president of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, also greeted the assembly on behalf of the network.

A first ballot was taken for election of ELCA secretary. A total of 866 votes were cast and 646 votes were required for election. There was no election.

Live video of the plenary sessions is accessible at elca.org/cwa.

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About the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

The ELCA is one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States, with nearly 3.5 million members in more than 9,100 worshiping communities across the 50 states and in the Caribbean region. Known as the church of “God’s work. Our hands.,” the ELCA emphasizes the saving grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, unity among Christians and service in the world. The ELCA’s roots are in the writings of the German church reformer Martin Luther.

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