

LOWER SUSQUEHANNA SYNOD, ELCA
SYNOD COUNCIL
Minutes
December 3, 2011

The Lower Susquehanna Synod Council met for a special meeting to continue discussing the recommendations from the ELCA Churchwide Assembly on Living into the Future Together (LIFT) on Saturday, December 3, 2011, at 9:00 a.m. in the Board Room of the United Church Center, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Vice President Lucinda L. Bringman called the meeting to order at 9:13 a.m. The Rev. J. Richard Eckert presented devotions on discernment, prayer, and using silence as a way to listen to God's call. He led the members of the Synod Council in prayer.

ROLL CALL

Members present: Bishop B. Penrose Hoover Lucinda L. Bringman

Thomas C. Benner	Edward J. Robbins
Elizabeth D. George	Marcus W. Thomsen
J. Richard Eckert	Chelle J. Huth, AiM
Elizabeth C. Polanzke	

Staff present: Clifton D. Eshbach

Members excused: Thomas E. McKee	Bruce E. Seagrist
Lisa M. Gobrecht	Patricia A. Snyder
Molly E. Crouser	April E. Trout
Dawn O. Frees	Tyler J. Wilson
Robert H. Getz, Jr	Holly Freas-Webster
Kurt S. Strause	Judy K. Collins, AiM

Liaisons excused: Fred W. Bohls	Susan Master
Sarah Canning	

Staff excused: Pamela B. Drenner	Charlie Roberts
Virginia J. Cover	David R. Fisher
Joanne Wilhelm	

Vice President Bringman made introductory remarks. How shall we begin this discussion? Having re-read the minutes of the October 27, 2011, special meeting, she noted that we covered many topics, including the goal of encouraging congregations to begin congregation mission plans by the end of 2012, and to have the Synod Council model to review and develop a mission plan. She invited Bishop Hoover to make introductory remarks.

Bishop Hoover: Reflected on the Synod Council meeting of two days previous, Thursday, December 1, 2011. Felt that the call to prayer during the meeting led by Pastor Elaine Dent was an important piece of the meeting. That practice kept us from wandering. His current thinking is to ask Pastor Dent to be the chaplain for the 2012 synod assembly and to use during the assembly the example of the prayer practice she led us through the meeting Thursday night.

Chelle Huth: Was thinking the same thing. Could Pastor Dent also be asked to be the chaplain to the Synod Council as well as the assembly?

Beth George: Appreciated the period of silence Thursday night and during the devotion this morning. Allowed her to focus her attention where it was needed to be focused.

Ed Robbins: Affirmed Pastor George's comment. The practice evoked long-ago good memories. The ambiguity and purposefulness of the Word of God was present.

Lucinda Bringman: Thursday night was effective and powerful. It allowed us to attend to business and discerned what we're really about.

Bishop Hoover: If the assembly theme would be "Who Are We? Why Are We Here?" then this deliberative approach to discernment can work.

Elizabeth Polanzke: In her congregation there is not only a parliamentarian but also a discernmentarian, not a member of the Congregation Council, who is responsible to be watchful of the group.

J. Richard Eckert: We have someone at St. Peter, Middletown who does the same thing, called a "presence keeper." It needs to be someone from outside the council.

Ed Robbins: Irrespective of the assembly theme, this is a good idea.

Bishop Hoover: I think I made a decision.

Lucinda Bringman: We also discussed the issues of accountability and expectations at our October 27 meeting.

Bishop Hoover: All rostered leaders should attend the Synod Assembly. It is a unique gathering – rostered leaders and a greater number of attendees being lay people present together to do the things we're discussing now.

Beth George: It is a wonderful idea that the assembly model a prayer practice that they can they take back and use in their home congregations. Sometimes you just gotta stop...

Lucinda Bringman: With all the organizational responsibilities presiding officers have, trying to stop is so hard. I take comfort in the words of Psalm 46.

Chelle Huth: This practice is calling out to us to model missional discernment to others.

Lucinda Bringman: How do we let others know we're going to do this?

Ed Robbins: Prepare a handout for people attending the assembly, something they can take back with them. Develop a mission emphasis on discerning the needs of the neighborhoods congregations are located in. This raises up the tension between "doing" versus "being." We need to be a church which stands for the presence of God and the absence of God (Pastor Robbins related a story of a recent funeral where this tension was present).

Elizabeth Polanzke: The only caution to this is that the practice may shock some assembly goers, especially those who have attended many assemblies and who are focused only on completing the legislative business and want to race through the agenda. We can prepare people for this by talking in conference meetings about what may happen. Maybe provide a short list of questions or prayer petitions people can use during the periods of silence. Give them a heads up and some basic tools.

Tom Benner: Could we make time early in the assembly agenda to share our expectations?

Elizabeth Polanzke: We could also put something in the pre-assembly mailing.

Chelle Huth: Pastor Dent attended to that in how she introduced the prayer practice to us on Thursday night, then the first period of silence was long and subsequent periods of silence became shorter.

Lucinda Bringman: Any announcement introducing this should be kept simple, "At times the agenda will be interrupted by prayer."

Bishop Hoover: And don't suggest any potential outcomes from the practice.

Ed Robbins: Make a reference to the presence bowl and have people take note of it. Use this notion of the presence of God in our midst. We're simply living.

Bishop Hoover: It has been a spiritual learning experience for me. It's exciting.

Beth George: Could the Friday morning worship service leave behind a remnant of the worship in plain sight so that the assembly sees it the entire time?

J. Richard Eckert: Also be sure to use the natural moments of silence in the liturgy to accomplish this. We already have several opportunities to practice silence in our liturgy.

Elizabeth Polanzke: Just being in the same room for worship and the business meeting will be good.

Chelle Huth: Perhaps a large baptismal font located down front and center can be a constant reminder. (She has one which can be used).

Beth George: A visual left from worship to the meeting. It's a good idea.

J. Richard Eckert: It is important to teach, but all we're asking for is moments to fall into the presence of God.

Clifton Eshbach: The idea of silence was hard to put into practice for someone coming from a background in radio, where the idea of silence was thought of as terrible. In radio, they don't call silence "dead air" for nothing. I rediscovered the great value of silence while recuperating at home a couple of months ago.

Elizabeth Polanzke: All we are doing is a prayerful practice. Can we change the topic now? We also discussed the effort to encourage congregations to begin developing congregation mission plans. As Synod Council liaison, I recently brought this subject up at a meeting of the West Cumberland Conference. I asked if they had heard of the LIFT report and asked if pastors have mission plans in their congregations? About one quarter of the congregations present said they have something like a mission

plan. Two said they want nothing to do with this. These two in particular said they sense and receive no support from the synod. Pastors, as a whole in this group, said they need educational resources to do this: both written programs and proposals and workshops dedicated to mission planning. Could forum time at the assembly be used for one such workshop? Three types of resources are needed: people, things and workshops.

Beth George: One word of caution. With 240 congregations, even if ten percent of them wanted to seriously do a mission plan, no one person on the synod staff can do that amount of work. Pastors need to be trained to also be competent to lead congregations through this process.

Ed Robbins: At the recent regional gathering in Altoona I spoke with two pastors from western Pennsylvania who were part of developing a mission strategy which centered on having congregations figure out the details and needs of the neighborhoods surrounding their congregations and to go into those neighborhoods. Live with the smallness and bigness of our situations. The church in the neighborhood. It took two years to listen and to discern what can be done in the neighborhood. Walter Taylor's work on the larger family is very helpful for this discernment.

Lucinda Bringman: "Re-routing" in the community. It's relationship building in the community.

J. Richard Eckert: Isn't the first step in mission planning prayer and listening?

Elizabeth Polanzke: The pastors I talked to say they are tired and don't feel supported. That group turned the topic into how to do marketing on a conference-wide basis.

Lucinda Bringman: That was tried in the Gettysburg Conference and it didn't work very well.

Ed Robbins: Can we develop an event which helps pastors get started on developing the skill sets to get pastors involved?

Tom Benner: Some time ago I remember doing an asset discerning program through the Region 8 coordinator at the time. Is this information still around? It was time consuming to do and required an investment by people. The people in our congregation who participated said it was a good thing to do.

Lucinda Bringman: I'm trying to get information from the D.E.M. in Southwest PA Synod for developing mission plans.

Marcus Thomsen: His congregation in Lancaster is doing this now. They have worked with Pastor Dave Fisher. The end goal of LIFT is to focus on the congregation. Could we take time at the assembly, outside of forums, to get out information on LIFT to the congregations? Then it can be discussed in conferences and then discussed in congregations. We cannot mandate that congregations go through a mission planning process, but we can be responsible in getting the information to them.

Beth George: Dave Fisher and his counterpart in the Upper Susquehanna Synod are meeting with her two congregations in the Upper Dauphin Conference to do this. But we are including all the conference pastors in our meetings to learn how we can develop a conference mission. It helps us answer the question, "What is the strongest thing you do in your congregation?" Once answered, "Then work to make it stronger." Attitude has a lot to do with it. One of her congregations is excited about going through mission planning. The other thinks it is unnecessary.

Chelle Huth: The West Shore Conference congregations have also begun open discussions under the theme that, "We're all in crisis." They are discussing what that means as a conference. It is hoped these discussions can develop a more cooperative understanding of what it means to be the church. They hope to build assets together.

Ed Robbins: In the example from western PA he referenced, care was taken not to make cooperative ministry threatening. Families worship where they wish to worship, but work together in larger congregation groups at other ministries, such as cooperative youth groups.

Chelle Huth: That's a key in cooperative ministry. You work together and always return to your home congregation to work and support that part of the ministry in your home congregation.

Elizabeth Polanzke: I participate in the ELCA rostered leader discussion page on Facebook. It is very good for a wide perspective. But should we have such a page for our synod's rostered leaders to assist in this discussion of mission?

Lucinda Bringman: It may be better to start with an in-person gathering. And then branch out to an electronic resource.

Tom Benner: There is information out there now for congregations and pastors to use. Our role as a Synod Council ought to be to provide trained facilitators to go into congregations with this material.

Beth George: Provide intensive training to create those facilitators. I want to react to the comments about the two pastors from West Cumberland who said they have no support from the synod. Her two congregations used to be angry at the synod. If they are honest with themselves, they are just transferring their anger from themselves to this synod for their own failure to do mission as a congregation over the years. Don't let them get away with that transference.

Chelle Huth: We should remember that we have two really great assets very close to our synod: They are the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. We should "suck them dry" for the resources and expertise on the issue of mission.

Clifton Eshbach: So we're back to the issue of accountability.

Lucinda Bringman: What's next?

Chelle Huth: Perhaps continuing this discussion with the members of the 2011 Churchwide Assembly delegation at our next meeting. They are very interested in following through with what they learned and discussed at the Orlando assembly.

Ed Robbins: Let's take the ideas from these two special meetings to such a meeting.

J. Richard Eckert: The only critical comment I have about the LIFT document, well it's more of a question; was the word "discernment" used honestly in the document? It takes time, maybe one or two years, to seriously pray and listen to God to really get involved. Maybe our message is, "Are you listening?"

Bishop Hoover: Similar questions have been asked at the churchwide level. The bottom line is that the LIFT task force had to produce a report on deadline, and the report went through several layers of review and editing, so much so that some on the task force didn't recognize the final product from what they first produced. Here in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, we need to take care as we move from conversation to implementation.

Elizabeth Polanzke: We take risks in setting goals. We live in the tension of goal setting and discernment.

Lucinda Bringman: What's next?

Marcus Thomsen: Do we need to ask the rest of the Synod Council?

Lucinda Bringman: Do we need to stay longer at the next Synod Council meeting and have this discussion?

Ed Robbins: More dialog with others is needed.

Beth George: The Assembly Planning Committee next meets January 11.

Lucinda Bringman: Ed, can you work with some others to put something on paper from our conversations?

Elizabeth Polanzke: Move on with a summary of the conversations. Trust each other and trust the process.

Lucinda Bringman: Who is willing to work with Ed? (Chelle Huth and J. Richard Eckert volunteered.)

Lucinda Bringman: Do we need to set another special meeting? Maybe continue this at the next Synod Council meeting? In the meantime, stay in prayer.

Tom Benner: Have we discussed how to be a catalyst for mission planning?

Ed Robbins: Yes we have. We are moving forward with steps to establish context.

Tom Benner: I think we still need to go further to decide what steps need to be taken to be a catalyst for congregations.

Lucinda Bringman: We're headed there.

In closing, Pastor J. Richard Eckert offered a prayer. The meeting adjourned at 11:19 a.m.