

Report on the 2016 Synod Assembly By Philip Jenks

On Thursday, Friday and Saturday this week, Pastor Jim, Dick Case, and I had the honor of representing this congregation at the 2016 Metropolitan New York Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

I may have been the newest Lutheran there. I had been attending Baptist and ecumenical assemblies for nearly 40 years, and after most of them I had to write a press summary of the meeting. Pastor Jim must have sensed my confusion that this would not be required after adjournment yesterday, so he asked me to prepare a brief report to you. I invite Jim and Dick to add any items I might miss.

More than 400 clergy, laypersons, staff, and visitors attended the assembly in Melville, Long Island, under the theme of *Confronting Racism: Connection, Commitment, Courage*. The scripture basis for the meeting was Ephesians 2:14, Paul's call for reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile Christians: "*For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*"

The need to confront racism has been a concern of our national presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton. In a recent online message to the church, she noted that only 1.9 percent of the ELCA nationally is African American. "It is time to make a change," she said. Bishop Eaton was not at the meeting this weekend, but her concerns were expressed. In a video, she expressed her pain that two of the victims of the shooting in Charleston's "Mother Emanuel" AME church had Lutheran school connections, and that the alleged shooter – Dylann Roof – was Lutheran. Of course, that was merely a bizarre coincidence, but it suggested a need to intensify the conversations among Lutherans on the issue of race.

The meeting was presided over by Synod Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo, a tall, smiling, white-haired man who looks like a casting director's image of white male bishops. But Bishop Rimbo worked hard to facilitate the discussion on confronting racism.

One of the statements passed by the delegates was entitled, “African Descent Lutheran Lives Matter” which called for “acknowledging the Lutheran church’s complicity in the 400+ years of slavery and oppression of other marginalized groups ... and that the ELCA has perpetuated racism and discrimination through attitudes, actions, policies and practices these communities still endure.” The statement was endorsed by a vote of 242 to 20.

The keynote speaker – or preaching theologian -was Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, an Episcopal priest, professor of religion at Goucher College, and Canon Theologian of the Washington National Cathedral.

Dr. Douglas cited the frequency of the shooting of unarmed African American males by white cops and said the shootings and other episodes of white on black violence were made inevitable by the “Stand Your Ground” laws in Florida and elsewhere. She said laws that justify the killing of anyone who appears threatening leads to tragedy in a culture where slavery remains entrenched in the genetic memory of the nation, and where too many whites that regard black males as “always guilty of something.”

But Jesus’ death on the cross showed his solidarity with victims and society’s oppressed peoples, she said. The church has “moral accountability to the past” when it was a participant in the oppression of persons of color.

Not all delegates were comfortable with Dr. Douglas’s analysis, but it seemed to me she spoke prophetically.

“As people of God,” she said, “we must demand changes at the source. To do anything else is to be complicit with those who cry out, ‘Crucify Him, Crucify Him.’ Real change starts from the bottom up, and churches must lead the way by having difficult conversations about race.”

Providing a context for these sometimes difficult conversations were frequent interludes of worship and daily Eucharist. The musical group “Glocal” led the delegates in singing songs of many languages and cultures, and when we swayed to triumphant tones of “Eyes on

the Prize,” I could close my eyes and believe I was back in a Baptist meeting. I was grateful for the worship, because it is the heart and soul of the church, and makes it possible to open our hearts and minds to one another in the midst of difficult discussions.

What is the future of the ELCA, and will the time come when it is more inclusive of different races and backgrounds? For some, it’s an impossible dream.

But Kelly Brown Douglas told us of a conversation she had with the son of Cecil Gaines, an African American who worked as butler at the White House for decades (whose life was told in the movie, *The Butler*).

Gaines said he sat next to his father at the 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama and he asked his father, “Did you ever dream you would see the inauguration of a black president?”

Mr. Gaines replied, “I didn’t even dream I could have such a dream.”

But among the reflections of the 2016 Assembly of the Metropolitan New York ELCA is that God enables us to dream impossible dreams, including that of a completely inclusive beloved community. And it begins with connection, commitment, courage, and the willingness to have the difficult discussions that lead to change.

Thanks, church, for the honor of being one of your delegates to this challenging assembly.