

Resolution SA24.05

PASTORAL LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS IN THE CENTRAL STATES SYNOD

Congregational leadership transitions are the work of the whole church. They involve bishops and synod staff members, who help guide the process and who work with pastors who might be appropriate candidates for ministry in that particular congregation. But pastors do not simply drop out of heaven, but are raised up from the pews of congregations. Thus, these transitions also involve Sunday school teachers, confirmation class leaders, synod candidacy committees, seminaries, and seminary field work and internship sites, as they all work to prepare candidates for ordination and service across the church.

When the ELCA was formed in 1988, the call process was shaped very differently from what it is today. In 1988, it assumed a lot of homogeneity of both congregations and pastors. There was a basic assumption that pastors were interchangeable, and the skill sets required in one setting could easily transfer to any congregation. Today, we recognize that both those assumptions are misplaced, and more care is needed to get a good fit of pastor and ministry site in order for ministry to flourish.

At the same time, technology has reshaped the process. Instead of paper files held in the synod office, electronic documents in a churchwide database makes all that information available across the ELCA at the same time.

For both these reasons, the call process documents have become longer and more detailed. Instead of check marks to answer multiple choice questions, we now ask rostered ministers and congregations in transition to reflect on themselves as they answer questions with a paragraph or two of concise, well thought-out sentences. Their answers describe the unique gifts, challenges, and opportunities, so that the transition results in better matches between congregations and rostered ministers. This kind of reflection takes time, but the experience of many call processes across the ELCA, has taught us that this is time well spent.

When congregations reflect more on their identity, community, mission, gifts, and leadership needs *before* looking at specific candidates, and when candidates reflect more on their vision for ministry, their gifts and talents, and the settings where they feel called to serve *before* looking at specific congregations, the more likely it is that the call process will result in a good “fit” between the congregation and the candidate. In addition, the time spent in reflection has proven to help pastors and congregations get off to a better start together when a call is extended and accepted.

At the same time, the ELCA is facing an imbalance between rostered leaders seeking calls and congregations seeking rostered leaders. Over the last several decades, the ELCA has seen large numbers of pastors retire or leave the ministry each year, while smaller numbers of new pastors have entered the ministry to take their places. Making matters worse, the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic led more pastors to retire or leave the ministry in recent years than would be expected in an ordinary year. A surplus of clergy 40 years ago has become a clergy shortage today.

Central States Synod 2024 Synod Assembly

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Different parts of the ELCA are hit in different ways by this imbalance. Some synods have plenty of pastors to serve their congregations, while other synods – including our Central States Synod – feel the shortage of pastors much more acutely. Simply identifying pastors and candidates who are willing to look at calls in our synod stretches out the length of the process. In addition, candidates also have to balance other considerations such as a spouse's employment, special needs for their children, and the adaptability of congregations to be receptive to their particular gifts and life situations.

Instead of getting five or six candidates to consider, a call committee might receive three or two or only one – and those candidates are likely to be looking at other congregations at the same time. For some congregations, even identifying one candidate for them to consider can take quite a while.

The ELCA as a whole and our synod in particular are involved in the same kinds of leadership transition conversations as congregations seeking new pastors. The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized the establishment of the Commission on a Renewed Lutheran Church. Candidacy committees are reexamining how candidates are prepared and certified. Seminaries are reexamining their curricula, their facilities, their structures, and their teaching methods for preparing leaders for the church. The overall result is a changing pattern for rostered leader deployment and service.

The long-term solution to this leadership imbalance is to increase the number of pastoral leaders, as well as other items arising from all these transitional conversations across the ELCA. But meanwhile, congregations, rostered ministers, bishops, and other leaders cannot stop and wait for the long-term solutions to bear fruit.

Here in our synod, we have been working to address this shortage of pastors by practicing healthy habits for dealing with change. We have become especially curious about our communities, encouraging healthy self-assessment of our own gifts and needs, engaging in playful experimentation with alternative arrangements for ministry, and developing an entrepreneurial spirit that seeks out new gifts as well as new uses of old gifts. We have worked to raise up and support deacons, Parish Ministry Associates, and Synod Authorized Ministers, adding to the pool of possible leaders to serve our congregations. We have also changed how the synod supports congregations with transitional leadership, expanding the forms that support may take.

And while those efforts continue, the work of congregational transitions goes on.

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Be it resolved that the 2024 Synod Assembly of the Central States Synod:

1. gives thanks for the work of
 - a. call committee members and congregation council members as they faithfully reflect on their congregation's mission and ministry during leadership transitions;
 - b. pastors, deacons, candidates for the ministries of Word and Sacrament and Word and Service, PMAs, and other pastoral leaders as they faithfully reflect on their gifts for ministry and how God is calling them to put them to use;
 - c. seminaries, our synod candidacy committee, and others involved in leadership development, as they prepare leaders for service across this church;
 - d. intentional interim pastors, interim consultants, other transitional leaders, and synod staff as they support congregations and related organizations going through leadership transitions;
2. encourages the raising up of new leaders by asking
 - a. congregational leaders to seek out, invite, and support those in their midst who might be suitable candidates for ordination, for entering the Parish Ministry Associate program, or for preparing to serve in other leadership positions in the church;
 - b. pastors and those who work with youth to plant seeds that might lead them to consider pastoral or other leadership positions as they grow and mature;
3. calls on congregations and leaders across our Synod to take note of the changing circumstances of pastoral call processes, and ask that
 - a. all congregations entering a leadership transition recognize the increased length of time these transitions take, and ask that they be open to new and creative partnerships with transitional leaders throughout the entire transition;
 - b. as smaller congregations face the departure of their previous rostered minister, they look at the possibility of shared pastoral leadership through a parish relationship;
 - c. as larger congregations with multiple rostered leaders face the departure of one of their pastors, they look at the possibility of adding a lay staff member (or members) rather than automatically seeking to replace one pastor with another pastor, recognizing that calling multiple pastors in one congregation means some other congregation will go without any pastor at all;
4. directs the bishop and synod staff to share this resolution with congregations, parishes, and other organizations who are entering leadership transitions in their ministries; and
5. asks our bishop, synod staff, and synod council to engage with the ELCA Conference of Bishops, ELCA churchwide staff, ELCA Church Council, seminaries, and their counterparts in other synods to learn from their experience with leadership development and congregational leadership transitions, and to offer them our experience.

Submitted by:

Rev. Peter Rehwaldt

Rev. Keith Hohly

Rev. Jealaine Marple

Rev. Merle L. Brockhoff

Rev. Cynthia Schnaath