



North/West Lower Michigan Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

October 2023

Over the past few months, our congregations have increasingly relied on retired pastors as we work to cover both congregations without called pastors and congregations whose called pastor is facing serious health concerns. We thank retired pastors who continue to preach the Word, administer the Sacraments, support colleagues in active ministry by listening to them and praying for them, and genuinely entrust their former ministry to the Lord of the church and their current leader.

As we've shared before, our church is facing some new realities in regards to the number of pastors available to serve congregations. The ELCA recently shared a report with the Conference of Bishops that showed the trends of candidates approved for entrance into Word and Sacrament ministry. As we've seen for the past two years, the number of candidates is declining. There were 183 candidates across the entire ELCA in 2022 and the same number is estimated for 2023.

Facing this new reality, many retired pastors are increasingly being asked or are asking to support congregations and synods. While in some cases this support is appropriate, many synods and congregations are experiencing situations in which it is not, consistently having to do with retired pastors not maintaining appropriate boundaries. Therefore, across the ELCA, there has been an increase in discussion about how best to support retired pastors in maintaining healthy and appropriate boundaries. Our synod is no exception as we have experienced a number of situations involving retired pastors not maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Maintaining healthy and appropriate boundaries is an expectation for all pastors, both in active ministry and retired. We experience former and retired pastors crossing boundaries by seeking roles in the very ministries they relinquished, providing unsolicited critique and direction to the called pastor, and sharing outdated information to advance their own status at the expense of the called leader. While those former or retired pastors may feel that their intentions are good, they are actually harming the ministry they loved and served.

Like everyone else, as pastors age, filters may lessen and pastors may come to value their own judgment over the policies and best practices of this church. We experience this when former and retired pastors speak inappropriately during meetings in the congregation, violate personal boundaries (uninvited touching, unwanted hugs and kisses during the passing of the peace, stalking), and request meetings with young (usually female) pastors to provide "mentoring." While those former or retired pastors may feel that their heart is pure, they are actually harming the ministry they loved and served.

As most have experienced, it can be hard to let go of something we love and have someone else take our place. This is especially true when a former or retired pastor has served a congregation for a long time and remains in the community. However, maintaining appropriate boundaries and respecting the current leader is an important part of helping the congregation move forward and grow in their ministry. When former and retired pastors question a new leader's judgment, they undermine the current pastor's ministry. This may result in the current pastor experiencing physical manifestations of stress and has even pushed some to the brink of resignation. While

those former or retired pastors may feel that their actions are justified by prayer, their behavior actually harms the ministry they loved and served.

In response to policies regarding maintaining appropriate boundaries, some former, retired, and ready-to-rotate pastors have said that current leaders should develop thicker skins, become less anxious, and learn to appreciate their elders. Even if that was ELCA policy, which it is not, respecting your elders becomes difficult when your elders undermine your ministry, violate your boundaries, and treat you with disrespect.

Concern over the behavior of some retired pastors led the ELCA to adopt a policy directing Synod Councils to conduct a triannual review of retired pastors:

1.f.: The Synod Council shall engage in a regular, periodic examination of all ministers of Word and Sacrament on the retired roster such that each and every retired minister's status is reviewed at least once during a three-year cycle.
Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 36.

We also invite you to consult the Call Process Manual where you will find (1) Addendum G: Pastoral Ethics: Pastors and Rostered Ministers Relating to Previously Served Parishes, Adopted by the Synod Council of the North/West Lower Michigan Synod September 2012 and (2) Addendum H: Covenant for Departing Pastors. Both of these documents were established prior to 2013 and will continue to be used in the future. The ELCA Church Council adopted similar guidelines for the whole church in 1998.

Our synod has been slow in implementing the review policy; however, the increase in expressions of concern about the behavior of some of our former and retired pastors pushes us to fully implement it. The implementation of this policy provides us all an opportunity to engage in self-examination as we all play a part in supporting healthy and appropriate boundaries. Congregation leaders and rostered minister colleagues have a responsibility to assist and support former and retired pastors as they maintain appropriate boundaries and to hold them accountable when they do not. However, the most effective accountability comes from other retired and former pastors. As a synod, we offer boundary trainings to help rostered ministers refresh their understanding of healthy and appropriate boundaries. Whether active, retired, or on leave from call, rostered ministers are expected to participate in boundary training every three years. Our next boundary training will be offered via Zoom in January 2024.

Most recently, the expressions of concern about the behavior of former and retired pastors have come from rostered ministers and congregation leaders both inside and outside of our synod. First, we have received reports that some of our retired pastors are sharing outdated information with congregations in the call process, including information about "the annual draft of first call candidates," and the availability of mission developers or redevelopers. Sharing outdated information only hinders a congregation's call process as it sets unrealistic expectations. As we've shared before, the annual assignment of seminary graduates to synods was eliminated several years ago due to the low number of graduates. Seminary Graduates are assigned to their home synod and the bishops work together to assist them in securing a call in a preferred synod. And, as we've shared before, the ELCA ended its mission developer/redeveloper program, as investing a lot of money in a few congregations was not a fruitful strategy.

Second, experienced pastors that we recruit for open congregations increasingly ask if the congregation comes with a retired pastor or if the former pastor lives in the community. They

state that former and retired pastors are troubled they don't need and decline to be available for interview. The increase in being asked this question indicates the pervasiveness of this issue across the ELCA. As we recruit pastors, we want to be able to demonstrate that our synod is attempting to address their concerns.

Finally, there is a sudden confusion over who can ordain and install pastors within our synod, with some of our retired pastors suggesting that they can be authorized to perform ordinations and installations. Our current Synod Constitution says the bishop shall "exercise solely this church's power to ordain (or provide for the ordination by another synod bishop of) approved candidates who have received and accepted a properly issued, duly attested letter of call" (S.8.12.c.). The bishop is also to "Install (or provide for the installation of) rostered ministers whose calls the bishop has attested" (S.8.12.c.). For this reason, we encourage newly called pastors and congregations to be in conversation with Bishop Satterlee very soon after the call has been accepted to arrange the ordination and/or installation.

Pastors offering themselves to perform ordinations or installations in place of the bishop is akin to former pastors offering themselves to baptize in place of the called pastor. The guidelines adopted by Synod Council in 2012 state: "It is the responsibility of the former pastor to decline invitations to conduct pastoral acts in any former parish. It is important that the burden of such decisions does not fall back to the pastor who currently holds that call." We note that Bishop Satterlee will occasionally invite retired pastors to represent the synod at funerals of rostered ministers and congregation celebrations.

In addition to addressing concerns within our synod, planning is underway for our 2025 Synod Assembly, which includes a bishop election. As with any bishop election, it is the responsibility of the current bishop to ensure the synod is in good order. Whether it's to enable starting a new term focused on new priorities or ensure the next bishop doesn't unknowingly step on a landmine, it is the current bishop's responsibility not to leave difficult things undone. Again, from the Synod Council guidelines: "It is the responsibility of the former pastor to be supportive of the successor, even when that is difficult to do. The responsibility for the success of the current pastor is also part of the former pastor's responsibility."

This is daily dying and rising, our baptismal vocation, sharing Jesus's abundant life. As we look to the future, we thank retired pastors for continuing to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments while maintaining healthy and appropriate boundaries, respecting the polices and best practices of this church, and trusting new and current leaders' judgment. Thank you!