

Report on the Florida-Bahamas Synod Assembly

October 12-14, 2017

Embassy Suites, Kissimmee

Theme: Freed and Renewed in Christ, 500 years of God's Grace in Action

Synopsis: The 30th Annual Assembly of the Florida-Bahamas Synod was a rich opportunity for pastors, deacons, voting members, volunteers, special speakers and guests to gather together to worship together, celebrate the common work of the Gospel, build relationships, and prayerfully discern together the leading of the Holy Spirit as we elected a bishop, synod council members, and other members of synodical committees. Through music, prayer, scripture, reflection and testimony, the story of God's ongoing work and presence in the world was lifted up and the theme of Reformation500—God's grace in action—was felt by all.

Plenary

The Assembly began with a heartfelt tribute to the ministry of former Bishop Robert Schaefer, led by Synod Vice President Cheryl Stuart, followed by an introduction of the synod staff that included a special recognition of Pr. Jim Graeser and Pr. Jaime Dubon who have moved on to other ministries after serving as Directors of Evangelical Mission/Assistants to the Bishop for the last 3.5 years. Bishop Lohrmann's report to the Assembly included pictures and stories from throughout the synod centered on the 4 themes of: We are Church, We are Lutheran, We are Church Together, and We are Church for the Sake of the World. ELCA Secretary Rev. Chris Boerger provided oversight of the election, which included a series of ballots that gradually narrowed the candidates down to 3 pastors (Pr. Thomas Slater, Pr. Bobbie Blackburn, and Pr. Pedro Suarez), who rotated through 3 Q&A forums. Pr. Pedro Suarez was elected bishop on the 6th ballot and will begin serving as Bishop in December. The Service of Installation for Bishop-Elect Suarez will be at noon on Saturday, January 20, 2018 at St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church in New Tampa. Other elections were held for synod council positions, which included Cheryl Stuart being elected for a third term as Vice President. Special guests were invited throughout the plenary to give words of greeting and brief presentations on a variety of ministries throughout the church, including Sam Sipes from Lutheran Services of Florida, Portico Benefits, Phyllis Wade (Women of the ELCA), PJ May (Global Mission Committee), Ruth Hamilton (ELCA Candidacy and Leadership), and Pastors Melinda Plumley and Julie Frank who shared their experience of providing pastoral care after the Pulse Shooting, which occurred on the last day of the 2016 Synod Assembly. Bishop John Noonan, from the Orlando Diocese, brought words of greeting and friendship in observation of the ongoing dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics towards unity and reconciliation. The youth voting members had an opportunity to address the Assembly, giving words of thanksgiving for a positive welcome as well as inviting the church to intentionally create space for their voices to be heard. Rev. Boerger brought a report from the churchwide office, which focused on the many ways congregations and the synod can participate in the broader ministry of the church—focusing especially on Bishop Eaton's Leadership Initiative and an invitation for all congregations to identify, equip and lift up leaders for the church. The one resolution considered and passed by the Assembly was the 2018 Budget. Vice President Cheryl Stuart's report included a word of thanksgiving for the interim ministry of Bishop Lohrmann, who faithfully and graciously led the synod through this year's season of transition in preparation for the election of a new bishop.

Worship

Opening and closing worship framed the Assembly, and included scripture readings from several languages represented throughout the Florida-Bahamas Synod, including Spanish, German and Portuguese. Bishop

Lohrmann's sermon in opening worship focused on the image of Christ praying for his people, and invited all to reflect on the question "how is your spirit?" Rev. Boerger's sermon in closing worship encouraged an ongoing commitment to Spirit-filled living. Morning Prayer on Friday morning provided an opportunity for prayer and contemplation, led by youth voting member, Ashley Hoy. Pr. Carol Solovitz, retired pastor, served as the Assembly Chaplain, and brought prayers and words of reflection to the Assembly throughout the weekend. A prayer chapel was available for personal prayer and quiet contemplation. Music combined a variety of styles and was provided throughout worship and the plenary.

Fun and Fellowship

The Assembly was also an excellent opportunity for fun, fellowship, and conversation with others. Voting members were seated by conference, which allowed for connections to be made that can strengthen collaboration throughout the year. A variety of lunches and receptions provided opportunity for people to gather and connect, as did the daily manager's reception hosted by the hotel. Castle Church Brewing Community provided beer sampling to go with the Reformation Buffet, and the Connections Café was frequently bustling with vendors and display hosts sharing their ministries and stories with others. The Global Mission Committee once again won the display contest, where display tables were invited to demonstrate the theme of the Assembly in some way.

Service Project

This year's Synod Assembly Service Project was collecting items for New Beginnings, a full-service ministry to those experiencing homelessness in Orlando. Conferences from throughout the synod brought a variety of supplies that piled up in the Sacristy and overflowed the space provided. Over \$900 of loose change was collected for this important ministry.

Looking forward

The Synod Assembly provided many opportunities to reflect on the grace and goodness of God in the last year. It was also a chance to learn about and anticipate participating in new ministries in the year to come. The 2018 Assembly will be June 1-3, 2018, also at the Embassy Suites in Kissimmee, and will be a Discipleship Assembly—full of workshops and learning opportunities. As we move into a new year with a new bishop, we pray for God's grace in action to not only be a reflection of the past, but also a statement about the present and the future.