

## Serving as Bishop of the Virginia Synod, ELCA 2017-2023

A very brief overview by Bishop Bob Humphrey

### PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The Bishop's Election Committee has invited me to reflect on some of my experiences while having the extraordinary privilege of serving as Bishop of the Virginia Synod, ELCA.

Much like the Office of Pastor or Deacon, the Office of Bishop is made possible not by a single individual elected at a Synod Assembly every six years, but by an amazingly devoted and skilled staff of those who serve in the Office of the Bishop along side literally hundreds of remarkably gifted rostered and lay leaders throughout our Synod, Region 9 and the ELCA Churchwide Organization.

So, here in a nutshell is **what they tell you** about serving as a synod bishop in the ELCA. You can find it in Chapter 8 of Synod Constitutions: It seems pretty simple... at first. The Bishop is **this synod's pastor**.

There are nine ways in which the constitution is specific:

1. Preach, teach and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confessions of faith of the ELCA
2. Primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this synod...(including providing pastoral care and leadership to both rostered ministers and congregations);
3. Ordain approved candidates for Rostered Ministry (Deacons and Pastors) – (something normally *only* the bishop can do);
4. Attest letters of call (ensure RMs are properly called and supported – Call Process – a big deal!)
5. See to the Installation of Rostered Ministers (Our Deans to this – part of building conferences...)
6. Exercise leadership in the mission of this church... (in 5 specific ways – here is 1):
  - a. Advise and counsel this synod's 9 related institutions and organizations;
7. Practice leadership in strengthening the unity of this church ( in 7 specific ways – here are 3):
  - a. Oversight of preaching, teaching and administration of sacraments within the synod;
  - b. Establish processes for the resolution of controversies and discipline of rostered ministers and congregations of this synod; (This takes a lot of energy and time...)
  - c. Be a member of the ELCA Conference of Bishops; regularly consult with other bishops (This really is a critical group of colleagues. I am especially grateful to those in Region 9);
8. Oversee and administer the work of this synod (Administration in 12 specific ways. Here are 5):
  - a. Serve as President and CEO of the synod corporation;
  - b. Preside at meetings of the Synod Assembly, etc...;
  - c. Ensure the constitution and bylaws of the synod and ELCA are duly observed;
  - d. Supervise the work of other officers;
  - e. Coordinate the work of all synod staff members;
9. Provide spiritual leadership for the people of this synod\* (no specific ways listed here. I miss planning a sermon series; liturgical worship and regular contact with those I'm called to serve)

Okay... That's a LOT of stuff that goes into being *this synod's pastor*...

But, that's not all of it. Here are **some things the constitution doesn't tell you**...

- *The Office of Bishop comes with a lot of respect, but not a lot of power.* I've been amazed since the instant I was elected how people responded to me differently. Still,...
  - *As the synod's pastor* I get to know and offer pastoral support to our rostered ministers, their families and many lay leaders and congregations during joyous and difficult times.
    - It is always a privilege to offer pastoral care when I can, But I miss having the regular contact with people that leads to trusting and deep relationships.

- *The flip side of the coin?* The respect people offer the Office can turn to frustration or even anger in some cases. I get a lot more angry email and anonymous messages than I used to as a pastor...
  - I'm afraid a lot of what I have done and what I hear from other bishops is – there is a lot of conflict and the Bishop has the responsibility for “*the resolution of controversies and discipline of rostered ministers and congregations...*”
  - *It's really tough to be both pastor and prosecutor.* Bishops receive a phone call that requires immediate response, rescheduling whatever was on the calendar, followed by weeks of investigation; difficult discussions and decisions. This has been the hardest part for me. The stuff that keeps me up at night...
  - To be honest, because of all this, many bishops feel isolated and lonely. I think every pastor, including bishops, need solid support, healthy boundaries and self-care, including a great therapist, spiritual guide and/or experienced coach!
- *The Bishop gets to travel a lot; attend events and meet a lot of people.*
  - Like most of our staff that travel, I average 30-40,000 miles a year (in non-COVID times) driving, visiting most of our congregations, rostered ministers, agencies and institutions; attending Conference events, dedications, openings and closings, weddings and funerals all over our beautiful Commonwealth. (The synod provides the car and covers the expenses for travel, food, and lodging, including expenses for a spouse to some events;)
  - I get to attend the ELCA Conference of Bishops, Region 9, Churchwide Assemblies, Events for Rostered Minister, Youth and other throughout the U.S. and sometimes beyond, like visiting our global companion synod: Islands District in Papua New Guinea.
  - There are invitations to a lot of other events and ecumenical gatherings.
    - The flip side of the coin is the Bishop is away from home – a lot! Bishop Mauney estimated 60% of his time was spent on the road; in meetings; and hotels.
- *The Bishop is appropriately and well compensated, in line with other ELCA Bishops, – usually somewhere between 15-25% above synod minimum guidelines for Pastors with their experience.*
- Okay... Now, ***what are the Opportunities and Challenges facing future bishops?***
  - *Shaping the future of the ELCA:* (younger; more diverse; 1 million new people)
    - Facing the changing landscape of religion and culture in the U.S.
    - Participating in the process of defining what it would mean to reform the ELCA
  - *The Virginia Synod* has remarkable resilience; truly gifted leaders at every level; and a few special financial resources:
  - *The flip side of this coin:* What does it mean to be faithful to our calling in a culture that is increasingly polarized, politicized and suspicious of institutional religion?
  - To live into our vision to be a radically welcoming, younger, more diverse church as we address our own conscious and unconscious biases, advocate for social justice and remaining faithful is an exciting opportunity and daunting challenge. The Bishop is often compelled and called to respond to injustice and crises in church, society and the world, (which in turn prompts the emails, letters and phone calls – both supportive and critical)
- Finally, I want to tell you I simply could not have functioned well, at all, during these past 5 years without the incredible wisdom, strength and fierce determination of my spouse, Barbra. Period! But, the stress of this office, irregular hours, frequent absences, etc have been hard for her, too.
- It is an amazing, challenging and powerful call and I join you in praying for our next bishop – for someone who is faithful, inspired, experienced, energetic, creative, caring, wise and resilient – ready and excited to help lead us and the whole church into new and faithful ways to proclaim God's all-inclusive love and follow Jesus for the sake of the Gospel and world... Come Holy Spirit!