

## Withdrawal figures in Lutheran bishop election

By John Smith, religion columnist for the *Reading Eagle*

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The buzz at a Lutheran synod election for bishop always picks up after the second ballot, on which the scores of contenders are whittled to seven.

But last weekend, at the Northeastern Pennsylvania assembly at Split Rock Lodge in the Poconos, the buzz came before the second ballot.

That's when the voters learned that the favorite and clear first-ballot leader, Associate Bishop D. Michael Bennethum, was withdrawing his name. What's more, two other assistants, Catherine A. Ziel and Kurt E. Garbe, who finished fourth and fifth, respectively, on the first ballot, also were withdrawing.

That opened the way for three pastors who weren't in the top seven on the first ballot to snare those positions on the second. (On the first, or nomination, ballot, any voter can write in any pastor's name. Then anyone who gets at least one vote appears on the second. This time, 144 people got first-ballot mention.)

Bennethum, former pastor of Reformation, Reiffton, received 91 mentions on the first ballot; a distant second was Carl D. Shankweiler, Valley View, Schuylkill County, former Geigertown and Wernersville pastor, with 41.

That Bennethum's withdrawal made it a wide-open race became clear when no one got more than 15 percent of the votes on the second ballot. Shankweiler led with 102, two more than eventual electee Samuel R. Zeiser, Allentown, an Albright grad and former West Reading pastor.

"This is the first time I've ever heard of no assistant bishops being in the running," said the retiring bishop, David R. Strobel. Often the final ballot comes down to a choice between an assistant bishop and a prominent pastor. In three of the four other Evangelical Lutheran Church in America synod bishop elections in May, an assistant finished second.

It was not a conspiracy.

"Independently," Ziel said, "we came to the conclusion that we didn't have the gifts that

are required. We've had a closer look than anybody at the requirements." And also at the strains.

Asked about his reasons, Bennethum recalled Claude Schick, the secretary and executive assistant of the then Pennsylvania Ministerium a half-century ago.

"They decided he ought to be bishop after all those years as assistant," Bennethum said, "and he agreed to run. But then his wife became sick, he had to miss the meeting and so he wasn't chosen.

"Afterward, he said that was a fortunate thing. He felt he had the skills to be good and effective in his role, but realized that being bishop requires a different skill set."

Bennethum, 54, puts himself in the same position. "We've had a lot of focus groups leading up to the election," he said, "looking at the characteristics and the temperament needed in a bishop, and that's not who I am. My gifts, skills, passion, energy are in other things than the ones that occupy a bishop.

"I like the job I have here ... I'll stay on if the new bishop wants me." (Ziel, the executive assistant, also has said she's willing to stay.)

Bennethum said he had pretty well made up his mind not to be a candidate following a discernment retreat in October, but admitted to being somewhat "seduced" by those who felt he should be one. "I really didn't decide to withdraw until Thursday (the evening of the first ballot)," he said.

One supporter asked him how he felt Thursday night, and was puzzled by his answer - "free." The next morning, she found out why.

Next week: How the Lutherans got from seven candidates to one.