

ELCA Conference of Bishops holds spring meeting

CHICAGO (March 11, 2021) — The Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) held its online meeting March 4-5. The conference, an advisory body of the ELCA, comprises 65 synod bishops, the presiding bishop and the secretary.

“While the technology allows us to meet, much of what we do when we are together is build relationships with each other between sessions,” said the Rev. Tracie Bartholomew, bishop of the ELCA New Jersey Synod and chair of the conference. “To that end, we are eager to meet in person and hope to do so in October. We accomplished the business of the conference, as well as spent time talking about and moving into the future.”

“We bid farewell to Pastor Walter May, executive for Synod Relations, as he retires later in March, and we welcomed Deacon Mary Ann Schwabe into that role,” Bartholomew said, adding that the conference expresses heartfelt thanks for May's 13 years working with the bishops.

In her report to the conference, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton said, “We’ve learned over the past year how resilient we are as church and as people of God. Last year was a year of pain, loss, injustice and uncertainty. It was also a year of learning, listening and trying new things — stepping out of our comfort zones and into a more virtual world. This church persevered in so many ways.”

During the meeting, the conference reviewed an updated draft of “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline” from the Committee on Appeals. The document describes the grounds by which officers, rostered ministers, candidates for rostered ministry, congregations and members of congregations may be subject to discipline according to the practice of this church. The document now goes to the Church Council for consideration during its spring meeting.

The conference also welcomed guest speaker Krish Vignarajah, CEO of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), who spoke of the long legacy shared by the ELCA and LIRS in welcoming and caring for newcomers.

A panel of pastor-theologians addressed the topic of the post-pandemic church, and this address was followed by small-group conversation. The panelists were the Rev. Peter Marty, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa; Dr. Anthony Bateza, assistant professor of religion at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn.; and Mary Hinkle Shore, rector and dean of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir-Rhyne University.

In other business, the conference:

- Received a report from Judith Roberts, ELCA senior director for Diversity, Equality and Inclusion, addressing synod diversity goals. Roberts spoke of the

trend toward an increase in synods that have created anti-racism teams and diversity goals. Roberts also provided the conference with information on resources to help build intercultural competence.

- Received a report from John Weit, ELCA executive for Worship, addressing how worship has been adapted during the pandemic.
- Engaged in conversation about the conference's role in the ELCA's Future Church design.
- Received written reports from the secretary, treasurer and other churchwide home areas, and updates from the conference's various committees.