

Assembly passes budget and death penalty resolution

The 2016 Nebraska Synod Assembly passed a balanced budget, adopted a resolution urging members to study the church's position on the death penalty as part of its annual business sessions, and reelected its secretary.

The 2017 Synod Budget passed by the assembly anticipates \$3.677 million in revenue during the fiscal year, including \$3.375 million in mission share from congregations, to cover \$3.676 million in projected expenses. Synod Treasurer Dan Friedlund explained that the budget was developed with six principal objectives in mind:

- the need for a balanced budget;
- the need to address trends in mission share giving while being responsive to the needs of the Synod's ministries;
- taking advantage of new and expanded opportunities for revenue;
- the need to examine how best to fulfill our responsibilities to ELCA Churchwide;
- the need to examine how best to support Synod operations and ministries while also supporting serving arms;
- the need to support and fairly compensate Synod staff.

The assembly considered three resolutions, passing one which urges its members to study the ELCA Social Statement on the Death Penalty as part of their discernment when voting this fall.

Nebraskans will be asked on the November 2016 ballot to decide whether to retain the law passed last year by the Nebraska Legislature eliminating the death penalty, or to repeal the law and reinstate the death penalty.

Resolution 2016:2, which was co-introduced by the Nebraska Synod Justice Committee and Pastor Bob Bryan, was passed by a show of hands. Before doing so, the assembly considered a proposed amendment offered by Bryan that would have urged members to vote to keep the repeal of the death penalty in place. That amendment was defeated by a 204-209 vote.

The other two resolutions offered were:

- Resolution 2016:4, introduced by Pastor Damon Laaker and others, which would have called for the Synod to repudiate the doctrine of discovery, a legal principle used in the nation's early days to justify the taking of Native American lands. The resolution was defeated.
- Resolution 2016:1, introduced by Mark Caspers of Auburn, which would have called for rostered leaders to refrain from discouraging others in participating in freemasonry. The resolution was ruled out of order.

Also, among the elections held at the assembly, voters reelected Karen Melang of Fremont as Secretary of the Synod. Melang's new term of office will run through 2020.

Contributors: Lori Long and Amanda White. Photography: Bob Oleson.

all things new

Stories from the 2016 Nebraska Synod Assembly

Bishop Brian Maas: "We are not called to sit still"

"We are not called to sit still," said Nebraska Synod Bishop Brian Maas in his report to the 2016 Nebraska Synod Assembly.

"Jesus speaks again and again and calls us actively into the ministry. We walk together. Encouraging one another. We hold one another accountable."

The Synod has claimed the theme of "We are Church," which includes all synod ministries and congregations.

"We become more aware of one another – to walk together," he said. "We are called together into this one body that is Christ's church."

Congregations can now use an assessment tool called the Nebraska Synod Quick Check. The assessment tool helps measure the vitality and sustainability of congregations. It focuses on what a congregation can do to enrich and enhance its health within and also the outreach in the community.

Three new staff positions - development, stewardship and evangelism - exist because of a generous grant.

Bishop Maas said, "It's important to work on being church together. We are diverse, but we face challenges. Most of us grew up in 'Church-ianity.' We need to get back to Christianity, back to Bible study and prayer."

The median age of the ELCA is 58, he said. Those who remember the mid-1960s remember a time when church membership was exploding. But, over the last 10 years, membership has declined faster than any time in history, he said.

The church has reason to hope, he said; however, first everyone needs "to get real." Anxiety is real when the bullies and terrorists say "If this doesn't change, I'm going to leave." Maas called on the assembly to practice saying to those who make threats, "We'll miss you." He called on everyone to stop letting anxiety and fear dictate our choices.

"Jesus did not die and rise so that we can be hostage to our anxieties, but that we can be free of them!" Maas said.



Peter Marty: “Living together as sisters and brothers”

During the final festival session of the 2016 Nebraska Synod Assembly, keynote speaker Rev. Peter Marty provided insight and inspiration.

Marty is the senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, and was recently named publisher of *The Christian Century* magazine. He spoke on what the Church is facing – the middle is disappearing. Today, he said, people are pulling apart and looking to their differences. But, Jesus is alive in the work of the church, and to do that work, it is imperative to look beyond the middle and beyond differences to make a difference. Christ has not been divided; the church of the New Testament is the church of the undivided Christ.

Marty indicated three common misconceptions to accepting differences in one another. The first is that the toleration of other’s differences is sometimes the best we can do.

“Tolerance is a weak word,” he said. “To be a legitimate, faithful follower of Christ, we must move beyond tolerance to ‘allogophilia’ – positive feelings toward another ‘liking or loving the other.’”

The second misconception, according to Marty, is that uniformity should be our goal. Instead, diversity is a blessing. He said Peter addressed the apostles and elders and the subject of diversity in the church: “On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:11)

The third misconception considers the “selling of our souls” to achieve true unity.

“We can be uniquely ourselves and still be open to those not like us,” Marty said. “The more room that is made for those who are unlike us, the more open and evangelical the church will be – grounded in faith, experiencing Christ in the other.”

“When the church trusts that God is at work, its hands will be free,” he said. “When our hands are free, God can use us to do so much more. Hold a child. Hug a friend. These people and gifts from God we enjoy have a joy unto themselves. When you come to the table, to church, use two hands.”

Marty quoted Martin Luther King, Jr., saying, “We must live together as brothers or perish together as fools.” To embrace the diversity of the church, he said, remember God’s grace, a shared vision, and hard work must combine to form a community.

“The secret is to see the Messiah in one another as the community comes together.”



Rev. Peter Marty

Mikka McCracken: Report from ELCA Churchwide

The Nebraska Synod welcomed Mikka McCracken, director of planning and engagement for ELCA World Hunger, to the Synod Assembly to report on behalf of ELCA Churchwide.

McCracken said the church shares a living, daring confidence in God’s grace through 9,300 ministries, 65 Synods and 3.7 million people churchwide. As part of her greetings from the ELCA, McCracken included a video from ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton who delivered a powerful message of what the church is doing around the world to serve and share God’s word. The ELCA is church first, Eaton said, because of life in Christ – church together for the sake of the world.



Mikka McCracken

McCracken reminded the Assembly that when ELCA congregations show up to God’s work, they show up en masse. This year’s “God’s Work, Our Hands” Day of Service will be held Sunday, Sept. 11, and congregations are encouraged to remember the events of that day in 2001 as a part of their worship and work. She also reported that in 2015, ELCA Mission Support received \$1.8 billion from congregations worldwide. Last year, the Nebraska Synod contributed \$1.8 million to mission support.

As the church is, “Always Being Made New,” in the past year the ELCA welcomed 62 new ministries and supported the renewal of 134 congregations. Two hundred thirty-five students received support from the ELCA Fund for Leaders, including nine from Nebraska, five of whom received direct support from the Nebraska Synod.

The ELCA continues to support missionaries throughout the world. The Young Adults in Global Mission program continues to have double the number of applicants as there are available positions – 223 missionaries in more than 40 countries.

McCracken claimed that it is possible to end world hunger and that we have the power to make it happen. ELCA World Hunger received \$21.9 million in 2015 – \$614,000 from the Nebraska Synod, which ranked sixth in giving out of all 65 synods. ELCA World Hunger also supports a number of efforts in the U.S. – 349 programs, in fact – including Table Grace Ministries in Omaha.

ELCA World Hunger serves the world’s newest country, South Sudan, and supports a new worship center and health clinic. The ELCA’s anti-malaria campaign raised \$15.5 million, reaching 105 percent of its original goal. The Nebraska Synod alone gave \$241,000 in support. In 2015, Lutheran Disaster Response received \$6.8 million and responded to events in eight states and 23 countries.

Next year marks 500 years since the Reformation. McCracken said the ELCA is reflecting on its mission and direction in an initiative titled, “Called Forward Together in Christ.” Each Synod will be asked to be part of the conversation. The 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly and Grace Gathering will be held in New Orleans in August.