

MINUTES
of the 143rd MEETING
of the SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA SYNOD COUNCIL
of the EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA
Brossman Center, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia
January 31, 2017

This meeting of the Synod Council was called to order by Vice President Tracey A. Beasley at 4:06 pm.

This meeting was called for the purpose of discussing processes for the election of a bishop as they have been done in other Synods, and to determine how Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod might proceed as we enter this process at next year's Synod Assembly.

Also present in addition to members of the Synod Council and the Synod Staff were President David Lose, Secretary Wm Chris Boerger, the Reverend Donna Wright and the Reverend Sandra Brown.

Secretary Richard began the meeting with prayer.

Vice President Beasley introduced Dr. David Lose, President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, who offered words of welcome, thanks and encouragement.

Welcome, Secretary Boerger

Vice President Beasley introduced the Reverend Wm Chris Boerger, Secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and invited him to share some words about our Church.

Secretary Boerger expressed his appreciation for being able to be present and help in the discussion in which we will engage. He pointed out that we in the E.L.C.A. are not like most other Christian denominations. We are neither Congregational nor Presbyteral in our polity. We are one Church in three expressions, each expression being fully the church, but not the whole church. When discussing the work of the Church we do not say what are "they" doing, for we are all they. This interdependent nature makes us stronger, as we have the support and resources of each expression to do the work before us. But it also makes it confusing, in that there is not always a clear sense of what each expression "has" to do in every instance.

He noted some of the things we do well as we do them together. We raise up leaders. We are very good about World Hunger. We recognize we are a country of immigrants. When we speak of "them" we are speaking of us. And our outreach ministries to those in need are incredibly strong and important.

Secretary Boerger expressed his thanks to the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod for our leadership in the Church, particularly in showing that multicultural representation is not only possible, but happening.

Overview of past Bishop Elections

Mr. Bob Hensil shared some of the process from previous elections of a bishop. The organizing team was basically a group of tellers. In the year when Bishop Burkat was first elected Bob met with Bishop Hanson the night before the election, but as far as planning, that was it. Some Conferences had meetings

to discuss the issue, but nothing formal had been planned. He noted that unlike the packet available today, the guidelines for this process were not very detailed in the past.

After the first ballot, the Committee on Elections attempted to contact the prospective candidates to see if they were willing to stand for election. If they were not able to be contacted, their names went forward.

The Committee made sure to say it is the responsibility of voting members to be on the floor whenever the Assembly is in session. The agenda is a guideline only, and voting times may move, as was the case in a previous election of a bishop, when some were not present at the time of a vote.

The Committee provided a questionnaire to allow voting members of the Assembly to submit questions for the candidates to answer after the 3rd ballot. In the most recent election this was not necessary as Bishop Burkat was re-elected on first ballot.

Options and Insight from other Synods

Secretary Boerger stated there are four ways that Synods elect bishops. Two of them require Constitutional revision, and so they are not possible for us. The first of these two ways involves a system in which candidates are Pre-nominated in various processes prior to the Assembly, and they comprise the candidates on the first ballot of the Ecclesiastical Balloting. No other names are brought forward for consideration. The second is when candidates are Pre-nominated in various processes prior to the Assembly, and they comprise the candidates on the first ballot of the Ecclesiastical Balloting, but additional name are able to be placed in nomination at the first ballot at the Assembly. Again, these two are not available to us because of Constitutional constraints.

The two options available to us as a Synod include what we have done all along, the “model ecclesiastical ballot,” which is used by the vast majority of Synods, or a system of Pre-identification, in which persons and characteristics are lifted up, but there are no nominations made. The first ballot at the Assembly is open.

For those Synods that choose the Pre-identification system, it is usually a three stage process. The following names of the stages are Secretary Boerger’s designations, and are not official or definitive.

There is a “Transition Team” which develops a Mission Profile for the Synod. This may include a Position description for the Bishop. The description in the Constitution is so expansive no one can do it. The Transition team may work to narrow the focus to those areas which are most critical in this place and at this time.

A “Bishop’s Election Team” supervises and oversees the process of pre-identification. This team addresses such issues as who can identify candidates, by what process, and what deadlines might be imposed.

Then there is an “Elections Committee” – which runs the actual balloting process at the Assembly.

Chair persons should be lay people so that the clergy, who may receive a vote, do not have to recuse themselves.

It is also strongly recommended that Synod Staff not be involved in the process to avoid any conflict of interest.

Discussion followed Secretary Boerger's comments.

Pr. Donna Wright: is it permissible to have candidates speak or answer questions prior to the Assembly?

Secretary Boerger: It is possible; there are questions and concerns about it. How do you not penalize those who are unable to attend the forum, causing it to seem as though they are not invested?

Mr. Bob Hensil: If we have a pre-identification process we want to do so in a way that does not seem as though we are pushing a particular candidate. As a result we want to be careful about whether persons should be encouraged to or invited to speak and or answer questions prior to Assembly.

Ms Susan Pursch: Some were on a committee prior to Bishop Burkat's election. The whole process included many people and much prayer as we saw Claire being elevated to bishop.

Secretary Boerger; I recommend you be in weekly prayer for the year after the conclusion of this Synod Assembly. This is a call process. We are the Church. He also referenced the E.L.C.A. website where there is a tool kit for the election of a bishop.

Pr. Brad Burke, Assistant to the Bishop: How should we make use of social media?

Secretary Boerger: If you do this, a team needs to be aware of this and set some parameters. In one Synod an anonymous post was uploaded which stated they had information about a candidate and that this person should be contacted before the candidate continued. Fortunately this was pulled down before many people saw it.

Pr. Jane Marston: What about vetting or background checks?

Secretary Boerger: You should be clear that this is a needed part of the process. Whether you do this prior to the election, or get permission of identified persons but run the checks after you get to the round of 3 candidates, it should be made clear that the candidates will need to submit to a background check. This has sometimes caused people to remove their name from nomination. If not done before election the Executive Committee needs to see and evaluate the background checks and discuss the steps if there are any issues. You may want to do a financial background check as well, so that you know how to structure the Synod staff for effective service.

Mr. Rod Rothermel: What if there is something in a background check that is ambiguous or borderline?

Secretary Boerger: Churchwide attorneys are available to advise. Ultimately the Synod Council will need to make the decision.

Mr. Dave Ehret: Are any synods doing drug testing?

Secretary Boerger: Not that I am aware of.

Mr. Adam Clark: What if the background check has false information?

Secretary Boerger: As with the previous comment, this would be shared with the Executive Committee, who then meets with the candidate. Then a determination can be made of what the issue may be and what steps if any are necessary to resolve it.

Vice President Beasley called on Secretary Richard to place before the Synod Council the recommendation of the Executive Committee.

Secretary Richard placed before the Council the recommendation that we adopt a three stage pre-identification process for selecting a bishop, and that these stages include those steps outlined by Secretary Boerger above: a Transition Team to draft a Mission Profile; a Bishop Election Team to discern how to raise up persons with the gifts for this ministry, and the Committee on Elections to oversee the Ecclesiastical Balloting at the Assembly.

The motion was seconded.

Discussion ensued, and included a desire to be certain that this was not a nominating process; that the stages be defined and a timeline be developed; that we avoid the sense that we are placing endorsement status on anyone in this process; and that we surround the process with openness and prayer.

The Synod Council unanimously approved the recommendation.

Secretary Richard was directed to draft a Continuing Resolution to be reviewed by the Executive Committee, and then presented to the Synod Council for review and adoption.

Bishop Burkat closed the meeting with words of thanks for Secretary Boerger, words of thanks for the work of the Synod Council, and words of encouragement as we go forward together proclaiming the good news of Christ.

The meeting adjourned at 6:11 pm

Respectfully submitted,
The Rev. Karl M. Richard, Secretary
Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA

Approved by Synod Council February 23, 2017