Witness with your smartphone

Assemblygoers gathered at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center this year around the theme of “You Will Be My Witness.” Moments of witness punctuated the assembly’s business throughout the three days.

The Rev. Norma Malfatti, Director for Evangelical Mission, kicked things off by using her cell phone to create and share a video introducing video storytelling as a witnessing tool for modern times.

She hopes that by encouraging individuals in congregations to create short videos about the ministries in which they are engaged, they can build relationships and inspire others to grow in their own witness to the love of Jesus. “This is our book of Acts for 2019,” Malfatti said. More videos will be shared in the future.

Malfatti also invited individuals to share their “Faith Alive!” moments by writing down their personal stories about encountering the love of Jesus on cards and posting them in the assembly hall. The idea was to keep it short enough to be shared in an elevator ride. Some were even brave enough to share their stories with the assembly from the podium.

Malfatti demonstrates her own smartphone video.

Bishop Macholz on family leave

As voting members and guests gathered for the 2019 Upstate New York Synod Assembly, Vice President Tom Madden brought some sobering news: Bishop John Macholz would not be present at the assembly this year.

A letter from Bishop Macholz stated he needed to be present with his daughter Barb as her life’s journey was nearing its completion. She has been fighting breast cancer for several years. As of the starting date of the assembly, Thursday, May 30, Bishop Macholz was officially on family medical leave. His letter thanked the assembly and asked for its continued prayers.

Bishop Jim Hazelwood of the New England Synod was present with the assembly and will serve as interim bishop now and in the days to come.

In Friday morning’s plenary, Vice President Tom Madden announced that those who wanted to support the Macholz family in another way could donate to the fund “Hearts and Hands for Barb.” Checks can be made out to Atonement Lutheran Church with “Hearts and Hands for Barb” written on the memo line and sent to Atonement Lutheran Church, 1900 Westfall Road, Rochester, NY 14618.
Trumpeting the good news for all

The echoes of brass instruments throughout the assembly hall heralded the start of the 2019 Synod Assembly, which happened to fall on the festival of the Ascension of Our Lord.

As the gathered people sang “God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind,” the trumpet and trombone fanfares soared overhead, a musical reminder of every Christian’s call to share the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ. The assembly had the chance to groove to a different kind of brass music when the opening worship continued and concluded with “Oh, When the Saints Go Marching In.”

During the opening worship service, St. John’s, Allegheny and St. Paul’s, Ellicottville were both received into the ELCA. Both were previously congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

After the evening plenary concluded, the assembly moved into Holden Evening Prayer. The middle of the service included an extended time of Scripture and hymns, during which individuals were given an LED tealight candle and asked to light it and place it on a map of the world at the front of the assembly hall. The result was a shimmering image of the world surrounded in prayer.

Resolutions, memorials adopted by assembly

On Thursday evening, the assembly dove into business, adopting the agenda and rules of procedure as published, considering and adopting Resolution #2, and hearing a number of reports.

Resolution #2 is a memorial to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly later this summer, urging the ELCA to endorse The Earth Charter. According to the resolution, the Earth Charter is “an international declaration of values and principles that support building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century.” It speaks about care for the earth and maintaining a healthy ecosystem as well as sustainability in the future and reshaping our economic and political systems to better build “a democratic and humane world.” It was adopted by a margin of 192 to 13.

Business wrapped up on Saturday as the assembly adopted Resolution #3, a memorial urging the 2019 Churchwide Assembly to adopt the proposed social statement “Faith, Sexism and Justice: A Lutheran Call to Action.” The assembly also debated Resolution #1, the 2020 mission proposal, with voting members proposing amendments to restore funding to the New York State Council of Churches and Vanderkamp. Neither was adopted by the assembly and the mission proposal was adopted as originally presented.
Elections completed

Several elections were held for Synod Council seats at assembly. Two Synod Council seats were at-large seats nominated and elected by the assembly, one designated for a youth ages 16 to 17 and the other for a lay person of color or primary language other than English.

In Friday morning’s plenary, the assembly elected Ryan Hunneshagen of Lord of Life, Depew to the first seat and Atif Dean of Good Shepherd, Loudonville to the second.

The remaining seats were nominated by the conferences and required only a vote by the assembly. Gary Roller and Daniel May were duly elected. Fred Risser was also elected to another term on the board of United Lutheran Seminary.

Next year’s assembly will be tasked with electing a bishop, and Vice President Tom Madden reminded assemblygoers to be mindful of that in the year to come. The process of electing a bishop will begin in the fall.

More than just “business as usual”

Thursday and Friday, the assembly welcomed several guests to the podium to hear their reports:

- Lori Fedyk, treasurer of the ELCA and representative of the churchwide organization, shared that the Upstate New York Synod gave a total of nearly 1.4 million dollars to the work of the greater church, and gives the second highest total of any synod to ELCA World Hunger.
- Sue Fox, president of the synodical Women of the ELCA, reported on their work and invited all women to come to their fall convention.
- The Rev. Dr. Martin Otto Zimmann, president of United Lutheran Seminary, spoke on the current state of seminary education at United.
- The Rev. Lori Kochanski shared the work of the Women and Justice task force of the ELCA, which has produced a social statement entitled “Faith, Sexism and Justice: A Lutheran Call to Action,” which will be on the agenda of the Churchwide Assembly this August.
- Nick Stroczkowski, director of Organic Faith in Buffalo, lifted up the power of youth ministry to help young people process their pain and find healing in healthy ways.

- Deacon Lee Lindeman, executive director of Lake Chautauqua Lutheran Center, reported on the ministry happening and the new improvements being made to the facilities there.
- The Rev. Peter Cook, executive director of the New York State Council of Churches, reported on the work they do with prison chaplaincy ministry and advocacy in the state capital.
- Fred Risser, synodical treasurer, also delivered his report on the financial state of the synod.

Setting aside business for a time, the assembly entered into committee of the whole on Friday morning to reflect on and discuss current trends of decline within the ELCA and mainline Protestant denominations. This was in response to a request made of Synod Council. Saturday morning’s plenary session included additional time to discuss this topic in small groups.

The Rev. Dr. Julius Carroll and the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Simurro shared a historical presentation about the Lutheran witness to slavery during the last 400 years in North America. The issue proved to be a challenging and divisive one throughout the history of various Lutheran bodies in North America.
“We are witnesses” in today’s world

A mournful plainsong chant transformed into a lilting jazz melody as the Rita Collective Ensemble began playing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," the processional hymn for Monday evening’s worship service. The ensemble of bass clarinet, marimba, alto saxophone, piano, bass, percussion, and vocals skillfully led worship with a wide variety of global jazz rhythms.

Bishop Jim Hazelwood preached on being a witness to God’s love in Jesus Christ for the whole world. He shared stories from courtrooms, T-shirt shops, and congregations about the importance of witnessing to our world today, using what we already have. Even if it’s as simple as sending notes to people when a congregation prays for them, a connection is created that witnesses to a God that truly cares about them and loves them.

The Rev. Hannah Benedict shared a dramatic reading of Exodus 3:1-15, the story of Moses and the burning bush. Pastors celebrating milestone anniversaries of ordination served Communion as well as some who serve as synodical and churchwide staff.

Celebrations take center stage Friday

At Friday evening’s celebration banquet, eleven pastors were honored for their milestone anniversaries of ordination, ranging from fifty to sixty-five years each, for a combined total of six hundred and thirty-five years. Members of Synod Council completing their term of service were also thanked.

For the first time, the assembly took time to verbally thank congregations for their mission support to the synod. Greg May, chair of the finance committee, named each congregation and especially noted those that had grown substantially in their giving.

Two other awards were given: Vice President Tom Madden presented Fred Risser with the Synodical Discipleship Award, and Keith Mundy, program director for stewardship for the ELCA, recognized Denise Ballou for her outstanding work as Mission Interpreter Coordinator for the churchwide organization.

The assembly began by surrounding the world in prayer and went on to raise nearly $40,000 to fight world hunger.

Hands and feet working together to fight world hunger

It all started with the Rev. Dave Preisinger inviting assemblygoers, “Open Wide Your Hands,” and participate in the special offering held every year at assembly for ELCA World Hunger. It ended with the assembly coming in just shy of the $40,000 with a final total of $39,770.75. In between Preisinger led the assembly in hand-themed songs and shared updates as the total inched upward.

The total amount includes $1175 raised through Bishop Macholz’ “Sneak Up on Hunger” challenge. Macholz and his wife Lin pledged to donate $5 for every person who wore sneakers to the plenary hall on Saturday morning. Two hundred and thirty-five people laced up their shoes and met the challenge. One hundred eighty-two letters to legislators were also written and signed, urging lawmakers to fund hunger relief programs in New York state and in the nation.

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Upstate New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Grounded in Christ Jesus • Growing in our Witness • Giving from our Bounty • Graced for the World