

From the bishop

Hard and faithful conversations

My high school friend, Danny, and I were having a difficult and fruitful exchange on Facebook a couple of years ago. It was about professional football players kneeling during the national anthem before games. Danny is an Army veteran, a retired police officer and was a football player in high school. I asked him two basic questions: how he connected the national anthem with football and how he viewed the act of taking a knee in protest of police brutality.



Bishop Tracie Bartholomew

Danny responded with passion and honesty. Our exchange went back and forth with reasoned and civil words. We have a long-standing relationship, so we trusted the other was coming from a place of respect. Because we were not together face-to-face, there was a lot of room for misinterpretation and our words needed to be weighed carefully.

Our exchange proved that, even on social media, hard conversations can take place. But social media being what it is—public and social—the conversation didn't end well. Others who didn't know either of us the way we knew each other began to insert their opinions into our exchange. People called each of us derogatory names and sought to derail what had been a civil conversation. We decided to end and delete the post.

I know some of you will think I was naïve to expect an honest and civil conversation to take place on Facebook. Maybe that's true. But when the conversation was between two people who entered into it with the best of intentions, we could hear each other and agree to love each other even while disagreeing. If I'm naïve to expect such conversations, so be it. I know that engaging in these honest conversations, with respect for the other, strengthens our human community.

On Nov. 13, pastors and deacons from across our synod will gather for a day to learn more about creating communities of deliberative dialogue and communal discernment. The Rev. Gregg Kauffman (formerly of the New Jersey Synod and now working with the Kettering Foundation in his retirement) will lead us as we seek to learn the skills needed to help our congregations engage in honest, difficult, civil and faithful conversations around issues on which we may disagree. The goal of this gathering is to have concrete tools we can use in our communities to improve the ways we talk with and to each other.

Ours is a diverse church in New Jersey—we celebrate that our congregations span economic, racial, ethnic, generational and political spectrums. This diversity means we will not all agree on how we live out our faith or how we spend our resources. But we can expect that we share a unity in Christ that binds us to one another and allows us to love each other even in our differences. I look forward to continuing our hard and faithful conversations about life.

—Bishop Tracie Bartholomew

2019 New Jersey Synod Assembly recap

On June 6-8, 475 members of the New Jersey Synod gathered in assembly at the Hyatt Regency in New Brunswick. Our theme of “Be Bold” was lived out through workshops, worship, reports, celebrations and elections. Reports, photos and sermons can be found online at njsynod.org. Below is a brief recap of our time together.

Workshops

We began our time together on Thursday afternoon in a variety of workshops on topics important to our life together. People gathered to learn from each other in the areas of advocacy, race, congregational vitality, financial literacy, ELCA World Hunger, and Excellence in Ministry, Unleashed (EMU).

Worship

Opening worship included the ordination of the Rev. Heidi Link, called to serve Reformation Lutheran Church in Absecon. Bishop Tracie Bartholomew preached and presided. Music was provided by Brian Conover (keyboard and vocals) and Jim Harris (trumpet and flugelhorn).

Photos: The Rev. Jesse Brown Jr.



The Rev. Heidi Link was ordained during the New Jersey Synod Assembly in June.

Martin Luther’s morning and evening prayer book ended our day on Friday, while Saturday morning began with the Rev. Raymond Kolison (Redeemer Lutheran Church, Trenton) and Erica Earnest (Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey’s hunger fellow) leading the assembly in song and prayer.

Songs and prayers and Bible dwelling were interwoven throughout our time together.

Reports

We heard from ministry partners, the Synod Council, and teams/committees of our synod.

Of note, the Synod Council proposed a 2020 budget plan that keeps spending at the same levels as 2019. The result of this plan is that staffing will change to keep within our anticipated income. A full-time youth ministry specialist will no longer be funded beginning Feb. 1, 2020.

As part of the Reference and Counsel report, the assembly passed two resolutions and one memorial while referring a third resolution to the Synod Council. The first resolution to pass affirmed our synod’s commitments to first fruits, percentage giving in congregations and as a synod to the churchwide organization.

A resolution related to including nonbinary gender identification in our representational principles was divided into a memorial to churchwide—asking the 2019 Churchwide Assembly to add language to the constitution that specifically includes nonbinary gender

identification in the changes it is proposing to the constitution and two resolutions related to the synod constitution, and synod policies. The memorial passed, as did one resolution about synod policies asking for gender information for events and registrations. A resolution asking for changes to the synod constitution was referred to the Synod Council.



Laying on of hands during the ordination at the assembly's opening worship.

Celebrations

Woven throughout the assembly were several celebrations of ministry. First, we celebrated the completion of EMU Phase 1 and the good work this project has accomplished in strengthening financial literacy among our pastors, alleviating student debt for our rostered ministers, and incentivizing retirement and health savings for our pastors. The Rev. Scott Schantzenbach handed off the leadership for EMU Phase 2 to the Rev. Fred Becker.

Our second big celebration was for The Bishop's Challenge for World Hunger (aka "The Cow Challenge"). Thanks to your generosity, our giving to ELCA World Hunger has doubled since our 2018 synod assembly. Out of our 160 congregations, 130 of them donated over \$360,000 to ELCA World Hunger—and most brought a decorated wooden cow cutout to decorate the ballroom. It was a wonderful celebration, but, more important, a wonderful way to reach out to our neighbors in need. Many thanks to the Rev. Sara Lilja and "the cow crew" for their hard work in making this effort such a success.

The third big celebration was for the retirement of Pastor Schantzenbach. During our banquet, we thanked him for his 41 years of active ministry, the last 16 as an assistant to the bishop. With humor

and deep gratitude we were able to highlight his stewardship work among us. You gifted him by contributing \$15,000 toward the EMU Ministry Excellence Fund as well as a significant cash gift for him personally.

Elections

The assembly reelected Bishop Tracie Bartholomew to a second six-year term, and Vice President Arundel Clarke and Secretary Cassandra Mack to second four-year terms. In addition, the following people were elected to the Synod Council:

- The Rev. Giselle Coutinho (Bridge of Peace, Camden).
- William Emerson (St. Mark, Oaklyn).
- Andrea Gerrard (St. Stephen, Woodbury).
- Steven Hernandez (Faith, Lavallette).
- Daniel Fields (Messiah, Parlin).
- Linda Magill (Holy Trinity, Manasquan).
- The Rev. Carol Lindsay (Calvary, Cranford).
- Josie Sanchez —youth position (Bridge of Peace, Camden).

Please continue to support these elected leaders of our synod with your prayers. ॥

Northern New Jersey Youth Co-op

How can ministry among youth reflect our interdependence as a synod? Churches in the Bergen-Passaic Conference have worked together to strengthen the faith of high school-aged youth.

Recently, high schoolers from three area churches took part in the Awake-A-Thon. This 24-hour adventure in staying awake was, more importantly, an adventure in being a blessing to others in the world.

Youth started the day with a hike at Ramapo Reservation and then volunteered at the Star of Hope Ministries in Paterson, organizing their thrift shop and creating meal packages for local churches. This was followed by a scavenger hunt with random acts of kindness, a movie and dinner at the mall.

The group returned to Calvary Lutheran Church in Allendale for midnight devotions and games throughout the night.



In the morning, the youth rubbed the sleep from their eyes during a sunrise worship service led by the Rev. Jenny McLellan of Calvary Lutheran Church.

The Awake-a-Thon ended with a pancake breakfast and sleep for all!

Beyond making a difference in the community, the youth also raised money to support

Lutheran outdoor ministry programs in the area. The 12 participants included kids who are members of our Lutheran churches and their friends. Through their effort of talking to their faith communities, families and friends, together the youth raised close to \$2,000. They were also supported by several pastors and numerous adult volunteers.

The Bergen-Passaic Conference is looking forward to a fun and faith-filled 2020 through this Youth Co-op. ㄿ

Lutheran Advocacy coming in 2020

O sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous things (Psalm 98:1).

Lutheran Advocacy in New Jersey is excited to be growing into a new creation. In 2020 we will be transformed into a new faith-based advocacy organization! This new organization will focus on training emerging leaders of faith to effect change in the area of public policy.

Seminarians, college students, young adults and all who are new to leadership will be engaged in hands-on advocacy while helping run this nonprofit board. This learn-by-doing model will be supported

by mentors of the faith, subject matter experts and experienced nonprofit managers.

At a time when nearly 40% of all New Jerseyans are struggling to make ends meet, the faith community is coming together to advocate for the needs of the most vulnerable. We can use your help. This organization will welcome your membership—individual, congregational or judicatory. Members will give input on issue priorities, receive monthly issue updates, and be invited to attend events at reduced rates. So keep your eyes and ears open for this marvelous thing that God is up to, and use your voice in song and speech to advocate for a fair and just state. ㄿ