

## Bishop Smith's reflections—August 2, 2016



### ELCA Churchwide Assembly

Everyone is profoundly, if not painfully, aware of our national political process churning along in the wake of the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and in the home stretch of a presidential election. Regardless of your political persuasion and candidate preferences, most would agree that the stakes are high in this election, and much of our country's future identity and direction is at stake.

What most Americans and maybe even most ELCA Lutherans don't know is that there is one more important convention on the docket this summer. The ELCA holds its highest legislative assembly every three years. This year the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, consisting of just shy of 1,000 voting members from across the ELCA, will gather August 8-13 in New Orleans. The assembly's theme will be "Freed and Renewed in Christ: 500 Years of God's Grace in Action." In case you missed it, the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is October 31, 2017, so beginning in just a few months we will be in that 500th year as the Lutheran expression of the Church of Christ. I encourage you to [read more about this assembly](#).

One more reminder of the "polity" (church world for "politics") of the ELCA. There are three "expressions of the church" in the ELCA. The first and by far most familiar and relevant to most of us is congregations. The second is the synod ("traveling together"), of which there are 65 across the U.S. in the ELCA. North Carolina is one. St. Paul, Minnesota is one. (I'm told Lutherans are really dense up there.) The third and highest legislative authority is the churchwide assembly every three years.

The ELCA constitution did away with calling churchwide or synod assembly members "delegates" in favor of the term "voting members." Voting members are not told by their congregations or their synods how to vote but instead, as the Spirit moves in our gatherings, prayerfully to consider decisions and to vote their consciences in the most faithful way they can discern. At the last ELCA Churchwide Assembly, Elizabeth Eaton was elected the ELCA's Presiding Bishop. This 2016 assembly will be the first one over which she presides. We will be electing a new ELCA Vice-President next week.

A word about social statements, resolutions, and memorials at the synod or churchwide level. Though these documents are guidelines carefully and prayerfully considered as we gather as church, they are not binding on congregations or on individuals in this church. In fact, most ELCA Social Statements begin with a statement recognizing that people of faith may well find themselves on very different sides of controversial social issues. Our statements are guidelines but not mandates. The "box" of belonging and thus of opinion in the ELCA is quite large—full of Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, traditionalists and change-agents. Should church look different than the general culture in its political deliberations? Will it? I hope and pray so.

The NC Synod elected voting members at our synod assembly a year ago who are now heading to New Orleans this weekend for the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. I am going to represent our NC Synod as its bishop. Our synod Vice President, Diana Haywood, is going as our VP and as a member of Abiding Savior, Durham. Other elected voting members are: Sandra Cline, Holy Comforter, Belmont; Faith Ashton, Holy Trinity, Chapel Hill; Rachel Birkedal, Mt. Olive, Hickory; Fred Black, Holy Trinity, Chapel Hill; Pastor Rachel Connelly, Water of Life, Wilmington; Ted Goins, Lutheran Services Carolinas and St. John's, Salisbury; Pastor Dave Keck from St. Mark's, Mooresville; Pastor John Mouritsen, Morning Star, Matthews; Ethan Overcash, Mt. Olive, Hickory; Kai Thurow, St. John's, Salisbury; Linda Warren, Abiding Savior, Durham; Carter Woolly, St. John's, Salisbury; and Pastor Carol Yeager, Friendship, Taylorsville. Several other NC Synod people are going as visitors.

Please pray for the NC Synod team and for all of the ELCA in New Orleans this week as we celebrate our life together as church. Again, [learn more](#) and follow along using **#ELCAcwa**. It's my privilege to serve among NC Lutherans, the state and the synod and the people I love.

Walking with you,

Bishop Timothy Smith



**North Carolina Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.