ELCA Strong Connections with the Lutheran World Federation

Reflections on the Retreat for Newly Elected Leaders

By: The Rev. Dr. Phyllis Blair Milton, Virginia Synod Bishop

Every year, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) hosts a Retreat for Newly Elected Leaders (RoNEL) in Geneva, Switzerland and in Wittenberg, Germany. This is an opportunity for newly elected leaders (bishops and presidents) of LWF member churches to gather, learn, and share together while visiting people and places affiliated with the global Lutheran communion. This year's RoNEL took place on September 29 – October 8, 2024. The ELCA had the opportunity to submit one bishop to attend, and Bishop Eaton asked me to be that bishop.





Chateau de Bossey Hotel and Conference Centre, in Geneva where we met.





Fifteen church leaders from LWF member churches around the world learning about the work of LWF, its global role, and how it supports churches in leadership and service.

My journey to RoNEL began with my husband dropping me off at the airport in Norfolk, on Saturday afternoon, September 28. To be honest, I was a little anxious being the only one from the ELCA traveling to the retreat. After an 8-hour flight, I landed in Geneva, made my way through the passport gate, and picked up my bag. Yea! My bag made it!

Just as promised, I saw the LWF sign being held by the driver who would take me to the Chateau de Bossey Hotel and Conference Centre, in Geneva. After arriving and checking in, I made preparations for our first gathering which was Evening Prayer.

Prayer and worship was a highlight of my time at the Retreat. We started our day with morning prayer and Holy Communion, paused for Midday Prayer, and ended our day with Evening Prayer. Speaking of strong connections, the spiritual emphasis of the retreat was the thread for the entire event.

In attendance, with their representatives, were Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and Latin America, with 12 Bishops, 2 Presidents and 1 General Secretary. For our plenary session, headphones were provided with translators so that everyone could understand each other's contributions to the topic of discussion.









Every morning began with worship and the evening concluded with worship in the Conference Centre Chapel.

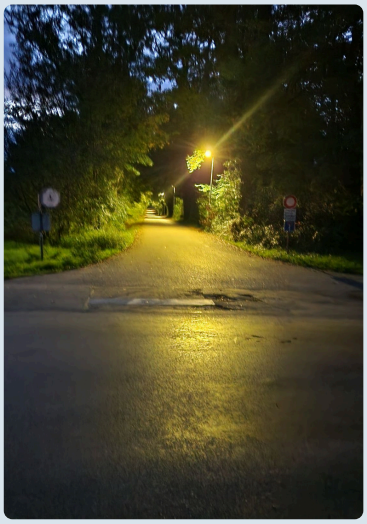
After a welcome from our hosts, The Rev. Katarina Kiilunen and The Rev. Sonia Skupch, LWF staff and The Rev. Dr. Samuel Dawai, LWF Center Wittenberg , we introduced ourselves by sharing the area we represented and the position to which we were called.

Our plenary session topics ranged from an introduction to the LWF to episcopal ministry in the Lutheran Communion. We learned about each other's churches and gathered in small groups around the topics of responsible theology and thriving churches. We were greeted by the General Secretary of the LWF, Rev. Dr. Anne Burghardt, as she shared the mission and vision of the LWF.

Another highlight for me was hearing the other leaders' call stories. An old spiritual says, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."I would say that song expressed every leaders experience. Not one of us expected to be elected to the call in which we now serve.

Our week in Geneva concluded with a tour of Reformation Square and Old Town Geneva, and worship in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva where I had the opportunity to read the Gospel for the service.

From Geneva our retreat took us to Wittenberg and the LWF Center Wittenberg, "Theology in the Heartland of the Reformation." Seminars, conferences, and training for the member churches of the LWF are held here. Our emphasis during this time was "Episcopacy in Lutheranism" by The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Peterson, Wartburg Seminary, Academic Staff. During our time in Wittenburg, we learned about the office of the Bishop according to Lutheran tradition.



Early morning walk to the Conference Centre.



Small Group Discussions



Conference Grounds

We experienced worship at the Corpus Christi Chapel, Church St. Mary, and Castle Church, all in which Martin Luther preached in his time. The Executive Director of LWF Center Wittenberg, Dr. Anna Krauss was also installed during our visit. At her installation, I had the opportunity to read the scripture for the service.

We visited the Luthergarten, the Luther House Museum and received a guided city tour with "Katharina von Bora."

This event was a once in a lifetime experience. I am grateful that Bishop Easton asked me to attend. I ask your prayers for the Lutheran World Federation as they attend to their commitment of being a global communion of churches in the Lutheran tradition, living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.



Bishops at the Castle Church



Female Bishops with statue of Katharina von Bora, Martin Luther's wife.



Walking to Castle Church on Sunday morning.



Rev. Bridget Gautieri, ELCA Wittenberg Center; Bishop Milton; Dr. Cheryl Peterson, Academic Staff



The bronze door on Castle Church bearing Luther's 95 Theses.