

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
NEW JERSEY SYNOD
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

The Congregation Call Process

for

Ministers of Word and Service

A Guide to Procedure and Practice

June 2024

STEPS IN THE CALL PROCESS FOR A DEACON

Step 1 – Deciding to Call a Deacon to Serve in the Congregation

- Consultation with the Office of the Bishop and Council
- Assessment of financial ability

Step 2 – Mission Exploration Process

- Job description and expectations of the deacon
- Completion of Ministry Site Profile

Step 3 – Appointment of a Call Committee

Step 4 – Meeting with the Bishop

Step 5 – Call Committee Preparation

Step 6 – Call Committee Activity

- Candidate identified by Office of the Bishop
- Call committee interview process (2 stages)
- Decision to recommend made by majority plus 1, or decision to begin Step 7 again

Step 7 – Joint Meeting of the Candidate, Council and Call Committee

- Candidate interview
- Decision to recommend made by a two-thirds affirmative vote, or decision to return to Step 5 or 7

Step 8 – Special Congregational Meeting

- Informal gathering (recommended)
- Candidate presented to the congregation
- Congregation votes with two-thirds affirmative required for election, or back to Step 5 or 7

Step 9 – Congregation Council Issues Letter of Call

- Candidate has up to two weeks for a decision
- Council prepares for welcoming the new deacon

The Congregation Call Process in the New Jersey Synod

A congregation's calling a deacon is not the same as a business or organization's hiring an employee. This is not so much about finding a particular person to do a particular job as it is about entering into a relationship. A deacon brings a previously affirmed commitment to Word and Service ministry into a specific community, and there promises to bridge every barrier between the congregation and the world in order to stand as a faithful witness for the sake of the Gospel in that place.

In so doing, the deacon brings the care and concern of the whole Church. The deacon is ordained by the whole Church both to provide for the baptized members of the congregation, and to lead and enable those same disciples in their witness and service to the community in which they are placed.

We believe the Holy Spirit works through the Church – in the work of bishops and synod staff, mission districts and their deans, congregation councils, and call committees – to establish, renew, and change these relationships between pastors, deacons, and congregations of God's people. To that end we are called to be constant in prayer for trust in and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to understand that it is God's intention for us that we are trying to discern, and not the satisfaction of a two-thirds majority of congregational wants.

Suggestion: Lift up the call process and the names of the call committee in the public prayers of the church each week.

In the time when a congregation is seeking a deacon, the Office of the Bishop assumes a very important role. The process of calling a pastor is outlined in this Procedure and Practice document.

In every instance the final decision about a candidate rests with the call committee, council and ultimately with the congregation.

The process described in this document offers efficiency and a high level of communication. It places significant responsibility upon the Office of the Bishop, emphasizing the role of the Bishop as pastor to the synod.

Procedure and Practice for the Call Process

Calling a deacon to be engaged in mutual ministry with the members of a congregation and the community in which it is located is an important event. As such it is necessary to recognize that it is our Lord Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, who works in guiding each of us. The congregation council, the call committee, the congregation, the designated representative of the bishop, the mission district dean, and the bishop of the synod are all involved in calling a person to be a deacon in a congregation.

The steps described in this document are to be followed as a congregation engages in the process of calling a deacon.

Step 1 – Deciding to Call a Deacon

The first step in deciding to call a deacon is to assess the missional needs of the congregation that make a deacon the best possible choice in staffing. Because a deacon is a minister of Word and Service, they are expected to preach occasionally as well as serve the needs of the congregation and wider community. In consultation with the Office of the Bishop, a prayerful decision to seek a deacon to meet the identified needs should happen as early as possible in the decision making process. Part of the consultation will be assessing the financial ability of the congregation to compensate the deacon according to synod guidelines.

Deacons may be called for specific purposes such as working with youth or senior adults, as a musician, beginning a new ministry outreach in the community, Christian education, etc.

Once a decision is made to call a deacon to the congregation, the congregation is ready to move to Step 2.

Step 2 – Mission Exploration Process

Prior to the appointment of a call committee, the congregation council shall prepare a Ministry Site Profile (available at www.elca.org). In order to complete this report, the congregation will engage in a mission exploration process. The purpose of engaging in this process is to define future directions and priorities for the mission and ministry of the congregation and how the deacon will fit into those. The information gathered during this process will assist the congregation council in completing the Ministry Site Profile.

The Ministry Site Profile will also provide a description of the congregation for use by the bishop in seeking persons who might be nominated as deacon, as well as for use by a candidate in preparing for an interview by the call committee.

Possible steps in the mission exploration process may include events in the following areas:

- History event exploring the congregation's past ministry
- Community demographics
- Outreach exploration
- Community asset mapping
- Stewardship
- Mission review
- Congregational gifts assessment

This is the fun part!
Exploring the mission
and ministry possibilities
can energize the whole
congregation.

Step 3 – Appointment of a Call Committee

The call committee should not be appointed until after the congregation council has assessed congregational needs, has satisfactorily completed the mission exploration process, and forwarded copies of the Ministry Site Profile to the bishop. According to the *Model Constitution for Congregations of the ELCA*, the call committee is composed of six persons. The majority shall be persons not currently serving on the congregation council. The composition of the call committee should intentionally reflect the makeup of the congregation, assuring that all persons and age groups are represented.

It is recommended that the chairperson of the call committee be a member of the congregation council. Upon appointment and approval by congregation council, the names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of the call committee along with the designation of the chairperson shall be communicated by the chief lay officer in writing to the bishop.

Does our call committee reflect our mission needs? Do we have a wide diversity of ages, length of membership, interests and a gender balance on our call committee? Is our call committee made up of people committed to the future mission of our congregation?

The call committee's primary responsibility is to interview deacon candidates recommended by the bishop. The call committee is responsible for making specific recommendations of a candidate for consideration by the congregation council.

It is also the responsibility of the call committee to keep the congregation regularly informed about the status of the call process. This can be done through occasional announcements at worship, newsletter articles, or even a poster display listing the steps in the process and indicating those completed.

Confidentiality regarding the name of any candidate is of utmost importance and expected of those involved in the call process.

The call committee will be expected to reimburse any candidate for expenses and provide overnight accommodations for out of town candidates. Members of the call committee are to be reimbursed for expenses they may incur in the call process. Therefore, the congregation council should authorize funding for the call committee.

Step 4 – Meeting with the Bishop

When the mission exploration process and Ministry Site Profile have been completed and received by the bishop's office, and the call committee identified, the bishop will arrange to meet with the congregation council and the call committee together.

The bishop will conduct the meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to review submitted mission exploration information and discuss implications in an effort to further clarify the needs and expectations for ministry in and through the congregation. The information provided in this combined meeting will be used by the bishop in making a candidate recommendation to the call committee. The call committee may also at this time bring to the bishop's attention names of deacons in which there is expressed interest.

Following this meeting, the bishop will, with the staff, engage in a process to identify, interview, select and nominate a candidate for the consideration of the call committee. Criteria that will be used include:

- Specific skills which a deacon should possess in order to help the congregation fulfill its mission tasks identified in the Ministry Site Profile
- Comparison between the responses of the congregation in the Ministry Site Profile and the information potential candidates have provided
- Challenges and opportunities for ministry by the congregation
- Location of the parish and its general characteristics
- Mission of the congregation in the community
- Financial provision the congregation is able to offer the deacon

Time given by the bishop and staff in study of the specific situation and in securing the interest of any candidate is an investment in our mutual ministry. Prayer and patience are important.

Step 5 – Call Committee Preparation

The primary responsibility of the call committee is to interview and screen any deacon candidate recommended by the bishop, and when ready, to make a specific recommendation of a deacon candidate to the congregation council. It is important to note that the call committee is a subcommittee of the congregation council and as such, it is accountable to the congregation council. The bishop will conduct an orientation session with the call committee in preparation for the candidate interview. This is usually done on the same date as Step 5, after dismissing the congregation council. During this orientation the committee will:

- Review the Ministry Site Profile
- Review information provided by the mission exploration process
- Identify other specific items that it considers of importance in fulfilling the mission tasks of the congregation
- Develop specific questions related to professional skills which will be used in the interview

This orientation is an important preparatory step, which should provide a framework that will help to assure an effective interview.

The call committee members are expected to approach their task with a high commitment to the Gospel and to be faithful representatives of the congregation that has chosen them to serve in this capacity. Likewise, they seek to listen carefully to the leading of the Holy Spirit as they interview a candidate. Call committees generally understand that God calls many different kinds of persons with a great variety of gifts into the ordained ministry.

Nevertheless, some problems remain. Chief among these is age discrimination, racial/ethnic prejudice, gender discrimination, and bias against those who are single, and those who are differently-abled. Our baptism into the family of God calls us to stand firmly against all forms of injustice which in any way demean the dignity and self-worth of any of God's people. It is our aim as a synod to insure that every call process results ultimately in the affirmative call, that is, a call free of inappropriate discrimination or unjust relationships with candidates. Discussion of what is appropriate and inappropriate in the interview step will be important in this orientation meeting.

Step 6 – Call Committee Activity

The bishop will submit the name of one candidate at a time. Only after a deacon has given consent to be nominated will the bishop propose their name to the call committee. If the deacon is from another synod, the bishop will first clear that name through the bishop of

the synod involved. No deacon is to be considered by the call committee apart from this procedure.

Prayer and
Patience are
most
important in
this process.

This is one of the more difficult stages of the call process. Members of the congregation, and especially members of the call committee and council, may well be concerned that a new deacon be called as soon as possible. The bishop shares that concern and is also concerned that the best possible selection of a candidate be made.

In order to select the best possible candidate, a great deal of consultation and correspondence is normally required. Consequently it may take several weeks before a recommendation is made to the call committee by the bishop. After careful review of the congregational situation and the gifts and availability of candidates by the bishop and staff, the call committee will be given the name of the best candidate available for their consideration and decision. If either the call committee or the candidate determine not to proceed with the conversation after the initial interview step, or any point thereafter, the bishop and staff will review and nominate another candidate.

The bishop will appoint a designated representative to shepherd both the congregation and potential candidates through the remaining steps of the call process. Once a candidate has been nominated, the call committee shall take responsibility to contact that candidate and set up an interview in a timely manner.

The bishop's designated representative may accompany the candidate to the interview, introduce them, and remain at the meeting.

The purpose of the meeting is:

- To give the candidate opportunity to see the church facilities and gain initial exposure to the community including schools, shopping facilities, medical resources, community services including libraries, parks and recreation, etc.
- To become acquainted—candidate and call committee members, and vice versa
- To review biographical data and other pertinent information provided by the candidate
- To review congregation data with the candidate, discussing congregational needs and expectations in relation to the candidate's expressed needs and expectations

A welcoming atmosphere
for the interview will
help set the tone!

The deacon candidate and, if married, the candidate's spouse, shall be invited to visit the parish on the day of the meeting and tour the facilities and community. The candidate shall be reimbursed by the congregation for the expenses of the visit. For married candidates travelling a significant distance, the congregation is expected to pay the expense of the spouse for at least one trip.

Note...

It is hoped that there will be some interaction between the call committee members and the candidate's spouse. However, the spouse will not normally attend the interview. Members of the call committee, the congregation council, and the congregation are reminded that the spouse is not being considered for a call, and are also advised against having any particular expectations of the spouse in relation to the congregation.

It is also important for both call committee and the candidate to keep the bishop's designated representative informed of their developing relationship. If, after the interview process, there is no continuing interest in a given candidate, the chairperson of the call committee shall quickly notify in writing both the candidate and the office of the bishop of such a decision, and the factors which shaped the decision. If, after the interview, the candidate has no continuing interest in the congregation, they shall notify the office of the bishop of that decision.

When after prayerful consideration, the call committee has interviewed a candidate it believes can well serve the parish, and providing a majority plus one of the call committee favor recommendation of the candidate to the congregation council, the chairperson of the call committee shall inform the office of the bishop and shall request a special meeting of the congregation council to present the candidate.

Step 7 – Joint Meeting of the Candidate, Council and Call Committee

When the call committee has identified a deacon candidate to recommend to the congregation council, arrangements shall be made for a joint meeting with the council, call committee and candidate. The bishop's representative working with your call process may attend this meeting.

The chairperson of the call committee shall prepare a written resume of the candidate being recommended and the committee's rationale for the recommendation. This written report can be distributed to council members prior to the joint meeting. If differences between the candidate and the call committee have been identified, those differences and their proposed resolution should also be submitted to the council at this time.

A one-page written resume on the candidate and the committee's rationale for the recommendation should be prepared and distributed to the council.
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A proposal for compensation shall be prepared by the office of the bishop for discussion and approval by the council at this meeting. This proposal may be shared with the council and finance team in advance of the meeting. If agreement on compensation cannot be reached at this council meeting, authorization may be given by the council for

the candidate and finance team to negotiate the compensation in advance of a congregation call meeting. The agreed upon compensation must be approved by the council prior to a congregation call meeting.

The chief lay officer of the congregation should conduct the joint meeting. The purpose of this meeting is:

- To receive the report of the call committee and meet the recommended candidate
- To provide the congregation council members with an opportunity to discuss the possibility of mutual ministry between the congregation and candidate.
- To discuss and approve issues related to compensation.

After the call committee has presented the candidate, and sufficient discussion has taken place, the candidate should be excused. The congregation council should take action on the call committee's recommendation. A two-thirds affirmative vote of the council members is required to approve the recommendation of the call committee.

When the congregation council has given such an approval, the chief lay officer should arrange for a meeting of the congregation in which the congregation will vote on the recommendation. Setting the date for the congregational meeting is done in consultation with the candidate and with the bishop's appointed representative working with the process.

The chief lay officer of the congregation should promptly notify the bishop in writing of the council action and the planned congregational meeting.

Step 8 – Special Congregational Meeting

As per constitutional requirements, the congregation council shall inform the congregation, in writing, as to the day and time of the special congregation meeting.

The congregation meeting, with the representative for the Office of the Bishop presiding, will have the following agenda:

- Prayer invoking the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- Written recommendation by the congregation council that the deacon be called; salary and other provisions are to be stated in the recommendation
- Discussion
- Vote by written ballot
- Prayer and blessing

A two-thirds majority of voting members present is needed for the election of a deacon.

There must be a two-thirds majority of those members present and voting to elect. Should there be negative votes cast, there shall be no motion to make the vote unanimous.

Step 9 – Congregation Council Issues the Letter of Call

An election by the congregation constitutes a call and authorizes the congregation council to issue the *Letter of Call*. The deacon candidate and the bishop shall be notified as to the exact number of both affirmative and negative votes.

Three blank *Letter of Call* forms will have been supplied by the bishop to the chief lay officer. Within two days of the election, it shall be the responsibility of the chief lay officer of the congregation to deliver in person or by certified mail to the bishop three completed copies of the *Letter of Call*. If the documents are in good order with the provisions acceptable to the candidate and congregation, the bishop will attest the call, and then mail the three copies to the candidate.

The person called to become the deacon has up to two weeks in which to decide to accept the call. If the call is accepted, a signed letter of call will be returned to both the congregation and the bishop. The deacon candidate shall indicate the effective date the ministry will begin. The acceptance of the call may then be publicized.

Following the acceptance of the call, the deacon will consult the bishop and chief lay officer to arrange for the deacon's installation, and with the chief lay officer regarding moving arrangements. It is the responsibility of the calling congregation to pay for the deacon's costs incurred in moving.

The congregation council should make special arrangements for welcoming the arriving deacon and family, if any. The appointment of a welcoming committee is desirable. Such a group might plan an appropriate *welcome to our congregation* event. All sincere efforts to greet, welcome, and assist the deacon in the start-up days of a new ministry will be much appreciated by the deacon and help to assure the good beginning of a strong, mutually developed ministry.

It is strongly recommended that a *Mutual Ministry* or *Staff Support Committee* be established within the first two months of the deacon's arrival. The committee's primary purpose is to strengthen the deacon's ministry through careful listening and sharing, reviewing and reflecting, praying and caring.

Call Process Resource Persons

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