



# Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

## **THE OFFICE AND MINISTRY OF THE BISHOP IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA** *A Shared Vision of Episcopacy and a Relational Agreement*

### **PREAMBLE**

The office of bishop has developed, been reformed, and locally adapted for the sake of the Church over many centuries. As ministers of the Gospel and in keeping with Scriptural, confessional, and the constitutional principles of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we pledge to fulfill faithfully our responsibilities within the office of bishop. As this church and the world move into the twenty-first century and third millennium of Christian witness, our vision of the office is summarized in the following four-fold description:

### **THE OFFICE OF THE BISHOP WITHIN THE OFFICE OF MINISTRY**

As a priesthood of believers, all baptized Christians are called to serve in the name of Christ. Some also are called and ordained for the ministry of Word and Sacrament, an office given by God for the sake of the Church. The ministry of Word and Sacrament is centered in the proclamation of the Word of God and the administration of the Holy Sacraments. This ministry embraces both the ministry of pastor within and for a local community of believers and of bishop within and for a communion of local communities” (*The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry*, Lutheran World Federation 1983). The ministry of bishops is understood as an expression of the pastoral ministry. Describing the office of the synodical bishop as the *synod’s pastor*, roots this ministry most deeply in its pastoral understanding.

### **THE OFFICE OF THE BISHOP WITHIN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

“Each bishop shall give leadership for ordained (Word and Sacrament ministry) and other ministries; shall give leadership to the mission of this church; shall give leadership in strengthening the unity of the church; and shall provide administrative oversight” (ELCA Study of Ministry: *Together for Ministry*, 1993). In exercising this leadership, the bishop is to give attention to four tasks:

- 1) to preach and teach the apostolic faith of the Church;
- 2) to provide for Word and Sacrament ministry within the territory of the bishop’s ministry, including the Church’s power to ordain;
- 3) to oversee the work of the Church’s mission within the territory of the bishop’s ministry; and
- 4) to give witness to the unity of the Church.

This church’s understanding of the apostolic faith, and the Creeds and Confessions that give witness to it, are described in its constitutions under the chapter title “Confession of Faith.”

### **THE OFFICE OF THE BISHOP WITHIN THE NATURE AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS CHURCH**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America understands itself to be one church in three expressions: congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. Each expression is fully the church, but not, by itself, the whole Church. These expressions work interdependently, rather than hierarchically. The ministry of bishops is to exemplify this understanding of interdependence. Bishops are accountable to the Gospel. Bishops also are accountable to those among whom they serve, to one another, and to this entire church. As individuals and as a conference, the bishops provide counsel to this church. In their public ministries, bishops draw attention to needs that must be addressed in Church and society.

### **THE OFFICE OF THE BISHOP WITHIN A CULTURE OF DIVERSITY AND CHANGE**

In serving the Gospel, the ministry of the bishop serves the Church. Because the Church is called and gathered by the Holy Spirit in a wide variety of settings and circumstances, it is useful and even necessary for there to be a

variety of gifts and styles of ministry exercised by those called to serve as bishops. Flexibility and adaptability — according to the mission needs of this church, but always within the confessional and constitutional understandings of this church and the collegial agreements of the Conference of Bishops — are both honored and encouraged. Emphasis on the servant nature of this ministry provides the consistency of purpose within the diversity of practice.

We view these understandings to be normative for our life and work together as bishops. They represent our collegial intentions. They presume that neither ecumenical agreements, nor the participation of this church in conciliar movements or organizations with churches that hold differing views of episcopacy, alter these understandings in any essential way.

*This relational agreement regarding the responsibilities of the synodical bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the relationships between and among them has been approved by them for their own advice and use.*

## I. RESPONSIBILITIES

For the purpose of this document, it is appropriate to summarize the responsibilities of synodical bishops as defined in the churchwide constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (**10.31.a.**). Their responsibilities as elected leaders of their synods include:

### A. WORSHIP AND SPIRITUAL OVERSIGHT

The synodical bishop, as the synod's pastor, regularly leads worship in congregations and in other gatherings of this church and, through a variety of activities and contacts, teaches the Christian faith, and provides spiritual leadership and oversight in the synod.

### B. PASTORAL CARE

The synodical bishop, as the synod's pastor has "primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this synod and its congregations, providing pastoral care and leadership for this synod, its congregations, its ministers of Word and Sacrament, and its ministers of Word and Service" (**†S8.12.b.**).

### C. MISSION PLANNING

As the chief executive of the synod responsible for the oversight of its life and work, the bishop is the chief planner for its life and mission, giving ongoing attention to the use of all its resources.

### D. MISSION INTERPRETATION

The bishop is the primary spokesperson for the synod in respect to its mission, theology, and life, both internally and externally. It is understood that others may be given specific interpretative assignments.

### E. MISSION ADMINISTRATION

Bishops also are the chief corporate and executive officers of their synods. In order to give fuller attention to other aspects of their responsibilities, it is understood that they often will exercise this leadership by delegating major administrative tasks to others who are accountable to them.

### F. ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

Bishops are the chief ecumenical officers of their synods and are a sign of the unity of the Church, between their respective synods and other denominational families and ecumenical organizations. It is understood that bishops may name other persons to assist them in maintaining contacts and in carrying out specific ecumenical and interreligious tasks.

### G. LIAISON

Synodical bishops, by virtue of their office, have high visibility across this whole church. Their contacts with each other and with the churchwide units, organizations, agencies, and institutions of this church form a vital network marked by collegiality. Through this network the bishops together support this church's

cohesiveness and public witness to the mission of the Church in service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This relational agreement among bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is designed to assist the bishops in their collegial relationships and contacts with one another in support of that witness.

## II. PRINCIPLES

Given the collegial nature of the responsibilities of the synodical bishops, it is appropriate to identify certain principles that govern those relationships.

### A. AUTHORITY

“This church recognizes that all power and authority in the Church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, its head. Therefore, all actions of this church...shall be carried out under his rule and authority...” (ELCA churchwide constitutional provision **5.01.**). Bishops are accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ, the whole Church, and to this church in the exercise of their ministries.

### B. GRACE

All humans sin and fall short of the glory of God but by God’s grace may be empowered to walk in newness of life. Bishops recognize the reality of sin and power of redemption both for themselves and for those whom they serve.

### C. WORTHINESS

Bishops recognize that leadership in the community of Christ carries with it the responsibility to represent the community faithfully (ELCA churchwide constitutional provision **7.22.**). By the grace of God bishops seek to live and act in a manner consistent with the Church’s confession of Christ.

### D. MERCY AND JUSTICE

Bishops recognize their pastoral responsibility both to admonish and to support those whose circumstances in life require special care.

### E. INTERDEPENDENCE

The constitution and polity of the ELCA envision this church as being composed of interdependent expressions, each with its own integrity (ELCA churchwide constitutional provisions **5.01.c.** and **8.11.**). Bishops recognize and support this principle.

### F. INCLUSIVENESS

Consistent with the ELCA’s commitment to be an inclusive church in the midst of the divisions in society (ELCA churchwide constitutional provision **5.01.b.**), bishops assist this church in fulfilling that commitment through their relationships and activities.

### G. VARIETY OF PRACTICE

In view of the interdependence of the various expressions of the ELCA, this church recognizes that decisions are to be made principally by the entity most directly affected (ELCA churchwide constitutional provision **5.01.c.**). This implies that some variety of practice will develop with integrity across this church. Bishops respect this variety.

### H. COMMUNICATION

Consistent with the interdependence and integrity of this church’s various expressions and of its variety in practice, bishops communicate with appropriate other bishops when dealing in their role as bishop with persons on the roster of another synod or with a congregation, an agency, or an institution beyond their own synod. Whenever possible, this communication should be done prior to any contact with a person rostered in another synod.

### I. LEADERSHIP NEEDS

The geographic, ethnic, and social diversity of this church means that leadership needs are equally diverse and never uniform in opportunity from synod to synod. In working with rostered leaders and candidates,

bishops consider persons focusing primarily upon the needs of this church for specific leadership, while also providing opportunity for individual preferences to be expressed and considered.

**J. SERVICE**

Inherent in the work of a bishop is the opportunity to gain a broader view of the needs of this church and of its public leaders. Informed by this broader view, bishops strive to deal with all candidates, rostered persons, congregations, institutions, and agencies.

**K. CONFIDENTIALITY**

The constitution of this church acknowledges and obligates all ordained ministers to the historic discipline of confidentiality in the exercise of the pastoral office (ELCA churchwide constitutional provision 7.45.). Bishops respect this discipline and practice in conferring with each other, seeking when appropriate the permission of the person involved before sharing confidential information with another bishop. Bishops also participate in a confidential listserv which provides a platform for sharing information that may be of benefit to all members of the conference of bishops. As a matter of courtesy, personal responses intended for a particular bishop are sent directly to the intended recipient rather than as a reply to the listserv.

**L. COLLEGIALITY AND SUPPORT**

Because of the nature of their responsibilities and opportunities in the Church's mission and ministry, synodical bishops work collegially together and provide personal and pastoral support to each other in the spirit of mutual accountability.

**III. APPLICATIONS**

The following applications are illustrative of the above principles:

**A. PREACHING AND TEACHING**

Before accepting any invitation to preside over any worship setting, or to be a preaching or teaching theologian in a place outside of one's synodical jurisdiction, bishops will confer with the bishop of the inviting synod, and they will honor that bishop's wishes regarding such an invitation. When serving on the governing board of an educational institution of this church, conferring with the synodical bishop about visits to the institution, meetings, and responsibilities related to board service is not always necessary.

**B. WORD AND SACRAMENT MINISTRY**

**1. Candidacy**

- a. Bishops recognize that the ongoing commitment of the ELCA to receive new members who are persons of color or persons whose primary language is other than English requires careful and constant focus in all aspects of the life of the synods. One aspect to which bishops give particular attention in respect to this goal is the development of current and future leaders of this church. Therefore, synodical bishops work regularly with committees, institutions, and other entities in order to develop the leadership of such persons.
- b. Synodical bishops exercise caution and selectivity for the sake of this church when responding to ordained ministers and others outside the ELCA for admission to the official rosters of this church.
- c. Synodical bishops recognize the necessity of receiving and sharing all pertinent information concerning applicants and candidates in order to assist in the full and forthright discernment of gifts for and impediments to rostered ministry.

**2. First Call and Ordination**

- a. In order to meet the full range of needs in the ELCA for rostered persons, synodical bishops seek to be sensitive to the needs in less popular locations and areas of the nation when determining synodical and regional assignment and reassignment.
- b. In dealing with first calls, bishops make judgments fairly and evenhandedly considering the following:
  - 1) Assessing the particular needs and opportunities in a ministry setting.

- 2) Assessing the skills, resources, and capacities of individual candidates for particular ministries.
  - 3) Considering the preferences and restrictions of individual candidates.
  - 4) Examining the priorities and preferences of the congregation or other entity involved in the call or employment.
- c. When a candidate has been assigned to a synod, the bishop will make prompt and regular contact with the candidate.
  - d. Bishops will not condone or support any attempts to arrange conversations or negotiations between candidates and congregations or other entities involved in calls or employment prior to the formal assignment of the candidate to the synod.
  - e. Bishops will not condone or support attempts by candidates, congregations, or calling entities to consider a candidate outside of the synod of assignment without the consent of the synodical bishop of assignment.
  - f. The bishops involved must approve the reassignment of a candidate from one synod to another. They will consult with the staff person in the Churchwide Organization, who is responsible for the reassignment, before the staff acts on such requests by candidates.
  - g. By mutual agreement between the two bishops, a candidate assigned to one synod may be considered in another synod without reassignment after the candidate has been made available to other synods in the region of assignment. Responsibility for the candidate rests with the synod of assignment. Such a “contingency assignment” should be communicated in writing to the appropriate person in the Churchwide Organization.
  - h. On behalf of this church, the bishop ordains (or provides for the ordination of) candidates. Ordinations are arranged and conducted consistent with the policy and practice of the synod whose bishop authorizes them. When the ordination takes place in another synod, however, all bishops involved must be in conversation. A bishop who conducts or authorizes an ordination in another synod will consult with and obtain the approval of that bishop prior to any planning for the ordination.

*See also ELCA bylaw 7.31.07.*

### **3. Mobility and Call Process**

- a. The practices of bishops differ in nominating candidates to congregations, agencies, and institutions both in respect to the number of persons nominated and the number of nominations a candidate may have simultaneously. Synodical bishops respect these differing practices and keep one another appropriately informed.
- b. Both in establishing policy for the nomination of persons for call and in actual nominations, bishops are aware that some persons face particular challenges with regard to placement. These societally informed challenges may change over time. Bishops give particular attention to persons who experience difficulty because of prevailing challenges.
- c. Bishops cannot assure any candidate of a call since this church has not made that commitment. However, bishops may provide the opportunity for candidates to be considered by appropriate congregations as calling or employing agencies.
- d. Bishops include a Confidential Information form with Rostered Minister Profiles when they are posted/shared.
- e. Bishops consult with the bishop of the synod where a minister is rostered prior to that rostered minister being considered for call by a search committee. When approached by another synod which is seeking to contact a rostered person regarding a prospective call, a bishop shall be mindful that rostered persons belong to the whole ELCA and not just the particular synod in which they currently serve. Requesting that another bishop refrain from contacting the rostered person will be based upon the same criteria a bishop would use when discouraging a rostered person's name from being considered by a congregation in the synod the bishop serves: e.g., premature interruption of present ministry (normally not less than three years), known personal or family circumstances that preclude a move at the present time. Recognizing the needs of this whole church for experienced

rostered ministers, bishops will seek to avoid “keeping” an individual who is open to serve where needed. The bishop of the synod of roster may inform another bishop of a rostered person’s stated desire to remain in that synod; also, other preferences and special circumstances may be communicated confidentially bishop-to-bishop. In general, however, encouragement to explore with a rostered person her or his openness to be considered by a specific calling congregation will be granted absent compelling reasons to deny clearance. Many bishops delegate to a staff member the responsibility to communicate with other synods concerning mobility and call of rostered persons.

- f. Bishops always are building relationships with one another. Critical to this process is the expectation that bishops will be consistently candid and sufficient in recommending a candidate to another bishop. A test of the necessity of sharing information with another bishop is: “What information would be helpful to me in consideration of the recommendation of a candidate for call?” Doubt about whether certain information should be shared will normally be decided in favor of disclosure.
- g. Bishops always are building relationships with parish pastors, churchwide partners, and with agencies and institutions of this church. Through these relationships they are assisted in the critical task of making personnel recommendations.
- h. Letters of Call are attested by bishops (†S8.12.e. in the *Constitution for Synods*). This is required for the issuance of a regular, recognized Letter of Call in this church. As the note on the form indicates, such attestation signifies that the call has been properly extended and that the stated terms are accurate. Letters of Call also are attested by the bishop, assuring that the conditions of service are consonant with ELCA documents. In both cases, attestation means that the person has been properly called. It does not imply approval of the “match” between the person and the position.
- i. When a local search committee approaches a bishop other than its own in respect to candidates, that bishop will respond by asking the committee to route its request through its own bishop.
- j. When a local search committee from another synod asks a bishop for an evaluation concerning an identified candidate known to that bishop, that bishop may provide such an evaluation, informing the bishop of the synod to which the committee is related of the evaluation.

#### 4. Synodically Authorized Ministers

Bishops will act within the stated parameters of the *Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters* when authorizing for Word and Sacrament ministry those persons who are not on this church’s roster of Word and Sacrament Ministers.

### C. OVERSIGHT OF MISSION

#### 1. Servanthood

Since servanthood in behalf of the Gospel is a mark of the Christian life and therefore of the Church’s public forms of ministry, synodical bishops do not equate success with specific titles, compensation, responsibility, or location in ministry for themselves or others.

#### 2. Funding the Mission

As the synod’s pastor, each bishop shall be an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament who shall exercise leadership in the mission of this church and in so doing interpret and advocate the mission of this church within the synod (See †S8.12.).

Members of the Conference of Bishops acknowledge their role and commit to support the mission and ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Conference members are further committed to advocate for the mission and ministry of the ELCA to the members of our synods and to encourage generous support for funding mission and ministry in our congregations, synods, and churchwide organization.

Synodical bishops acknowledge that partnership in funding the ministries of the ELCA requires trust, transparency, and mutual accountability, and understand that decisions made within each synod have an impact upon ministry together. They remain committed to look to the opportunities and needs

beyond individual synods as they seek together to serve, support, and witness in Jesus' name for the common good in the Church and in God's world.

**3. Companion and Partner Synod**

- a. Relationships with Companion Synods necessitates following the guidelines provided by the Global Mission unit. It is imperative to be fully aware of the unique cultures and patterns of life within the country and the church of a companion synod. Our commitment is to accompany each other in our shared mission and journey of faith. Conversations with the appropriate staff member in the Global Mission unit is an integral part of the program. Conversations with colleagues who have experienced visits and exchanges with their companion synods can be helpful, as well.
- b. The sharing of history, context, structure, and resources is the basis of the partner synod relationships. Opportunities may present themselves for visits or exchanges, as well. Ongoing prayer support is encouraged in both companion and partner synod relationships.

**D. WITNESS TO UNITY**

**1. Participation**

- a. Meetings of the Conference of Bishops are a high priority for synodical bishops, for the sake of one's self and each other and this church.
- b. The Academy for Bishops, when providing continuing education that informs and supports the ministry of bishops, holds the same high priority.

**2. Additional Service**

Bishops represent the Conference of Bishops on various boards and committees of this church. The terms and meeting schedules of these groups are conveyed by the group to the bishop. Normally these are advisory roles, affording voice but not vote. The conference appreciates but does not require oral or written reports on the actions and business, as the bishops involved deem appropriate. Bishops also serve on committees and task forces within the conference. These appointments are made by the Executive Committee. A survey of interests for these areas of service within the conference may be utilized to inform assignments. However, assignments to committees will reflect the needs of the conference and the committees themselves rather than the preferences of individual bishops.

**3. Affirmation and Admonition**

Bishops place a high value on their relationships within the Conference of Bishops, and strive to maintain a climate of trust and integrity with one another. Bishops respect one another's decisions, but also realize that local and synodical decisions and actions can have an impact in other areas of this church. In this regard, members of the conference hold one another accountable to Matthew 18:18. Bishops further commit themselves to honoring the eighth commandment in their work together.

**4. Ethics Following Service as Bishop**

- a. It is expected that when a synodical bishop leaves the office, he/she will continue to be a resource to this church, including those currently serving in the office of bishops. Every effort to make a smooth transition of leadership, including sharing of pertinent and confidential information on rostered leaders, congregations, etc. needs to be initiated by the bishop leaving office. It is essential that the trust and confidences between present and former bishops be maintained permitting the open exchange of pertinent information in a candid and sufficient manner.
- b. Synodical bishops who retire, resign, or conclude their service as bishop shall respect the integrity of the office in which they no longer serve, and shall not exercise functions assigned to synodical bishops without direct invitation from the current bishop of the synod or the presiding bishop.
- c. Terms of address for those who no longer serve in the office of synodical bishop vary throughout this church. Some synods confer the honorary designation "Bishop Emeritus," others do not. Former bishops should be mindful of proper use of title following their term of service, so as to be clear that they are former, not current.