

## Indiana Jones and the quest for a Lutheran bishop

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

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The seven quarterfinalists for Lutheran bishop of Northeastern Pennsylvania in May had to undergo questioning by delegates from each of the nine synod districts before the third ballot would reduce their number to three.

So the seven - all of whom had qualified with plenty of votes to spare - trooped around to various rooms in the Split Rock Lodge Galleria on a three-hour ecclesiastical job search.

Since West Berks is the biggest district, it drew the theater, where later in the day Indiana Jones - who likes snakes even less than that bishop named Patrick - would be cracking his whip on his own sacred search for a crystal skull.

The first question asked by the West Berks group in the theater was one at which even Dr. Jones would stumble: How to empower congregations in evangelism? Or, perhaps: How could they help prevent an eventual accumulation of skulls throughout the synod?

Director Steven Spielberg has called the latest Jones adventure a "quintessential family film," which some might dispute. What he meant was that it can appeal to all sorts of people: those who know everything about Jones and those who know nothing, and in between.

So it was fitting that the seven were asked how to help churches appeal to all sorts of people.

Their answers ranged from Reading native William "Chip" Fairchild's quick litany of a half-dozen solutions to Charles Grube's disclaimer, "I ain't got a clue on particulars."

The consensus was that there isn't a great deal the bishop can do: It's up to the congregation.

Grube elaborated: "I'd throw it back in your lap. You are the evangelists."

"It must come from within the congregation," said Wayne Matthias-Long. "They must have a renewed passion for Jesus. Don't look to the bishop."

"The church must become more evangelical," asserted Fred Opalinski of Trinity, Reading, whose dress could have put him on the Jones set, though he was hatless. "People have to have a clear sense of what the gospel means and how to express it. They have to use language a fifth-grader can understand, and offer a Lutheran expression of their faith."

"Simply share what we know," said Mary Gade. "Ask simple questions and answer them."

Carl Shankweiler was not optimistic, but said the bishop could help make evangelism a priority. He urged being willing to face the issue of decline, encouraging discussion and sharing stories of growing churches.

Both Matthias-Long and Fairchild suggested the bishop should hold churches accountable when they talk about evangelism. Matthias-Long also said the bishop could provide opportunities for congregations to talk together about the subject.

Samuel Zeiser, the eventual electee, went a step further by saying the bishop "has to listen to the congregation and find out what its voice says." He talked about helping mentors define evangelism for them. "It grows out of who they are and how Jesus is in relation to them."

Fairchild's other points: challenge and inspire congregations, institute some training, realize things will be different in different places, work with those who are skilled, remember that the Spirit does the rest.

Matthias-Long recalled a survey that surprised him in that it showed the congregation members found a high percentage of joy in their faith. "I told them," he said, "You forgot to tell your faces."

The best way, of course, would be to somehow reduce the number in a quote the retiring bishop, David R. Strobel, likes to use: "The average Lutheran invites a person to church once every 23 years."

That might be questioned, but, says Strobel, "I have no reason to doubt it."

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