

# SUSTAINING FIRST CALLS



Resources for effectively navigating the transitions and challenges of a First Call in the ELCA

A H A N D B O O K O F B E S T P R A C T I C E S

*For synods, seminaries, and  
all those who offer support  
to first call leaders*



*Living in God's amazing grace*



# S U S T A I N I N G FIRST CALLS

A HANDBOOK OF BEST PRACTICES  
IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**he Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is blessed to have a continuing stream of new, hope-filled, well-prepared women and men who accept a call to rostered ministry. For over ten years, the ELCA has guided a program of ‘First Call Theological Education’ that provides three years of collegial support and skills training as people begin their public ministry.

We have learned a great deal about what contributes to effective first call ministries. Synods, seminaries, institutes, churchwide units, regions, Web sites, and individuals have written or developed materials, programs, and events for supporting the church and its leaders through the first years of public ministry. We have much knowledge about what is effective and where the needs seem to be greatest. We have taken initiative in creating excellent programs and processes for these beginning years.

A good foundation is essential for best practices to flourish. The ideal foundation for ELCA first call leaders includes programs like First Call Theological Education (FCTE). People who have worked with these programs have identified characteristics that provide nurture and support. Some of those are:

- Mentors and sufficient nurture of newly rostered leaders
- Collaboration and consultation among those who are leaders
- Sufficient staff time for coordination and frequent communication
- Creative planning
- Standards, guidelines, and clear expectations
- Seminary interest in effectiveness of preparation
- Recognition, rewards, and resources for the journey

Leaders in synods, regions, seminaries, and churchwide offices who have attended to FCTE programs and support for first call rostered leaders have much wisdom to share. Through many efforts, with trial and error, feedback and revision, we have documented discoveries of the kind of programming and support that is helpful for newly called rostered leaders. Much has been gleaned, learned, revealed, and demonstrated in the ten

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.

— I CORINTHIANS 4:1

years that an intentional program has been in place. We now share these discoveries with the church, with hope that every newly called pastor, deaconess, associate in ministry, and diaconal minister in the ELCA will benefit from the best practices that are known regarding the transition into public ministry.

## Background and History

The ELCA Study of Theological Education (1995) launched a formal expectation that every first call rostered leader would engage in continuing education and growth as a new pastor, associate in ministry, deaconess, or diaconal minister. The common purpose of First Call Theological Education has been to enhance the transition from seminary into leadership roles in the parish. FCTE involves theological reflection and collegial support as it builds upon foundations provided through education and preparation for public ministry.

**The three dimensions of leadership that are the focus of this program are:**

- Ministerial identity
- Ministerial skills and practice
- Discernment of the context for ministry

**First Call Theological Education programs include four learning components:**

- Core program
- Electives
- Mentoring or colleague groups
- Structured reading

Implementation of this churchwide requirement has led to longer, healthier first calls for newly rostered leaders and their congregations. It has resulted in new habits of learning and leadership that serve both the congrega-

tion and the wider church. The ELCA and its rostered leaders have been strengthened by this initiative.

### **Transition into Ministry**

More recently, through a generous grant from Lilly Endowment, the churchwide office has explored first call initiatives through a number of efforts, including:

- Surveys of first call leaders
- Focus groups with various cohorts
- Multigenerational events
- Events with pastors of color
- Rural ministry focus groups
- Community organizing focus groups
- Outreach focus groups

This resource is intended to gather some of those discoveries, insights, learnings, and advice. The purpose of this handbook is to ‘cross fertilize’ among the various programs and people who pay attention to first call initiatives.

We liberally borrow from among all the partners who have provided expertise, care, savvy, creativity, determination, and love to this important stage of public ministry. We thank the hundreds of people whose stories and wisdom are reflected in this handbook. The journey continues... and we offer Best Practices for synods, candidates, first call rostered leaders, candidacy committees, congregations, seminaries, and other partners in the journey through a first call in the ELCA.

## FIRST CALL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

**I**n the ELCA the requirement for a three-year program is carried out through many varieties of creative implementation. Synodical, multisynodical, and regional programs are thriving across the church. The rate of involvement and resulting benefits are a remarkable accomplishment in the ELCA. After ten years we can clearly see acceptance of programs and evidence of their effectiveness and value.

Synods report that almost all rostered first call leaders participate in programs that are offered. Most programs include colleague groups with leaders (in 78% of synods). 61% of the synods provide mentors for newly rostered leaders. Yearly events with speakers, small group discussions, spiritual formation, and recreation or refreshment are held in most areas of the church.

### Regional Collaboration

Many synods report that regional programs seem to strengthen a first call theological education initiative. They are particularly valuable when there are transitions in synod bishops and staff associates, since the program structures and practices can be more effectively maintained during those times of change.

Some regions involve several or all synod bishops in first call events and report this as a highlight. Such a common commitment among bishops strengthens the program and provides opportunities to build relationships with newly rostered leaders who feel affirmed by such an experience. Bishops are mutually accountable and share a commitment that sustains and strengthens their regional programs.

### Consultation and Cooperation

Partners are challenged to strengthen and sustain first call networks through collaboration, consultation, and intentional connections. Places where best practices seem to thrive are characterized by listening, gathering, celebration, worship, and a collective sense of imagination for the future.

Bishops learn from each other and contribute to a more consistent approach to first call support across the ELCA when they engage in conversation about ef-

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fective practices and initiatives. Some regional programs include regular review of the program by the bishops or other planners. A churchwide gathering every few years for bishops and bishop's assistants for consultation and learning is a valuable custom to maintain.

Many FCTE programs use parish pastors as presenters. These pastors gain a new appreciation for first call pastors. They also become identified as readily accessible resource people to first call leaders who provide current perspectives on national as well as local resources.

The direct involvement of first call leaders seems to be an effective practice for planning and developing highly successful aspects of first call theological education programs. Cooperative initiatives bring vitality and enthusiasm to first call programs. As methods, content, and delivery options are explored, a collaborative approach will bring out the best among leaders.

Many programs give attention to newly rostered Associates in Ministry, Diaconal Ministers, and Deaconesses. While the small numbers in each synod present a particular challenge, those synods and programs that make an effort to provide appropriate programs and support for lay rostered leaders find that this results in more satisfied and connected leaders.

Places where best practices seem to thrive are characterized by listening, gathering, celebration, worship, and a collective sense of imagination for the future.

This has been especially true for synods that encourage and expect rostered lay leaders to join first call colleague groups. Synods have reported that this effort results in a deeper knowledge and appreciation for the work and ministry contributions that deaconesses, diaconal ministers, and associates in ministry bring to their ministry and to the church.

### Content

FCTE programs follow basic standards for core content and electives that are offered to newly rostered leaders. A wholistic approach to planning affirms the value of FCTE programs by connecting attention to mind, body, and spirit with one's ministerial identity. Health and wellness is receiving increased attention in programs across the church. Recognition is given to the value of providing rostered leaders spiritual nourishment and encouragement for healthy balance in life.

Other effective programs offer a three-year curriculum that covers various ministry skills areas for FCTE (worship, stewardship, evangelism, teaching, community context, vocation of the baptized, administration, etc.). One program provides copies of a book to read prior to the yearly event which invites reflection on pastoral identity. This practice encourages good reading habits as well as intentional identity formation.

### Benefits of FCTE Programs

From recent reports, the impact of First Call Theological Education on synods, congregations, and leaders includes the following:

- More collegiality among new pastors and increased accountability
- Fewer 'lone rangers'
- Better understanding of and appreciation for the synod and the wider church
- Longtime pastors see value as they learn of FCTE
- First call leaders are visible and better known as a group
- Better interaction among synods in a region
- Events provide a refreshing reunion time for seminary classmates to share joys, concerns, and insights
- Increased connections of newly called rostered leaders from different seminaries
- Increased support and training opportunities
- Reinforcement of the importance of continuing education/lifelong learning

Issues that continue to be significant as FCTE evolves include:

- Increasing awareness in synods of opportunities to support the newly rostered and their congregations in healthy and creative ways
- Increasing efforts to establish mentor and colleague groups and train leaders adequately
- Attending to stewardship of time and resources as programs are planned
- Meaningful worship for FCTE participants
- Ongoing evaluation of content and format of programs



## BEST PRACTICES IN SYNODS

**S**ynods report a variety of effective practices that have emerged as they support the transition into ministry over the first three years through First Call Theological Education. Reports from synods suggest that significant contributions are being made to the development of new pastors and lay rostered leaders in the ELCA as they begin congregational ministry.

Increased awareness of the challenges and opportunities of first call ministry is reported by many synod staff persons. One of the primary needs for a candidate in transition from seminary to congregation is clear and continual communication with a synod.

### Call Process Practices

Many synods make effective use of electronic communication (Web, e-mail) as well as printed information, face-to-face interaction, and telephone contact throughout the first call process. Synod teams who are consistent in communication with candidates, the newly assigned, and first call leaders are consistently given high marks by grateful first call candidates.

From the first contact, synods strive to convey information about synod policies, procedures, and mission approaches to first call leaders. Such information includes sharing vision and mission statements, policies, standards, directories, and other insights into the synod, its life, and its vision.

Solicitation of feedback from first call leaders also reflects a strong communication loop. Newly rostered leaders can provide valuable insights from those personally involved with the call process and leadership support concerns. Fresh perspectives on the challenges experienced by new leaders can help synod staff leaders continue to refine effective practices. A system to monitor morale, networks, relationships, and support needs is valuable. One synod uses retired clergy to develop and oversee this system. Another synod regularly seeks evaluation of the first call process from new leaders.

Personal contact provides important affirmation to leaders as they begin their ministry. This is accomplished through informal communication or a more organized

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system, such as a synod First Call Committee. In this practice, members meet with each first call leader for an annual review to offer support and encouragement for full involvement in FCTE.

### Assigned Candidates

Many synods and regions have a clear commitment to welcoming newly assigned candidates and an established system for doing so. Once synods receive the names of ministry candidates assigned to them, they immediately begin building a strong relationship. Assigned candidates rely on synod staff to orient them to synod practices and expectations, as well as to facilitate communication with the bishop and other synod staff.

Confirmation of a call to rostered ministry is provided in many ways and on many levels during the transition from candidacy into first call. Some of the more public practices include:

- Candidacy Approval
- A formal vote by a congregation
- The rite of ordination, consecration, or commissioning

Less formal but equally significant moments of confirmation occur as a candidate plans a move, follows

Regardless of the initial system of assignment by the region, the more effective synods employ a variety of techniques—from welcome letters to personal visits to prompt phone calls—in order to successfully launch a long term, mutually beneficial and collegial relationship.

protocol for interviews, negotiates call documents, and navigates this challenging period of time. Reassurance from church leaders offers encouragement as well as a gift of grace in this transition.

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This includes:

- An introduction to the synod
- Clear expectations of the call process
- Connections with other rostered leaders
- Regular communication
- Personal contact with the synod bishop

Orientation for an assigned candidate may include a variety of effective methods, such as:

- An entire group of newly assigned leaders flown in for a gathering
- One-on-one meetings with each new leader
- A written description of the call process
- Weekly phone call or other communication from synods throughout the call process
- A program to encourage or offer coaching or mentoring

- Referral resources for spiritual direction, counseling, or other needs
- Continuing education information provided and learning covenants explained
- Including spouses in orientation sessions and considering family situations and needs
- Synod prayer lists that include first call candidates

Synods want to empower newly assigned and rostered leaders to do well, to be effective, and to establish collegial relationships. From surveys with first call leaders, we know that ongoing communication is critical to effective and healthy support of leaders as they become aware of synod expectations and culture, opportunities for personal development as well as the needs of the wider church. The best practices include plans for ways to integrate new leaders into the life and activity of the synod itself and the wider church.

Strongly connected leaders serve as a liaison with the congregation where they serve, building important connections for the work of the church. Investment by synod leaders from early in the relationship reaps rewards for the whole church.

The most effective synods establish practices based on research, feedback, and opportunity to offer helpful support and to boost morale among the rostered leaders of the synod. These synods take the initiative to find out what first call leaders want throughout the three years of the program. A consultative style integrates first call leaders into the synod more fully.

### Candidacy Committees

How Candidacy Committees communicate about developing expectations for rostered ministry assists in the transition into public ministry. Candidacy Committees have an ongoing relationship with every candidate for public ministry in the ELCA.

Markers of effective support by Candidacy Committees:

- A meaningful personal relationship with a member of the committee
- Public acknowledgement or rituals for (each) transition

- An experience of community during the candidacy process
- Confirmation of an external call
- Acknowledgement that imperfection and mistakes are part of the formative process
- Collegial approach with candidate that models an effective style of public ministry
- Understanding the unique role and responsibility of a ‘sending synod,’ beyond approval and through the transition into public ministry

The candidacy process provides an opportunity to nurture a growing confidence in the call to each candidate at entrance, endorsement, and approval stages. The final decision made by a Candidacy Committee is recorded on the Approval Decision Form (Form E), which also states recommendations related to First Call Theological Education. Committees can address the following aspects in that recommendation:

- Identify particular gifts and strengths, such as relational gifts, passion for learning, or being open to mentoring
- Identify specific areas where the candidate might focus on further learning or reflection
- Encourage the candidate to fully utilize a first call program

Candidacy Committees seek to be both a place for evaluation as well as a supportive and welcoming community, helping the candidate make the transition from being a congregation member to representing the church as a rostered leader. At the completion of the candidacy process a conversation about the candidacy experience and insights gained will model a critical-reflective process that will be useful in future ministry. Formation and identity concerns can be given attention throughout the candidacy process as vocational discernment emerges for every candidate.

### Building Relationships

Synods have reported encouraging trends in the attitudes, accountability, and effectiveness of newly rostered leaders who 1) feel less alone, 2) are more accountable,

**Sustaining newly called leaders results in long term service which can contribute to increased stability for congregations in the synod.**

3) are open to healthy relationships, 4) are open to ongoing learning, and 5) are more likely to establish healthy habits.

Relationship building is a priority for synods with newly called leaders. Sustaining newly called leaders results in long term service which can contribute to increased stability for congregations in the synod. A variety of methods to assist in keeping new leaders informed, educated and ‘in touch’ is critical to a synod seeking to use best practices. Practices in synods include:

- Scholarships to attend synod theological or leadership conferences
- Orientation for all new rostered leaders in the synod
- Personal visits to first call leaders by a synod first call team member

Synods encourage ongoing spiritual formation and provide information and encouragement about programs, retreats, spiritual direction, and other activities that nourish the spirit. Many synods make spiritual formation and self-care a vital part of their yearly leadership conference and other events.

Age and gender concerns are given attention in many synods. Synods are sensitive to the possibility that women might transition into public ministry in different ways from men and that congregations might have culturally formed attitudes about the roles of each gender. Advocates for women in ministry, sometimes women clergy, can provide insight and counsel about best practices as well as wisdom for addressing issues of sexism, ageism, or other concerns for justice as new leaders begin ministry.

Synods that reflect on what makes a congregation and a first call leader work well together are more likely to facilitate more successful matches.

Synods address concerns through such activities as:

- Cultural immersion training for first call leaders
- Anti-racism training
- Women in Ministry events
- Particular support for leaders of color

### Lay Rostered Leaders

Lay rostered leaders are called to provide leadership and support for ministries of the whole people of God. They provide care and nurture as they equip God's people in Christian faith. Synods acknowledge that efforts to orient and support lay rostered leaders—associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers—frequently do not provide sufficient attention to their particular needs.

FCTE programs are generally geared toward clergy, leaving synods as well as newly rostered lay people frequently unfulfilled by what is offered. Some larger programs do provide a 'critical mass,' but there is a desire by these leaders to be more fully integrated into the life of the church.

Programs with some success in integrating lay rostered leaders reflect some common characteristics:

- Intentionally inclusive language
- Small group involvement
- Affirmation of varieties of calls
- Integration into worship life in congregations and synod events
- Recognition of lay rostered leaders in synod activities

### Congregations

Identifying and assisting in the call process of congregations that are the best contexts for first call candidates is another challenge addressed effectively by many synods. Synods are aware that some congregations are excellent in supporting and encouraging first call pastors and lay rostered leaders. Knowledge of such congregations and the unique aspects of their mission and ministry can be shared with other congregations considering a first call candidate. Synods that reflect on what makes a congregation and a first call leader work well together are more likely to facilitate more successful matches. Criteria reported by synods in identifying what an appropriate first call congregation is include:

- Relatively stable – no recent conflicts
- Can afford and sustain adequate compensation
- Open to new rostered leader who is learning on the job: eager to be a training site
- Gifts, age, maturity of candidate
- A sense of partnership in ministry
- Previous history of congregation
- Congregation willing to change, grow, and learn
- Congregation's sense of God's mission for them

### Emerging Issues for Synods

Synods are able to identify emerging issues and needs in their FCTE program as well as the relationship with each assigned candidate. Consultation with colleagues in other synods provides a way for evaluation to take place. Some issues that synods continue to address include:

- Distance, geography, and numbers
- Funding
- Leadership, mentor and colleague training
- Coordination of programs
- Lay roster concerns
- Sensitivity to cultural and ethnic diversity
- Use of ecumenical colleague groups

There is promise in this ELCA initiative. Rostered leaders overall are being well-served by healthy and strong practices for transition into ministry.

## SEMINARY CONNECTIONS

**S**eminaries prepare students for first call ministry by expanding knowledge through academic work as well as formation through community life. The collective wisdom from ELCA seminaries suggests best practices for assisting in the transition into ministry.

Seminaries provide theological education and formation for faithful, wise and courageous leaders. The eight seminaries of the ELCA prepare almost 90% of people who become pastors in this church.

### Learning the Basics

Seminaries recognize that the focus for their resources is providing theological fundamentals for the practice of ministry. Practical courses and contextual education also make up a significant portion of the seminary experience. While it is not possible to provide comprehensive training for specific skills (e.g., clinical counseling, business management, and stewardship and evangelism programs) in a degree program, the seminaries actively encourage lifelong learning as a way of developing further skills for ministry.

First call leaders reported through our surveys that seminaries are a good place for learning basics for parish ministry in the ELCA. Best practices in seminaries include faculty who are regularly involved in and connected to congregational life. Faculty members continue to sharpen their own pastoral skills and use the congregational context as a learning arena for seminary education. The capacity of faculty in all the disciplines to regularly highlight the pastoral significance of coursework is particularly valuable. In addition seminaries are wise to involve adjunct faculty from the pastoral field to teach courses or modules related to theology and practice.

Rural first call pastors express the value of a seminary education that includes teaching ‘people skills’ and how to relate to people in different contexts. They affirm the value of a team ministry approach for encouraging a supportive environment for ministry, with effective methods for nurturing a collaborative spirit.

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### Contextual Education

Seminaries recognize various learning styles among students and make an effort to provide enriching field work as well as opportunities for research, projects, and reflection. By giving significant attention to contextualized learning, seminaries also recognize that their students are establishing habits to engage in the opportunity to learn throughout their service as rostered leaders.

Some seminaries use a checklist to assure that students experience and explore important skills and activities in their internship. Internship — a signature practice in Lutheran theological education — offers particularly valuable opportunities for gaining many such skills, and congregations are used where a range of skills can be developed while engaged in contextual learning. Selection of internship congregations is done through careful screening, and supervisors are appropriately trained by seminaries.

Seminaries provide an integrative opportunity for students when they return from internship so that reflection on the experience is intentional and rigorous. Assisting students in developing habits of theological reflection is important for effective rostered ministry.

### Partnership with Candidacy

The ELCA screens and approves every individual who seeks to serve on a roster of the ELCA through a church-wide candidacy process. Communication with Candidacy Committees reflects a seminary’s commitment to the best preparation of candidates for public ministry in the church. As endorsement and approval decisions are made, those people responsible for the candidacy process at the seminary play a significant role in facilitating the process and providing open and honest communication about every candidate. Synods value regular and ongo-

ing consultation and exchange of information regarding every candidate from seminary partners.

### Assignment and Transition

Seminary students benefit from their seminary's attention to and monitoring of their progress through the assignment and call process. Seminaries describe important issues for students making the transition from seminary life into a first call that include:

- Completion of requirements
- Seminary housing transition
- Interview skills
- Employment during the transition time
- Understanding protocol for the churchwide assignment and interview process
- Support and communication
- Spouse and family concerns

### Spiritual Formation and Readiness for Ministry

Attention to spiritual formation or more personal dimensions of ministry is a valuable practice in ELCA seminaries. Students are oriented to spiritual formation and health and wellness issues, provided with opportunities both corporately and individually, and encouraged to participate in practices that nourish their spiritual life and prepare them for many aspects of public ministry. Seminaries encourage growth in faith through activities such as:

- Being intentional about the spiritual life of the community through chapel, small groups, and other experiences
- Offering workshops and retreats for faith formation
- Gathering families for support and nurture
- Providing funding to help pay for spiritual direction
- Encouraging healthy practices, such as prayer or fitness disciplines
- Offering boundary workshops
- Holding anti-racism training
- Offering cultural immersion experiences

### Leadership and Learning

Alumni first call leaders continue to turn to seminaries for learning, resources, and wisdom for continuing education programs and consultation as they seek to remain current in ministry trends. Seminaries are partners in developing and sustaining leaders, from first year seminary students through lifelong learning opportunities. Leadership development is a growing focus for ELCA seminaries.

### Emerging Issues

- The role of the seminary in FCTE can be clarified and strengthened
- Seminaries might coordinate research efforts with the churchwide office to better assess what preparation is needed and valued in the first years of ministry
- Communication with candidacy committees can be strengthened and the role of seminary in the candidacy/assignment process can be clarified
- Effective collaboration among seminaries for exchange of internship sites can be encouraged as a way to maximize the benefits of contextual education, building on the Horizon model
- Attention to student financial concerns includes implications for first calls



## CHURCHWIDE ROLES AND SUPPORT

**P**roviding support, continuity, research, and resources for effective ministry, the churchwide office partners with synods, seminaries, life-long learning centers, and first call leaders to sustain and enhance first call ministry.

The churchwide expression of the ELCA is committed to cooperation, collaboration, and coordination among its units and its partners, including congregations, synods, and the agencies and institutions of this church. Leadership development is identified as a priority focus of churchwide work because leadership is central to achieving all of the strategic directions of the ELCA. The churchwide organization can effectively engage and support rostered and other leaders who serve in and through this church's congregations, synods, institutions, agencies, associations, and churchwide organizations.

The goal of this work is to "Assist this church to bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God's mission in a pluralistic world" (ELCA Strategic Direction 5, "Faithful Yet Changing: Planning for Mission," 2003).

First Call Theological Education fits into a constellation of initiatives and programs of the ELCA. The transition into public ministry requires a significant investment by all partners to equip and orient new leaders for service through the rosters of the church. Churchwide staff convenes gatherings to exchange wisdom about leadership development and supporting congregations in the call to be faithful, welcoming, and generous faith communities. Leadership development and support in transitions includes:

**A. Recruitment** strategies in the ELCA serve to encourage all God's people to be responsive to God's call through baptism. The ELCA provides opportunities to consider all life and work in relation to a Lutheran understanding of Christian vocation. Strategic planning includes particular attention to recruitment of leaders for ethnic communities as well as younger people who might have gifts for ordained ministry.

**B. Candidacy** is a churchwide process of hospitality, formation, and evaluation for rostered leadership. Policies and guidelines are developed so that a con-

"...bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God's mission in a pluralistic world."

sistent and fair process is carried out across 65 ELCA synods. Regionally deployed staff are present at every candidacy committee meeting where decisions are made, to assist in implementing the process in a consistent manner.

**C. Fund for Leaders in Mission** is a major initiative by the ELCA to provide scholarships for candidates for rostered ministry who attend ELCA seminaries. A growing number of scholarships are awarded based on merit and need.

**D. Seminaries** of the ELCA receive significant funding and support from the churchwide organization. Meetings of key faculty and staff are convened, clusters are supported, and coordination of programs is encouraged among the key learning centers for ordained ministry in the ELCA.

**E. Assignment** of approved candidates for rostered ministry is a responsibility carried out at the churchwide level. The ELCA is committed to effective and fair deployment of leaders for the ministry of this church. The Conference of Bishops has established guidelines for appropriate conduct during the assignment process.

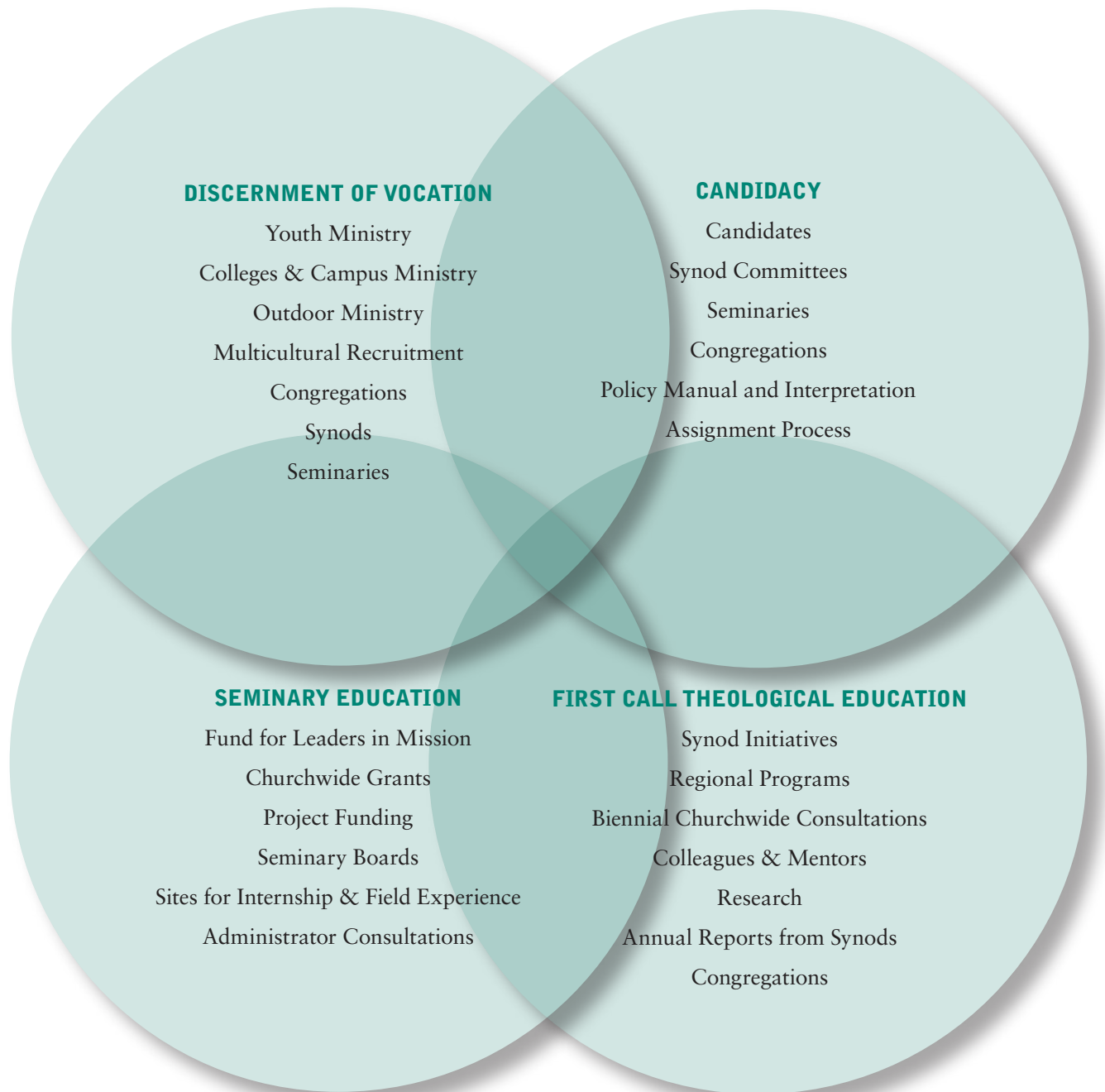
Best practices in implementing the assignment process include attention to many issues that impact this process:

1. Who 'counts' in the calculations for distributing candidates fairly among the regions is clearly defined, and candidates are truly available, affirming and maintaining integrity in the system.
2. Vacancies in congregations have common cri-

## Churchwide Partnerships In Developing Leaders

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STRENGTHENING A NETWORK





teria for a congregation to be a suitable first call congregation.

3. Resources are available to synods for encouraging the establishment of good habits for lifelong learning among newly rostered leaders.

4. Assignment of lay rostered leaders is given adequate attention.

5. Protocol for the process is clear, assuring a fair and equitable system, so that the transition into ministry has a good start.

**F. First Call Theological Education and Leadership Support** are critical to sustaining leaders in public ministry. The ELCA makes a commitment to the support of every first call rostered leader. Churchwide standards and guidelines for FCTE program participation are established and assist synods and regions in assessing their programs.

**G. Multicultural Leadership Development** is given priority, as we attend to concerns regarding the commitment to diversity in the ELCA as well as the particular issues faced by our ethnic leaders.

**H. Trends in Leadership** are monitored through attention to research, history, and support of particular constituencies, such as women, women of color, Latino, younger leaders, etc. The ELCA is committed to using research for decision making and better understanding of trends for the future.

### Emerging Issues for the ELCA

- Convening leaders of FCTE programs for mutual sharing and consultation
- Exploring the vocation of first call congregations, particularly in rural and small town settings, where most first call pastors are called.
- Enhancing the churchwide assignment process so that it best serves the church
- Providing research, interpretation, and support to synods and FCTE programs

## CONGREGATIONS AND FIRST CALL

**T**here are a variety of factors that make a congregation an appropriate first call site. The vocation of a first call congregation includes discernment of the most effective approaches to welcoming, supporting, and growing with the newly rostered pastor or lay rostered person.

The ELCA Transition into Ministry project has begun to discover a constellation of factors that might impact how first call pastors and lay rostered leaders are welcomed and sustained in their public ministry in a congregation. While further study of exemplary congregations (“The Vocation of First Call Congregations,” 2006-2009) will reveal some key characteristics of effective first call congregation sites, some markers have been identified for congregations that suggest a healthy start.

Congregations can be effective ‘first call’ congregations if they:

- Consider their context as a training ground for new pastors
- Understand this role as a vocation for the congregation
- Are patient with mistakes and willing to learn and grow together
- Encourage and model flexibility, resiliency, and maturity
- Honor the fresh perspectives of their first call leader
- Offer intentional entry into the life of the community
- Encourage participation in lifelong learning as well as Sabbath time

Congregations prepare in many ways to welcome a first call leader. Congregations can recognize the strengths and gifts of their community and communicate information and perspectives to the new leader. The new leader can then engage in the nurture and enhancement of these assets.

The highest percentage of first calls for clergy in the ELCA is to rural congregations. Transition into Ministry assists the ELCA in affirming those rural and small town congregations where first call leaders tend to serve and

offer resources. Many of these rural and small town congregations have been consistently welcoming and supportive of pastors just out of seminary. Through focus group research with rural first call pastors we learned about their challenges as well as their joys:

- Learning about what makes rural people “tick” is an important intentional effort
- A feeling of isolation is often related to the challenge in building friendships
- Bringing the gospel message of hope and life in the midst of loss of family farms and dwindling membership is critical
- Equipping members to be leaders and have a vision for mission (even if the future is uncertain) has been missing in rural ministries
- Spending time with people wherever they gather or work or play brings much satisfaction and joy.

FCTE participation is expected in most synods. Most synods assure that time and funding for this benefit is indicated in the call documents from the congregation. The congregation benefits from their new pastor’s involvement in continuing education specifically designed for new pastors in the first three years of ministry. From synod reports, the impact of first call programs on first call congregations includes:

- More appreciation for the significant transitions of newly called persons
- Increased awareness of the ‘learning curve’ for newly called leaders
- Healthier pastors and lay rostered ministers
- Benefit from new ideas brought back from FCTE events
- Understanding the congregation’s role as partners in ministry with a first call leader

Healthy leaders benefit congregations. A partnership in supporting a first call leader in a congregation is an investment in the health of the leader as well as the health of the congregation.

### Emerging Best Practices

A grant from Lilly Endowment will provide further study of congregations where first call pastors seem to do well. Sustaining and encouraging the best practices of congregations as they live out their vocation as communities of faith is of significant interest to the ELCA.

### Questions for the Future

Through experience and research, the ELCA has reached a more mature, seasoned place in understanding the life of first call rostered leaders. We can be open and welcoming as we consider alternatives and build on the strengths of our leaders and our congregations. Continuing conversations for First Call Theological Education include:

- ‘The vocation of first call congregations’ focus
- Continued attention to younger first call pastors
- Better equipping mentors and colleague leaders
- Reviewing the experiences of candidates in the transition from candidacy through assignment to first call and a public ministry vocation
- Support for the unique dimensions of ministry faced by new leaders of color
- Women in ministry concerns
- Advocacy for more effectively supporting lay rostered leaders
- Collaboration among partners that results in an integrated system of support

### Beyond First Call

First call ‘graduates’ can provide significant and meaningful support to newly rostered leaders. They can help lead events for first call, and they can serve as an important bridge with those in their first call.

Since most rostered leaders stay in their first call for many years (the average is four years), ongoing collegial support needs can be addressed among those leaders. Synods committed to best practices openly encourage this kind of collegial support and ask first call leaders to move into increasingly responsible positions of leadership in other arenas. This is, indeed, the future of our church.

## Project Highlights

**The Transition into Ministry project of the ELCA has gathered information and insights through research, focus groups, events and reports over the five years of the project. While much of this handbook reflects those discoveries related to best practices, some additional knowledge about sustaining leaders in first calls is provided here.**

Surveys of rostered leaders (clergy and lay) in their first call offer many suggestions and insights related to preparation for public ministry. An ELCA 2002 survey had a 75% response rate with a good balance between males (47%) and females (53%). First career leaders (identified as those under age 42) were more often baptized in the Lutheran church as infants and grew up in a small city or suburb. Most had full time work before seminary, often in professional areas.

Newly called leaders benefit from FCTE programs in the following ways:

- Collegial support
- Ministry skill enhancement
- Spiritual nourishment
- Theological reflection

### The Assignment and Call Process

The ELCA has identified some characteristics that are present in the most effective transitions:

- A real, engaged relationship with a church leader
- Genuine and candid evaluation
- Encounter with the mysteries of God
- Prayer
- An environment for formation
- Connection with other candidates or rostered leaders (and opportunities for those connections)

Newly assigned leaders benefit from guidance about how to navigate the transitions of this time in their ministry. Orientation to the protocol, boundaries, and expectations of the process generally or specifically employed by synods and regions of this church is important. The research identified four important aspects of the first

call process that need to be addressed by the church:

1. Improve open, honest, and clear communication between the synod and the candidate.
2. Improve the call interview process including more preparation for the interview, multiple interviews, and ongoing support through the process.
3. Flexibility in the process, including sensitivity to geographic and spouse/family considerations.
4. Attention to honoring God's call to serve for both congregation and candidate, and discerning the best match for the partners.

### Preparation for Public Ministry

Overall, the research suggests that candidates are generally well prepared for a first call. The most important factor in accepting a first call was 'a sense of call.' Other factors were 'the geographic location of the congregation' and 'needs of the larger church.'

These leaders reported they felt most prepared to preach, to lead worship services, and to visit members. First career leaders rated themselves higher in preparation for 'being a teaching theologian in the congregation,' while second career leaders felt they were more prepared for 'reaching out to unchurched persons.' High value was placed on the internship experience.

Respondents identified themselves most often as "preacher," "leader," and pastor." The respondents rated the highest needs of the church as 'reaching out to unchurched persons' and 'helping congregations work toward a vision.' The third highest need was 'helping people grow spiritually.'

From their first call experiences, the respondents reported the least difficulty with:

- Planning worship/programs through the cycles of the first year.
- Learning about the congregation's culture and traditions.
- Switching from seminary life/culture to congregational life/culture

The areas where respondents hoped to develop competencies included:

- Managing disputes and conflict situations
- Planning stewardship programs
- Training/equipping others for their ministries
- Planning a church budget
- Working effectively with congregational leaders
- Visiting prospective members
- Addressing social and ethical issues facing communities

Support that was important to newly rostered leaders included (in order of importance):

1. Colleague group support
2. A mentor
3. Help on how to train and empower lay leaders
4. Counsel on how to handle conflict
5. Getting acquainted with leaders in the synod
6. Opportunities for theological reflection on context and practice
7. The synod Bishop and staff
8. Access to programmatic resources
9. An advisor with ministerial experience outside the local community
10. Counsel on self-care issues, e.g., time management, health, boundaries

### Career Stage Differences

Both surveys with first call leaders revealed differences between first- and second-career leaders. Overall, second-career leaders felt more prepared in a variety of ministry needs, including:

- Working effectively with congregational leaders
- Giving guidance/support to committees
- Providing a ministry of healing
- Visiting prospective members
- Addressing social and ethical issues facing communities
- Managing a church office
- Planning stewardship programs
- Planning a church budget

The areas where younger, first-career leaders rated themselves as more prepared were “Preaching” and “Planning worship services.”

Older, second-career leaders also expressed needs for help that the church has in the following areas:

- Helping a congregation work toward a vision
- Listening to people’s questions and concerns
- Helping congregations to revitalize their ministry
- Reaching out to unchurched persons

First-career leaders rated significantly higher several areas of difficulty in the transition time:

- Finding time for my own spiritual growth
- Dealing with tax law for church workers
- Managing personal debts and financial planning
- Managing congregational debt
- Building an identity as a pastor or rostered lay leader
- Applying seminary training to the ministry setting
- Switching from seminary life/culture to congregational life/culture

While second-career leaders gave a higher rating to “A sense of call” in their decision to accept a first call, first-career leaders rated higher “Concerns about paying off my educational debt” and “A preference for working in a church with a multiple staff.”

In the process of moving from candidacy to a first call, first-career leaders value more highly:

- Internship
- First Call Theological Education
- Help with recruiting/supporting volunteers

In contrast, second-career leaders value more highly:

- Importance of outreach and mentors for outreach
- Personal study
- Help with listening/clarifying with lay leaders
- Finding ways to move the congregation toward mission-field perspectives
- Online learning and continuing education

### Challenges for Ethnic Leadership

Ethnic specific gatherings of first call leaders revealed many common issues among all new clergy. However, there appears to be differences in the strength or degree of concern as well as how the particularities of culture infuse these issues. For example, in both Latino and African American groups, issues of Lutheran identity emerged, especially in terms of how Lutherans from non-European cultures relate to traditions, music, rituals, pastoral roles, and expectations of Scandinavian or Germanic context and history. This is especially true related to worship styles as cultural rituals and celebrations are integrated into Lutheran worship.

Establishing pastoral identity in a way that incorporates a wholistic approach to healthy leadership includes self-care, safeguarding family time, and time for spiritual development. These are distinct concerns for leaders of color, perhaps especially because of the strong ties Latino and African American people have to family networks and to valuing deep spiritual experiences.

All newly called leaders are challenged with understanding the history and culture of the congregation to which they have been called. There may be unique dimensions of this for newly called people of color, especially if they are called to a primarily Anglo congregation. A newly called ethnic pastor needs to be aware of whether they are the first person of color or language other than English to serve in that congregation, and if so, how that might impact the ministry.

Subtle or even obvious expressions of racism may need to be addressed in the early stages of one's ministry. An ethnic leader who is also a woman may have an added layer of sexism to consider. Echoes of racist and sexist attitudes may persist among congregational members, and internalized racism continues to persist in our culture.

Leaders from all backgrounds, but especially ethnic backgrounds, need a strong sense of their gifts and capabilities which are reinforced through spiritual and familial resources as well as intentional support from every expression of the church. Their call will include advocacy and education, paving the way for change through open

dialogue and honoring of different perspectives.

The importance of having mentors for support in the early stages of a first call has been well documented. In ethnic cultures, an elder (living or dead) plays this role in very direct ways. Not only might a mentor help to answer questions and encourage, but the story and journey of the elder also illumines the biblical story and the story of the first call leader.

Newly rostered ethnic leaders may be called to serve on multiple committees or task forces, partly to achieve ethnic balance or representation. However, newly called leaders may see such extra duties as more than can be managed in a first call. Awareness of such additional expectations will assist a person to take a healthy approach to a balanced life as a first call is launched.

### Lay Rostered Leaders

- See themselves as resilient
- Frequently feel isolated and in need of support
- Find small groups a most effective way to be accepted and integrated
- Appreciate inclusive language
- Have varied understandings of the three lay rosters and their role in the church

### Non-congregational settings

While first calls for pastors are to congregational settings, those who are consecrated or commissioned may be called by an institution of the church or a secular employer. On occasion, an ordained person also serves in a setting other than a congregation in the first three years of ministry. In such situations, the FCTE program can be a vital link to the church, helping to prevent isolation and encouraging connection and support. An intentional effort to include such people in planning and participation of first call programs is valued by those leaders. This practice assists in giving attention to the unique issues of continuing education funding and time as well as advocacy with employers.

## Women in Ministry

Our surveys revealed many gender differences regarding support in the transition to public ministry. Women consistently felt the church needs higher levels of leader competencies than did men. There was a significant difference in the following competencies:

- Listening to people's questions and concerns
- Helping people grow spiritually
- Helping congregations work toward a vision
- Being a teaching theologian in your congregation

Women tended to rate themselves better prepared in the first two—listening and helping people grow spiritually. They also gave higher ratings and value to:

- Colleague group support
- A mentor
- Counsel on how to handle conflict
- Access to programmatic resources
- Meeting expectations from members concerning my responsibilities
- A spiritual director
- Mutual ministry committee

Asked what they valued in the process of moving from candidacy to a first call, women valued more highly:

- Seminary classes
- Spiritual mentors and mentors for outreach/evangelism
- First Call Theological Education programs
- Continuing education
- Personal study for managing disputes

## First Call Theological Education Programs

What we have learned about best practices in FCTE programs includes:

- The relational aspects of a core program can be emphasized even when the content aspects of a program do not fit everyone's needs. Collegiality is important for everyone.
- Pastoral identity continues to be shaped and formed in these early years of ministry. Colleague groups and mentors play an important role in the process of reflection and support.

- Consider a long-term plan—where things might be in 4, 6 or 10 years.
- First call leaders see lay people as a rich resource to be mined. New clergy understand that a collaborative style of partnership can be more effective than an authoritarian approach. First call leaders grow and benefit from wise lay people who offer insight and strong leadership.
- Investment in FCTE programs is strengthened when first call leaders are directly involved in the planning process.

## Contacts

### ELCA Web site for First Call Theological Education

[www.elca.org/firstcall](http://www.elca.org/firstcall)

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