

TASK FORCE STUDYING THE NALC'S PROCEDURE FOR ELECTING A BISHOP: Report to the NALC's Executive Council and Mission District Deans

This task force was created by Bishop John Bradosky and the Executive Council in response to a resolution adopted by the 2015 NALC Convocation. That resolution called upon the Deans and the Executive Council to study the NALC's procedure for electing a bishop, and to present a proposal at the 2016 Convocation. The 2016 NALC Convocation then adopted a resolution proposed by the task force, calling upon it to continue its work, make recommendations to the Deans and the Executive Council, and report to the 2017 Convocation. Submitted with this report are seven recommendations, together with proposed amendments to the NALC Constitution.

The task force met five times in 2016 – three times via conference call, and twice in person. It has six members, including three Deans and three members of the Executive Council:

- Ms. Rosemary Johnson, Executive Council
- Rev. William Maki, Dean, North Ohio Mission District
- Rev. David McGettigan, Dean, Atlantic Mission District
- Rev. Carl Rasmussen, Executive Council (Task Force Chair)
- Mr. Brian Sutton, Executive Council
- Rev. Alden Towberman, Dean, Mid-Northeast Mission District

We began our work by familiarizing ourselves with the NALC's current procedure for electing a bishop, outlined in Article 8 of the NALC Constitution (sections 8.05 and 8.06). In this procedure, a slate of candidates is prepared by the Nominating Committee well in advance of the electing Convocation. Additional candidates may be added to the ballot by way of nominations from the floor of the Convocation.

We then began discussing procedures that have been used by other church bodies for electing their bishops, giving much attention to the procedure known as the "ecclesiastical ballot," a procedure familiar to many through its use in the ELCA.

We solicited and received written viewpoints and thoughts from a number of NALC leaders who have participated in discussions and decisions on this matter in the past. These included the Bishop Emeritus of the NALC, who was a member of the NALC's initial constitution committee; a lay member of the initial constitution committee; the General Secretary of the NALC; a lay member of the "Vision Committee" that proposed our four Core Values and drafted "A Vision and Plan for the NALC"; a former candidate for bishop; and one of the authors of the 2015 Convocation resolution calling for this study.

We spent a good deal of time in Bible study, looking especially at those passages that describe how various leaders of God's people were chosen. We were humbled and inspired by one constant among all these passages: namely, the desire of God's people, regardless of the procedure employed, that God's choice of a leader might be discerned and acclaimed, rather than people getting their own way in the matter. The passage that received the most attention was Acts 1:15-26, which describes the choosing of Matthias to take Judas' place as an apostle. The procedure in that case was: 1) identifying qualified candidates; 2) prayer; 3) casting of lots. The prayer in Acts 1:24 reveals their chief objective: to discern God's choice. "Lord," they prayed, "You know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two You have chosen."

Another key passage was I Timothy 3:1-7, on the qualities expected of a bishop. That passage opens, "The saying is sure; whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task." This verse convinced us

that it is entirely proper for individual pastors to initiate their own candidacy for bishop by making their aspirations known to those who might nominate them (an NALC congregation or the Executive Council). Such initiative should not be construed as ego driven, but rather as the desire to serve, and the belief that one has the requisite gifts and is called by God. A candidacy can be initiated either by someone being approached by others who wish to nominate that person, or by a person taking the first step himself or herself. Either one will lead to conversation, reflection, prayer, and possible nomination; and, eventually, to a prayerful decision by the Church.

Other passages studied were Acts 6:1-6, on choosing the first deacons of the church; I Timothy 3:3-13, on the qualities expected of deacons; Exodus 18:17-27, on Moses appointing leaders to assist him; Genesis 12:1-4, on the call of Abraham; and many Old Testament passages describing the calls of judges, kings, and prophets. We recognized that some of these passages narrate direct calls from God to individuals, rather than calls mediated by a community, such as the Church, with its approved expectations and procedures. Such passages, while they do not provide procedural guidance or examples, nevertheless reinforce the over-arching desire to seek God's will and not our own in selecting our leaders.

There was a diversity of opinion within the task force, generating robust and respectful discussion and debate. While there were a variety of preferences as to electoral procedures, there was unanimity on the desire to discern God's choice in any election; and there was unanimous agreement that the Holy Spirit does not require any one particular procedure to successfully govern the church's deliberations, but is more than capable of using a variety of procedures to accomplish His will.

The ecclesiastical ballot was discussed at some length, as the task force considered its own members' viewpoints both for and against this procedure, as well as the viewpoints of those who submitted their thoughts in writing. Though its potential merits were acknowledged, eventually it became clear that the task force's majority was not inclined to recommend this procedure; ultimately, no task force member chose to do so. A key argument voiced against the ecclesiastical ballot was that it puts lay delegates at a disadvantage. Pastors have much more opportunity for fellowship and familiarity with other pastors than laypeople do. The ecclesiastical ballot thus tends to place laypeople in the unenviable position of having to vote for candidates about whom they may know very little. This argument was very persuasive to several members of the task force, eventually becoming perhaps the key reason for a majority recommendation to eliminate nominations from the floor when electing a bishop. It was further observed that this would make the NALC's electoral procedures more consistent, since floor nominations are not a feature of elections to either the Executive Council or the Court of Adjudication.

Finally, it is the unanimous recommendation of the task force that candidates for all elected offices, including Bishop, Executive Council, and Court of Adjudication, be given more time to submit their biographical information, by changing the deadline to 60 days prior to the Convocation, rather than the current 90-day deadline. In addition to giving candidates more time to prepare, such a change would also afford the Church more time to listen to the Holy Spirit before the slate of candidates is finalized.

I would like to thank all the members of the task force for their diligence and devotion to this task. I am grateful to God for the experience of serving with them.

Respectfully submitted, by the task force, to the Executive Council meeting held January 25-26, 2017.

Rev. Carl L.M. Rasmussen, task force chair