

Bishop Election Process and Timeline

South Central Synod of Wisconsin, 2019-2020

This process has arisen from consideration by the Bishop Election Task Force, the Synod Council and Executive Committee, and was originally drafted by Interim Bishop Peter Rogness. Over time, as it was reviewed and discussed, changes were made. It has been reviewed and affirmed by staff at the Office of the Presiding Bishop; it has been presented verbally to the Bishop's Convocation October 6-8, verbally and in writing at the November 2, 2019, special Synod Assembly. It was formally adopted as presented here at the November 9, 2019 meeting of the Synod Council.

The focal elements of the process are as follows:

- Lay a foundation based on careful and broad input from around the synod, a foundation that describes the synod and develops a profile for the bishop being sought.
- Invite participation at the Conference level for careful consideration of possible nominees for bishop.
- Charge a Bishop Call Committee with responsibility for conducting interviews, background and reference checks on proposed candidates, forwarding a slate of 4-6 candidates for the synod's consideration and election.

Timeline and description of the Process:

1. October – December – Bishop Rogness holds informal conversations with rostered leaders at Conference gatherings.
2. January 1 – February 15 – **6 Town Hall Meetings** – for rostered leaders and Assembly Voting Members (either '19 or '20) – These will be structured, 90-minute gatherings for (a) gathering input describing the strengths, challenges, hopes, issues that best describe our synod at this time, and (b) building a profile describing the needs we have in the person to be elected bishop of the synod. (Questions to be posed in this structured process may be sent in to Bishop Rogness between November 10 and December 10)
3. February 15-20 – summary of the Town Hall meetings and resulting **"Bishop Profile"** produced and distributed
4. February 20 – March 10 – **Conference Nomination Caucuses** are held. Participants are rostered leaders and lay voting members of the 2020 Synod Assemblies (or '19, if you haven't selected 2020 voting members yet). Each Conference may identify up to five persons¹ for consideration for nomination as bishop.
5. March 10 – April 24 – The **Bishop Call Committee** receives and researches the names coming from the Conference Nomination Caucuses. It may receive information, conduct interviews, do background and reference checks. It is charged with bringing forward 4-6 nominees for consideration by the synod for election as bishop.
6. **May 1-2 Synod Assembly** – the Nominees are introduced to the gathered Assembly.
7. May 2 – June 20 – (3) Forums are held involving nominees.
8. **June 20** – the members of the Synod Assembly reconvene for the **Election of the Bishop**.

¹ Nominees for bishop must be on the roster of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA. They need not be from that conference, or from this synod.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are we making changes to the process of electing a bishop? It's not the first time. For the first several elections, there was no pre-work at all, only a nominating ballot at the assembly. Later we followed what a number of other synods had done, which was to identify nominees beforehand and hold forums for those willing to be in the election. We continue to seek improvement.

Are the changes at this time because of our track record? Yes and no. Many synods tinker with changes to the process. In our case, we recognize that only two of our six bishops have left office at the conclusion of a term. There's no one single reason, but it does suggest we could make changes that would allow for more thought and consideration to candidates prior to the election.

So what are the key differences being introduced this year? There are several:

1. Town Hall meetings will draw on broad input from around the synod to describe the synod and what we need in the person elected to be the bishop. We'll develop a "bishop profile," that should guide our thinking about who best could serve.
2. Conferences will be asked to convene and discuss possible nominees. Names may still be put forward by individual persons or congregations, but would need to be supported by a conference to be sent on further into the process.
3. A Bishop Call Committee will do the work similar to a Congregational Call Committee – gather personal and background information, do interviews, and pass on to the synod as a whole 4-6 names of persons they consider the best fit for the synod's needs. By the time nominees are presented to the synod assembly, there will have been thorough vetting and support.

Who will be on the Bishop Call Committee? The members of this committee will be appointed by the Synod Council in January. It will be separate from the existing Bishop Election Task Force, which deals only with the process. Deans are invited to suggest persons to serve by December 10.

Isn't every synod supposed to use an "ecclesiastical ballot?" The model constitution for synods describes an election process via the "ecclesiastical ballot," which means the first ballot is a nominating ballot. But it is not a required provision, and the constitution of the South Central Synod of Wisconsin says "The Synod Council shall be responsible for determining the process to be used in the election of a bishop." (S9.04.01)

Have other synods used a process like this? Yes. To cite some neighbors: the Lacrosse Area Synod begins the process by involving assembly voting members at a "conference nominating caucus," that raises up nominees; no further nominations are allowed at the Synod Assembly. Northeast Iowa elected its current bishop using a Synod Call Committee that gathered nominations, did work similar to what we propose, and forwarded five names to their assembly. In recent elections, both Northwest Washington and Eastern Washington-Idaho synods had a pre-nomination process and no floor nominations. These are only a few examples.

Doesn't this call for much more involvement by people throughout the synod? Yes. Especially if you are a rostered leader or a lay member identified as a voting member of the synod assembly. You should plan on participating in (a) a Town Hall meeting; (b) a Conference Nominating Caucus; (c) two synod assemblies (the regular May 1-2 Assembly, and the one-day June 20 election assembly); and (d) a forum in your area to become familiar with nominees.