



July 28 – August 2
PHOENIX, ARIZONA



Report of the Vice President

Greetings! I'm Imran Siddiqui and I'm new. Well, as much as three years can be considered new, but this is my first report to the Churchwide Assembly as vice president of the ELCA (so be nice). I was elected at the last Churchwide Assembly, in Columbus, Ohio, in 2022. Since that Churchwide Assembly, things have been a bit of a whirlwind (hence the still "new" feeling). My first few months were occupied with getting up to speed on things while trying to wrap my head around what I had done. I purchased (and have had purchased for me) various books on *Robert's Rules of Order*, as that is what I had to learn to chair the meetings of the Church Council. And, of course, I engaged in lots and lots of prayer.

At the last Churchwide Assembly, I spoke constantly about listening to one another, and I have and will continue to do so. I truly believe that a church in which people listen to one another can be a model for how our society should live. So, I hope that we will be a church in which people listen to one another. Truly listen. Not listen just enough to make a counter point, but actually actively listen, hearing the other person's point of view. After all, how can we say that we love one another, as Jesus commanded, if we don't listen to one another? Right after my election, I was asked how I can merge my beloved consensus-based decision making, which is very listening based, with *Robert's Rules of Order*. My answer was (and remains) that I have no idea. But I have always felt the most important part of consensus was the conversation it promotes and the give and take it requires. I feel that if we are committed to listening to one another with all of our hearts, minds, and spirits, we will be more than halfway there.

In this journey I am especially grateful for all the help and assistance provided by Ms. Jodi Slattery, executive for governance, and Mr. Joseph Schmidt, her administrative assistant. They have treated all of my surely bafflingly obvious questions with grace and patience, and they have walked me through what I needed to know for the job. They helped mediate the fire hose of information that I received and prevented me from running for the hills before I even got started. They were and continue to be essential in helping me to do my job.

Some of you may be wondering, what is the job of the vice president of the ELCA? Well, the main work of the vice president is to chair meetings of the ELCA Church Council. The Church Council is made up of people from all around this church, lay and clergy. You will be electing half of the members of the Church Council this Churchwide Assembly. They will be responsible for carrying out the work approved by the Churchwide Assembly for the next three years. The Church Council meets twice a year in person at the Lutheran Center in Chicago, with an Executive Committee that meets electronically every month. The Church Council is filled with some of the most dedicated people in this church. I was in awe of all the work that was being done by people who felt called to volunteer their service in this way. I thank God for each of them and the work they do. I feel the Holy Spirit moving as we discuss, debate, and do our work—yes, even in the amendments to the amendments.

I am grateful for the example and the work of our presiding bishop, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, and secretary, Deacon Sue Rothmeyer. Both have decided not to allow their names to be put forward for another term in office. They leave very big shoes that will be hard to fill. I am glad that I was able to work with them for these last three years and wish them wonderful retirements.

Very early in my term, I realized the important, and often underappreciated work, of the staff of the churchwide organization. Three years ago, in his report to the Churchwide Assembly, Interim Vice President Carlos Peña referred to the churchwide staff as the "foundation supporting us all," and I could not agree with him more. I met so many people who are completely committed to the work of our church. These are folks who are dedicated to service to our God, our church, and sharing the gospel in all expressions of this church. We are beyond blessed to have them, and they have much to teach us. Many of them will be with us at the Churchwide Assembly, so go up and say, "Hi," and be kind!

Speaking of staff, I started bothering the Strategic Communications people (and they were very good sports to take a couple of Microsoft Teams meetings with me), talking about how we can leverage ELCA social media to share more widely the work the Church Council is doing. One of the challenges I see facing the churchwide expression of this church is telling the story of what we are doing. Folks in the pews don't know what is being done in the other expressions, and a lot of what is being done is incredibly exciting work that people simply don't know about. As part of those conversations, I ended up with an official Vice President of the ELCA Facebook page to facilitate engagement (always be careful of taking a meeting, as the folks involved may find additional work for you to do). It has led to pleasant surprises. Social media can be filled with pitfalls, but there are also people across this church who want to

engage and connect. There are people who are passionate about our church and our faith. Our people have made me realize that some of my harsh views of social media may have been somewhat premature. Real community can indeed develop on Facebook. Each week, on my page, I have asked a “Weekly Question,” a “Weekly Prayer Request,” and “Where Did You See God This Week?” The responses have surprised me (in a good way) and have taught me quite a bit. I see those weekly Facebook conversations as holy conversations and a community of faith.

Those of you who follow me on social media may know that since the 2022 Churchwide Assembly, my wife and I had another kid. You may remember that in 2022, I spoke about my son Asher (including how much he liked trains). Well, on May 3, 2023, we added to our family with Miriam. We have been pretty lucky that Asher and Miriam love each other, enjoy each other’s company, and make each other laugh. Earlier this year, Asher turned five and Miriam turned two. I am very much enjoying being the father of two young kids while I go through this journey as your vice president, and though I enjoy every trip I take on behalf of this church, the best part of every visit is coming back to the hugs of my wife and kids. I have also been grateful for the understanding shown by churchwide staff regarding the challenges of balancing this position with fatherhood, and not trying to overburden me with official travel (for example, in 2023, they took me off the synod assembly churchwide representative list so I could spend time with my newborn).

In addition to my push for greater communication between churchwide and this church’s other expressions, I have been very interested in the role of the laity in this church. At my first Conference of Bishops meeting, I spoke about how I feel that there is a systemic devaluation of lay leadership in the ELCA. Lay people may make up 60 percent of the voting membership of the Churchwide Assembly, but their voices are seen by many as less important than the voices of the 40 percent of rostered ministers (and among that 40 percent, deacons are drastically and systemically undervalued). In our congregations, we are taught that the pastor is the leader. This view is not only perpetuated by some ordained folks but also by lay people who have been instructed over time that this is the way congregations are supposed to work (and in the process, frustrating collaboratively minded pastors). Too many lay people have been taught that to have any real voice in our denomination a person needs to “go to seminary.” I do not have all the answers regarding how to reverse this impression. It is, after all, a systemic issue. I feel that it will require all of us working together to see where we can elevate lay leadership and where we have tended to suppress it. It requires all of us to look at our structures anew, find roadblocks, and remove them.

However, I think that an easy way to help rectify the situation is to honor and support synod vice presidents. The synod vice president is the highest-ranking lay leader in a synod. They chair the Synod Council, just as I chair the Church Council. In addition (also like me), they are volunteers in this role doing this work for the love of God and love for this church. I have often said that the 2018 Synod Vice President Gathering was instrumental in my development and growth as synod vice president of the Southeastern Synod, and I wouldn’t be in this role without it (whether that’s a good or bad thing is up to you to decide). At the gathering, I came a day early with the other new synod vice presidents for extra training. I am forever grateful for those vice presidents on the Planning Team who came early to teach us the ropes: Ms. Gwen Arneson, Mr. John Auger, Mr. Bryan Penvose, and Ms. Cheryl Stuart. All synod vice presidents stand on the shoulders of the giants who came before us, and I am no different.

Something that was very important to me was to formalize an Association of Synod Vice Presidents. I was lucky that, in 2018, the Southeastern Synod had some extra money that could be used to send me to Chicago for that gathering. During the last Synod Vice President Gathering in 2024, it was up to synods or the individual vice presidents to pay travel and registration costs to get to Chicago. While about 40 synod vice presidents were able to attend, we lamented that funding may have prevented other synod vice presidents from coming. Synod vice presidents also meet informally electronically every month, continuing a practice that started during the pandemic, to discuss important issues that affect each of our synods and how vice presidents navigate them. During that 2024 Synod Vice President Gathering, we were joined by co-chairs of the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church; they heard loud and clear that synod vice presidents wanted a more formal Association of Synod Vice Presidents, and that was one of their recommendations to the Church Council.

I am very happy to report that the Church Council, in a continuing resolution approved at the April 2025 meeting, approved the formation of an Association of Synod Vice Presidents and the process of electing the chair and vice chair of the association is underway. A formalization of this Association of Synod Vice Presidents is a small, but important, step to show that this church affirms lay leadership. I pray that this is just the beginning in our efforts. I pray that we listen more to our lay leaders.

I have been so happy to be able to meet with some of you in synod assemblies over the last couple of years (after a one-year break). I always loved going to synod assemblies. There is something powerful about seeing Lutherans from all over the synod getting together to do the business of this church and enjoying one another’s company, especially when you live in the southeastern United States. So, I was glad to travel across the country being a churchwide representative, seeing and talking to you. In 2024 and 2025, I have traveled to the Southeastern

Pennsylvania Synod, Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, New England Synod, Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, and Oregon Synod. I have attended virtual meetings of many other synods as well. Every meeting provided an opportunity for listening and hearing the wonderful things you all are doing in synods and congregations. I was blessed and honored to speak to each of you, and I pledge to continue to listen.

In addition, I attended the African Descent Lutheran Association Assembly in Atlanta and the Latiné Leadership Summit in Chicago, and I spoke remotely to the Asian Ministry Network of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod. In addition, I had multiple virtual meetings with the Asian American and Pacific Islander Ministries desk of the ELCA. I have enjoyed catching up with the presidents of the ethnic associations in the ELCA during Church Council meetings. Each time, I am reminded how our ethnic associations are an incredible asset to this church. They are vibrant communities that show the many different faithful ways to be Lutheran in our country. Too often, we do not listen and hear the important lessons they are teaching us. I intend to listen.

I have been honored to serve as a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The Central Committee serves as the chief governing body of the WCC between WCC assemblies, meeting every two years. It is responsible for carrying out the policies adopted by the WCC Assembly, reviewing and supervising WCC programs, and managing the budget of the WCC. I was able to attend the Central Committee meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2023 and Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2025. The Central Committee is made up of about 150 members from around the globe, representing over 350 different denominations and faith traditions. I am honored and blessed to be engaged in this ecumenical dialogue with our siblings in faith.

Coming back to the theme of listening, as we prepare for the Churchwide Assembly, too often I think we in this church get caught up in “efficiency,” “productivity,” “measurables,” and other buzz words, so much so that we do not stop to have open-ended conversations and take time to listen to one another. These conversations do not need to lead to a measurable result. There may be nothing to “report out” about them. They could end up feeling like a complete waste of time, but the mere act of listening and responding on whatever someone else wants to talk about (or yell about) seems to me to be a theological statement that the person matters. That person has equal human dignity because they are equally loved by God. In a world which seems to be moving away from those norms, there is something powerful about allowing that open-ended space. A result can be a holy conversation that could move in any number of directions and help people see the humanity in one another a bit more. Maybe that is worth a thousand “productive” meetings.

But perhaps we can do both in our time together. I once told the Church Council that I choose “naïve optimism” over the cynicism that too often seems pervasive in this church. I choose to believe that our decisions here matter. I choose to believe that we can achieve what we set as our goals, if we are serious about doing them, as long as we are serious about listening and loving one another as children of the Living God.

I give thanks to God and to all of you for being able and willing to serve as voting members of this assembly. I look forward to seeing each and every one of you.

Mr. Imran Siddiqui, *vice president, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*