**Convention funding a challenge**

**by Elizabeth Hunter**

If every woman gave 33 cents a day or about $120 a year to the organization, Women of the ELCA could more than meet its budget for conventions, regular ministries and resources that women love, Ely Smith, treasurer, told the Women of the ELCA churchwide executive board at its spring meeting. The board met at the Doubletree Hilton in Arlington Heights, Illinois, April 20-22.

Smith said that offerings to the churchwide organization continue to show a decrease, although the organization’s goal for regular offerings has not changed. Regular offerings and Thankofferings have been declining for at least the last 15 years. Regular offerings are those collected in congregational units that benefit the unit, the synodical organization and the churchwide organization.

Coping with challenges around decreased giving was a constant theme during the meeting, with much time spent discussing how best to continue funding the constitutionally-required triennial convention, which costs the churchwide organization nearly $900,000 every three years. Although triennial gathering costs are covered by registration fees, exhibits and sponsors, triennial convention expenses come out of the churchwide organization budget.

When Dinah Dutta, board member from Lawrence, Kansas, asked for a breakdown of those costs, staff listed expenses of housing, travel, food, production, video, printing and postage.

“Every year, the organization has tried to budget [to put aside] an additional $300,000 to hold the triennial event, but sufficient offerings have not come in,” executive director Linda Post Bushkofsky said. “Notwithstanding the financial challenges, everything else is in good order for the triennial convention.”

Bylaws of the churchwide organization of Women of the ELCA require the churchwide organization cover the cost of the convention, Post Bushkofsky said. Any change to that obligation would need to be made consistent with the constitution’s provisions for amending bylaws.

To cover the costs of the Tenth Triennial Convention (2017), the board voted to approve the use of $571,410 from the New Ministries Fund, which has a balance of $1,090,000. Although this allocation was first recommended by the budget and finance committee in October 2016, the action was tabled until 2016 financials were complete. The balance needed to cover the costs of the triennial convention will come from the Eshleman Fund, an action taken by the executive board at its October 2016 meeting.

Board members also discussed alternate ways to pay for the convention. Reporting on the work of the budget and finance committee, Deborah Banks Williams, board member from Chicago, Illinois, said: “We talked about moving the convention to a college campus to save money there. We talked about proposing a change to the constitution where synodical women’s organizations are required to either contribute to the expense of triennial conventions or pick up the travel costs for their voting members.”

“We need to take care of this now,” said Dawn Smith, board member from Midland, Michigan, underscoring the urgency.

“When you’re talking money, there are always two options: to increase income or to decrease expenses,” said Post Bushkofsky. A primary way of decreasing expenses in the annual budget of the organization, said Post Bushkofsky, would come by reducing staff. The organization had staff reductions in 2003 and 2009.

**Triennial gathering update**

So far 2,398 participants have registered for the Tenth Triennial Gathering (2017), including 914 first-time attendees. By comparison, there were 700 first-time attendees at the 2014 triennial gathering in Charlotte, N.C.

Gabriela Contreras, director for meeting planning, told the board that registration had surpassed the goal of 1,650 full-paying participants and hotels are nearly sold out.

Highlights include mid-day organ recitals on Friday and Saturday, as well as evening and morning prayer at nearby Central Lutheran Church. Food trucks will be present in the parking lot at Central over the lunch hour on Friday and Saturday. Two documentaries will be screened, *The Beauty of Our Dreams* by Diva Communications, examining education of girls, and *Dream Catchers*, a documentary about a Chicago anti-trafficking effort. Women of the ELCA is also working with a full-communion partner, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, to run a bookstore at the gathering. Featured speakers and worship leaders were previously announced.

In other action, the board voted to:

* Ask the executive director to investigate ways to lower costs for future board meetings, including holding board meetings at retreat centers, rather than hotels.
* Authorize the executive director to pursue negotiations with Equal Exchange with the goal of bringing a formal agreement between the two organizations to the October 2017 board meeting. Equal Exchange asked Women of the ELCA to continue the fair-trade relationship with Equal Exchange, although Lutheran World Relief is amicably ending its relationship with Equal Exchange at the end of May. Relationships should continue with both organizations, Post Bushkofsky said. “I can’t envision a day when the women of our organization aren’t making quilts to send to Lutheran World Relief,” she added. “We’ll continue to do fair trade work with LWR as well. There’s no reason we can’t work with both organizations.”

Board members also heard reports about:

* The 2017 Conference of Synodical Presidents.
* The 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering to be held June 27-July 1, 2018, in Houston.
* ELCA Slovak Zion Synod Bishop Wilma Kucharek gave a report from the ELCA Conference of Bishops, on topics of concern across the church, including interreligious and ecumenical cooperation, the Centurions (from the story of the centurion in the Bible) work with federal chaplains.
* Lutheran Men in Mission.
* The fiscal year 2017 budget of $3,246,995, and the proposed budget for fiscal year 2018 to be sent to the Tenth Triennial Convention (2017).
* Gather, the magazine of Women of the ELCA, which is seeing increased subscriptions, as well as generous donations from subscribers—a previously untapped source.

The executive board’s next regular meeting is October 21-21, 2017, in Chicago, preceded by a day of orientation for the board that will be elected at the Tenth Triennial Convention (2017).

Elizabeth Hunter is editor for Gather magazine.