

Lutheran View of Call and Vocation

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship

We believe it is our Savior Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, who guides the call process. The calling of a pastor or deacon represents a valuable partnership between God, the calling congregation, and the Sierra Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. An ideal call process builds on trust, openness, and good communication. When the call process results in a good match between minister and congregation, the total mission of the church is furthered.

Luther Says...

"... God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these God gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where God pleases, and those who hear the Gospel. Nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call. All Christians are called to the ministry of serving God and neighbor, but for the sake of good order in the church certain Christians are specially called to the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament."

The Call to Ordained Ministry

It is through the church that God calls certain Christians to ordained ministry. Once that call is discerned, the candidate devotes years to study, training, and preparation under the guidance of the whole church through the bishop and the candidacy committee. Not only does the local congregation participate in the call process, but so does the whole church through the Office of the Bishop

Discerning the Call of Your Specific Ministry

During the time of transition between pastors or deacons, a congregation is invited to engage in a spiritual discernment process to discover its call—what God wants the church to be and do in the next phase of its ministry.

Without knowing where God is leading your congregation, a congregation cannot know what skills, direction, and priorities it needs in their pastor. Pastors are not called to provide the vision for congregations; pastors are called to help congregations move toward the vision they have for where God is taking them.

The interim time is a period for your congregation to intentionally engage in a process that involves Bible study, prayer, and an honest and thoughtful look at your congregation and community, as a way to discern the ministry direction where God is leading you. Only after your congregation discerns its ministry direction can the call committee begin to discern what type of pastor to call to serve them.

Once this becomes clear, the call committee, in consultation with Office of the Bishop, begins the discernment process of discovering who God is calling to be the pastor in this next chapter of your congregation's life and ministry. The discernment process is an exciting journey that will take you through specific steps but moves according to the Spirit's timing. Faithful attentiveness to and trust in the guidance of God's spirit, will help to make your journey rich and fruitful.

The Partnership Between the Whole Church and the Local Church

The local congregation is fully the church, but the local congregation is not all the church there is. The local congregation calls a person to be its pastor, but the whole church everywhere has a stake in who is called and how the call process is handled.

The call committee, the congregation council, and the entire congregation all participate fully in the process. As does the Office of the Bishop, who represents both the interest and the commitment of the whole church in seeing that the pastor called is suited to ministry under the call that is extended.

The Office of the Bishop has deep concern for the well-being of the congregation's life and ministry. The Office of the Bishop also has deep concern about the person and gifts of the prospective pastor. In the call process the Office of the Bishop, the congregation, and the prospective pastor or deacon work together with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring about a new partnership that is faithful to the Gospel, empowers the local congregation in its ministry, and strengthens the whole church as people of God.

The Call Process is Unique

On the basis of our Lutheran theology, a pastor or deacon is **called**. The call process is not simply hiring a new employee for the church as would be done in a secular workplace. It is participating in God's own choice for the church by opening ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit who will guide, nudge, empower, inspire, comfort, and inform the journey toward finding new leadership.

Called, Not Placed

Unlike some other denominations, Rostered Ministers in the ELCA are not "placed" or "moved around" by bishops. Neither can congregation councils or senior pastors unilaterally secure rostered people for congregational leadership. All rostered ministers must be **called** by a congregational vote.

Called, Not Hired

The call process is not the same as the hiring process in other parts of society. The pattern that includes head hunting, résumé shuffling, or personality contests is highly inappropriate in the calling of a pastor. Neither is the call process like a popularity contest in which hosts of candidates present themselves to their best advantage so the call committee can select one as the winner.

The ELCA call process is unique because it is an effort to discern what God wants for this congregation and for the whole church, in order that the Gospel may be proclaimed and the sacraments administered in accordance with the Gospel.

The Wrong and Right Questions

It is not appropriate for a call committee to be guided by questions such as: “Will the congregation like this pastor?” “Will they approve of the call committee’s choice of candidates?” “Will people feel good having this pastor around on Sunday morning?” “Will this person do for now until a better pastor comes along?” “How will this person look to the rest of the community?”

The foremost question for the call committee always should be “Is this is the person God intends this congregation to have as its pastor or deacon?” Human preferences and personalities should never come before the mission to which God calls the church. That is why every meeting of the call committee will include prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the work that is being done.

This means that candidates for the call will not be submitted — and should not be evaluated — on the basis of age, gender, race, physical limitations, or any other “human distinctions.” The call is about the spiritual gifts needed for leading and facilitating ministry in a particular setting; nothing more, and nothing less.

The Significance of Service on a Call Committee

Many people report that serving on a call committee turned out to be one of the most important things they ever did as members of a congregation. It allowed them to experience firsthand how the Holy Spirit works through committed Christians to help the church be faithful to its calling. It gave them an opportunity to see how the local congregation is vitally connected to the whole church. And it let them participate in opening a new chapter in the life and ministry of their congregation as part of the history long, worldwide Church of Jesus Christ.

Expectations

It is important to be clear about expectations. What do you and this congregation expect of your pastor in:

- Worship
- Learning, Teaching
- Stewardship leadership
- Fellowship leadership
- Witness, Evangelism, Outreach
- Pastoral Care
- Communication
- Administration
- Ecumenical leadership
- Service in the Sierra Pacific Synod/Wider Church
- Service Projects / Social Justice
- Other ...

Conversely, since congregational ministry is always a mutual ministry between the called minister and the congregation, what can or should the pastor or deacon expect of you in:

- Support of family and time for family life, or personal time / time with friends if single
- Compensation package
- Continuing education opportunities
- Opportunities to serve and lead at the synodical and churchwide levels
- Support through your prayers
- Honor and respect them as a leader in the Church
- Other...

Doing the “Rite Thing”

It’s often helpful to listen carefully to the words that are spoken during the Rite of Installation. A pastor is asked, “*Will you...*”

- discharge your duties in harmony with the constitutions of the church (See Chapter 7.31.11 & 7.31.12 of ELCA Constitution; Chapter 14 of the Synod Constitution; and Chapter 9 of the Constitution for Congregations);
- preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church;
- love, serve and pray for God’s people; nourish them with the Word and Holy Sacraments, leading them by your own example in the use of the means of grace, in faithful service and holy living; and
- give faithful witness in the world, that God’s love may be known in all that you do?”

And the congregation is asked, “*Will you...*”

- “receive this messenger of Jesus Christ, sent by God to serve God’s people with the Gospel of hope and salvation? Will you regard them as a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God?;
- pray for them, help and honor them for their work’s sake and in all things strive to live together in peace and unity of Christ?”

Other “Right Now” Expectations

1. What are your expectations of the Call Process itself?
 - a. Do you clearly understand the process?
 - b. Do you understand the general time line for a “normal” process, and that this process ought neither be protracted nor rushed?
 - c. Do you understand how calling *your* pastor (or other rostered person) involves the entire synod and the whole church?
2. What are your expectations of this Call Committee?
3. What are your expectations of your Congregation Council?
4. What are your expectations of the Office of the Bishop?
 - a. In the ELCA, the Office of the Bishop and the congregation work in mutual consultation regarding the process and in identifying candidates for call. (C 9.01)
 - b. The bishop: attests Letters of Call, authorizes and provides for the installation of the pastor, authorizes and provides for the ordination of pastors.

5. What expectations do you have of yourself?
 - a. Pray; perhaps more than you have done in a while!
 - b. The Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and keeps us united in faith.”
(Luther’s *Small Catechism - The Apostle’s Creed, Article 3*)

Confidentiality Revisited

Confidentiality cannot be overemphasized in the task of calling a pastor. Mention of specific candidates outside the call committee meetings is inappropriate until the committee is ready with its recommendation to the congregation. It is important to keep all names and both verbal and written information about prospective candidates within the confines of the committee. Committee members will need to establish ground rules and boundaries, not only with the congregation at large, but also with those in their household or place of work.

Openness

Reporting regularly to the congregation council and to the congregation helps keep everyone on the same level of understanding about the process.

Holding Confidence

The Call Committee must keep all verbal and written information about each and every candidate strictly confidential.

The reasons for this are at least twofold.

1. The congregations the candidates are serving are (most likely) unaware that they are interviewing. If a name should get out and back to a candidate’s congregation it could severely damage their ability to do effective ministry at that site. Never underestimate the “connectedness” - who knows whom - within the Lutheran community!
2. You run the risk of turning the whole congregation into a call committee. People will be second guessing why you decided what about whom; without having all the information - “the rest of the story” - before them. The call committee has been chosen and set aside to do this work on behalf of the congregation. The whole congregation will meet the final candidate when the time is right

Communication

While confidentiality is important, that does not mean secrecy. Every means ought to be utilized to keep the members of the congregation informed about the call committee's work and progress. There must be as much transparency as possible. Consider using:

1. **Newsletter articles** explaining the call process to the congregation; with follow - up articles each time another stage in the process is reached.
2. Notes in the **Sunday bulletin** announcing that the call committee is meeting helps keep the congregation informed of progress.
3. **Temple Talks** by a member of the call committee to update the congregation on a weekly basis might also be welcomed. (Even if the report is “nothing has changed from last week” - it is very helpful to let people know what is happening in the call process. Also, from one week to the next, you will not be reporting to exactly the same audience).
4. **Announcements via email or newsletters** to announce open meetings.

5. **Have a Website section or page** dedicated to the Transition Process.
6. **Forums** can be used to make sure the congregation understands the call process; and to update them along the way. This format invites interaction and feedback.

As you keep the congregation informed:

- Always familiarize them with the process.
- Summarize specific presentations from the visit from the Office of the Bishop, and others the congregation may engage with during this time
- Keep them apprised of progress.
- Spell out preferred process for communicating with the members of the call committee

Do these things and:

- The congregation will clearly understand the process, including the roles of the Office of the Bishop, congregation council, call committee and congregation.
- The congregation will be able to identify and communicate with the members of the call committee.
- People will have a clear understanding of the proper process for communicating with the members of the call committee.

With the exception of confidential materials, there is no such thing as too much information.