

MEET THE NEW PRESIDING BISHOP

by Judy Hoshek

The Rev. Elizabeth Eaton faced 50 people from a congregation considering leaving the ELCA because of disagreements about church policy regarding gay and lesbian clergy. Their questions and comments expressed defiance, accusation, and skepticism. Eaton, at the time the bishop of the Northeastern Ohio Synod and now the ELCA's presiding bishop, responded calmly, with patience, quoting Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

In 2009, the churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) voted to open the ministry of the church to gay and lesbian pastors and other professional workers living in committed relationships. Eaton offered her understanding of the issues and events raised by the congregation. Throughout the hour-long meeting, she threaded her responses with good humor—a spirit not always shared by the others gathered there.

The congregation had been given materials that accused the ELCA, its leaders, and its policies of heresies. Bishop Eaton continued to smile and address the questioners as “ma’am” or “sir” while stalwartly trying to avoid being defensive. This was one of 69 similar congregational and council meetings she attended during her last years as bishop of Northeastern Ohio.

“Sometimes it feels like the scene in ‘Beauty and the Beast’ where the villagers come up over the hill with torches and pitchforks,” she said. Like the beast, she has



avoided being set on fire. But how does she prepare herself for these encounters?

“Before I enter the room, I whisper a prayer, usually, ‘God, help me,’ then I go into a zone.”

Setting guideposts

Eaton was elected to a six-year term as bishop of Northeastern Ohio Synod in 2007. She was re-elected in June 2013 to a second six-year term. But that term was cut short when, at the August 2013 churchwide assembly in Pittsburgh, Pa., she was elected presiding bishop of the ELCA.

“With God all things are possible,” she wrote to the people in her synod following the assembly. “Well, it turns out with God anything *is* possible.”

Her staff will tell you she is apt to burst into song, in the middle of a meeting or while walking down the hall. Usually a show tune, but sometimes the theme song of “The Jetsons” or “The Patty Duke Show.”

Asked to give one word that describes her, staff members offer: tenacious, passionate, unforgettable, quick-witted, engaging, Christ-centered, serendipitous. Asked for a word that captures what it’s been like to serve with her for six years, they say: grace-filled, joyful, supportive, inspirational, passionate, hopeful, kinetic, faithful.

During her tenure as synod bishop she has emphasized several initiatives. These guideposts have helped focus her ministry as bishop:

- Every congregation is a mission station. “If not, why are you here?”
- We must be authentically Lutheran. “The cross is the reason for the ‘hope that is within us.’ God’s love

for us in Jesus Christ is our message and our impetus for reaching out to the world God so loves.”

- All aspects of our worship experience must be excellent. “From the grounds that surround us as we walk to the door of the church, to the welcoming of the ushers and the greeters, to the way the readers deliver the day’s readings, to the music that surrounds and strengthens our worship.”
- Leadership must be faithful, fervent, and focused so that our mission and ministry may thrive.
- We’re all in this together. “We can’t be pixelated points on a screen. We need to cooperate so that together we can paint a picture that communicates God’s love for the world in Jesus Christ.”

Eaton helped create and guide the synod’s “Journey Forward” process as its way of expressing the ELCA’s “Living into the Future Together” initiative. She knows that a congregation’s natural instinct is to go it alone. “Our congregations are made up of human beings after all,” she acknowledges.

Church today can be challenging, overwhelming, and frightening. But Eaton is convinced it can be exciting and exhilarating, especially for congregations that listen to the Holy Spirit, each other, and their communities.

Preparing by experiences

When Eaton wants to decompress in the middle of a hectic day, she can be heard playing her flute in the chapel of the synod offices. She says she’s disappointed that the hymn “O Christ, the Same” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW 760) is no longer played to the tune of *Londonderry Air*, and she’ll be more than happy to tell you why.

Her staff frequently scolds her for not staying put at lunchtime, for walking around rather than eating and socializing during the lunch hour. She often jumps on the treadmill in the secretaries’ space, running several miles. She finishes, dripping in perspiration, then show-



ers in the janitor's closet where she has rigged a hose to the spigot in the slop sink. At the churchwide office, she'll have a private shower, but as this article goes to print, it is unknown whether she'll have a treadmill. Eaton has run half-marathons, and in June 2013, she participated in a "hell run," which involved a fast dip in Lake Erie, hurdling obstacles, encountering barbed wire, scaling walls, and an immersion in mud.

Asked, "Do you think the hell run prepared you to face angry congregations?" she answers, "I think those experiences prepared me for the hell run."

Keeping promises

During her three decades in the church, Eaton has inspired and influenced women to follow a path to ministry, as associates in ministry, as deaconesses, as diaconal ministers, and as baptized laypeople.

As for her own ministry, she was asked, "Will you love, serve, and pray for God's people?" when she was installed as pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, Ashtabula, Ohio, then as bishop of the synod, and finally as presiding bishop of the ELCA.

"I will and I ask God to help me," she responded each time.

And she does minister, wherever she goes. During a trip to the emergency room of an Akron, Ohio, hospital (which turned out just fine), she asked the nurse, the technician, and the doctor if they went to church. She was delighted when two of them said they did. She informed the one who didn't where the nearest ELCA congregation was.

The likelihood that she will keep her promise "to love, serve, and pray for God's people" is high as she enters her service as presiding bishop of the ELCA.

On a beautiful autumn afternoon last October, Faith Lutheran Church, Fairlawn, Ohio held a reception for Eaton. A couple of hundred people stood in a long line to wish her well and thank her for her faithful, lively service as synod bishop.

They acknowledged they were sad to lose her as their bishop, and, yes, they've heard the response: "But the ELCA will be blessed as she serves as presiding bishop." They understand and agree, but that doesn't ease the fact that they will lose proximity to their witty, theologically astute shepherd.

Following the reception the people gathered in the sanctuary for Evening Prayer. At the conclusion of the service as the assembly sang, "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" (*ELW* 750), Bishop Eaton removed the pectoral cross she wore as synod bishop and laid it on the altar. It now rests in the synod's Christ Chapel where people visit and pray for discernment before the election of the next Northeastern Ohio Synod bishop.

Verse two of her favorite hymn, "Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song" (*ELW* 808), says, "Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey. I'll tell everybody about you wherever I go. May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song. Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey."

She hopes that the 3.9 million members of the ELCA will join her in that chorus of praise as she assumes her new office and this next leg of her journey with a community and family that support her.

Eaton is married to the Rev. Conrad Selnick, an Episcopal priest. They are parents of two adult daughters, Susannah of Cleveland, and Rebekah (and her husband Michael Ray) who live in Chicago. Eaton and Selnick share their home with a dog, ferrets, and a cat, which they found as an unweaned kitten and nursed until she recovered. Now she "more than thrives, and even rules." Eaton is a fan of Cleveland sports teams and says that her loyalties will not waver. She is a deft mimic of celebrities, of her family, of people she encounters in her duties as bishop. So watch out. 🌿

Judy Hoshek serves as an assistant to the bishop in the Northeastern Ohio Synod of the ELCA. She received her training as a deaconess from the Lutheran Deaconess Association and is delighted to be a member of its class of 1971.

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