

# Presider & Assembly



ELCA Lutheran Teachings and Practice



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This resource was prepared in January 2022 to address some common questions we receive from congregations looking for ways to worship faithfully in the midst of pandemic as well as in times of pastoral transition. For further reading, [The Use of the Means of Grace](#) (1997) is available in full online, and gives in-depth guidance on Christian worship to leaders and congregations in the ELCA.

We give thanks to God for you, and for your ministry. The questions you are asking put you in good company with Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and countless theologians and practitioners of the faith throughout the generations and the world. Thank you for your commitment to gathering faithfully as the Body of Christ.

The Rev. Anne Edison-Albright  
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*For Lutherans, the question for communion isn't whether or not communion is valid, but whether or not it is faithful. We believe that Jesus will show up; he promised to. Faithful communion, though, is not a matter of just saying certain words or making certain gestures. What we are concerned about is how well and clearly our practices communicate Christ's true presence and unconditional love. Lutheran Christians have decided that Christ's communion communicates best in the context of worship, with a called presider, in the presence of the assembly.*

**Our congregation is in transition, and we do not have a regular interim or supply pastor. We are having trouble arranging for supply pastors even once a month. Can you authorize a lay person to preach, baptize, and preside at communion?**

Not unilaterally. Through the SAM process, yes. A SAM, Synod Authorized Minister, is a lay person who has been publicly identified as a healthy lay leader in a community, passed a background check, and who has been prepared with some basic theological and ministry training. While bishops are given power and authority in our denomination, our polity—the way the church is organized and functions—makes sure decisions of importance aren't held by one person acting alone.

In the Augsburg Confession, we read that to preach and administer the sacraments, a person must have a proper public call, (German Text—XIV. Concerning Church Government.) In *The Use of the Means of Grace* and *Who is a Presiding Minister*, we learn that the synod bishop may make arrangements, in extraordinary circumstances, for the trained and publicly accountable lay people to preside at communion at one ministry context for a limited period of time. In *The Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, we find a detailed description of the training necessary to be a SAM and how, with oversight from the synod bishop and a group of lay and ordained ministers, a congregation may raise up a lay person for consideration to be a Synod Authorized Minister.

The East Central Synod of Wisconsin has some very limited experience with the bishop granting temporary authorization on an *ad hoc* basis. This has been the practice in some synods, but because it does not meet our denomination's standards for public participation and accountability, most synods have moved away from this and implemented some version of the SAM process described within the *Roster Manual*. Learning from my colleague bishops and studying this issue was a priority for me in 2021; developing a SAM process tailored for our synod is a priority in 2022.

In addition to the SAM process, my staff and I are working on:

- expanding our interim and preaching supply options;
- encouraging discernment and getting the word out about new paths into ordained ministry, and encouraging congregations in transition to consider being TEEM/internship/collaborative learning sites in partnership with ELCA seminaries;
- investing in and encouraging the ministry formation of lay school;
- and exploring creative and collaborative ministry partnerships, particularly where pastors currently serving in calls can assist and support congregations in transition.

Chances are good that you or someone from your congregation is at work with us on one or more of these creative possibilities. But, in the midst of transition, the work of the call process can seem pretty slow and far away, and anxiety is understandable. If you haven't already, email [jenn.pockat@ecsw.org](mailto:jenn.pockat@ecsw.org) to get on her list for congregations in transition to receive synod updates and resources for worship. Pastor Jenn Pockat, Associate to the Bishop and Director for Communication and Community, fills these messages with encouragement and timely, practical tools you can use for worship, especially on those Sundays when you do not have a pastor leading.

### **Can we have a pastor pre-consecrate the elements, for us to distribute on Sunday? Can we have a pastor record themselves consecrating the elements, and then play that during worship on Sunday?**

No, because for ELCA Lutherans, Holy Communion is celebrated in the context of the assembly (people who are gathered and who take part in the liturgy of Word and sacraments together, as well as not only the communion liturgy, but the larger context of the worship service.)

ELCA Lutherans believe that Holy Communion is a sacrament, given to us by Jesus. In the bread and wine of Holy Communion, Jesus' body and blood are truly present. We believe that this meal is something we receive by faith and that it strengthens our faith.

For ELCA Lutherans, the essential elements of Holy Communion are bread and wine, Christ's Word, a presider, and the assembly. Even in cases where communion is brought to people in hospitals, at home, or in other settings, care is taken to make clear that this is an extension of the meal celebrated by the assembly. In the previous section, we discussed the care we take with the presider; it is an important element. The assembly, for Lutherans, is just as vitally important to the meal. Because of our reformation history and theology, we do not celebrate communion in any way that can be construed as private or disconnected from the assembly.

The Covid 19 pandemic brought a lot of questions up for us about what constitutes "the assembly," and the members of the Conference of Bishops do not all agree on that. It's hard to discern the outcome of a reformation while it's underway, but as of January 2022, online worship practices where presider and assembly are "live"—where they are together in time, if not in space—seem more consistent with our values and theology than practices that disconnect presider from assembly through pre-recording. Similarly, pre-consecration is not a Lutheran practice, because of the disconnect between presider and assembly, and because it is a practice that stems from a different theology of communion.

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### I'm curious and I'd like to read more!

You are in luck! ;-). This is a crucial aspect of the bishop's role, especially right now, so I'm grateful for the chance to share more about it. At the end of this document there is also a list of resources for further reading.

In the ELCA, most often preaching and presiding is the work of pastors: called and ordained ministers of word and sacrament. At their ordination and installations, pastors make promises to God and to the whole church that they will be diligent and faithful in their study of scripture, their preaching of the Gospel, and in their use of the means of grace and administration of the sacraments. They also promise to uphold the Augsburg Confession, a document that came out of the origins of the Lutheran Church, as theologians Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon clarified what this particular reform movement stood for.

*Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper public call.*

**-The Augsburg Confession—German Text—XIV. Concerning Church Government, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.**

The issue of who presides, teaches and preaches is one of order and governance—it falls under what Lutherans call the first use of the law, “good order.” Good order is how we know what side of the road to drive on, when to stop and when to go in traffic, how to stand in line at the grocery store, and where to go to vote on election day. Part of good order in any organization is knowing who does what, and why. This may sound a little overly tidy and oppressive, but it's helpful to remember that good order is good, but it is only good if it results in the thriving and wellbeing of the Body of Christ. When it doesn't function that way, it needs to be questioned and reformed.

The Lutheran reformers wrote in the Augsburg Confessions that preachers and presiders must have a proper public call: in the German text, *on ordentlichen Beruf* (with *Beruf* meaning both call and vocation) and in the Latin text, *rite vocatus* (called in a regular manner with proper public authority.) From this, we know that it was important to our theological forebears that Lutheran preachers and presiders have authority derived from their call and vocation—a call that is issued, authorized and affirmed publicly and by proper public authority.

There is a lot that goes into the vetting, formation and education of a rostered minister in the ELCA, above and beyond this requirement of a call and vocation that is affirmed properly and publicly. The value to a congregation of a rostered pastor or deacon cannot be overstated in any terms; they are educated, trained, prepared, accountable and vetted for ministry.

In recognition of the reality that many people who are called to and equipped for ministry are in need of different paths, the options in the ELCA for that public and proper call to serve the church have increased dramatically in the past five or so years. If you have ever felt a call to pastoral ministry or the diaconate and thought “I can’t because ...” check out the websites of some ELCA seminaries, and make an appointment to talk to Pastor Asher O’Callaghan, [asher.ocallaghan@ecsw.org](mailto:asher.ocallaghan@ecsw.org), Associate to the Bishop and Director for Transitions and Discernment. Some of the larger categories of possible paths include the following:

In the ELCA, a pastor is a rostered **Minister of Word and Sacrament**. The most common route for people called to this role is to apply for entrance in the candidacy process through their home synod, at the same time as beginning studies through an ELCA seminary or a seminary or divinity school of another denomination (synod approval is required for non-ELCA formation, and at least a year of formation at an ELCA seminary is required.) The graduate degree held by pastors is a Master of Divinity (MDiv.) Seminaries have a wide range of options for MDiv. students: distance learning opens up options for many, as well as programs that reduce the number of years of study for some students. In our synod, the Collaborative Learning Education program through Wartburg Seminary has allowed several candidates to work part time in ministry contexts in our synod while taking seminary classes.

A deacon<sup>1</sup> is a rostered **Minister of Word and Service**. Deacons are rostered leaders in the ELCA who, like pastors, are clergy who have gone through the candidacy process, attended seminary, and received a Master’s degree. They are leaders who are called to combine their training and expertise—often in areas like medicine, music, education, social justice, business, law, etc.—with living out their faith in their call and vocation. Their symbol is the pitcher and towel Jesus used to wash the disciples’ feet, telling them to continue this act of service and love. Deacons are committed to proclaiming the Gospel through service, and to reaching out beyond the walls of the church to connect with the whole Body of Christ and the world. They serve as parish nurses, directors of faith formation, church musicians, directors of nonprofit organizations, and in faith-based advocacy roles, among many others.

Deacons in the ELCA may preach, but do not preside at communion or baptisms. In some cases, deacons are called to serve congregations as Synod Authorized Ministers, and then administering sacraments becomes a proper part of their public call.

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<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran Diaconal Association (<https://thelda.org/>) is a pan-Lutheran community of deacons, and includes opportunities for study and formation for lay people to become deacons. Going through this process does not make a person a rostered minister in the ELCA, but ELCA leaders—rostered and otherwise—participate in this community.

A **TEEM candidate** is a lay person from an underserved community in the ELCA (new mission start, rural ministry, racial or ethnic minority, etc.) lifted up by their congregation to serve as a pastor while receiving a shortened course of practical training; they become a rostered minister in the ELCA, and after their training and certification are able to serve as pastors anywhere in the ELCA.

A **Synod Authorized Minister (SAM)** receives a set course of training through a synod lay school, and with approval by a committee related to the candidacy and after passing a background check, is authorized by the synod bishop and the SAM Committee to serve a specific congregation for a set period of time. They do not become an ordained, rostered minister in the ELCA, and their service is reviewed each year and can be ended at any time by the SAM Committee and the bishop.

A **vicar or intern** is a student preparing for rostered ministry, engaged in an intensive period of learning in a ministry context. Several seminaries, like Wartburg and Luther, have programs where students can work in ministry contexts while taking seminary classes online; these students may also be called vicars, even before their internship year. Typically, vicars and interns do not preside at sacraments; vicars serving in detached sites (where they are the only pastor on site) may request and be granted the status of Synod Authorized Minister.

In the ELCA, pastors, deacons and lay leaders may also serve in a variety of ministry contexts as **chaplains**. To be a board certified chaplain in a medical setting or a military chaplain, ordination is required, but some contexts, including some campus ministries, call lay people as chaplains.

### But what about weekly communion?

I don't think you should feel ashamed for wanting to have communion every week. In *The Use of The Means of Grace*, exhorting congregations to move to weekly communion got a whole section: "Principle 35, The Holy Communion is Celebrated Weekly." In 1997, when that document was published, most congregations were not celebrating weekly communion; many celebrated communion every other week, monthly, or even less frequently. The reason for less frequent communion was because of that teaching that went back to the Augsburg Confession—to preside at communion, one must have a proper public call. As Lutherans started immigrating to and settling in the US, Lutheran pastors were often in very short supply, with circuit riders and multi-point parishes a norm. A lived theology and practice of holy communion grew up with this experience of limited access to clergy, and to communion. When I started as a pastor in 2010, many people I talked to about communion shared that they appreciated less frequent communion, because it emphasized the importance, preciousness and solemnity of the sacrament.

In 1997, though, pastors were not in short supply, and we were not in the COVID-19 pandemic. Liturgical reformers looked to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession and found a section on communion to be celebrated in worship on Sundays.<sup>2</sup> With the *Use of the Means of Grace*, and in their classrooms, they promoted a theology of worship that was full, joyful and abundant: warm, flowing water for baptism and remembrance of baptism, and plenty of it! Fresh baked bread and good wine for communion, every week. In divinity school and seminary, I learned how to convince my congregation to move toward weekly communion, communion for all the baptized (including babies), remembrance of baptism with a full font always at the center of our liturgical life, and other practices that reflected the joy and abundance of God’s grace through sacramental practice. This teaching formed me and I am so grateful for it; especially when I think about baking communion bread with children and joining the confirmation youth in splashing water on the congregation to help everyone remember their baptism. Church really overflows with God’s joy with this approach to worship!

In March 2020, I started to experience some strong cognitive dissonance around the sacraments, and you may have, too. After being so completely convinced that we needed weekly communion—that it was like medicine for us, a meal we came to because we were broken and hungry, and a table we left fed, forgiven and sent out for God’s mission—it was hard to hear that now we were going to fast from communion. Right from the start of my time as bishop in December 2021, another level of dissonance was added with the reality of so many congregations in transition and so few rostered ministers of Word and Sacrament available to serve in interim or supply roles. We started recommending that congregations in transition shift expectations from communion weekly to communion monthly, if possible.

I don’t expect you to immediately and painlessly revert to an older lived theology and practice of Lutheran worship, that pattern we had before when pastors were few and far between. I can’t make that leap without feeling a sense of loss, either. Something I have learned is that I need more humility and perspective when it comes to worship practices, and appreciation for the practices of previous generations. For the sake of good order, I have to be direct and clear about what current Lutheran practices are (and aren’t.) But we know: these practices have changed, and will continue to change. The church in 1997 did not anticipate this moment, any more than we can anticipate what’s coming a few decades from now. We hold together, we hold the central things, but the rest, we can hold lightly, with appreciation for different practices, what came before and what’s coming next.

Something that has helped me is this advice of a colleague bishop who offered that our worship practices often change seasonally: confession and forgiveness for some seasons,

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<sup>2</sup> That section, Article XXIV, is not about encouraging the church to have weekly communion, though. It’s about discouraging church leaders from celebrating daily or private masses; from “multiplying” the mass and using it to burden people’s consciences, create requirements and obligations for salvation, and extract more money from people.



remembrance of baptism for others, etc. Being in pastoral transition is a season.<sup>3</sup> It's temporary, and though not having a set end date can make it feel endless, it will end. For this season, you will have a different pattern of worship. It may feel awkward and incomplete; that may be inevitable. Instead of fighting that, we can say: This is our awkward, in-between season. We are being challenged and pushed out of our comfort zones, we are growing in faith and changing, and something new is happening, here. There is loss, and there is much to celebrate and anticipate, too.

In the midst of loss, change and resurrection hope, I am grateful to be your bishop. Thank you for the honor of accompanying you in this time of transition and new beginnings.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne Edison-Albright". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

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<sup>3</sup> We may be able to say this about the pandemic, too, although moving from pandemic to endemic doesn't feel as good as moving from pastoral transition to calling a new pastor.

## **Bibliography/Resources for further reading**

*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.* Eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000. See especially: The Augsburg Confession (1530), Article XIII and Article XIV; Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531) Article XXIV

*Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,* Adopted by the ELCA Church Council, March 8, 2020, “Synod-authorized ministries” p. 76

*The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Adopted by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, August 19, 1997.

*Who is a Presiding Minister?* Worship Formation and Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions. January 2013.

*The East Central Synod of Wisconsin is one of 65 synods in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. To learn more about the work of the synod, visit [www.ecsw.org](http://www.ecsw.org).*