

Report on Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly
April 25 – 27, 2024

Denise & Martin Greller

Thank you for the opportunity to represent Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church at the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly this year. It was an interesting experience at which necessary work was done. It also suggests some preparation that may be needed before the next Assembly and actions we may wish to take as a congregation within the Synod.

Summary

The Assembly elected a new bishop. The continued deficit budget was a source of contention. People seem unwilling to see this continue. The most sensible response to the problem is for the RMS to commit to a strategy intended to achieve growth in membership and congregations, but doing so will require a deficit budget until such efforts are successful. Current ECLA initiatives may not be aligned with such an effort.

Election of a bishop

As reported in church, Megan Johnston Aelabouni has been elected bishop. A recap of the voting is reported in Appendix 1. These data show that there was no clear choice at the beginning. There was considerable shifting in the support for candidates through the 5 rounds of voting.

The Ecclesiastical Election process is uncomfortable. It is justified by its appearance in the RMS and ELCA constitutions. The practical problem is it was developed with the assumption that electors know the potential candidates quite well before the election. This may be true for the rostered clergy. For the lay participants it created a need to huddle with trusted friends to share what information they might have. This meant people were clustered in groups based on prior acquaintance for much of the time. The Assembly did not hear the candidates speak until after the second round of voting. After the third round of voting the three remaining candidates answered preselected questions before the voting members.

The budget and what it implies

The budget was passed as presented but with considerable consternation. Were it not for the practical impossibility of 400 people revising a 12 page budget written in 8 point type it is likely the task would have been undertaken. Fortunately, Lutherans are practical.

But, these Lutherans are not happy. After 8 years of shrinking annual budgets, balanced by drawing from reserves and selling assets, it is increasingly obvious that the eventual result will be the collapse of the RMS. What is not necessarily obvious is that this is not a problem grounded in the budget itself.

During the last decade the number of churches and the number of members in the RMS has declined sharply. We are about 30% smaller. It is fairly noted that this is true of most main line churches. The RMS takes some comfort that its rate of loss is less than that of other such churches in the region. Being last to collapse is not much of a victory. It means fewer people experience the gospel through the RMS. It means fewer people engage in spiritual and charitable activity through the RMS. Yes, fewer people supporting the RMS are a financial problem, but it is more than that.

If this is only understood in terms of the annual budget the problem will become worse. There was considerable pressure to solve the problem by balancing the budget without drawing on reserves or sale of assets. Simply do less. There were others who argued that congregations and individuals should be squeezed harder for donation to the synod. Either way RMS will decline dramatically and may cease to exist.

The alternative is to increase the number of congregations and the members within the Synod. Such an effort means making choices about the things we believe can work, committing the resources to enact those things, and then ruthlessly assessing whether they do work. If they do not, the Synod moves on to other potential solutions. This will require a number of years with annual budgets that have deficits. It requires articulating what the Synod is trying to do to improve its future – in other words having a strategy.

The difference would be having a purpose for the deficits. This year we received no explanation how the proposed budget would get us out of the situation we are in. The annual budget was never described in the context of a longer range plan or even aspirations. Members of the finance committee appear to be aware of the problem. They seemed to accept the election of a new bishop as reason not to look beyond this year.

The problem may be reflected in some of the other efforts the ELCA is undertaking

Social Statement for Civic Engagement

A 55 page document should scare anyone. It builds in too much compromise and justification. There is a 12 page summary of the current draft. A member of the committee visited us at TELC several years ago to ask the congregation what was important. The committee has made efforts at engagement and communication, but our congregation has not experienced much of their communication.

We heard about wonderful works being done with other groups, by supporting agencies – but this is a form of outsourcing good works. There is a place for such things, and they can be sources of powerful good. But, part of what engages, retains, and enhances a church member's experience is being involved in the works of the church. It is fulfilling. It adds to the meaning of one's life. There was no evidence the role of member engagement was a key feature of this initiative.

This statement is to be presented in its final form to the church-wide assembly. If it is adopted the roles congregations and individuals can take will be outlined. Perhaps our congregation, or a

sub-set of the congregation, should examine the draft to see what is being presented and if we have any opinions we wish to put forward. Comments will be accepted until September

Commission for Renewed Lutheran Church

This is a rethink of the ELCA, its purpose, and how that purpose is to be pursued.

The presenter at the Assembly was Ralie Deffenbach a member within the RMS. He has a long career as an attorney working on issues associated with refugees, including experience in the UN and with Lutheran agencies. He spoke from his experience on the commission, which has a number of working groups.

He offered exciting notions of building on interfaith partnership and successful initiatives to address social ills. While it is early days for the commission one can envision valuable areas of work and partnerships to do social good.

By the time of his presentation the issue of declining membership and congregations had come to the fore. He was asked about the commission's work on that issue. His response was that there was a separate group working on congregations and membership. If they have people of his quality working on the congregational issues they could come up with some great stuff. But, the fact that the efforts are operating in siloes suggests there will be a lack of integration. Who knows what connections there will be to spiritual topics?

Resolutions

The first item was so trivial it does not have an appendix in this report. The dates on which officers change was moved from August 15th to August 1st, except when there is a church-wide assembly at which time the change will occur immediately after the assembly. There was no explanation as to why this would matter. It was adopted.

Resolution #1 (Appendix 2) provides the heads of outdoor programs a vote at RMS assemblies and allows them to appoint someone to come on their behalf if they are unable to do so. This was approved. The sentiment for it was because this would give more voice to youth. Of course, the executive directors are not actually youths. The concern was that no other non-rostered leaders receive an automatic vote, and there was concerns what other leaders might ask for similar recognition. A question not raised was whether rostered leaders should be able to name proxies.

Resolution #2 (Appendix 3) calls for "Justice for Palestinians and Israelis." It was approved. The call to stop bloodshed and suffering appeared to be the driving force. While the beneficiaries would clearly be the Palestinians the resolution strove to be even handed in its language. The underlying issue of "just war" was not addressed.

Possible actions.

The Council may wish to take some actions of its own in response to this year's assembly:

- Appoint a member to monitor and report on RMS initiatives, including sharing the materials they have (e.g., videos) which describe their work.
- Advocate that the RMS articulate a strategy framed as a multi-year plan to address its membership issues and use this as the basis for the RMS budget. This should specify what the Synod and its congregations should expect to see if these efforts are successful.
- Appoint a group to study the Social Statement for Civic Engagement for the purpose of making recommendation on TELC's behalf by the September deadline.
- Explore opportunities for our congregation to collaborate with other similar congregations to experiment with innovative initiatives for growth.
- Foster the engagement of a few TELC members in synod activities so we can be better informed of the work and decision making within the RMS.
- Connect our representatives to future Assemblies with other representatives from our region prior to the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Denise E. Greller
Martin M. Greller
May 7, 2024

Appendix 1.

Election Results, Bishop RMS

Candidate	Total votes caste	387	386	396	336
	round 5 (est. by mmg)	round 4 reported	round 3 reported	round 2 reported	nominating round
Aelabouni	225	184	83	91	
Berry-Bailey	162	142	96	91	
Pancoast		61	92	99	
Ferry			68	58	
Behrens			24	17	
Laderach			13	13	
Lameraoto			6	9	
Zeller			4	6	
Marty				4	
Seitz				4	
Weber				3	
Martens				1	

Appendix 2.

Resolution #1

RESOLUTION TITLE: Allow recognized Outdoor Ministry sites in the Rocky Mountain Synod to send one lay voting member to Synod Assembly.

Whereas, the Constitution, Bylaw and Continuing Resolutions of the Rocky Mountain Synod allow all rostered leaders under call, to be voting members of the Synod Assembly (S7.21). But, those leaders serving in outdoor ministry settings who are not rostered; are not permitted to be lay voting members from their ministry contexts, because they are not designated or included in one of the three expressions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Whereas, the outdoor ministries of the Rocky Mountain Synod, in partnership with congregations, strive to strengthen, support, and lift-up the body of Christ by encouraging and facilitating spiritual growth in outdoor settings. Outdoor ministries offer a variety of programs that provide growth experiences for people of all ages and backgrounds through worship, study, service learning, games, and activities; and activates faith by living and working together in an intentional Christian community.

“Whereas, the enfranchisement of outdoor ministry participants will recognize vital ministry centers of the Rocky Mountain Synod who are not currently represented by this assembly.”
Therefore, Be It Resolved: That the Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA shall, amend its bylaws to include the following provision:

S7.21.04. The recognized Outdoor Ministry sites within this synod, each may send not more than one voting member to Synod Assembly. The person sent under this section should be the Executive Director* of the respective Outdoor Ministry site.

Submitted by:

Pr. Leta Behrens – Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church, Fort Collins

Pr. Joel Pancoast – Zion Lutheran Church, Loveland

Pr. Deb Abbott – Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Greeley

Pr. Joe Natwick – Bethel Lutheran Church, Windsor

Pr. Katie Emery – Sky Ranch Board of Directors

Jeff Fairfax – Northern Colorado Synod Council Representative

Lori Bode – Executive Director, Sky Ranch Lutheran Camp

Dave Jarvis – Executive Director, Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp

* This was interpreted to mean that the executive director could designate a person to go in his or her stead.

Appendix 3
Resolution #2

RESOLUTION TITLE: For Justice for Palestinians and Israelis

Whereas, the ELCA, in 2005, established an initiative, “Peace Not Walls: Stand for Justice in the Holy Land” (now known as “Sumud: For Justice for Palestinians and Israelis), which seeks “peace with justice for both Palestinians and Israelis and the continuation of the Christian witness in the Holy Land;” and

Whereas the ELCA, in its Social Statement “For Peace in God’s World,” has committed to promote respect for human rights; and

Whereas the ELCA is in relationship with the six Lutheran congregations in the Bethlehem area, Ramallah, Jerusalem and Jordan (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land) and Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem is a project of the Lutheran World Federation; and Whereas the ELCA Presiding Bishop and Council of Bishops have expressed sorrow over the loss of innocent lives on both sides and called for a ceasefire and for negotiations for an overall political solution to resume;

Therefore, be it resolved, that individuals and congregations be encouraged to:

- Pray for Palestinians and Israelis who work to create a future of justice, equality, reconciliation and peace for all Palestinians and Israelis;
- Stand in solidarity with all who are suffering in Palestine and Israel and to support the work of the ELCJHL (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land), LWF (Lutheran World Federation), ALAMEH (Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage), and WCC/EAPPI (World Council of Churches/Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel) in bringing comfort, support, accountability, and relief;
- Be informed about and engaged in the SUMUD (formerly Peace Not Walls) initiative of the ELCA: <http://elca.org/sumud>; and
- Sign up for ELCA monthly Advocacy Alerts - “Middle East Network”.

Be it further resolved, that individuals and congregations be encouraged to call on the US Administration to work to:

- o Secure a permanent ceasefire and the release of all hostages and unlawfully detained political prisoners, resume efforts toward a political solution to the conflict, establish immediate and unhindered humanitarian access to the entire Gaza Strip, and support the restoration of vital infrastructure; and
- o Secure access to Augusta Victoria Hospital and other East Jerusalem hospitals for Gaza cancer patients and others needing urgent medical attention and provide continued funding for the East Jerusalem hospitals.

Submitted by:

Jo Ann Wacker-Farrand

Rocky Mountain Synod Sumud: For Justice in Palestine and Israel (formerly Peace Not Walls)