



North Carolina Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Contact: Bob Shoffner, Communications Coordinator

North Carolina Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

704-633-4861

rshoffner@nclutheran.org

AMEZ, ELCA members continue conversation at Summit Weekend

HICKORY - Members of two Christian denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), got to know one another better during a Summit Weekend, held September 16-17 in Salisbury. The weekend began with a covenant service Friday evening at St. John's Lutheran Church Bishop George W.C. Walker Sr., the AMEZ's senior bishop, as preacher, and Bishop Mark S. Hanson, the ELCA's presiding bishop as celebrant. The summit continued at Hood Seminary on Saturday.

In his sermon, Walker exhorted the congregation to wake up and arise as one church to focus on the problems affecting society today. In Saturday's daylong meeting, bishops from both denominations spoke about:

- Who are we?
- What do we believe?
- What makes us unique?
- Where do we go from here?

Who are we?

Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton of the ELCA's Northeastern Ohio Synod gave an overview of the Lutheran church's history, including the 1988 merger which gave birth to the ELCA.

"No Lutheran ever thought of America as the new Jerusalem," she said. "No country is can be considered the kingdom of God."

Noting that the Lutheran church also upholds its sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, she said, "'Lutheran' is a place where people can get over themselves and be freed to serve their neighbors."

Eaton added that although the Lutheran church is overwhelmingly white, church basements are beginning to be filled with the smells of greens, tortillas, fried rice, and goat, as the denomination is being enriched by the influx of immigrants.

Bishop Dennis V. Proctor of the AMEZ's Western Episcopal District noted his denomination's "tenacious resolve" to form a place of worship.

The AME Zion church was born when the leaders voted themselves out of the White Methodist Episcopal Church in 1820.

Black worshippers have upheld their Methodist and Episcopal traditions over the years. It is very much a church of ritual, he said, and it is known as the "Freedom Church."

"From the beginning, Zion has been at the forefront of the perpetual march for human freedom, dignity and equality," Proctor said. He added, "These talks today, although new to us, follow in the legacy and lifestyle of the people called Zion."

What do we believe?

The Rev. Donald McCoid, the ELCA's executive for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, emphasized that Lutheran theology is centered in grace.

"We are justified by God's grace, not our behavior," he said. "Lutherans have much to learn from AMEZ about on sanctification, what God does in us through the Holy Spirit."

Lutherans, he said, read scripture through the lens of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, and believe in the catholic (universal) church.

"We strive for unity so that our witness to the world will be more effective," he said. "It does feel good to join hands with people of common belief. It is so important for us to see what is a part of our traditions so we can move forward."

Bishop Darryl B. Starnes Sr. of the AMEZ's Southwestern Delta Episcopal District said that the AME Zion church owes much to Luther and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

"Much of what we believe comes from Methodist doctrine," he said. "Scripture is the ultimate authority for our faith and practice."

For the AME Zion church, belief in scripture is followed by tradition, reason and experience. The church has summarized its beliefs through its 25 Articles of Religion.

Starnes also said that faith and repentance are like two sides of the same coin, both being integral parts of the Christian life.

What makes us unique?

In talking about what made their two denominations unique, different from one another, the bishops explained their respective churches' structures, their call process for pastors, the ordination process, and the authority of their bishops.

"We are not a rich church," said Bishop Warren M. Brown of the AMEZ's Mid-Atlantic II Episcopal District. "We don't have a lot of foundation money, but I think we've done an outstanding job of spreading the gospel with what we have."

The AME Zion church, Brown said, has a worldwide presence with both domestic and international areas in most of the bishops' districts.

"We are driven by a desire to share the gospel wherever possible," Brown said. "Since 1796, we have sought to spread the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ and will not abandon this calling."

Bishop Herman Yoos of the ELCA's South Carolina Synod explained the process whereby the Lutheran church calls its pastors to ministry, how conflicts are resolved, and how the church is involved in mission in the world.

Where do we go from here?

The most important question of the weekend was, of course, where do the two denominations go together?

"This conversation needs to be spread to members of both denominations," said Bishop Kenneth Monroe of the AMEZ's South Atlantic Episcopal District, to take the mission "to the pews and pulpits."

The most obvious answer to "Where do we go from here?" is simply "home," said Bishop Wayne Miller of the ELCA's Metro Chicago Synod. The real questions, he said, are "Will the person who goes home be the same as the person who came and will the churches who now descend from this summit today be transfigured in some noticeable way?"

Miller said that Bishop Walker in his Friday night sermon had given both groups a call to action. "Action begins with learning to live 'awake,' knowing in our bones that it is too late to sleep."

The AMEZ-ELCA Summit weekend came about as the result of a mutual statement of mission adopted and affirmed in the past year this year by the AMEZ Council of Bishops and the ELCA Conference of Bishops. The document is thought to be the first of its kind between a historically black church and a historically white church.

"This is a primary relationship for us," ELCA Bishop Hanson said. "This has been a very important relationship to us. We fear that unity means uniformity and that diversity means division but here we have experienced unity in our diversity."

Proctor agreed. “There are many divisions in our country,” he said. “But these dialogues are so helpful. We have learned so much in our dialogue today.”

“God has been right in the middle of our conversations,” Yoos said.

Bishop Monroe concluded, “We know need to include our congregations and denominational offices in this conversation before we can full discern where we go from here.

The AME Zion Church (<http://www.amez.org/news/index.php>) has over 1 million members worldwide, with headquarters in Charlotte. The ELCA (www.elca.org) has approximately 10,000 congregations, over 200 of which are in the North Carolina Synod (www.nclutheran.org), with headquarters in Chicago.