

#792 The ELCA's New Bishop

Colleagues,

I get to this a few days late, the week having been filled with much else, chiefly the work people pay me to do, but also some distractions. Of the latter the main one was a sudden urge on Wednesday to spend some time watching the video feed from a churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It was taking place in Pittsburgh.

As a rule I pay less heed to big church meetings than the folks who organize them would want me to. This one was off my radar all together. The forecast had predicted an unusually tame-and-lame event, with not much on the agenda apart from the perfunctory reelection of Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson.

But then came Tuesday, and an evening post on Facebook which suggested that a genuine contest for the bishop's office was unfolding for some reason, and that one of the persons involved was my own bishop, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton of the ELCA's Northeastern Ohio Synod. That caught my attention. So, yes, I forsook some other duties the next day to watch a bit of the action, just enough to gather that the people in Pittsburgh were seeing and hearing what we in Northeastern Ohio have witnessed for the past six and a half years. So when the news rolled in at day's end that Liz Eaton was the ELCA's Presiding Bishop-elect, I wasn't at all surprised; and I also thanked God.

Later came the note from a Crossings colleague, asking if and what I knew about Elizabeth Eaton, a person he hadn't heard of until this week. I told him I'd answer him here. That's what the rest of this is about, with comments amplified somewhat for the sake of readers who live, work, and serve outside the purview of the ELCA.

I like Bishop Eaton a lot. Others in my synod of 180 or so congregations like her too. That was demonstrated vividly two-and-a-half months ago when she cruised to reelection for a second full term as our bishop here. I was by no means the only person who spent much of Wednesday ruing the thought of losing her.

Why those others appreciate her so well I can only guess. Her wit, perhaps. Her skill as a speaker and her ease in front of a crowd. I assume that many would offer thoughts about her strength, her fairness, her willingness to grasp the nettle that screams for attention, and to deal with it decisively and effectively. I applaud her gracious grit. The past four years have been especially tough on ELCA synod bishops. Theirs is the face of the ELCA at the local level, and in that capacity they've had to meet time and again with people aggrieved and angered by the decisions of the 2009 assembly that opened the church's clergy roster to partnered gay and lesbian pastors. Bishop Eaton has caught as much of this flak as anyone. She has handled it kindly yet firmly. She has also bent over backwards to underscore that the decisions of 2009 call chiefly for mutual respect among those who disagree on the matters at issue; and in her dealings with the aggrieved she has modeled that respect. I wish I could say that this has been noticed, acknowledged, and appreciated to the extent it should have been, but it has not. As elsewhere, congregations and pastors have peeled off, in some cases leaving their erstwhile bishop on the receiving end of sins against the eighth commandment. She has suffered some sharp sorrow, I should think.

These things aside, what I've valued most about Bishop Eaton is her rock-solid integrity as a Lutheran pastor and bishop. She knows her confessional stuff, she puts it to work, and she's not the least bit shy about pushing others to do the same. When she preaches I hear the Gospel. I don't mean that I hear the word

“gospel” bandied about mantra-like, as if everyone knows what the word signifies and will somehow be blessed and fed if you repeat it often enough. That’s been the fashion of too much official preaching over the course of the ELCA’s brief twenty-five-year history, or so it seems to me. Bishop Eaton, by contrast, doesn’t say “gospel,” she preaches Gospel; that is, she points to the Son of God hanging on a cross and tells you why that’s good for you. That’s why I suggested her last week as the preacher for the Tuesday evening eucharist at next January’s Crossings conference; and when others on the planning committee urged me to extend an invitation, I did so. There was joy all around when she accepted. Whether that arrangement still stands, who can say?

Was this Gospel-preaching gift of gifts the reason for her election on Wednesday? In small part, perhaps; though what I continue to sense of the small “s” spirit that animates the ELCA leaves me guessing that her identity as a woman mattered much more to many of the people who voted for her. So be it. Before they know it, they’ll find themselves strangely blessed by something they didn’t bargain for, a presiding bishop whose stewardship of the office will leave us all wondering why anybody paid attention to the male/female thing in the first place, or would ever do so again. Have all of us in Northeastern Ohio learned that lesson over the past six and half years? If not, we’re slow learners. We’re bound to find out more about that in a couple of months when there’s a special election to fill the yawning void here.

As for others in the ELCA, if they keep their ears open they’ll soon discover that they finally have a pastor-in-chief who treasures the distinction between Law and Gospel and the contribution this makes to the ongoing mission of Christ in the world. Those who listened carefully to Bishop Eaton on Wednesday will have already picked this up. Could this be why they chose

her over the other candidates? I'd sure like to think so. Saying this, I'll also dare to think that the Holy Spirit has used the aforementioned small "s" spirit—in the ELCA's case, a persistent yen to mirror values of that part of the wider culture deemed progressive—to pull off a coup and get the ELCA on the track where it belongs, at least where the bishop's office is concerned. It would hardly be the first time that God has pulled a fast one on the Zeitgeist and all the other powers and principalities out there. Fast ones, come to think of it, are one of God's delicious specialties. So says St. Paul, among others, and he says it more than once.

Final word to those in the Crossings community who belong to the ELCA, and to anyone else who cares about faithful and joyful confession in the Church: take it for granted that your new bishop has your backs. Thank God for her. Pray for her. Honor her in the fidelity of your own confessing for the sake of the Church. And may the grace of God sustain us all.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

Addendum:

In the bag of yesterday's email was the following report by a member of the Pittsburgh assembly. Jim Lillie is his name. I don't know him. His report got to me by the usual forwarding route. I backtracked through that and got his permission to share the report with all of you. I think you'll appreciate his first-hand account of what he witnessed on Wednesday. –JB

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, bishop of the ELCA Northeastern Ohio Synod, was elected Presiding Bishop of the ELCA at the 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly on August 14, 2013.

When I was appointed to be a Voting Member of the 2013 Churchwide Assembly, I looked over the agenda and thought that it would be a calm meeting. The only major actions were a Social Statement on Criminal Justice and the election of our Presiding Bishop. The Social Statement looked to be noncontroversial, and Presiding Bishop Hanson was running for re-election, and I was sure that he would be re-elected. The Social Statement has yet to be voted on, but the election of Presiding Bishop took me very much by surprise.

Using a process called Ecclesiastical Election, many people were nominated on the first ballot. However, the second ballot brought a surprise, with Bishop Hanson receiving fewer votes than on the first ballot, and several female Bishops receiving many votes.

Before the third ballot, each of the top seven candidates was given the opportunity to answer several questions. Three of the top seven chose not to stay in the race, and three of the remaining four candidates were female Bishops. The turn of events caused me to reexamine my vote. The female candidates seemed to be bringing a fresh attitude to the office of Presiding Bishop. The fourth ballot left just two candidates, Bishop Mark Hanson and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.

The two candidates were again asked questions and given an opportunity to speak to the Assembly. Again, I was impressed by the attitudes, opinions, and plans expressed by Bishop Eaton.

The fifth and final ballot overwhelmingly elected Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA.

The process of discernment for us Voting Members was a difficult, surprising, and exhausting one. We all felt very strongly that we were shaping the immediate future of the ELCA. I believe that all of us took our roles in the election totally

seriously. We also knew that we would be breaking new ground in church governance by electing a female Presiding Bishop.

I believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us in many different ways, sometimes in spreadsheets, occasionally in visions, and often in such mundane things as elections. I seriously felt the power of something greater than the 950 of us assembled in the hall as we listened to the candidates and cast our ballots. The theme of this Churchwide Assembly is "Always being made New." I believe that the ELCA is, indeed, in the process of "being made new."