



Greater Milwaukee Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's Work. Our Hands.

A Pastoral Letter on Retiring Pastors
March 12, 2018

*Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.
Moreover, it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy. (1 Corinthians 4:1-2)*

Dear friends in Christ:

I believe that the calling to serve as a parish pastor is one of the most challenging and rewarding ways to live out one's baptismal calling. We are invited and expected to engage in a wide variety of ministries, from visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, welcoming the stranger, teaching, preaching, administering, strategizing, and loving the people whom God has called us to love. I love being a pastor, and I can't imagine using my gifts, passions, and experiences in any other way.

One of the most challenging dimensions of serving a particular congregation comes when it is time for us to take our leave. Whether it is because we have accepted a new call or entered retirement or for some other reason, leaving the people we have grown to love is hard. But leave we must.

In the case of retirements, our ELCA governing documents are clear: "A retired pastor should not remain a member of the congregation served at the time of retirement. Transferring one's membership to another congregation allows the successor pastor to assume pastoral leadership more readily. It also provides an opportunity for the retired pastor to enter fully into the life of a different congregation with clarity about the pastor's retired role." (ELCA Roster Manual, p. 37) Our constitution also clarifies that pastors are not to exercise any ministerial functions in congregations which they do not serve unless they are invited by the pastor or interim pastor. (GMS Constitution, S14.19)

In my time of service as the bishop of this synod, I have become aware that, while these provisions are widely understood, they are not widely embraced, and in too many cases, they are not being followed. While I recognize that some may view these guidelines as unduly harsh and against the stated desire of many pastors and congregations, I have found that whenever they are not followed, congregational life and health are hindered.

My calling is to be a steward of the mysteries we call congregations. As my staff and I accompany congregations in transition, we will be including in our work the clear and firm expectation that retired pastors not retain their membership nor be involved in the congregations from which they retire. I know this is hard and that it involves a painful separation from people we have come to know and love deeply, but I also know that this is a necessary step if our congregations are going to enter the next chapter of their life and ministry on healthy terms.

We will be working to provide additional resources to assist leaders in our synod with all of the transitions we face, and I welcome your comments and questions and, most importantly, your prayers.

In Christ,

Paul D. Erickson, Bishop