That “the church” is much more expansive than each individual congregation was highlighted over and over at the 2015 Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly that took place in Salt Lake City, May 1-3.

“Our form and structures may change, the extent of our actual usefulness to God may wax and wane. But that God can and does work in and through us—this is a promise,” said Bishop Jim Gonia, addressing the assembly.

The assembly was privileged to welcome ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton as the featured guest. She shared insights with the assembly regarding the ELCA’s ecumenical life together and its global reach.

“[Martin] Luther never planned to divide the body of Christ—to start a new denomination,” Eaton said. “The Lutheran Confessions set a ‘low bar,’ naming only proclamation of the gospel and celebration of the sacraments as requirements for other denominations to be considered for ecumenical relationships.”

The assembly also welcomed Elder Von G. Keetch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ First Quorum of the Seventy. In dialogue with Gonia, they spoke on the role of “mission” in each tradition.

Noting that the word “mission” never appears in the Bible or the Book of Mormon, Keetch said it is what unites Mormons together. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a fourfold mission: to perfect the saints, proclaim the gospel, redeem the dead, and care for the poor and needy.

While there are are major differences in theology and tradition between the two church bodies, Lutherans join Mormons in their focus on Jesus’ new commandment to “love one another even as I have loved you.” Gonia said it’s the church that carries out God’s mission in the world.

The assembly was invited to be in conversation with those who share different perspectives and beliefs, beginning at the place of what we share in common.

“I believe with all my heart that God uses us best when, as congregations, as ministries, as a synod and as a national and global church, we live together from the promise and conviction that we are always Jesus’ church better together,” Gonia said. □
We together sing God’s song for the sake of the world

An excerpt from Bishop Jim Gonia’s assembly sermon, May 3, in Salt Lake City

This last year we have been centered on “Our Life Together,” asking what it means to be called into intentional community with one another as church, and then what it means to live as neighbors with the rest of God’s beloved in this world.

A subtheme of “Our Life Together” has been the reminder that as church, we are wired for connectivity and relationship. As church, we are “Better Together!”

As we move into another year of being church, better together, our theme will now focus us on the importance of vocation—learning to find our voice, not only as individuals but as communities of faith.

It will be a theme with a musical motif: “Many Voices, One Song”—reflecting the fact that God’s love is a song for the world, whose melody is Jesus and whose rhythm is the Spirit. This love song relies on the rich and diverse harmonies provided by each of our unique voices as we reflect on our vocation as the people of God.

In our day-to-day world, vocation has become associated with finding the right career, but the original idea of vocatio is specific to the Christian life. It is rooted in our belief that God has created each and every person with gifts and talents that draw us toward specific purposes and point us to a particular way of living.

Our Christian vocation isn’t limited to one aspect of our life. It includes the gifts and voice summoned forth from us for the sake of our professions, our families, our life in relationship, our care of creation, our spiritual journey, to name a few.

It’s not possible to separate the theme of vocation from that of our life together. These themes go in necessary tandem. The particularity of your voice or mine only matters when it is joined to that of all others for the sake of God’s “One Song.”

At the same time, it’s only in our life together that you and I discover the uniqueness of our voices. You can’t find vocatio in isolation—it takes the perspective of community to figure out what is being summoned forth from you for the sake of the whole. Which means that everyone within our life together—not just those we prefer or like—all are needed for us to discover and claim our vocatio.

Beloved church: God’s ongoing song of creation, whose melody is Jesus and whose rhythm is the Spirit, this holy and divine song that is sung through your voice and mine, this song makes things happen. From this one song fruits blossom—God’s reign enters—forgiveness and hope and life are born anew. The world and everything in it is transformed. If that’s not incentive for some shared vocational discernment, for finding and claiming our voices together, I don’t know what is!

Of course, no voice can sing the one song without some nourishment. Here at this table we bring our voices to the One who feeds us for and by our life together. Here we are tuned back in to the melody that is at the heart of our song.

Here, we have a chance to practice our parts in chorus with the saints of all time and all places. And from here, we are sent to make beautiful music—many voices, one song—for the sake of God’s beautiful, broken and beloved world.
Assembly business

Election results

2016 Churchwide Assembly
The Rev. Jerry Reynolds
Kayla Aspeslaugh
Bob Erickson
The Rev. Tim Orlowski
Marti Weber
Richard Burk
The Rev. Emily Ewing
The Rev. Alena Lamirato
Laura Carson
Carlene Goldthwaite
The Rev. Gabi Aelabouni
Miguel Hernandez
Hannah Purkey
Peter Severson

Secretary
Jody Brammer-Hoelter

Consultation Committee
Carlene Goldthwaite

Campus Ministry
April Flanigan
Andrew Lubansky
The Rev. Brigette Weier

Congregation & Leadership Health
The Rev. Michael Tassler
The Rev. Karen Thompson
Andrea West

Assembly resolutions & memorials

• Addressing Mental Health and Wellness: Expresses love and concern for all people struggling with mental health conditions, urges education and compassion, and calls for a task force to address mental health and wellness in our congregations and communities.

• Making U.S. Aid to the State of Israel Contingent on Halt to Settlement Construction: Urges Congress to make future U.S. aid to Israel contingent on Israel’s halt to all settlement-building in the West Bank; calls on members of the synod’s congregations to contact their congressional representatives and senators, asking them to apply this condition to future U.S. aid to Israel.

• Called to Set the Captives Free: A Call to Increased Awareness and Action to Confront the Practice of Human Trafficking: Calls for education and advocacy, formation of partnerships with local agencies, and creation of a synod task force on the issue of human trafficking.

One memorial to the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly was adopted.

• Designating Lay Rostered Voting Members for Churchwide Assemblies: Calls for amending the ELCA governing documents to designate that voting members at synod and churchwide assemblies be made up of at least 60 percent non-rostered lay members. The remaining voting members are to be leaders drawn from all four ministry rosters of the ELCA, reflective of the current ratio of ordained, consecrated and commissioned leaders of that synod.

2015 financials

The 2014 fiscal year ended Jan. 31, 2015. The closing figures show total income of $2,740,382 and expenses of $2,756,086. Thus, for the year the Rocky Mountain Synod showed a deficit of $15,704.

We are grateful for the generous partnership with our congregations, which provided 99 percent of expenses. Thank you!

The revised 2015 finances were approved, as well as the preliminary budget for 2016.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton speaks to the assembly about ecumenism.
Voting members respond to the assembly

Having attended the gathering, what did you learn about the church?

After the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly, the following comments from participants were shared.

- We have learned that it is much bigger than we had thought and we are involved through the church in a lot of neat ministries.
- I learned the most from Bishop Elizabeth Eaton ... about our global ministries and the plans for the next couple of years.
- I learned that we have so much to celebrate together and sing alleluia about. Why we spend so much time singing “Woe is me” is quite puzzling.
- I was amazed at all the things the ELCA is involved in and how we stretch around the globe.
- We are church, better together. As churches, we often try and compete with other churches. However, we need to learn that we truly are better together. We should work together for the sake of God's ministry in this world, not only for God's ministry in my church. This includes our sisters and brothers in other denominations.
- I greatly appreciate the fact that we are reaching out to other Christian denominations, and are doing so by focusing on the things we have in common.
- There is some very good leadership and we do a good job of trying to fulfill Jesus' mandate to care for the least of us. We need to highlight the work of ELCA churchwide ministries and regional synods to the person in the pew “back home.” There are even some pastors who think synods are a waste of our offerings.
- Serving in an excruciatingly remote area, it is always good to be reminded that we are part of something much larger, including people of other faiths.
- There is a large support system in place for us as a smaller church. This year’s theme of “Better Together” was well presented. It works on two levels, better together with our multitude of individual congregations, as well as better together with Christians in general.

‘I am a relatively new member to the Lutheran church. I am learning each day new things about it. I went home with brain overload. There was so much I wanted to know. This experience for me was wonderful. I loved it all.’

- I love that we can address even the difficult and uncomfortable questions and issues in healthy and productive ways.
- That it is still well and alive. My church has been experiencing lots of difficulties, and the synod assembly served as a place to refresh and become on fire again.

Wearing ELCA “Church Together” T-shirts, assembly participants learned about the Mormon Church by visiting Temple Square in Salt Lake City. They discussed what it means to be a Lutheran in a context where Lutherans are a minority. The ELCA’s 10 Utah congregations were gracious and welcoming hosts.