

Greetings!

I want to reflect a bit about lay ministry in the Montana Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We believe that all Christians, in their baptism, are called to ministry. All Christians have a God-given vocation. The world functions because people are called to be teachers and computer technicians and cooks and engineers and farmers and nurses and much more. As Christians we believe that these aren't just things people do to make a living. We believe that they are callings. Not all callings are jobs. Some callings are volunteer positions, or vocations. And not all callings are centered in work in the church.

As Lutherans we talk about ministry in a couple of ways. We talk about the things that church members do in the world as ministry. Being 4-H leaders, building houses for Habitat, volunteering in a soup kitchen, and doing your job well, being a parent—these are all ministries.

We also talk about things that go on in the church as ministries. As a Lutheran Church we believe in a trained, educated and orderly ministry. Normally, congregations are served by pastors who have the extensive education and approval required by the standards of the Church. In our Church it is ordained pastors who are authorized to do ministry of Word and Sacrament. If anyone else does it, it takes special permission from the Bishop's office. The church has other rostered professional leaders (Associates in Ministry, Diaconal Minister and Deaconesses), but they have other responsibilities in their ministries. They are not normally ministers of Word and Sacrament, unless special permission is given by the Bishop.

Some of our congregations do not have pastors to serve them, either on a short-term basis or on a long-term basis. When that is the case, the Bishop often authorizes a lay person to do Word and Sacrament. When it is a short-term situation, the Bishop licenses on a week-to-week basis. When it is a long-term situation, the Bishop sometimes appoints a lay person to be a Synodically Authorized Minister.

Our Synod has a training person for lay people who are nominated by their congregation and/or pastor to delve more deeply into the resources for the theory and practice of ministry. The Lay Pastoral Associates Program, is a two-year training program that introduces participants to some of the basic skills of ministry. Upon completion of the program, a person is a Lay Pastoral Associate (LPA). But completion of the program does not grant special status. It does not mean that the LPA will be invited to preach, short-term or long-term. It does not mean that an LPA can provide Word and Sacrament without the authorization of the Bishop. But it does mean that an LPA will most likely be given opportunities to learn and study with others and to share with congregations. Some LPAs love to preach and do it a lot.

Thank you for your interest in lay ministry,  
Bishop Jessica Crist