

MINUTES
of the 173rd MEETING
of the SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA SYNOD COUNCIL
of the EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA
Zoom Meeting
December 8, 2022
6:00 p.m.

DEVOTIONS

Vice President Tracey A. Beasley welcomed the Synod Council at 6:05 p.m. and invited Pr. John Heidgerd to lead the Council in devotions.

Pr. Heidgerd spoke on the theme of longing, a key part of our worship in Advent. In this time, we look at short days and dry trees and we long for life to return. We sing songs of longing, like “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” We hear words like those from Isaiah 35 about life springing forth in the desert, and we are filled with longing. In Isaiah we also have the image of a stump. A dead stump is not generally seen as a sign of hope; it is rather seen as a sign of death and the grave. But in Isaiah, life comes from this dead stump; the Messiah, the descendant of Jesse, will come forth and bring life where it seems there is no life. New life emerges like new shoots from deep roots. When it begins it may be ungainly, and not lovely, but it is new life.

In this age we are afraid of what is dying all around us. Our congregations are smaller, and finances are difficult. As we look around, we long for new life. But we are reminded that new life is coming, even as what we see looks like a dead stump. We have the Messiah. We have Emmanuel. God is with us.

CALL TO ORDER

Vice President Tracey A. Beasley called the 173rd meeting of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council to order at 6:14 p.m. The Rev. Karl M. Richard, Secretary, confirmed a quorum was present.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The Minutes of the 172nd Meeting of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council were approved as presented.

SETTING THE AGENDA

The agenda for the 173rd meeting of the Synod Council was approved as presented.

MISSION MOMENT

Ms. Ellen Daneke, chair of the Forward Together in Faith Team, presented the current round of grants provided from this ministry endowment.

Ms. Daneke noted that the fund had \$25,000 to distribute this year. This number is lower than last year, but that is due to the drop in the stock market.

The Team received thirteen applications. Of those thirteen, one was rejected, as it did not meet the parameters of the grant guidelines. The remaining 12 applicants will receive at least partial grants for their projects, if not the full amount they requested.

When asked into which of the four areas of emphasis (Networking, Innovating, Communicating, and Equipping) the grants fell, she said they were predominantly in the area of Communicating.

Congregations are still quite focused on making improvements in technology to assist with their on-line presence and ability to reach out to a broader audience.

REPORT OF THE BISHOP

Bishop Davenport commented that we do this work of the Church in teams; we do not do it alone. It is the OFFICE of the Bishop, not just the person who is the Bishop, that accomplishes much of what is contained in her report. Members of the Synod Council should feel free to ask the staff questions regarding the items before the Synod as well as asking the Bishop herself.

Pr. Gwendolyn King raised a question for co-Director for Evangelical Mission, Pr. Bryan Penman. She thought she had heard a survey was coming out regarding congregational vitality. Is there an update on this?

Pr. Penman said that we have been working with the Rev. Dr. Dave Daubert, who has reworked our congregational assessment tool. It is now much simpler to use, and it is web-based, making it more immediate in providing “results.” When a congregation fills out the form, the program produces a report with PowerPoint and other helps nearly instantly. And above all this, it is FREE.

Mr. Bert Glenn asked if, in addition to providing such a tool for congregations, we monitor congregations to see if they are approaching a “danger zone,” where they may be in risk of closing, so that, perhaps, we can offer assistance earlier and possibly stave off an end to their ministry.

Bishop Davenport said we are working with the Deans to identify such congregations, and are building a database from that information.

Bishop Davenport then shared several pieces from her written report with the Council.

Rostered Ministers Equipping Event

After three years we were finally able to come together again for this event. It was offered both in person, and online for those who felt uncomfortable gathering face to face. We were able to offer this event free of charge to our rostered ministers. The event was not free, but it was important to find a way to offer it free of charge as an investment in our leaders. With the level of burnout among rostered ministers, we wanted to be sure to provide this opportunity to allow our pastors and deacons to experience rejuvenation and renewal.

African Descent Lutheran Association

ADLA held an event at Christ, Upper Darby, to honor the Rev. Jehu Jones, the first African American Lutheran pastor, who was ordained in 1832. Jones established the first African American Lutheran Congregation, St. Paul, in 1834 here in Center City Philadelphia. This celebration was somewhat bittersweet, as the Rev. Dr. Richard Stewart, who had unearthed this history which has allowed us to have a street marker erected at the historic site, died just before this celebration.

When we celebrated the life and ministry of Dr. Stewart the next day, also at Christ, Upper Darby, it was good to have the black theologians present, reminding us of the diversity we have in the Body of Christ.

Sparking the Movement

The ELCA is striving to recognize this diversity, even as it struggles to find helpful ways to do so. The “Sparking the Movement Gathering” raised three challenging questions for the Church to consider: over the next ten years, what does the ELCA need to give up? What do we need to hold on to? What do we need to be? While these are good steps, a sign of our struggle for change is seen in the makeup of the team. It is nearly entirely prominent, well-educated, white people. Bishop Davenport was the only woman of color present. Bishop pointed out another missed opportunity to spark change and diversity. While the Sparking the Movement group was meeting, there were other groups searching for more inclusion and diversity, including a gathering of womanist theologians, present at the Church Offices at the same time, and yet there was no cross conversation. There was not even a plan for these different teams to share lunch together, which could have been a simple way to begin building bridges and connections moving forward.

Conference of Bishops

The Conference had many important conversations, including a discussion with the Rev. Jeff Thiemann of PORTICO Benefits regarding disability benefits, and discussions about the recent events in the United Methodist Church, the actions of which are resulting in many people coming to the ELCA.

Zone of Peace

We, with our ecumenical partners, have been in discussion about the “57 Blocks” program. This is a program to address issues in the 57 blocks in Philadelphia where the greatest amount of gun violence occurs. How can we take steps to increase opportunity, and mitigate situations that increase the chance of violence, in these specific areas? The number “57” has now been expanded to 72, but even with the greater number, it is a relatively small percentage of the total number of blocks in Philadelphia where such violence is experienced. The Black Clergy of Philadelphia also have representation in this discussion. The violence in the city is becoming so great that the Jewish Federation now has a security office.

Mr. Glenn asked Bishop Davenport what the issues are with the United Methodist Church that are causing such division.

Bishop Davenport shared the United Methodists are debating the same issues of sexuality as the ELCA did in 2009: same sex marriage, ordination of LGBTQ ministers, and transgender issues. This is causing a major divide in the denomination.

Pr. King recognized how much Bishop Davenport has on her plate, and asked how she might be taking care of herself in these difficult times.

Bishop noted that her relationships with friends and colleagues are important. She will be going, with a few other people, to visit Bishop Burkat in California, where she is serving as interim Bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod, for some time of mutual support.

REPORT OF THE VICE PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Vice President Beasley noted that the Council has the minutes from the meeting of the Executive Committee.

Ms. Beasley shared that, as part of her role as Vice President, she attended the Holy Closure of Bethany, Roxborough. She encouraged the members of the Synod Council to be aware of such Synod events, and take the time to show up to them, showing our support by our presence.

Vice President Beasley then invited Ms. Carrie Schwab, coordinator of our Synod Assembly, to present on where we are to date with this upcoming meeting.

Ms. Schwab shared that we will be back in person for the Assembly this year. After several years of being distant, we are working on making our return to an in-person Assembly a cause for celebration. We sent a survey asking what people had as their hopes for this year's Assembly, and we gathered a many different opinions. There was a fairly even split between having a one-day on-line event, a one-day in-person event, and a two-day in-person event. While the divisions were fairly even across the three categories, two-thirds of the responses did ask for an in-person Assembly.

We are also working on a program that would span a day and a half, starting in the afternoon on Friday, and then concluding on Saturday. This is an attempt to balance the desire to have the opportunity to gather, but recognizing that two full days, especially a full day on a Friday, is difficult for lay people who cannot get the day off work for the Assembly.

We have been in conversation with Franconia Mennonite Church, and they are holding the date for us. Before we commit to going back to our former site, we are also investigating the Valley Forge Resort Center. This is because another major component of the survey showed that people wanted to have the chance to fellowship and network with each other, and a Resort Center may be more able to provide such opportunities than the Mennonite church can. Valley Forge will be more expensive as a site, but we will also save on the expenses of the tent for the meals. Valley Forge has offered us a price that is significantly lower than their usual fee, but the cost of food would be more expensive than the caterers we used at Franconia. All of these varying costs will be part of the determination as to whether we move to a new site, or return to Franconia.

We will keep some form of electronic voting. We need to address concerns about how we do this. At the church there may not be strong enough WiFi to have this work properly. At the Resort Center there is likely enough bandwidth, but we need to investigate the if there is an increase in expense that goes with this greater capacity. Pr. Bob Fisher, Assistant to the Bishop for Communication and Mission Interpretation, is also exploring other systems by which we might be able to conduct electronic voting.

Pr. Marie Sager asked where Franconia is, as she is relatively new to the Synod and has not been there before.

Pr. Penman said it is in Montgomery County, near Souderton, north of Lansdale.

A question was raised about V-poll, which was used last year, and whether voting members will need to bring a laptop.

Ms. Schwab said a smartphone should work for V-poll, if this is the system we determine to use.

Ms. Schwab then asked Bishop Davenport to share the tentative theme for the Assembly.

Bishop shared the current idea: “Called by God to Serve in an OMG World.” The idea is to have something provocative that will encourage people to attend, and to have a hook by which we and address many of the concerns that people are dealing with. Bishop asked for reactions. Would this inspire you to come?

Pr. Nathan Krause: When I hear this, I hear that we are going to be equipped for serving the people of this day, in the language of this day.

Bishop Davenport: I read this is Bishop Almquist’s newsletter, and it grabbed me. I want language that will grab attention.

Pr. Stacey-Kyle Rea, Assistant to the Bishop for Youth and Young Adult Discipleship: for some, “omg” is like “like, ya know,” where for other generations it might be offensive.

Ms. Schwab: When I saw it, I heard it as flippant, and that people were not taking the Name seriously. But how do we approach people where they are, in a secular, not religious world?

Bishop Davenport: To me, what is it to serve when everywhere we turn it is “Oh my goodness!” There is the war in Ukraine, there is gun violence, there is more racial tension. But we cannot give up.

Mr. Roland Thompson: It is like the end of home improvement shows, where they are surprised at the finished project: “OMG! I cannot believe it can look so good!”

Ms. Schwab asked the Council if they are good with the overall format of a day and a half. The consensus was affirmative.

Pr. Krause said that he is very much looking forward to returning to being in-person and having this time together.

REPORT OF THE SECRETARY

Actions on the Roster

Secretary Richard brought forward the following actions on the Roster:

Renewal of Call to Specialized Ministry

S.C.22.12.33. THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council extend a one-year, renewable call to Specialized Ministry to the **Rev. Margaret J. Ainslie** as Director of Pastoral Care at Doylestown Hospital beginning February 27, 2023 to February 26, 2024.

The Synod Council unanimously adopted the resolution

Request to Move from On Leave (Disability) to Retired Roster

S.C.22.12.34. THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council approve moving the Rev. Susan K. Ericsson to the retired roster effective January 1, 2023.

The Synod Council unanimously adopted the resolution.

Request to Move from On Leave to Retired Roster

S.C.22.12.35. THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council approve moving the Rev. Tina Mackey to the retired roster effective February 1, 2023.

The Synod Council unanimously adopted the resolution.

Information Only; No Action Required

Transfers

The Rev. Dr. Richard Mathisen *to* Northeastern PA Synod effective 02/08/2022

The Rev. Nelson Rivera *from* Northeastern PA Synod effective 09/19/2022

The Rev. Rick Elliott *from* Northeastern PA Synod to retired roster effective 10/31/2022

Deacon Jane Elliott *from* Northeastern PA Synod to retired roster effective 10/31/2022

The Rev. Dr. Richard Stewart *from* Upstate New York to retired roster effective 11/01/2022

Deaths

Mrs. Martha Reumann (*honorable mention; will not be included in official Report of the Secretary for Bulletin of Reports*) death occurred November 13, 2022.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Stewart death occurred November 13, 2022.

The Rev. Kenneth Smith death occurred November 27, 2022.

The Rev. John Stevens Kerr death occurred November 30, 2022.

Reception of the property of the former Bethany, Roxborough

Secretary Richard then brought forward a resolution to receive the property of the former Bethany, Roxborough:

S.C.22.12.36. THEREFORE, RESOLVED THAT the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council acknowledges with sadness the action of Bethany Lutheran Church, 401 Martin Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19128 to close, effective November 20, 2022, on which date the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod received the property of Bethany, Roxborough, in accordance with the Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, specifically 9.71.b., +S13.23., and *C7.01.; and, on this date, December 8, 2022, authorizes the Bishop of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, or the Bishop's representative(s), to sell the property on behalf of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

Secretary Richard described that this is a formal action we take in order to authorize the Office of the Bishop to dispose of the property if it seems the best course of action to take. In some cases it may make sense to keep the property and try to repurpose it, but we learned from past experience that it is important to make the resolution so that there is clear action acknowledging that we as the Synod have received the property, and have given authorization to sell it if we need to.

Secretary Richard noted that we, as the Synod, do not close congregations, nor do we desire congregations to close. We do not gain anything from this, as there is more opportunity to share the Gospel if we have more sites from which to do ministry. Congregations that believe that we as the Synod close congregations, or that we are trying to do so, do not understand the role we play.

Congregations close when the people in the congregation feel they can no longer afford to do the ministry, either from a lack of finances, or from a lack of people. But as the ELCA is an inter-dependent organization, with Churchwide, Synod, and Congregation each playing a role in the work of the Church, when a congregation chooses to close, the Synod becomes, in a sense, the “executor of the estate.” As in our families, when a member of the family dies, someone in the family receives the estate, and deals with its disbursement after the fact. So it is with the property of former congregations. The Synod receives the assets, and by the way, the liabilities, of the now closed congregation. The congregation no longer exists, but someone has to deal with the affects.

Pr. John Heidgerd asked if there is an assessment of the liabilities that come from closed congregations, and whether we should know that balance sheet prior to acting to receive the property.

There is not such an assessment, and even if there were, the Synod is the body that constitutionally is responsible for the property regardless of net asset or net liability.

Pr. Penman shared that congregations do not close because they could still be viable. They usually wait until they cannot pay for the deferred maintenance that has caught up with them. In Bethany’s case, some of the reasons they voted to close were an outdated and costly heating system, a lack of parking, and roof repairs that will cost more than \$250,000. The idea that we are going to receive congregations with valuable assets is not true, and gives a misleading sense of what we are doing in this action.

Secretary Richard asked if the Council was ready to vote.

The Synod Council unanimously adopted the resolution.

Appointment of a Synod Attorney

Secretary Richard noted that our previous Synod Attorney, Mr. John Gordon, has retired. We need to appoint a new attorney to do the work of the Synod. Upon Mr. Gordon’s recommendation, and with the agreement of Bishop Davenport, the Executive Committee recommend the Rev. Kim L. Lengert, Esquire, be appointed to serve as Synod Attorney for Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA. She has been working for us in several matters over the past months, but according to the Synod Constitution, her appointment as our Synod Attorney needs confirmation by the Synod Council:

†S8.13. The synod bishop may appoint an attorney, admitted to the bar within the territory of the synod or the state where the synod is located, to be Synod Attorney. The appointment must be approved by the Synod Council and reported to the Synod Assembly and to the secretary of this church. The appointment continues until resignation or until a successor is appointed. The Synod Attorney provides legal advice and counsel to the synod officers and the Synod Council. The Synod Attorney is expected to be familiar with the governing documents and policies of the synod and, as necessary, to attend meetings of the Synod Council. The Synod Attorney serves without salary but may be retained and compensated for specific legal services requested by the synod.

To this end, the following resolution was placed before the Council:

S.C.22.12.37. THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council approves the appoint of the Reverend Kim L. Lengert, Esquire, to serve as Synod Attorney for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA.

Mr. Glenn inquired as to the type of work the Synod Attorney does.

Bishop Davenport replied that it covers many types of issues; concerns regarding property, issues with the Boy Scouts, concerns such as those of Trinity, South Philadelphia and Synodical Administration.

Mr. Glenn: I note that the candidate does not have a significant amount of time in service as a lawyer. While she has been an attorney for 15 years, she is also a pastor, and she has spent many of these years in that role. Are you comfortable with the level of experience she brings?

Bishop Davenport said she is very comfortable with her experience.

Vice President Beasley also said that she is comfortable with Attorney Lengert, having worked with her often in the situation at Trinity.

Mr. Glenn also asked if it bothered anyone that our Synod Attorney lives in Maine.

Vice President Beasley said that this is not important, as Lengert has passed the bar in Pennsylvania, and she has been here in Philadelphia several times to handle business for us.

Vice President Beasley noted that Attorney Lengert has many contacts in the area that have proven to be helpful to us.

The vote was called.

The Synod Council unanimously adopted the resolution.

2023 Housing Allowances for Rostered Ministers on Synod Staff

Finally, Secretary Richard brought to the Council a resolution setting Housing Allowances for the staff.

WHEREAS, Internal Revenue Code Section 107, as well as the associated Regulations and Revenue Rulings, provide that a portion of a minister's remuneration, designated as rental/housing allowance by the employing church or other qualifying organization, is excludable from the minister's gross income under Section 107 of the code; and

WHEREAS, The Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a qualifying organization, and

WHEREAS, of the compensation paid by SEPA Synod to ministers listed below in the calendar year 2022 the amount stated in each instance is designated as a rental/housing allowance in accordance with the provisions of section 107 of the Internal Revenue Code.

S.C.22.12.38. THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council approve the 2023 housing allowance for Bishop Patricia Davenport, Pastor Robert Fisher, Pastor Violet Little, Pastor Stacey-Kyle Rea, and Pastor Karen Sease, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT the recipients be reminded that the amounts so designated as rental/housing allowance are excludable from the gross income of the respective recipients only to the extent that said amounts are used to rent or provide a home. Further the amount eligible for the Section 107 exclusion may not exceed the fair rental value of the minister's home (including furnishings and appurtenances) plus the cost of utilities. To the extent a greater amount is designated as rental/housing allowance, the designation will be ineffectual with respect to such amount.

The Synod Council unanimously adopted the resolution.

REPORT OF THE TREASURER

Ms. Janet Neff, Treasurer, shared details from her written report. The financial reports are from October. The numbers from November show that Partnership Support has grown slightly.

The Generosity Team sends quarterly reports to congregations to keep them apprised of where they stand with regard to their giving to the Synod.

Treasurer Neff encouraged members to check their own congregation's numbers, and see how they are keeping up with their support.

Much of the loss we have continues to be due to the depressed market, and the subsequent decrease in our investment portfolio. These losses are still "unrealized" losses. The hope is that the market will rebound, and these losses will be regained in the coming year.

The losses in the investment funds show as loss across the four areas of our budget; Unrestricted, Temporarily Restricted, Mission, and Permanently Restricted.

Expenses continue to be lower than they were pre-pandemic, which has helped our overall bottom line.

Treasurer Neff expressed her thanks to Mr. Glenn, chair of the Finance Committee, Pr. Heidgerd, chair of the Investment Committee, and Mr. Martin Schwab, the Synod's Senior Accountant, for their ongoing help and support.

REPORT OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE

Mr. Glenn noted that the Committee reviewed the most recent statements available and found no issues with the reports.

Grace Trust

The Committee looked at the status of this Trust, which has been received by the Synod to assist congregations in Montgomery County. A proposal for how this money may be accessed is being developed with the Deans of the four Conferences with congregations in Montgomery County. At this time there is no income for disbursement. The Finance Committee recommends that the Investment Committee consider if there may be a better investment vehicle for this Trust that may generate more income.

Fund for Mission

While the Fund for Mission is not directly under this Committee's purview, the Finance Committee does keep an eye on this Fund as it is such a significant pocket of money. It does

also help with the Mission portion of the budget, and is also used for projects recommended by the co-Directors for Evangelical Mission, and approved by the Fund for Mission Trustees. The next meeting of the FFM Trustees will be in January 2023.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Investment Committee

Pr. John Heidgerd, chair of the Investment Committee, shared that the Committee is taking the Grace Trust into consideration as they review the entire portfolio. The Committee hopes to have a proposal for the Synod Council at its January meeting.

Nominating Committee

As Pr. Klinger the chair of the committee, was unable to attend this meeting, Ms. Doreen Kinzler shared the following report on their progress.

The letter asking for nominations has been sent to the congregations and rostered ministers of the Synod. We have added to the letter a description of the tasks and preferred backgrounds that would be helpful for the various positions. We are looking for two clergy and several lay persons from particular conferences. If you are from one of those conferences, please help us find quality people to serve.

Constitution Committee

Pr. Marie Sager, chair, said the Committee has received word of one congregation that is starting the process of revising their constitution.

OLD BUSINESS

None

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None

NEW BUSINESS

Vice President Beasley shared a “praise report” with the Synod Council. While she was not elected Vice President of the ELCA, she is still in the room. She has been chosen to serve on the ELCA Executive Committee. She feels that this is an affirmation from the Holy Spirit. God wants her at the table, but has spared her the added pressure that goes with the title “Vice President.”

Bishop Davenport noted that the All Saints Appeal continues. She encourages all members of the Synod Council to make a contribution, large or small. It is good to be able to say we have support of 100% of the Synod Council.

The meeting adjourned at 8:01 p.m. with prayer by Pr. Gary Costa.

The next meeting of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council will be January 26, 2023, at 6:00 p.m., and will be held via Zoom.

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

Approved by Synod Council, January 26, 2023