



Reflections from the 2025 Churchwide Assembly



Attending from the Virginia Synod

Tom Bartkiewicz (Our Saviour, Warrenton), Judy Castele (Good Shepherd, Lexington), Cam Haggett (College, Salem), Carlton Hardy (St. Mark, Yorktown), Sylvia Miles (Good Shepherd, Galax), Bishop Phyllis Milton, Rev. Viktoria Parvin (St. Mark, Charlottesville), Rev. Adam C. Schultz (Good Shepherd, Lexington), Blythe Scott (First, Norfolk), and Dr. Yolanda Shea (First, Norfolk)





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PHOENIX, ARIZONA



Tom Bartkiewicz

Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Warrenton



The 2025 Church Wide Assembly was an awesome event. We elected new leadership, helped heal a thousand-year rift, debated and voted on social statements and the church constitution, and were moved by extraordinary preaching and messages.

I was elected to the CWA at the 2024 Virginia Synod Assembly. While I was looking forward to the experience (I called this my National Youth Gathering), I knew almost no one who was going. That changed by the end of the assembly. One of the gifts of the Churchwide Assembly is the opportunity to meet and become friends with people in our synod and across the country. Through worshiping, breaking bread, and sharing ministry and personal stories with others, I was amazed and excited about the diversity of ideas and passionate people in the church. Experiencing the Holy Spirit move through the singing and praying assembly in real-time as we elected a new Presiding Bishop was incredible.

Of course, all that could be anticipated. What I will remember most was something completely different. Long days and jet lag can take a toll on people. What people think they're saying or doing can be perceived as hurtful. While undoubtedly occurring often, several instances occurred in full display during the main sessions. In each of those cases, those involved identified the hurt, met with each other to communicate and seek understanding, and then made public repentance. Instead of leaving the assembly with division, we concluded, going out into the world, with a spirit of forgiveness and new understanding.

Hot Take: Travelling thousands of miles to go to a church assembly can be trying. Then again, the Apostle Paul would like to add a word or two.





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Judy Castele, Secretary of the Virginia Synod
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lexington



It was an honor and a privilege to serve as a voting member from the Virginia Synod for the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Throughout the long, hot week in Phoenix, I was constantly reminded of the words that Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton used when she began her first term as bishop 12 years ago. Bishop Eaton shared the vision that would guide the ministry of the ELCA during her tenure. That vision was: We are church. We are Lutheran. We are church together. We are church for the sake of the world.

Those tenets were more evident during the Assembly than you can possibly imagine. I left the week tired, but firmly grounded in the vision of how we stand together in the proclamation of the gospel.

We are church. This wasn't a social gathering. Sure, there were new friendships formed, lots of laughter, long lines for meals, and getting lost in the hot Phoenix sun (that was just me, not the group!) But, surrounded by 803 voting members and numerous guests, visitors, and speakers, it was evident that we were there to not only do the business of the church, but to be the church in the world. Our shared belief in Jesus Christ brought us together and sustained us as we headed out to proclaim the gospel to all ends of the earth.

We are Lutheran. How could you tell? The music, the liturgy, the familiar tunes and settings, and even the not-so-familiar tunes that we wrestled with had me thinking of my own congregation. Over 2,000 miles away from home, I knew that my congregation was sharing in the same rituals of worship that bring Lutheran believers together Sunday after Sunday.





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We are church together. With our siblings from across the US and around the globe, we struggled with memorials and social statements. Divergent ideas and opinions came to the microphone to speak boldly and passionately. I didn't agree with everyone (that's why we had those little voting machines), but I never once thought to disrespect or disregard those whose ideas differed from mine. Some of the impassioned speeches changed my way of thinking. Through it all, there was a sense of "we're all in this together," and those differing opinions didn't drive us apart.

We are church for the sake of the world. We heard about the ministry and mission of the ELCA. We learned about the work going on around the world for the sake of the gospel. We had hard conversations, celebrated retiring leaders, and elected new ones. We heard from numerous world leaders who brought a global perspective to our ministry together.

In her sermon during opening worship, Bishop Elizabeth Eaton said, "The world wants to divide us, but the eucharist brings us together." Thank you for the opportunity to experience this unique expression of the church that truly brought us together as one in the Body of Christ.

Judy Castele





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Cam Haggett

College Lutheran Church, Salem



When I was elected to attend the 2025 Churchwide Assembly, I didn't totally understand what I was getting myself into. I was excited to go to Phoenix and have the opportunity to discuss important matters related to the past, present, and future of the church, but I wasn't sure what to expect.

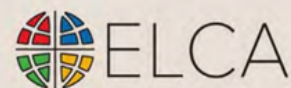
My journey to Phoenix was rocky, but when I arrived and walked into the conference center, I was awestruck. Seeing so many Lutherans from all over the country, and some guests from all over the world, took my breath away.

Over the course of the week, I got to hear from a lot of those people, whether they were telling the Assembly about their ministries, speaking to motions, or simply chatting with me in a hotel bar! I am so grateful for this opportunity to expand my knowledge of the necessary work done by the ELCA, at the CWA, and beyond.





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Carlton Hardy

St. Mark Lutheran Church, Yorktown



The 800 delegates to the 2025 CWA in Phoenix, AZ, shared many wonderful anecdotes, stories, and camaraderie. The ELCA numbers about 2.8 million baptized members. The assembly was composed of both rostered (40%) and lay members (60%). Approximately 10% represented youth and young adults (up to age 30).

The 2025 CWA demonstrated that with effort, understanding, and work, all may come together in the end -

- We are church.
- We are Lutheran.
- We are church together.
- We are church for the sake of the world.

Highlights were:

- Tributes and heartfelt thanks to the work and leadership of outgoing Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. The first woman to serve as Presiding Bishop. 2013-2025
- Tributes and accolades for the dedication and work of outgoing ELCA Secretary, Deacon Sue Rothmeyer (2019-2025), and her 40-year career with the ELCA.
- The election of the first African American Presiding Bishop, Bishop-elect Yehiel Curry.
- The election of the first African American Secretary, Secretary-elect CeCee Mills.
- This 17th CWA was a historic event with the election of persons of color to the two top positions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Both leaders bring new and fresh perspectives to the positions to which they were elected. In addition to these historic elections, the Assembly theme, "For the Life of the World," celebrated the Nicene Creed's 1,700th anniversary.





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- Takeaways from this Assembly are that we are each undercover evangelists with the benefit of theologians in the field (Pastors). We must get to work where God has planted us and reach people in the community and the world. Members of the ELCA are urged to advocate for human rights and a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis by supporting policies that end the occupation; to join the World Council of Churches in calling for an immediate end to the mass killing in Gaza. We urge the Office of the Presiding Bishop to petition U.S. leaders to recognize and act to end the genocide against Palestinians, halt military aid to Israel used in Gaza, and support Palestinian statehood and U.N. membership. We recognize the wisdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said, “The church is the church only when it exists for others.”

Another way of expressing the pervasive atmosphere and outcome of CWA 2025 can be found in the words of the Bill Staines song as performed by Celtic Thunder -

All God's creatures have a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wires
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got now

(Celtic Thunder - A Place In The Choir (Live From Poughkeepsie / 2010 / Lyric Video))

2028 Churchwide Assembly will be convened in August in Des Moines, Iowa.



Carlton Hardy





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Sylvia Miles

Church of the Good Shepherd Episcopal- Lutheran Church, Galax



I had the honor of representing the Virginia Synod as a Voting Member at the 2025 Churchwide Assembly this past week in Phoenix, Arizona. Phoenix in Arizona in July was chosen, as you might expect, because it is the off-season and the rates are reduced. Ah! The frugality of the ELCA!! The high temperature was 110 degrees each day!! There were over a thousand people present, including 803 Voting Members from the 65 Synods of the ELCA.

It was very much a working meeting, with 2-3 Plenary meetings/day, which often lasted until 9:00 pm. During these sessions, we:

- Heard reports and reviewed the work of churchwide officers, leaders, and units.
- Received and considered proposals from synod assemblies.
- Elected officers, board members, and other leaders as specified by the constitution or bylaws.
- Established ELCA churchwide policy.
- Worshiped together.
- Adopted a budget.

We worshiped together every day, we ate all our meals together, we walked a lot to our meetings (over 6000 of my steps/day) and we dropped into bed exhausted every night. We were provided puppies to pet each day, we had a for-real Native American pow-wow one night and a banquet for retiring Bishop Elizabeth Eaton on the last night.

We met many wonderful people of God, being God's hands in the work of God. AND, the Spirit of God was among us!!





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We elected Bishop Yehiel Curry, the first African American bishop, whose key priorities included:

- Lay leadership and education: Curry has expressed a strong belief in equipping and empowering lay leaders to serve effectively within changing congregational structures, particularly given the trend toward part-time or multi-point pastoral leadership.
- Community-rooted ministry: As a former mission developer, Curry emphasizes the importance of ministries being deeply embedded within and responsive to the needs of their communities.
- Embodiment of the church's call: His leadership is rooted in faith, shaped by service, and driven by the biblical call to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God.
- Investment in emerging leaders: Curry's own journey, including his participation in the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program, highlights a commitment to nurturing and supporting new leaders within the church.

We elected as Secretary Lucille “CeCee” Mills, the first African American secretary, whose key priorities included a “new season for our church.” Mills articulated a sense of a new era for the ELCA, emphasizing a commitment to listening to God's call and striving to become “God's beloved community”.

In addition to the individual priorities, both leaders will likely prioritize the ELCA's existing and evolving federal policy priorities, which are grounded in Scripture and Lutheran theological tradition. These priorities include:

- Civic Engagement: Facilitating depolarizing conversations, fostering pluralism, and supporting Lutheran participation in civic life.
- Economic Policy: Supporting poor and working families, expanding affordable housing,





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- Migration Policy: Ensuring stable families, maintaining safe borders, opposing mass deportation, and protecting vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers.
- Civil Rights Policy: Preventing discrimination, protecting religious liberty for all, improving outcomes for disadvantaged groups, and addressing historical injustices.
- International Policy: Restoring humanitarian aid, defending human rights, and advancing women and girls' rights and equality.
- Environment & Energy Policy: Pursuing pragmatic climate solutions and supporting impacted communities.
- Middle East & North Africa Policy: Insisting on equal rights and safety for all in the Holy Land and stabilizing the region.

The ELCA also continues to focus on Racial Justice Ministries, building alliances across different groups, creating ecumenical networks, and working for racial justice through public witness, programs, and policies. Our social statement "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture" provides theological reflection on this commitment. We voted on numerous amendments to the Constitution, the Bylaws, and Policies to support these priorities, including the proposed social statement "Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All," which addresses questions about civic engagement, Christian nationalism, and the role of clergy in political discourse.

And a good time was had by All!

Submitted by Sylvia Miles





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The Rev. Dr. Phyllis Milton
Bishop of the Virginia Synod



Psalm 133:1 (ERV)

Oh, how wonderful, how pleasing it is when God's people all come together as one!

When I reflect on my attendance and participation at the Churchwide Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona, this scripture from the Psalms came to mind. Especially on the first evening of the first day, when we were all gathered together for worship. And 65 Synod Bishops and their Synod Vice Presidents processed in together to proclaim that we are indeed called “For the Life of the World”.

“For the Life of the World” was the theme of the Assembly. Each day's worship was focused on an aspect of being called “For the Life of the World”:

- The Body of Christ
- Baptized
- Justice and Peace
- Praying
- Confession and Repentance
- Sent as the Body of Christ

Several members of our Virginia Synod delegation participated in worship as Communion Assistants. The majority of our group were first timers and by the end of the Assembly were ready to attend another Assembly.





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Our Assembly prayerfully discerned together amendments and resolutions and new leadership for our denomination. We watched history being made when the Assembly elected two African American Rostered Ministers to serve as its Presiding Bishop and Secretary, Bishop Yehiel Curry, and Pastor CeCee Mills, respectively.

Two of our own were elected to positions in the Churchwide organization. Jillian Stierwalt (St. Andrew, Portsmouth) was elected to a position on Church Council, and Rev. Adam C. Schultz (Good Shepherd, Lexington) was elected to a position on the Committee on Discipline.

Thank you, VA Synod, for the opportunity to gather with over 1,000 Lutherans, including 803 voting members, to give voice to our love for Jesus and our love for our neighbors.

Bishop Phyllis Milton





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The Rev. Viktoria Halmagyi Parvin
St. Mark Lutheran Church, Charlottesville



From July 28 to August 2, I had the honor of representing our synod at the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona. I'm deeply grateful for the trust you placed in me to carry our shared voice into this sacred gathering. A friend said to me before I left, "That's where the sausage is made," and while that may sound humorous, it's true — the assembly is where decisions shaping the future of our church are prayerfully and thoughtfully made.

But it wasn't just about votes and business. It was about being the body of Christ together. We gathered — bishops, lay leaders, young adults, youth — from across the church to worship, listen, pray, and discern God's will together. Over and over again, before every vote, we paused to pray. Not asking what we wanted, but what God desires for us, and for the world we serve.

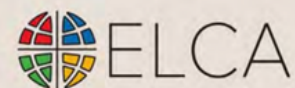
One of the most powerful moments for me came during worship, when I was invited to serve as a communion assistant. Standing among hundreds of Lutherans from every synod, I felt the weight and beauty of our unity in Christ. The services were deeply moving — with liturgies of confession and repentance for the harm caused by patriarchy, sexism, and past divisions. We joined in a powwow to honor Indigenous communities. One evening, we held a candlelight vigil for AMMPARO, lifting up the dignity of migrants with prayer and lament.

Another unforgettable moment was reciting the Nicene Creed — in a way we never had before. For the first time in ELCA history, we removed the phrase "and the Son" from the creed, a small change in words but a huge step toward healing centuries-old divides between the Eastern and Western church traditions. In adopting the "Common Statement





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on the Filioque,” the Assembly affirmed our commitment to reconciliation and unity in the Body of Christ. As I spoke the words of that revised creed, I felt a deep sense of hope — that we, as Lutherans, could be part of something so historic and healing.

There was joy and sorrow in leadership, too. We elected a new Presiding Bishop, Yehiel Curry — an energetic and mission-minded leader, the first African American in this office. But we also said goodbye to Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, who has led this church with wisdom and courage. In her final report, she reflected on Mary Magdalene at the tomb — how she couldn’t recognize Jesus until he called her by name. Bishop Eaton reminded us that we come to see when we know that we are seen — by Christ himself.

She shared that throughout her time in office, she was guided not by a desire to preserve institutions, but by a call to be faithful, truthful, and honest. She called the church back to its center: to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments. She also cautioned us not to become spiritually complacent — warning that for many, “Jesus has become wallpaper.” She urged us to return to Scripture, to prayer, and to a living, breathing relationship with our Savior.

And then, in a moment I’ll never forget, more than 800 of us stood and sang her favorite hymn: ELW 808 – Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song. Her voice caught as she shared how the final verse sustained her in difficult times:

“I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey;
but courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side.
And with all of the family you saved by your love,
we’ll sing to your dawn at the end of our journey.”

We sang it not just for her, but for all of us — as a prayer, a blessing, and a reminder of who we are: God’s beloved, called into this journey together.

Thank you again for the privilege of representing you. It was truly a holy and unforgettable experience.

In Christ,
Viktoria Halmagyi Parvin





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The Rev. Adam C. Schultz

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lexington



It was truly an honor for me to attend Churchwide Assembly this year as a voting member from the Virginia Synod delegation. While on the outside of things, it might look like we sat around black tablecloth-covered tables for a week listening to other ELCA Lutherans talk about how good the ELCA is, in actuality, when you dig just below the surface, the churchwide expression of our denomination is very active, and the Churchwide Assembly is just one example of the Spirit moving through the ELCA! By the end of the week, we:

- Elected a new Presiding Bishop: Rev. Yehiel Curry.
- Elected a new Secretary: Rev. Lucille “CeCee” Mills.
- Elected 110 other people to the Churchwide Council, the Committee on Appeals, the Committee on Discipline, the Nominating Committee, and to the boards of Affiliated Organizations like Portico and Augsburg Fortress.
- Adopted three years’ worth of budgets for the ELCA Churchwide and for the ELCA World Hunger.
- Received updates from the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church (CRLC)
- Adopted a new social statement of the ELCA entitled “Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All” that among many other things repudiates Christian nationalism.
- Revised the social statement entitled “Human Sexuality Gift and Trust” to better reflect the language of marriage as we understand it both within our civic laws and our congregations.
- Adopted 35 separate Memorials from Synods, including:
 - Restoration of Funding for USAID
 - Indian Boarding School Remembrance (in line with the ELCA’s renunciation of the Doctrine of Discovery, which gave theological justification for colonialism and conquest)
 - Implementing dismantling racism recommendations from the CRLC, including constitutional amendments by Fall 2027
 - Stand for Palestinian Rights and End to Occupation of Palestine





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- Adopted constitutional and bylaw amendments, including:
 - Youth (Confirmation to age 18) and Young Adult (18 to 30) representation targets among voting members of Churchwide Assembly, Church Council, and churchwide boards and committees increased from 10% to 20%.
- Referred a resolution on A.I. in the Church to the Office of the Presiding Bishop - Theological Discernment, and the Service and Justice Unit - Advocacy, in consultation with the Office of the Treasurer - Information Technology.
- Adopted the “Common Statement on the Filioque: The Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church” which is a first large step in mending a millennium-old theological and ecclesiastical rift in the Christian Church between the Orthodox Church and we Lutherans (the descendants of the Latin Church).
- Celebrated the twelve-year tenure of Presiding Bishop Rev. Elizabeth Eaton and the six-year tenure of Secretary Deacon Sue Rothmeyer.
- And announced ELCA Churchwide Assembly 2028 in Des Moines, Iowa; August 7-11, 2028

And these were just the highlights of the business parts of our Churchwide Assembly!

Even after all that was accomplished in just six days is not what stands out to me. What stands out to me is not so much what all was accomplished over those six days, but how it was accomplished. Everything we did was wrapped in theological intention, prayer, worship, and careful discernment (to say nothing of a layer or two of Roberts’ Rules of Order). We did all this as the Church; as Lutherans; as the Church together; as the Church for the sake of the world—the way the Church ought to be when we are at our best. Just like grains of wheat scattered among the Hollywood Hills of California, across the rolling hills of Nebraska, to the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains were gathered up to become one bread, so were the people of the ELCA from all the various synods who called Minnesota or Wisconsin or Texas or Alaska or Massachusetts or Pennsylvania home were gathered into one body—one body of Christ. Over 800 voting “grains of wheat” (plus





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official guests, staff, and volunteers) gathered together into one loaf—the Church. Together we worshiped every day. Together we sang and prayed between votes. Together we ate. Together we learned—about each other, about our indigenous neighbors, about the work of the ELCA in our neighborhoods and around the globe. Together we listened. Together we envisioned. Together we discerned the Spirit's calling. Together we debated our theological response to the world. Together we sinned in the words we used to debate and, in turn, harmed our neighbor. Together we sought true repentance for those harms, asked for forgiveness, and prayed for God's Spirit of reconciliation.

Rev. Adam C. Schultz





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Blythe Ann Scott, Vice-President of the Virginia Synod
First Lutheran Church, Norfolk



As I wait in the Phoenix Airport for my return flight to the East Coast, I feel a sense of calm after a week of trepidation and excitement at the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. I spent the week with our own Bishop Phyllis Milton, Synod Secretary Judy Castelee, Pastor Adam, Tom, Viktoria, Sylvia, Cam, Yolanda, and Carlton. Our week was spent worshipping together and listening to the call of Our Lord as we selected our next Presiding Bishop and Secretary - and considered some very serious memorials and resolutions. I will not dwell on the details of the tasks (I am sure the Bishop and Secretary of our Synod will enlighten you on those); instead, I will tell you that it was a week of engagement with old friends and new in Christ. I am truly grateful to the Virginia Synod for allowing me the opportunity and serious responsibility to represent our Synod during this time; all of you were with me in spirit. I want each and every one of you to know that the daily tasks were weighing, humbling, and joyful all at the same time. I will forever and always carry the lessons and blessings of my days with fellow Lutherans in Phoenix in my heart.

With love and blessings to you all - Blythe Ann Scott, Virginia Synod Vice President





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Yolanda Shea

First Lutheran Church, Norfolk



The 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly was my first churchwide, and I was honored to represent the VA synod as a voting member. It was invigorating for me to meet, pray, and worship with other Jesus-loving Lutherans from across the ELCA. It was exciting and inspiring to approve a new important social statement, elect a new Presiding Bishop, Secretary, and many others to critical positions across the churchwide organization, and I appreciated that the work we accomplished was done with intention and heart. At times, there were disagreements and tense moments of hurt, frustration, repentance, and grief, but there were also times of celebration, appreciation, and gratitude. Even though some of these moments were challenging and uncomfortable, each of them was a reminder to me of the beautiful, and at times messy, way that we live out our lives together as the body of Christ.

The week before churchwide, I participated in a small research conference where I was able to connect with other scientists conducting research about our beautiful home planet and its climate. Perhaps in part because of this, how our changing climate is impacting people all over the world was especially at the forefront of my mind during churchwide. It was therefore especially uplifting that I had a couple moments throughout the week that felt like a balm for my aching heart: the eco-theologian Reverend Chad Rimmer's plenary (especially, but really all the sermons during the week were included in that too – take some time to listen to them!), and an ad hoc lunch with other folks at churchwide who also have a heart for caring for God's creation. The lunch was such a great time for me to connect with Lutherans from all corners of the country who have been working on or want to work as a part of our reconciliation with nature. Getting the opportunity to share how our churches and synods are doing to be better stewards of the creation placed in our care was so healing for me that day. It's almost like God knew exactly what I needed, and I plan to share what I learned with my church family now that I'm back home.

