



New Jersey Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Dear Friends,

I just returned from our ELCA Churchwide Assembly, along with almost 1000 other voting members (including 13 others from our synod¹). We spent six days listening, discussing, praying, singing, meeting new friends, and living out our faith. We re-elected Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton to a second six-year term and elected Deacon Sue Rothmeyer to a six-year term as secretary. A number of memorials and resolutions were debated and adopted covering a variety of topics. Constitutional amendments were approved (or defeated), including a provision that declares ordination to be the entrance rite for deacons to come onto the roster of the ELCA. The ELCA offered an [Apology to the African Descent Community](#) for systemic racism and oppression in the church – the Apology was accepted by the African Descent Lutheran Association. We began a year-long celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women, 40th Ordination Anniversary of the first African-American woman, and 10th Anniversary of the church removing barriers to ordination for LGBTQ people. We adopted a social statement called [Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action](#) and a policy statement on [inter-religious engagement](#).

While the assembly engaged in a lot of work and stopped for worship in the middle of each day, I have only seen headlines about two actions – a prayer walk to the ICE office in Milwaukee and the approval of a memorial naming the [ELCA a sanctuary church body](#). Both actions are public witnesses to our standing with refugees and asylum seekers, working for improved immigration policies, accompanying the most vulnerable among us, and praying for all who seek safer homes. Praying for an end to the detention of children seeking asylum and an end for the separation of families at our southern border is in line with the biblical call to love our neighbors.

The word “sanctuary” when used in the context of immigration, can be understood in many ways; there is no legal definition of sanctuary. For some, the word elicits an emotional response, even without being sure what it means. In 2016, the ELCA adopted the [AMMPARO](#) strategy which speaks about sanctuary as everything from holding English classes to housing people to writing to congress – all of these are ways of being sanctuary. This action does not ask for anyone to engage in illegal behavior.

Because we are church in three expressions (congregations, synods, and churchwide) the decision made at the Churchwide Assembly to become a sanctuary church body, only applies to the churchwide expression. Any congregation or synod wishing to become a sanctuary entity is free to decide to do so, or not. No congregation or synod is compelled to take on that designation. If a congregation wishes to become a sanctuary entity, it should also decide what that will mean.

We have congregations in our synod that already do the work of being sanctuary, some with an official designation and others working quietly behind the scenes. As a synod, we are committed to calling for immigration reform, to supporting a ministry for those in the Elizabeth Detention Center (under the leadership of Pastor Ramon Collazo), and to working with neighbors who make NJ home. This commitment is long-standing and unwavering.

In the coming weeks, the voting members from our synod will share reflections of the Churchwide Assembly with you through Jersey Jottings. I hope you will read them and then thank those who gathered for this holy time of being church. Behind the headlines and social media posts, the Holy Spirit called, gathered, and breathed life into the assembly. I am grateful to be a part of such a church.

Peace,

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew

¹ Voting members from the NJ Synod:

Jack Bryant (St. Stephen, Woodbury)
Arundel Clarke, vice-president (Resurrection, Hamilton Square)
Haydee Colon-Hernandez (St. Matthew, Union City)
The Rev. Dr. Christa Compton (Gloria Dei, Chatham)
The Rev. Jill Collicot (Nativity, East Brunswick)
Alyssa Gautieri (Abiding Presence, Ewing)
The Rev. Jeff Miller (First, Clifton)
The Rev. Gladys Moore (St. John's, Summit)
Kennedy Nyangacha (St. John, Jersey City)
Wayne Olsen (St. Paul, Teaneck)
Joy Serena (Cape May, Cape May)
The Rev. Moacir Weirich (St. Stephan-Grace Community, Newark)
Felicity Wong, youth (Abiding Presence, Ewing)

In addition, visitors included:

LuAnn Barnes (Holy Trinity, Manasquan) – support for the team
Jessica Clarke (Resurrection, Hamilton Square)
The Rev. Alexis King (St. Matthew, Moorestown, and Air Force Reserves Chaplain)
Ralph Serena (Cape May, Cape May)