

A WORD  
FROM  
PASTOR  
LAURA



# We Are Church

In August, over a 1000 Lutherans gathered at the Wisconsin Center in Milwaukee for the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. I was one of 932 voting members who, for six days, worshipped together, prayed together, and did the business of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American together.

Our denomination has three unique expressions – the churchwide organization, synods, and congregations. Each congregation has its own constitution and bylaws, owns its own property, calls its own rostered leaders, and does ministry in its own context. Each congregation is assigned to one of 65 geographical synods, which are groups of congregations that walk with individual congregations in their ministry. Synods elect bishops, who help to oversee our common life together as church, and who support rostered leaders and candidates for ministry. Each congregation also relates to the churchwide organization, often with the help of the local synod. Churchwide, which has an office in Chicago, helps local congregations do ministry by providing support with programs like World Hunger, Lutheran Disaster Response, and Global Mission; relates to our ecumenical and interfaith partners in the U.S. and internationally; and helps the church advocate in the public square and develop resources that promote justice and peace in our world. The Churchwide Assembly elects a Presiding Bishop to lead us in this work.

This year, we elected Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton to a second six-year term. Bishop Eaton was re-elected on the nominating ballot, with an overwhelming majority. Her election to another term in office was a clear statement of our trust in her and her leadership of this church. We also elected Church Council members, who oversee the work of the churchwide organization until the Assembly meets again in 2022, and a Secretary of the ELCA, who oversees the rosters of Ministers of Word and Sacrament (pastors) and Ministers of Word and Service (deacons), interprets and maintains the governing documents of the church, and is an important part of the Presiding Bishop's leadership team. Deacon

Sue Rothmeyer was elected as the Secretary of the ELCA on the fifth and final ballot, after we heard from seven qualified and faithful candidates.

We passed a budget for the next three fiscal years. We amended the constitution and bylaws of the ELCA. We adopted a new social statement that has been in the works for 8 years: *"Faith, Sexism, Justice: A Call to Action"* that denounces all forms of sex- and gender-based oppression. We considered memorials from synods and resolutions from voting members. We recommended a Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity in the ELCA, which came from a committee of faithful leaders within the ELCA who are all people of color.

Of all the actions we took that week, the one that has received the most press is a memorial declaring that the Churchwide expression of the ELCA is a *"sanctuary church body,"* and that we will continue our commitment to protect and accompany migrants and refugees in our country. The memorial came to the Assembly from the Metropolitan New York Synod, and highlighted the work of AMMPARO, a comprehensive strategy of our church *"Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation, and Opportunities,"* and five synods that have become sanctuary synods. In the days since the assembly has concluded, there has been much discussion within our ELCA congregations about what exactly it means to be a sanctuary church body. Northern Illinois Synod Bishop Jeff Clements has offered some clarification; you can find his letter on our website and at the Resource Center, along with the talking points produced by Churchwide after the Assembly concluded. It seems that our discernment about what this means for our church and where exactly the Holy Spirit is leading us is just beginning. What is certain is that, as people of faith, we have a responsibility to have the conversation and do the work in order to ensure that God's love is made known and that the justice that God desires for all people is realized.

—Pastor Laura