

**Conference of Bishops (COB) Overview**  
**by Bishop Rodger Prois**  
**September 29 – October 4, 2016**

**Thursday, September 29**

In the morning most of the regions met for candidate assignments to synods. Region 5 met to learn that there are about 180 first call sites open in the ELCA, with 47 in Region 5. There were 40 candidates to assign. Western Iowa received on candidate and we are in conversation to nominate her for service in the synod. In the afternoon the other committees of the COB met - Synodical and Rostered Leader Care, Academy, Bishop Formation, Roster, Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, Global Mission Liaison, Theological and Ethical Concerns, Ministry Among People in Poverty, DM: New/Renewing Congregations (I sit on this committee), and DM: Leadership.

We later enjoyed worship together Bishop Martin Wells (Eastern Washington-Idaho) preaching and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, presiding. It was St. Michael's Day, so we considered the mystery of angels in our lives.

Afterward, we had a reception and dinner to welcome the "Magnificent Seven" new bishops among us. They are Erik Gronberg (Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana) who is the son-in-law of Jim and Connie Mohn from Cherokee, Jeffrey Clements (Northern Illinois), Daniel Beaudoin (Northwestern Ohio), Paul Erickson (Greater Milwaukee), Andrew Taylor (Pacifica), William Gohl (Delaware-Maryland), and Barbara Collins (Upper Susquehanna).

**Friday, September 30**

The bishops of Region 1 served as the chaplains for each day. Our first devotion was led by Bp. Shelley Wickstrom (Alaska), who encouraged us to get out of our heads and into our senses. It was a meditative devotional that created a good start for the day.

After opening remarks, introduction of invited guests and observers, and a general welcome, the COB chair, Bp. Bill Gafkjen (Indiana-Kentucky), introduced Bp. Eaton for the Presiding Bishop's Report.

She reflected on some of the actions from the Churchwide Assembly and then shared several things with the COB.

- 1) Contextuality and Catholicity – How do we celebrate the uniqueness of this church across the ELCA and remember those things that we hold in common?
- 2) Accountability to each other through Baptism – We can't opt out of the Body of Christ. While that kind of individualism is part of our culture, it is not a part of our faith. How can the COB model accountability across the ELCA? Where does cooperation, coordination, and collaboration fit into this accountability question?

We received the report of the Executive for Synodical Relations, Pr. Walter May. There will be several gatherings in 2017 - Synod Vice Presidents meet next fall during the COB meeting; Bishop Assistants will meet February 11-15 in Charleston, SC; and Administrative Assistants to Synodical Bishops, but a date and location have not yet been set.

Bureau of Federal Chaplaincy report - Over 200 pastors and seminary students of this church serve in federal chaplaincies. Chaplains accompany uniformed military personnel across the full spectrum of wartime and peacetime service. Chaplains accompany veterans who have borne the battle

and return. Chaplains accompany those incarcerated in federal correctional institutions and the staffs of these facilities.

We currently send 212 pastors and seminary students as chaplains and chaplain candidates in the:

- Department of Defense -- 177 chaplains and chaplain candidates
- Department of Veterans Affairs -- 32 chaplains
- Department of Justice -- 3 chaplains

Bp. Mark Rhyne gave a report from the Appalachian Ministry Task Force. From a recent meeting of ELCMA (Evangelical Lutheran Coalition for Mission in Appalachia), people in Appalachia welcome health and assistance, but also want us to “come alongside them.” Plenty of social issues are faced by the people of the area like poverty, loss of jobs, etc. Plans are for an April 2017 Appalachian Synod Assembly in Flatwood, Virginia. The hope is to find new partners for ministry.

Pr. Ron Glusenkamp gave his report as the Director for the ELCA Campaign. There has been \$90M in cash gifts, \$5M in multiyear commitments, and \$22 M in planned gifts. Currently, about 48% of the Campaign’s \$198 M goal has been committed. 75% of the congregations have made a gift to at least one of the Campaign’s emphases.

Challenge – World Hunger is the Campaign’s emphasis this year, with a goal of \$24M. We have received \$10M so far. Can we raise another \$14M between now and Feb. 1, 2017? I think we can, I think we can, I think we can! Please share this in your congregation.

After a break, the COB began a process to elect a bishop to a four-year term to the Executive Committee. We began the ecclesiastical ballot. After multiple votes during the COB, Bp. Jim Ahrens (La Crosse Area) was elected.

We heard a report from the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee by Bp. Don Kreiss (Southeast Michigan). We learned of conversations with Full Communion Partners (Lutheran Moravian Coordinating Committee and the Lutheran Episcopal Coordinating Committee); Bi-Lateral Partners (African Methodist Episcopal Church and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church); Conciliar and Multi-Layer Ecumenism (conversations with the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and from the resolution for “Deepening Relationships with the Historic Black Churches); Inter-Lutheran Relations (Lutheran World Federation and the North American Lutheran Church); and Inter-Religious Relations (Lutheran College Conference that centered on “Preparing Global leaders for a Religiously Diverse World” and the churchwide resolution on “My Muslim Neighbor”).

Synodical-Churchwide Relations Committee chair, Bp. Suzanne Dillahunt (Southern Ohio), reported highlights of their actions. They heard from Annette Schumacher who does oversight of gift planners with Mission Advancement Unit. Currently, there are 23 partnerships of gift planners across the ELCA.

A report from the 2016 Churchwide Assembly commended most aspects of the week, with 475 attending the Grace Gathering. Also, the first ELCA Rostered Ministers Gathering will be held in August 7-10, 2017, in Atlanta and that Facebook page is live.

We enjoyed a noon lunch, at which those bishops who serve on seminary boards met with seminary presidents. This led to a conversation of the whole COB on the implementation of an item from the Theological Education Advisory Council related to funding for seminaries through the synods and churchwide.

We then heard a report from Pr. Chris Olkiewicz, President of LEIRN (Lutheran Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Representatives Network). This network is vital and vibrant, connecting and shaping our church’s ecumenical and inter-religious relations in partnership with local, regional, national, and global

partners. LEIRN meets face-to-face annually at the National Workshop on Christian Unity ([www.nwcu.org](http://www.nwcu.org)). Representatives share best practices and resources and build relationships with other ecumenical networks and partners. The next workshop will be held May 1-4, 2017, in Minneapolis, and the theme will be the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. For more information, see the LEIRN blog (updated monthly) at <http://leirn.blogspot.com/> Pr Peter Maisenbach is the WIS LEIRN representative.

At the end of the day, the COB went into executive session for conversation and also heard Bishop's Announcements and Concerns.

We concluded the meeting so all could attend the Fund for Leaders Banquet. There are currently 47 synod partners as part of Fund for Leaders and over the years we have provided 55 full-tuition, 7 diversity, and 67 half-tuition scholarships, totaling \$1,514,347. Current market value of the Fund for Leaders endowment is \$47,090,928.99.

### **Saturday, October 1**

The Chaplain for the Day was Bishop Kirby Unti (Northwestern Washington). He shared his personal experiences of the explosion of Mt. St. Helens on March 18, 1980, and commented on its destruction and resurrection to new life.

After opening devotions, we heard the Report of the Secretary by Pr. Chris Boerger. He gave us an update on the variety of changes to the churchwide, synodical, and congregational constitutions and the proper procedure for how those can be enacted. His staff is also working on the Roster Manual and issues related to the new roster of Ministers of Word and Service.

From annual parochial reports in 2015, Secretary Boerger reported that we continue to lose roughly 2.6% of baptized membership each year. The baptized membership as of December 31, 2015, was 3,668,034. This represents a reduction of 97,328 from 2014. Congregational total financial receipts were up 1.6% to \$2,464,222,611. Regular giving by members was \$1,755,747,689 or an increase of \$3 million dollars. Current fund expenditures were \$1,824,485,333. Congregations spent more in current fund expenses than they received in regular offerings. Payments on debt were up .4 % and mission support was down 1.43% to \$97,942,700. This mission support number represented 3.99% of total spending.

Christopher Carpenter, Director for Budget Planning, gave the Report of the Treasurer as Pr. Linda Norman is on sabbatical. Total operating revenue and support of \$39.0 million for the seven-month period ending August 31, 2016, was \$2.8 million higher than expenses of \$36.2 million. Revenue totaled \$36.4 million for the seven-month period compared with \$36.0 million the previous year. Income from congregations through synods in the form of Mission Support income for the seven months was \$24.9 million, favorable to the budget by \$0.5 million and unfavorable to the prior year results by \$0.7 million.

The Mission Support budget for 2016 of \$45 million is \$2.1 million or 4.5 percent lower than the amount received in fiscal 2015. Total contributions to ELCA World Hunger for the seven months were \$9.8 million, favorable to the budget by \$0.7 million and favorable to the prior year by \$1.1 million.

Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA has raised \$94.8 million in revenue and commitments to date in our five-year, comprehensive campaign. This amount represents 47.9% of the total goal of \$198 million by January 31, 2019. In addition to results reported above, strong response to date continues to be in the areas of New Congregations, Fund for Leaders, and Global Church-Missionaries/Young Adults in Global Mission and International Leaders: Women.

Pr. Kevin Strickland, Director for Worship, gave a report on the ELCA Rostered Ministers Gathering on August 7-10, 2017, in Atlanta. The theme will be "On the Way...Together" using the

Emmaus Road story. You can keep up with details on the ELCA website very soon and on Facebook at “ELCA Rostered Ministers Gathering 2017.” Registration begins March 1, 2017.

After the morning break, we received a report from the Director for Mission Support, Victoria Flood. She will be sending a letter for mission support intent for 2017. She also shared information from the synod partnership consultations that have been held and how the synod’s DEM will develop a plan to create a mission support/stewardship strategy in each synod.

Bp. Jim Hazelwood (New England) gave a report on the five synods (New England, Nebraska, TX-LA Gulf Coast, Lower Susquehanna, and Metro DC) that are in a Mission Support Pilot for three years. During this period these synods would retain the amount of funds that had previously been granted them by the Domestic Mission unit for their DEM package as well as grants for new and renewing ministries. The pilot is meant to test two hypotheses: 1) that the allocation of mission support dollars for new starts and renewals would be more easily and effectively managed and administered through local oversight of synods, and 2) that moving the funding of new mission starts and renewals to the synod’s responsibility would have an overall net gain in mission support from both congregations and individuals. While it is still early, some synods have seen slight growth in mission support and the streamlining of financial reporting. Also, they have experienced more flexibility to allocate dollars for mission starts and/or reinvest funding for training or other areas supporting mission development. Since the DEM is called by the synod, there is also cost savings on compensation and clarifying the line of accountability. Regular reports will be given at each COB.

We were pleased to hear the first report of the Vice President-elect, Bill Horne. He provided a personal testimony based on Psalm 121 and the assurance of the Lord’s guidance and help. This keeps him calm in the midst of struggle. He shared his personal story, his business background, and his dreams and leadership style for the ELCA.

After lunch, the COB enjoyed a renewal break until 2 p.m. and then attended Interest Groups on the use of Social Media, Bound Beyond Conscience, Zero Tolerance for Racism, and Multiple Point Calls.

Later in the afternoon, we began the first of three sessions on Called Forward Together in Christ: Future Directions Conversation. The bishops of the 9 regions met over dinner to discuss our contextual realities.

### **Sunday, October 2**

We met for Sunday worship in the Lutheran Center Chapel. Presiding Bishop Eaton was the preacher and Bp. David Brauer-Rieke (Oregon) was the presider.

After worship, we continued with the other sessions on Called Forward Together in Christ: Future Directions Conversation, Parts II & III.

We then enjoyed lunch together and had the afternoon free, allowing COB members a time for rest, attending a football or baseball game or movie, casual conversations, a relaxing dinner together, etc.

Ask me what I thought of The Magnificent 7 redo.

### **Monday, October 3**

The day began with devotions by Bp. Rick Jaech (Southwestern Washington). He shared a segment of the parable of the lost son and God’s joy in finding us.

We then heard **COB Committee Reports:**

Bishop Formation: Bp. Kurt Kusserow (Southwestern Pennsylvania) -- There will be six bishop elections in 2017. Three bishops are retiring from the Virginia, Great Lakes, and Eastern Washington/Idaho synods; three other synods have elections with bishops open to serving another term: Southern Illinois, SE Michigan, and Arkansas-Oklahoma synods. Also, mentors for new bishops were selected.

Roster, by Bp. Mary Froiland (South-Central Synod of Wisconsin) -- The report was approved for all categories for rostered leaders for extensions for On Leave from Call, Non-Stipendiary Call, and Three-Year Waiver requests.

Theological and Ethical Concerns, by Bp. Jon Anderson (Southwestern Minnesota) – The committee dealt with the following issues:

1) They reviewed a series of Corporate Social Responsibility documents for editorial purposes. I serve on the CSR sub-committee.

2) The members of the committee suggested books that could be read by all on the committee for the purpose of discussion and formation of a common language about matters at the intersection of theology and ethics. The committee decided to read “The End of Words” in anticipation of the March 2017 COB meeting and to discuss the book during a lunch break.

3) The committee began a lengthy discussion on the Office of Ministry, prompted by concerns about the use of Synodically Authorized Ministers and the potential ramifications of this church's understanding of ordination. It was agreed that members of the COB be familiar with the 1993 ELCA Study on Ministry, and that it would be wise to engage in a churchwide conversation about Synodically Authorized Ministry prior to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly.

4) The committee held a discussion about how the COB develops statements made to the church. An introduction to this will be shared with the COB.

5) Bishop Ann Svennungsen (Minneapolis Area) noted that the study period allotted for the social statement, “Women and Justice: One in Christ,” will extend for one year. Synod appointment of Process Builders will be important.

Ministry Among People in Poverty, by Bp. Wayne Miller (Metro Chicago) – The 3-fold purpose of this committee is to: a) Provide support and consultation for the Churchwide staff working on strategies for engagement with people in poverty; b) Think critically and strategically about new approaches or initiatives related to the concerns of people in poverty; and c) Explore ways to call the entire Conference of Bishops into deeper engagement with the concerns of those in poverty.

Along with reports of various ministries by churchwide staff, there was discussion about “Start-up to Sustainability.” Most of our strategies for the development of faith communities among the poor follow a traditional model of “seed grants” distributed over a short time period, but faith communities that continue to do ministry among people locked in chronic poverty regularly find “self-sufficiency” an impossible threshold to cross. So, is it possible to imagine a structure or strategy by which faith communities on the margins can be indefinitely or permanently sustained with outside revenue sources? Is such a structure or strategy (if possible) actually advisable or does it necessarily create inappropriate dependency?

Synodical and Rostered Leader Care, by Bp. John Roth (Central-Southern Illinois) -- This committee addresses the “Shared Risk Fund” among synods for the cost of disciplinary processes and the “Good Samaritan Fund” which provides financial support for rostered leaders related to health care costs. No assessments are required from synods for the Shared Risk Fund at this time, and gifts to the Good Samaritan Fund are always welcome.

Academy, by Bp. Larry Wohlrabe (Northwestern Minnesota) – Plans were shared on the 2017 Bishop’s Academy in Charleston, SC. As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we will hear three presenters: Dr. Timothy Wengert, Ministerium of Pennsylvania Professor Emeritus of Reformation History and the Lutheran Confessions at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia; Dr. Susan McArver, Professor of Church History and Educational Ministry at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary/Lenoir-Rhyne University; and Dr. Kathryn Lohre, Assistant to the Presiding Bishop and Executive for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The Academy will take place at two neighboring venues in Charleston—the Francis Marion Hotel and St Matthew’s Lutheran Church. Off-site activities will include an optional tour of historic Fort Sumter, a pilgrimage to Mother Emanuel AME Church, an evening on the Isle of Palms, and Sunday morning worship in the ELCA congregations of the Charleston area. Spouses of bishops will have a program and lunch on Friday, January 6.

The Committee is anticipating the 2018 Academy in Vancouver or Victoria, British Columbia. Taking seriously this opportunity for deeper engagement with our colleague bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the Academy Committee proposes that the 2018 Academy focus on the working theme of “First Nations Peoples: Theology, Spirituality, Reconciliation.”

DM: New/Renewing Congregations, by Bp. Hermann Yoos (South Carolina) – There was conversation with Rev. Sandy Chrostowski, Director DEM Relations, and her newly configured role. They also had a first glance of the ELCA Youth Gathering 2018 by Molly Beck Dean, which will be held in Houston. There was also extended conversation concerning “Called Forward Together in Christ” recommendations from this unit by Mark Burkhardt.

DM: Leadership by Bp. Brian Maas (Nebraska) – The Word & Service Roster was discussed, noting the overwhelming CWA vote (96.43%) in favor of unifying the existing Word & Service rosters. There was also conversation on updates to the Candidacy Manual. Those changes can be seen in the document itself as the Church Council gets ready to address it in November.

Global Mission Liaison, by Bp. Jim Gonia (Rocky Mountain) – There is an extensive written report that shows the work of Global Mission in countries around the world. Of personal interest was information on Global Service. The Global Service team called, oriented, and deployed 124 new missionaries in the summer of 2016. The breakdown of new missionaries by pattern of service is as follows:

- 17 paid personnel, including 4 international seminary interns through the ELCA’s Horizon internship program.
- 11 year-long Central Europe Teachers Program volunteers. Though classified as “volunteers” because they are not on Global Mission’s payroll, Central Europe teachers receive a local salary from the Lutheran schools in Slovakia, Hungary, & Poland.
- 8 short-term Global Mission Volunteers. These self-funded missionaries serve in a variety of positions for a period of 2-6 months.
- 3 Lutheran Global Health Volunteers (LGHV). Missionaries in the LGHV program serve from 1 month to 1 year in a variety of health-related capacities.
- 1 Global Mission Associate (GMA). This pattern allows ELCA rostered leaders to maintain their roster status while serving independently in congregations or institutions around the world.

The Rev. Fatima Bass Thomas, Evangelical Lutheran Church of The Gambia, is among this year’s new ILP scholarship recipients, pursuing a M.Th. at LSTC. She is also a former participant in the Wittenberg International Women Leaders Seminar.

- 84 Young Adults in Global Mission volunteers.

The ELCA currently supports 228 missionaries in total, who serve alongside companion churches and agencies in 49 different countries.

After the Committee reports, Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and Pr. Marcus Kunz shared information on the materials for the continuing study of the Small Catechism. There is a wide variety of materials that can be located at [Augsburg Fortress](#).

A Book of Faith update was given. Bp. Wilma Kucharek (Slovak Zion) and Pr. Brenda Smith shared a summary of their work. They have attended the Youth Extravaganza, the Lutheran Ministry Network, connections with the 500<sup>th</sup> Observance of the Reformation, and exploring Biblical connections with racial justice issues.

We broke for lunch and Ready Bench meetings - Middle East, Immigration, Domestic, Care of Creation, International, and Justice Is Not Just Us.

After lunch, we heard a report about Portico Benefit Services from Pr. Jeff Thiemann, CEO.

On January 1, 2017, you can call one phone number to contact “Quantum Health Care Coordinators.” They will help find providers, manage a health condition, get the right care, save you money, resolve medical and pharmacy issues, and anything else that makes the health care process easier for you. It is a streamlined new system to benefit all its sponsored members.

In 2017 we will see the lowest ELCA-Primary baseline health contribution rate increase in four years. There are innovative changes designed to limit the growth of health care cost increases and to better serve its members, a renegotiated prescription drug contract, and the decision to build the 1% discount into this year’s rate. A 30-minute webinar led by Portico Chief Operating and Financial Officer Stacy Kruse, “[A Closer Look at 2017 Health Benefits and Rates](#),” explains current cost drivers and the Portico Care Coordinator by Quantum Health service.

To foster financial wellness, Portico is enhancing its in-house retirement planning services by adding Certified Financial Planners, developing a personalized online planning tool to help members envision and prepare for the retirement they want, and including an incentive within the 2017 wellness program to create a retirement plan.

Bp. Jon Anderson led us in a discussion on “Finding Our Voice as a Conference: conversation about development of joint statements and other ways we speak as a conference.” We talked about various kinds of statements (e.g. resolution, pastoral letter, sense of the conference, ready bench sign-on letters, shared concepts for individual synodical letters), triggers for starting a conversation toward a statement, the process for writing the statement, the threshold needed to begin the process, and communication after the statement is completed.

Bp. Don Kreiss gave a report from the seminary presidents/seminary board bishops lunch conversation. It was noted that seminaries are the communities in the church that are feeling significant pressure right now and that the health and vitality of the seminaries reflects the health of the church. Other topics discussed were the various funding levels by synods that support our seminaries, candidacy process changes, types of competencies needed to serve multiple congregations or tent-making, and different types of toolkits necessary to leverage lay leadership. To build relationships, suggestions were made to include one seminary president who would stay with us the duration of the COB meeting or to follow the practice of Region 8, where all the bishops would visit the seminary and spend the day.

After a break, there was a report from the Assignment Process Task Force by Bp. Patricia Lull (St. Paul Area). There was extended conversation and an approval of the new process. It will receive evaluation on a regular basis.

After Bishops’ Announcements and Concerns, we enjoyed an Oktoberfest meal together and a free evening.

## **Tuesday, October 4**

The chaplain for the day is Bp. Jessica Crist (Montana) who led us in morning devotions. On this day of the commemoration of St. Francis of Assisi, lover of creation (ELW 835), she shared her ministry with Native Peoples as related to the current issues in Standing Rock. With the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly, standing in solidarity with Native Peoples to work for treaty rights, the protection of land, and particularly, water.

Bp. Michael Burk (Southeastern Iowa) led the COB in a review of the document, “A Shared Vision of Episcopacy and a Relational Agreement.” We reviewed suggested changes and have homework for our next COB meeting. This document clarifies the responsibilities of the office of bishop, principles of the collegial nature of our work together, and the practical implications of such in preaching and teaching, candidacy, first call, ordination, mobility, call process, synodically authorized ministers, oversight of mission, and witness to unity.

After an executive session, there was a wrap-up conversation about what needs our attention in future meetings, highlights from our sessions, and what we could have done better. Evaluation of our sessions has been an important component in making future COB meetings more productive.

Bp. Jessica Crist, closed the meeting with pTexas  
er and bishops began their travel home, to seminary visits, etc.

Thank you for remembering the Conference of Bishops in your prayers during its meeting time and following. We deeply appreciate your prayers and certainly keep you in ours.