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Synod Elects Next Bishop

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by John Smith, columnist with 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 at May's Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod 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 of the Bishop D. Michael Bennethum, was withdrawing his name. What's more, two other associates, Catherine A. Ziel and Kurt E. Garbe, who finished fourth and fifth, respectively, on the first ballot, also were withdrawing.

### **The Top Seven**

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.

In addition to Shankweiler, the top seven on the second ballot were Charles Grube, Mary Gade, Sam Zeiser, Wayne Matthias-Long, William Fairchild, and Fred Opalinski.



The seven quarterfinalists had to undergo questioning by delegates from each of the nine synod mission 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.

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.

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.

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.)

Because three associates of the bishop 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.

### **And Then There Were Three**

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 voting members from each mission 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.

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.

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.

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."

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