

Speeches, dialogue crucial to bishop election

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

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The recent election for Northeastern Pennsylvania Lutheran bishop was wide open after the second ballot, as detailed here last week.

In large part because the three assistant bishops in the top seven on the first (nominating) ballot had all withdrawn, the four pastors in the top seven - Carl Shankweiler of Valley View, Samuel Zeiser of Allentown, Charles Grube of Dallas and Wayne Matthias-Long of Emmaus - were joined by William "Chip" Fairchild of Conyngham, Fred Opalinski of Trinity, Reading, and Mary Gade of Breinigsville for the third ballot.

Shankweiler and Zeiser led the second with 102 and 100 votes; Matthias-Long and Grube had 69 and 61, respectively; the three others were at 37 or 35.

Things always change on the third ballot, which cuts the field to three, because first each of the seven makes a three-minute speech, then undergoes questioning by delegates from each district.

Grube and Fairchild made the weakest speeches, I felt. Grube, the youngest at 48, explained why he didn't want to be bishop (but was willing to let the Holy Spirit make the decision), and Fairchild focused on the job's difficulties. (He was hurt 12 years ago by a too-long speech.)

Zeiser's speech was a strange one about his high school experiences in a shoe-repair shop, but he was among the best in the Q-and-A sessions.

So where would the third-ballot shift come? Not the top, where Shankweiler and Zeiser were still 1-2 with 145 and 124 votes, respectively.

Would Trinity lightning strike again? Twelve years ago, David Strobel of Trinity just made the third ballot by two votes, climbed to the top three and became the final choice.

Not this time. Opalinski finished two votes shy of third, which went to Gade (97-95). Matthias-Long was close at 81; Fairchild and Grube had 66 and 55, respectively.

Some felt that if either Opalinski or Matthias-Long, a former West Berks dean (the post Opalinski now holds), had made the top three, he would have picked up most of the

votes of the other. But Gade had effectively let her humor and extroverted personality shine through.

Opalinski could have been hurt by being relatively new to the synod. And just maybe he lost a few votes when he said how happy he was at Trinity.

The three finalists were required to give a 10-minute Bible study the next morning on a text revealed late the night before - the opening of the Sermon on the Mount. All three did well, but Zeiser did the best.

The surprise on the fourth ballot was that Shankweiler's total fell by 12 votes to 133, eliminating him, while Zeiser picked up 179 to 303 and Gade 135 to 232.

The explanation: Shankweiler had a sizable corps of supporters, but did not have the backing of those who had voted for others, being viewed by many as too conservative or too negative.

His supporters split almost evenly on the deciding ballot, Zeiser winning by 366-289.

Zeiser got high marks from many of the Berks attendees; a few would have preferred someone more dynamic. "He's solid, steady, a good leader, very intelligent," said Strobel, who called him a wonderful choice.

Ironically, Zeiser was the only one of the seven who has been neither a dean nor an assistant bishop. But he's also the only one with a doctorate, earning a Ph.D. in 2001 while serving part time at Bethany, West Reading. He was known widely, due to serving in several districts, and two terms on Synod Council.

His sense of humor showed more than once, including his opening words following election: "When I received my first call, I thought things would get easier over time."

Next week: Indiana Jones and the seven candidates.

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