

Calling a New Pastor - What is a “Call”?

“Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rostered leaders may serve as pastors, associate pastors, or deacons. The process of calling rostered leaders within the life of the church is therefore primarily about discerning God’s will for and God’s call upon the congregation or ministry in which they will serve. Prayerfully, the church calls forth those they believe God can best use to help them carry out their mission together.

Rostered leadership is not a self-called vocation but a unique calling from God through the church to serve and equip the whole people of God. This is so that the church can live together faithfully as the body of Christ, equip the baptized for their work, and fulfill its purpose to proclaim and embody the redemptive intentions of God in the world.”

“A Theology of Call” - ELCA Website

The Lutheran call process is unique because it is an effort to discern what God wants for the local church and for the whole Church in order that the Gospel may be proclaimed, and the sacraments administered in accordance with the Gospel. Below are the steps to be followed in this important process:

1. The interim pastor is to work with the council to determine the appropriate time to begin the process of gathering the information that will be used in the call process to develop the Ministry Site Profile (MSP).
2. The congregation council may choose to set up a transition team to assist with the gathering of information. The congregation’s Constitution gives guidelines for selecting a call committee, but usually not a transition team, so the appointment of such a team is determined by the council. In smaller congregations, the transition team may be the same as the call committee, but, if possible, the two committees should be separate. The transition team’s responsibilities involve research and analysis, documentation, and study. The call committee will have strengths in relationships and discernment. Both should have good communication skills so that the whole congregation is aware of the important work that they are both doing. Responsibilities of the transition team include:

Review of the Congregation’s History

- Review of the current makeup of membership with input from congregational members regarding leadership needs;
- Review of the congregation’s Constitution;
- Review of core values, mission and vision statements;
- Review of staffing needs and resources;
- Review of property and other physical resources.

Sample surveys and questionnaires that can assist in gathering some of this information can be found on [Pages 30 and 31](#). After gathering the information provided by the congregation, the transition team is to make a final report to the council.



3. The council is to create a position description and summary and range for a compensation package. **These forms are found on [pages 32 and 33](#).** The actual definition of compensation and benefits will be finalized at a later date with the final candidate. The council is to provide a budget and procedures that will be used to reimburse candidates' expenses so that the call committee will know the budget they have to work with during the interview process. This budget should include reimbursement for travel, lodging and meal costs for candidates who come to interview with the call committee, and for the final candidate (and family) to meet the congregation.

4. The call committee is appointed by the congregation council or elected by the congregation. The congregation's Constitution should be consulted for any provisions regarding the call committee's composition and formation. If no provisions exist, the following guidelines are recommended:
 - The model Constitution for congregations (C13.05) provides that the council appoint a call committee of six members whose term of office ends upon the installation of the newly called pastor/lay rostered leader. The more members on the committee, the longer the call process will likely take. Every member of the call committee is expected to be at EVERY meeting of the committee.
 - The council invites congregation members (both verbally and in written communications) to nominate persons for the call committee. Members are free to nominate themselves. The council needs to be clear that not every person nominated will be asked to serve.
 - The council determines some general criteria for the composition of the call committee. Members should demonstrate Christian maturity and be concerned for the welfare of the whole congregation, rather than their own personal preferences. Members should work well with others. They should be diverse in age, gender, and length of membership in the congregation. The same qualifications that are needed for council service, such as voting member, regular worship attendee, regular giver, and participant in congregational ministry apply here, as well. It is strongly advised that council members not be on the call committee. It is the responsibility of the call committee chair to maintain regular communication with the congregation's council.
 - *In congregations that have a strong vision for mission and a ministry plan that will be the foundation for the new leader's ministry, an additional step is desirable. Invite those who are interested in serving on the call committee for a gathering. Ask them to briefly introduce themselves, to indicate why they are interested in serving on the call committee, and about their commitment to God's mission and the ways it is being followed in the congregation. Only members who attend this gathering will be eligible to serve on the call committee. A council member records the information for the council deliberations.*
 - The council selects the call committee from all nominations (including those made by council members), on the basis of its criteria. It informs the call committee members of their selection and thanks all who have offered their services.
 - The call committee appoints the chairperson of the call committee. Gifts needed for this ministry are spiritual maturity, organizational ability, conscientiousness, and a sense of partnership with the council. The chairperson is responsible for regular communication with the congregation council. Because documents will be sent electronically from the synod office, it is important that the chairperson or others have access to email.
 - The call committee should be installed during a regular worship service of the congregation. **The rite of installation is found on [pages 34 and 35](#).**



5. Once the call committee is in place, the chair of the committee contacts the synod office, and a Call Process Minister (CPM) is assigned to assist the call committee through the call process. The CPM meets with **the call committee and the council together** to provide an orientation to the process on how to fill out an MSP, receive names of candidates, how to interview, and the importance of confidentiality. **While it is important to keep the council and congregation informed regarding the process, the names of potential candidates are to be kept confidential by the call committee until the council approves the recommendation of a final candidate.**

6. At this point, the call committee begins the process of creating their call documents. This will be done by going to the ELCA website (www.elca.org) and clicking on **Call Process** at the top of the front page. This will take you to a page to create a username and password to complete the Ministry Site Profile (MSP) and other forms. The committee is encouraged to fill out all seven questions in the reflections document, but at least Questions 1 & 3. For a recommendation, enter the name and email address of the individual on the congregation's status page, the link will say Reference Recommendation, and you will receive a notice that it has been successfully sent.
 - Committee reviews data submitted to the transition team.
 - Committee fills out MSP form using data provided by transition team.
 - Call Process Minister and synod staff review MSP.
 - Finalized MSP is approved by the council before it is submitted electronically.
 - Once the MSP is submitted, the synod office is notified by email and will activate the MSP on the churchwide website.

NOTE: If this is a multiple-point parish, only one MSP should be submitted. Under Question 1, "Name and Location," please list the parish name in the line that asks for CONGREGATION/MULTIPLE POINT PARISH/ORGANIZATION and list all congregational names under NAME. Leave the Congregational ID number blank. List all cities under CITY, STATE, ZIP COUNTRY, all years organized under SYNOD TYPE OF MINISTRY SITE YEAR ORGANIZED. Once the MSP has been completed, each individual congregation can develop their own document that includes information about their own congregation, which will be sent to potential candidates.

7. Synod office gathers names of potential candidates. This group of candidates come from several sources:
 - Rostered Leaders within the synod. The synod staff identifies potential candidates or those candidates who indicate their interest in the ministry. Sometimes leaders in the synod will recommend others.
 - Candidates from other synods. These are candidates who submit a Rostered Leader's Profile (RLP) indicating interest in the Central States Synod.
 - Candidates suggested by the congregation. The call committee invites congregation members to submit names. **This should be done as soon as the MSP has been activated.** In submitting names, congregation members need to first understand that these names may NOT be considered under certain circumstances (e.g., if there are serious ethical problems), and secondly, that they should refrain from being in contact with the pastor once the name is submitted. **A referral form and sample cover letter are provided on [pages 36 and 37](#).**



- All rostered leaders will be able to learn about your pastoral vacancy by going online to the ELCA Ministry Opportunities webpage, and they will be able to read your 75-word description. It is helpful to include a link to your congregation's website when you compose your 75-word narrative, as that webpage will reach potential pastors and rostered leaders.

NOTE: If there is an agreement between the synod office and the call committee that the call is suitable for a first-call candidate, no other candidates will be given to the committee until it has decided about the first-call candidate. This is a matter of fairness to a person who has had no previous call to ordained ministry. If the call committee decides not to continue the process with this candidate, they/she/he will be released to consider other call opportunities and the committee will receive other names.

Potential candidates who are willing to be interviewed by congregations in the synod are encouraged to go to the synod website to familiarize themselves with the Call Process handbook, as well as access the Synod Compensation Guidelines.

8. Call committee receives and studies candidates' materials. The synod office will send a group of candidates to the call committee chair for the group's consideration. All call committee members should receive complete copies of the candidates' materials in order to prepare a final list of questions for the interview process. Important items to remember during this time are:
 - The call committee keeps the names and resumes of all candidates in the strictest confidence throughout the committee's work. The call committee reveals only the name and resume material of the candidate it recommends to the congregation council.
 - As soon as the call committee receives the candidates' materials, the chairperson should immediately contact each candidate by phone to let the candidates know:
 - that the committee has their/her/his materials;
 - when they can anticipate further contact;
 - if the committee is requesting any additional materials from the candidate or if the candidate can expect any additional materials from the committee.
 - Contact candidates and the CPM every two to three weeks throughout the process to keep them informed of progress.
9. The Call Committee schedules and conducts interviews for all candidates as their materials are submitted. It is best if the candidate has a brief biography of each call committee member and the general questions that will be asked before the interview.

Sample interview questions can be found beginning on [pages 38-41](#).

 - The first interview can be via conference call or web conference in order to narrow down which candidate(s) to bring for an onsite visit and interview. Telephone interviews should be very carefully structured. Onsite interviews usually include a general introduction to the community, a meal (hosted by one or more of the call committee members), and an interview.
 - The call committee shall release the candidate(s) that are no longer being considered with a phone call and a follow-up letter detailing the committee's decision. **A sample letter can be found on [page 45](#).** Please inform the call process minister and synod office when releasing candidates. It is also helpful for the synod office to know why a candidate is being released.



- If the committee is impressed with two or more candidates, it should be honest with those not selected. Inform them that they made a very favorable impression and ask if they would be willing to be considered if the process with the candidate of choice does not work out. Most candidates are willing to be reconsidered if the call committee is clear.
10. The committee often invites the candidate of choice (and family, if applicable) for a second visit. At this time, a preliminary financial package can be developed by the council and offered to the candidate through the call committee. ([See page 33](#)) The candidate may want to meet with the staff of the congregation at this time. Even though the candidate may be meeting with staff, the name of the candidate remains confidential until the council approves the candidate of choice. Further, staff members are not allowed to influence the discernment process of the call committee. Sometimes this step is not financially feasible and any issues which might preclude the candidate's agreeing to go further in the process will need to be addressed by phone.
 11. Call committee members sometimes want to visit a *final* candidate's congregation on a Sunday morning to experience worship and preaching. Such visits are not encouraged. If done at all, they should be conducted with the knowledge and consent of the candidate. Keep in mind that the candidate is currently a worship leader and preacher for a specific congregation, and their style may be adapted to fit that situation. What is experienced in another congregation may not be what that leader chooses to do in your congregation.
 12. When the call committee has agreed on a candidate, the call committee chairperson informs the CPM that they are ready to present the candidate to the council. The committee then makes their report to the council. It provides the council with all the information it has about the candidate, along with the committee's reasons for recommending that particular pastor. Under no circumstances is the call committee to reveal the names or resumés of the other candidates it considered.
 13. Council votes on recommending the candidate to the congregation. If the decision is positive, the council president informs the CPM and the synod staff and moves on to Step 14. If the decision is not positive, the council president informs the CPM and the synod staff, and the process goes back to either Step 7 or the third bullet point of Step 9.
 14. Council arranges for the congregation to meet the candidate. The council president contacts the candidate to negotiate a date for the candidate (and family, if applicable) to meet the congregation. The council:
 - sets a date for the congregation to meet the candidate;
 - provides information about the candidate to congregation members;
 - affirms the date for a special congregational meeting to vote on the call, observing the congregation's constitutional requirements for such a meeting;
 - The executive committee or other appropriate body from the council works out the financial package to be offered to the candidate.

(Definition of Compensation found on [pages 46-49](#)).



- Council and call committee make plans to provide hospitality to the candidate and their/her/his family during the visit. It is recommended that the candidate be introduced at an informal congregational gathering, such as an afternoon coffee or evening dessert event. It is appropriate to ask the candidate to lead a Bible study or devotion during the event, giving the congregation an opportunity to observe the candidate's public presence. Sometimes a brief question-answer session is desirable. **“Trial sermons” are discouraged.**

15. The call process minister calls the candidate to make sure everything is in place and asks if the candidate is ready to accept the call if issued or if the candidate has any reservations. The candidate is also asked to remove their name from consideration by other congregations.

16. The president calls the Bishop’s office to report the date of the congregational meeting. In response, the synod office sends a blank **Letter of Call** document, a blank copy of the **Definition of Compensation, Benefits and Responsibilities form**, and the **Vote Verification Form** to the president and appoints a synod representative to attend the congregational call meeting. This person’s sole role will be to observe the meeting, make sure a quorum is present (as defined by the congregation’s Constitution), and make sure the vote is properly conducted. The representative completes the **Vote Verification Form** and reports the results of the vote to synod staff.

17. Council prepares for the congregational meeting and moves two resolutions for the congregation to consider. The congregation should receive materials about the candidate well before the meeting.

(When the call is to a parish, each congregation of the parish arranges for its own meeting. Resolution 1 must be approved by a two-thirds majority vote in each congregation.)

RESOLUTION 1: "Shall _____, of _____, be called to serve as pastor/deacon of _____ Lutheran Church?"

[This resolution shall be by written ballot and requires a two-thirds majority for approval.]

RESOLUTION 2: "Shall the initial annual compensation of the leader be: [an itemized list of compensation]?" **or** "Shall the congregation council be authorized to negotiate the compensation package with _____?"

[Voting on Resolution Two may be by voice vote and requires a simple majority for approval.]

NOTE:

- If both resolutions are approved, the congregation president informs the candidate and the synod office of the vote by telephone and proceeds to Step 18. The congregation president shall supply the candidate with the vote count if requested.
- If the first resolution fails to be approved, the congregation president contacts the Bishop's office for consultation about the next steps. The president informs the candidate of the vote by telephone.
- If the first resolution is approved but the second resolution fails to be approved, the council president informs the candidate and the synod office of the vote by telephone and then arranges for the candidate to renegotiate the compensation package with council. A second congregational meeting is then held to act upon the renegotiated compensation package.



18. Complete and send the Letter of Call to the Bishop.

- When the congregation approves both resolutions, the president and council secretary sign the Letter of Call and the Definition of Compensation, Benefits and Responsibilities documents and send them to the Bishop for review and attestation along with the signed Vote Verification Form.
- The Bishop then attests the Letter of Call and sends the Letter of Call, and the Definition of Compensation, Benefits and Responsibilities form to the candidate, who has up to thirty (30) days to respond in writing to the congregation's call.
- Usually, a candidate who has allowed their/her/his name to be presented to a congregation is prepared to accept the call immediately. When the candidate has received the Letter of Call from the synod office, they/she/he sends a written acceptance of the call to the congregation, along with a copy to the synod office.

19. Candidate notifies Bishop and congregation.

- The candidate first informs the Bishop of their acceptance of the call.
- The council receives the candidate's written response, and the president notifies the congregation.
- In the rare occurrence that a call has been declined, the candidate should inform the council president and the bishop, at which time the process goes back to either Step 7 or the third bullet point of Step 9.

20. When the call has been accepted, plan for the candidate's move (if applicable) and installation.

- The council begins to plan hospitality for the new candidate (and family) and to work with them/her/him to arrange for moving their household, if applicable. The congregation is responsible to pay usual costs for a move.
- The council also works with the candidate in consultation with the bishop to arrange an agreed-upon date for a Service of Installation.

21. The council ought to plan a service of closure and/or other appropriate acknowledgements of thank-you for those who have offered ministry support (interim pastor, transition consultants, Transition Team, Call Committee, etc.) during the pastoral transition. Such acknowledgements should be completed before the candidate arrives to begin ministry.

22. Establish a mutual ministry committee. To get the ministry started, oftentimes three or four members of the call committee are to serve in this capacity for the first several months of the pastor's call. During that time, the pastor can be involved in selecting the committee's new members. The mutual ministry committee provides feedback and can be a sounding board for the pastor as they/she/he acclimates to the new culture of the congregation.