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The Rev. Scott Alan Johnson Installed as Bishop of the Nebraska Synod

KEARNEY – The Holy Spirit is active and up to something. During a period of great change and transition in the church and the world, together recovering from two years of COVID time uncertainty, anxiety, and isolation, the Nebraska Synod officially received its new bishop, who will walk alongside the synod’s 235 congregations and the whole of the ELCA.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton led the service to install Rev. Scott Alan Johnson as Bishop of the Nebraska Synod on Sept. 24.

The afternoon service brought hundreds—church leaders and laity alike—through the doors of First Lutheran Church in Kearney.

Presiding Bishop Eaton delivered the sermon, where she focused on the work of pruning in church life, based on the service’s Gospel text.

“God is busy pruning us,” Bishop Eaton said. “We understand that though we are baptized and we are saints, we are also sinners. And apart from God, without the assurance of forgiveness that comes to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, without the outpouring of the Spirit, we can’t do a thing... And Christ wants us to bear fruit so that others may come to know the life and the freedom that is only available to us through the unbelievably intimate and infinite love of Jesus Christ.”

But Eaton said the role of bishop cannot involve solving all the synod’s problems.

“Preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments—that’s the primary work of church leaders,” Eaton said in an interview. “Your people need to know that you love God, and they need to know that you love them.”

Eaton ended her sermon by imploring Bishop Johnson to sing—a metaphor for joyous service pulled from the song-filled service, where even the Lord’s Prayer was set to a tune.

And Bishop Johnson has been singing—metaphorically and literally—for his entire life. He first discovered his passion for ministry in college, studying music education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Johnson hoped to become a band teacher.

He took a job as a counselor at Camp Carol Joy Holling. The work, rooted in faith and leadership, resonated with him.

“That whole first summer, I felt just like everything was lining up,” Johnson said. “Like that was the way it was supposed to be.”

He returned in the fall to music education but didn’t find the same sense of fulfillment. The next summer, he worked at Carol Joy Holling again.

“That’s when the executive director of Camp Carol Joy Holling threw his arm around me,” Johnson said. “And he said, ‘You should think about going into ministry because I think you might have the gifts to be a pastor.’ And that stuck. It just kept surfacing.”

Johnson said he became more involved in The Lutheran Center at UNL, where Pastor Larry Meyer helped him find his way to seminary. Since his time at Luther Seminary, Johnson served in parish and campus ministry contexts, from Peace Lutheran Church in Barret, Minnesota to his most recent position as director of campus ministries at Midland University.

Johnson started in his position as bishop on Sept. 1, and he said he’s since felt the lightness and heaviness of the job. During the installment, former Bishop Brian Maas placed a pectoral cross around Johnson’s neck.

“I didn’t imagine myself in this role so much when I was becoming a minister,” Johnson said. “But I love that a lot of what I think I’m going to be doing in this work will be the kind of things that I’ve always treasured in other bishops that I’ve worked under: supporting congregations, supporting pastors.”

Eaton said Johnson’s installment follows several new faces in the ELCA’s Conference of Bishops.

“I think in the last three or four years, over half of the Conference of Bishops has changed from all the elections,” Eaton said. “It has brought in younger people and a new, fresh set of eyes. And that’s so important... I believe that Bishop Johnson will certainly bring a lot of energy.”

Johnson has no doubt: the road ahead for church leaders is as challenging as it is ambiguous. From a decline in in-person church attendance to a growing sense of distrust across the country, Johnson said the Church is exactly the thing the world needs.

“I think we as the Church really need to learn how to be uncomfortable together and learn how to not be quite so absolute with one another,” he said.

But Johnson does not face the future’s challenges alone. His song is not a solo.

Johnson’s installment saw ecumenical and international involvement. The Roman Catholic Omaha Diocese Archbishop George Joseph Lucas and the Episcopalian Bishop Scott Barker joined the assembly.

Bishop Johnson's installment also celebrated the continuing relationship between the Nebraska Synod and its partners in Argentina and Uruguay.

"We must keep learning about what the others are doing," Rev. Dr. Mercedes Bachmann, a Lutheran pastor and professor from Argentina, said. "Our problems are the same as yours, and we need to know that the Church is much larger than our own individual communities. So we should explore how best to serve God in different situations, different places."

Rev. Dr. Mercedes Bachmann said the pandemic paused the relationship between the two bodies, which involved exchanges of laity and leaders, but said she's happy to see it flowering again.

Johnson said he's eager to learn more about and lead the Nebraska Synod. He said the song he's most tried to sing is one that lingers on the personal love God has for every individual.

"I've tried to make that the way that I preach and do ministry as much as I can," Johnson said. "To find ways to connect with people, and just communicate to them that they are cherished and beloved by God... I'm not going to come into a congregation expecting to give them all the answers. I will try to ask good questions and try to help people see their own soul and see the potential that they have for doing ministry in the place that God has entrusted to them."

About the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Nebraska Synod

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is a denomination with congregations across the USA. The Nebraska Synod is one of 65 synods in the ELCA, regional bodies that connect congregations to the larger church. The ELCA is committed to witnessing to and living out God's gracious welcome to all people.

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