

From Pastor Marissa Becklin

Embody The Word: ELCA Churchwide Assembly 2022 According To Pastor Marissa Becklin

In early August (the 8th through the 12th) I had the great joy of joining our larger church in its triennial Churchwide Assembly. This Assembly is a gathering of folks from across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, clergy and laypeople alike, who are raised up by their home synods to do the business of the national church in a weeklong gathering. Churchwide Assembly is a smattering of around 1300 Lutherans that represent the diversity of the ELCA—from California to Alaska to Pennsylvania, Iowa, Florida, and everything in between. This gathering consists of over one thousand people who care deeply about the future of this church, who love this church, and who trust that in community we can discern the Holy Spirit's will for this church.

We gathered in Columbus, OH at the Greater Columbus Convention Center, the exact place where the ELCA was constituted by a gathered Assembly back in 1987. Our Worship space was located in the very room where, 35 years ago, predecessor bodies voted to come together to form the ELCA. It was a powerful thing to gather at the font and the table of grace in this very room where our history as a denomination has its roots.

The theme for the week was *Embody The Word*, and each day contained plenary sessions and Worship Services that centered around this theme. The main things to know about our time gathered in Assembly are these:

The Assembly elected a new Vice President of the ELCA: Imran Siddiqui. Imran is a layperson from Southeastern Synod (a synod that includes Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi). He was the vice president of that synod, but will now begin a new role as the vice president of our denomination. He serves as a senior investigator for the U.S. Department of Labor. Imran grew up Muslim to Pakistani parents, and experienced a powerful conversion to Christianity after college and then to Lutheranism in 2011. He takes his faith very seriously, he loves this church, and he cares about its future. He spoke about falling in love with the liturgy and theology of Lutheranism, which was powerful for those of us in the room who grew up in this denomination. It is a gift to be reminded of what beauty our church has to offer this whole world. Imran's main work will include serving as the liaison to the national Church Council. He is the first Asian American vice president of the ELCA.

The Assembly approved a memorial encouraging ELCA members and congregations to support "creative programs of restorative justice in partnership with Indigenous peoples". This memorial is timely, as our denomination announced at this Assembly the Declaration of the ELCA to American Indian and Alaska Native People. Our denomination continues to work toward more authentic, healthy and holistic relationships with Indigenous peoples, acknowledging the harm done by the Doctrine of Discovery and the Christian church in American history. One example of restorative justice can include educating ourselves about the Indigenous peoples whose land we inhabit and to deepen relationships with Indigenous peoples and tribal nations. This day of business included a Worship Service led by Indigenous Lutherans that was extremely powerful. That leadership notably included The Rev. Bishop Guy Erwin, the president of our local Seminary, United Lutheran Seminary (Gettysburg and Philadelphia), who is an enrolled member of the Osage Nation, on whose reservation he was born in Oklahoma, and who is the first Native bishop in the ELCA.

We voted to review the Social Statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust". This Social Statement, which was established in 2009, guides the ELCA's theological stance on same-sex relationships. The original document in particular holds that "on the basis of conscience-bound belief" Lutherans can hold differing views about sexuality and marriage, while we must be united in the belief that God rejects discrimination and calls us to create safe spaces for all people to Worship. The Assembly approved a memorial to review the language in this document from 13 years ago, to make sure its wording is up to date and reflects current church and civil realities. A theological team has also been tasked with reviewing the point of "bound-conscience" in the document. Any suggested revisions to this document may arrive as early as the 2025 Churchwide Assembly.

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We voted to approve a memorial directing the ELCA Church Council to establish a Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church. This Commission will review the principles of our denomination's organizational structure, and will examine how reconstituting may create a pathway forward for new life in our denomination. A lot has changed in the 35 years since this denomination was first constituted, and there are many ways in which our church structure impedes us from doing the work of the gospel (and from being flexible in a constantly changing world). This Commission will present their findings and recommendations at the 2025 Churchwide Assembly, in preparation for the anticipated formation of a reconstituting convention.

Bishop Eaton issued a public apology to Iglesia Luterana Santa María Peregrina, of Stockton, California. The painful events leading up to the necessity of this apology are complex, and I do not presume to fully comprehend their scope or depth. A short summary is this: This congregation's pastor was abruptly removed from leadership in their congregation on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in December 2021 by the former bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod. This abrupt removal on such a holy day for the Latinx community was inappropriate and deeply insensitive, and the lack of pastoral care provided to the congregation in its wake caused outcry across our denomination. The former bishop of the synod was forced to resign. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton appointed a listening team months after the removal of this pastor, and then failed to immediately act on their recommendations, which caused further pain in this process.

Members representing this community were present at the Assembly and came onstage to receive public words of apology from Presiding Bishop Eaton, and then offered their own response of forgiveness and grace. The whole process was deeply emotional and raw, and this is the kind of work that we are called to as people and as churches as we seek to heal from the sinister power of racism in our country and world. To overcome evil with love we must be vulnerable, able to admit when we have made mistakes, and open ourselves up to the process of repentance and reconciliation. Presiding Bishop Eaton will be working with the congregation in future months along with their synod and leadership to respond to requests that the congregation made.

Our denomination has made a commitment to engage 1 million young, diverse people in the coming years. We are a denomination of around 3 million baptized members across this country, which means that this work falls to every single one of us—if we care about the future of the ELCA's proclamation in this world, if we are hopeful about what lies ahead, if we believe that we have something unique and important to offer the world, we must share it with others. We—every single one of us—must be intentional about inviting others to come to church with us. If we want to engage 1 million young, diverse people, we all need to be in relationship with these very people. We do this work because we are called to share God's love, because we are called to tell the good news of the promises made for us in Christ Jesus, and because we are emboldened by the Holy Spirit.

Thank You to our conference and synod for lifting me up as a representative at this Churchwide Assembly—it was an honor and joy to do the work on behalf of this church that I so deeply and fervently love.

Peace, Pastor Marissa Becklin

