



September 30, 2021

Dear Retired Pastors of the Montana Synod ELCA,

Grace to you and peace as we enter into an autumn season still plagued by Covid and its effects. My hope and prayers have been that you are moving through this time supported by your faith in the risen Christ and your love for your neighbors even as you have experienced the difficult effects of the pandemic.

In the Fall of 2019, you received a letter from me outlining the responsibilities you have as clergy on the retired roster of the ELCA. For most of you that letter came as an important reminder or a welcome set of guidelines to follow as a retired pastor in order to protect the health and well-being of yourself, your former congregations and the people in them. Despite this reminder, however, we in the synod and across the church are still having difficulties with retired pastors interfering in the lives of the congregations they use to serve or are currently attending.

So, I am sending yet another reminder with some additional information. The biggest change comes through the revision of the document that lays out what constitutes behavior that is incompatible with ministerial office as well as the discipline that can follow when an active, retired or on-leave-from-call pastor engages in such conduct. That document is “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline: Roster Leaders, Congregations and Members of Congregations.” The problems with retired pastors interfering in their former or current congregations have become so prevalent across the church that a new section on this issue had to be added to the Definitions and Guidelines document in its update. This document was written by the Committee on Appeals, a committee made up of lay and clergy (active and retired) who serve on the Churchwide Council. While the bishops of the 65 synods did provide input into the document, it was written by the Committee and by its approval, the Churchwide Council calls upon the bishops of the ELCA to enforce it.

For those who wish to read this document in its entirety, you may find it at:
https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Definitions_and_Guidelines_for_Discipline_2021.pdf

I direct your attention to Section B.14, quoted in its entirety: ***Relationship with prior congregation(s) or ministry: Rostered ministers who have resigned or retired from or otherwise no longer officially serve a congregation or other ministry shall honor the integrity of the congregation or ministry. They shall respect and honor the current rostered minister(s) and mission of the congregation or ministry they no longer are called to serve. They shall decline invitations from members to perform pastoral acts and refrain from asking members to directly or indirectly seek permission to perform such acts from the currently serving rostered minister. They shall not participate or interfere, whether personally or through a proxy, in the life of the congregation or ministry in any way, unless invited to participate by the current rostered minister(s) in conjunction with the congregation council or governing board. Such interference constitutes conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office or retirement status.*** (“Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline,” p. 10)

This guideline emerges from the sections of both the ELCA Church and Synod Constitutions as well as the Roster Manual. For example, from the Synod Constitution S14.19: “*Ministers of Word and Sacrament shall respect the integrity of the ministry of congregations which they do not serve and shall not exercise ministerial*

functions there in unless invited to do so by the pastor, or if there is no duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.”

Also, from the Roster Manual (p. 37): *“At the time of retirement, a minister of Word and Sacrament is no longer pastor of a congregation and therefore must discontinue the functions of the pastoral office in any congregation previously served unless specifically authorized to do so. Ministers of Word and Sacrament must respect the integrity of the ministry of congregations which they do not serve as well as the authority of the current pastors of such congregations.”*

These three statements from the ELCA’s governing documents mean that a clergy person who is not the called or contracted pastor of a congregation may not preach, preside at communion, perform baptisms, funerals or weddings, or conduct any other duties of a pastor in the congregation of which they are a member or in any other congregation unless invited or given permission by the currently called pastor or, in times of transition, the interim pastor/council.

Furthermore, “respecting the integrity of the ministry of congregations” means that a retired pastor not under call/contract in a congregation should not interfere, intentionally or unintentionally, with the life and ministry of the congregation or its pastor(s). Some examples of such interference could include but is not limited to:

- a) serving on the congregation council or in any leadership role that could improperly affect the current pastor’s ministry and relationship with their congregation or unduly influence the life, ministry and mission of the congregation in ways not supported by the current pastor or congregation members;
- b) refusing to say an outright “no” when asked by parishioners of the congregation to perform a pastoral service without the current pastor and/or council’s permission and instead implying or outright stating a “yes” and then sending the parishioner to ask the current pastor for permission, thus forcing that current pastor to be one who has to say no and undermining the pastor’s relationship with that person as well as others;
- c) leading or facilitating any faith formation or education experiences for any age group without the ongoing permission of the current pastor;
- d) re-entering a congregational system in any way after departing under circumstances of conflict or misconduct. In this case the departed or retired pastor should stay away in all cases and have no contact with the people of the congregation, except as necessary through the current pastor.

Also, as indicated in the Roster Manual (p. 37): *“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.”*

While most retired pastors and their families have fulfilled this guideline, a few have remained in the congregation out of a desire to maintain the relationships built during their service. This creates a difficult problem for the incoming or current pastor who is trying to live out their call of pastoral leadership and build relationships with the people of the congregation while the former pastor and their active family members remain in the community.

But even more problematic is that, simply by staying, the retired pastor encourages or at least does not discourage congregation members from coming to them for pastoral guidance and service at the expense of their relationship with the new pastor and the future ministry of the congregation. Essentially, by remaining, the retired pastor and their family becomes a stumbling block for the Holy Spirit’s activity in the congregation by helping people cling to the past rather than encouraging God new life-renewing work in their midst. I write this not just as a bishop naming roster guidelines but also from my experience as an interim pastor who has had to help clean up the problems left behind in congregations by pastors who refused to leave, problems that can continue long after their death or departure.

One question I am asked regularly is “what about friendships?” It is the case that as pastors we become friends with some of the members of congregations we have served. Must the departing or retired pastor cut off such friendships entirely? My response to that question usually revolves around “how good are you at maintaining boundaries between yourself and the congregation?” If the friendship truly goes beyond a pastoral relationship and there are other things in common to sustain such a friendship outside of the congregation’s life, then perhaps a former pastor can remain friends with certain persons as long as conversations or activities stay away from the congregation’s life. However, it is the responsibility of the departing/retired pastor to set a strong boundary when/if the topic of the congregation’s life comes up (and in no way should the pastor bring it up) by saying something akin to “I’m no longer the pastor of blank Lutheran Church nor am I your pastor any longer. I need, for my health and for the health of the congregation, to stay away from the happenings in the congregation. Will you support me in this?” This is a difficult thing for many of us to do and say, and therefore the caution remains to cut ties except with the healthiest of boundaries.

Finally, from the Roster Manual (p. 36): *“the Synod Council shall engage in a regular, periodic examination of all ministers of Word and Sacrament on the retired roster such that each and every retired minister’s status is reviewed at least once during a three-year cycle.”*

Also, *“a minister of Word and Sacrament who has been granted retired status shall retain that roster status until (1) the minister is no longer on the roster of Ministers of Word and Sacrament, (2) the minister accepts a call, or (3) the Synod Council revokes retired status upon the recommendation of the synod bishop. Such revocation of a minister’s retired status may occur only upon a two-thirds vote of the Synod Council, present and voting at a legally called and conducted meeting.*

In the past, this status review by the MT Synod Council has not been conducted as regularly as indicated in the roster manual. But this review is now being conducted by the Synod Council every fall as recommended. Every three years, one third of the roster of retired clergy in the MT Synod are having their status reviewed by the synod council according to the expectations and reminders laid out above and the retired roster report sent to the bishop each year. In the case of ongoing, habitual or damaging interference by a retired pastor, the Synod Council and I will discuss possibilities of discipline, including removing the retired pastor from the roster and therefore their title, credentials, rights and privileges as an ordained pastor of the ELCA.

Some of you may find the legalistic nature of this letter off-putting and even judging. However, I would remind you of the second function of the Law in our Lutheran theology, that the law serves as a mirror that points out when we have strayed from our responsibility as followers of Christ to love our neighbors. It is the bishop’s difficult duty to speak this law when neighbors are being harmed and it is the Synod Council’s responsibility to enforce it. Even though removing one’s self from the congregation may seem unloving on the surface, in fact it is the most loving thing a departing pastor can do to encourage and empower that congregation in its future work as the Body of Christ. And there are plenty of ways retired pastors can still serve as pastoral leaders in the church which I am glad to explore with you if you are interested. So, I ask you to take seriously your responsibility as a pastor of this church and as a follower of Christ to love the neighbors of your former and current congregations and follow the definitions and guidelines laid out by this church.

May God bless and keep you and your families as together we follow Jesus on our journey together.

In Christ’s love,



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