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(page 41)

Living Lutheran
Summer 2025

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Study guide

Seedbeds reimagined and renewed

Ministerial preparation grows in new ways to serve a changing church

By Robert C. Blezard

The 21st century has brought many changes to churches worldwide, and the ELCA is no exception. As in other mainline denominations, the ELCA is experiencing smaller worship attendances, tighter finances, and more churches merging or sharing resources. In the face of these trends, the model for equipping pastors, deacons and lay leaders has become more varied and creative. How is your congregation and those of your synod faring?

EXERCISE 1: YOUR CHURCH'S LEADER

Many congregations are being led with different staff configurations than they did a generation ago. For example, congregations that used to have two pastors may now be getting by with one. Or two congregations that used to have one pastor each now share a pastor.

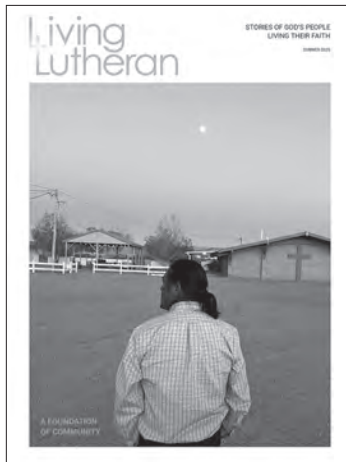
- What was your congregation's leadership configuration in 2000? The number of deacons and pastors? The number of lay staff, including custodians, office staff, musicians, building staff, etc.?
- What is it now?
- How has it changed and why?
- What role did attendance figures have to do with changes in staff? How about finances?
- Will your congregation's current leadership configuration be stabilized? Why or why not?
- What does the future hold?

EXERCISE 2: LAST STAFF STANDING

When it comes to staffing, the worship leader—whether a deacon, a pastor, a synodically authorized worship leader (SAM) or vicar (seminarian)—is often the last position to be eliminated in a budget crunch. After all, office functions and building maintenance can be done by lay volunteers, but *somebody* has to lead worship, preach and celebrate the eucharist.

If budgets continue to put pressure on a congregation, members may decide to opt for a half-time rostered minister instead of a full-time position, and then move to a quarter-time position or share a leader with another congregation.

- How familiar are these dynamics of decline to your congregation? Or those in your area or synod?



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- What have you observed? Why has it happened?
- What generally happens to a congregation that goes through a spiral of staff decline?
- What is the end game?

EXERCISE 3: ROSTERED MINISTER EXPENSE

For most budgets, the cost of a rostered minister's salary and benefits is the congregation's largest single expense. For example, the North Carolina Synod's 2025 minimum salary guidelines call for a starting defined compensation (base salary, housing and self-employment tax compensation) of \$60,000 for a pastor and \$50,000 for a deacon, according to the synod's website. The figure increases with years of experience. Added to defined compensation are pension and medical benefits that can add another 24% to 58% of base salary. Most every synod sets its own guidelines based on local factors, such as cost of living.

As a study group, examine your synod's minimum salary guidelines for rostered ministers.

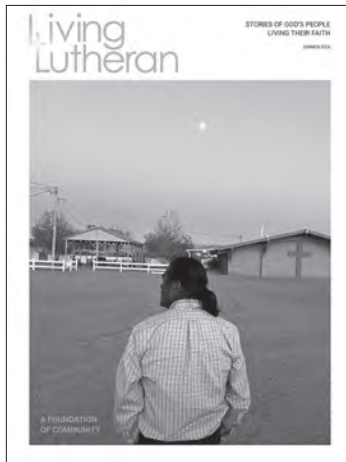
- How do the salaries compare to those of other professional vocations in your area that require advanced education?
- What would the expense be for your congregation to call a pastor with 10 years of experience who had a spouse and children? A deacon with the same profile?
- Looking at your congregation's budget, is your rostered minister receiving at least the minimum salary and benefits? Why or why not?
- How does this exercise help you understand why many smaller congregations cannot afford the expense of a full-time rostered minister?

EXERCISE 4: CREATIVE APPROACHES

As congregations across our denomination face these pressures, the "one-pastor, one-congregation" norm of yesteryear is increasingly being replaced by creative models.

Yoked congregations: When churches share a rostered minister, it provides adequate pastoral service with shared expense. There are advantages and tradeoffs.

- Yoked congregations are positioned well to share more than just pastoral leadership, but also social fellowship, Christian education, youth ministry, charitable outreach and administrative functioning.
- Ideally, the two congregations can grow into a new identity with greater purpose, clarity, mission and vision.
- More would be needed from the lay leadership of each congregation in such areas as financial administration, building and grounds maintenance, and pastoral support.



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- Lay leadership of each congregation would need to coordinate in such areas as division of common finances, worship schedules, bulletin preparation and communication.
- Congregations, which sometimes may see one another as being in competition with one another for pastoral time and other resources, would need to cooperate.

Discuss:

- In addition to those mentioned above, what other opportunities, issues and needs may arise?
- If you have experienced or observed the yoked-congregation model, what are your observations of what went well and what went poorly?
- How can congregations work better together?
- Would your congregation be up to the challenge of sharing a rostered minister? Why or why not?

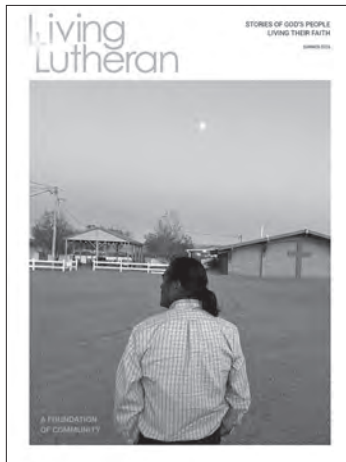
Synod-authorized ministers: SAMs now serve in 9% of ELCA churches and are becoming more prevalent as we weather changes in congregational size and finance. In some cases, the practice returns to the pastoral-service model before professional, seminary-trained pastors were widely available. In many cases, SAMs arise from the same congregation that they serve.

SAMs provide the advantage of providing leadership that is often local and at a much lower expense than a seminary-trained rostered minister. At the same time, SAMs generally bring less education and ministry experience to a congregation. Are the trade-offs worth the advantages?

- What congregational situations would be especially suitable for SAM leadership? Especially unsuitable?
- What would you see as the minimum training and education requirements for a SAM? How would someone obtain that training?
- List the pros and cons of SAMs, rather than rostered ministers, providing pastoral leadership. Be thorough in your exploration, thinking of such issues as finances, availability, flexibility, suitability, etc.
- Would your congregation ever consider a SAM to lead it? Why or why not?

Bi-vocational rostered ministers: Some pastors and deacons serve a congregation part time while also holding down another part- or full-time job outside of church. This model, too, heralds back to an earlier time in the church, when professional ministry was not the norm. For example, Paul and his colleagues “worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

- What are the advantages of this arrangement for the congregation? For the leader?
- What are the disadvantages of bi-vocational ministry for the congregation? For the leader?



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- Under what circumstances would bi-vocational leadership be ideal? Unsuitable?
- Bi-vocational ministers would necessarily serve congregations part time, while also handling an outside job and personal and family responsibilities. What would be expected of lay leaders in cooperating to manage church affairs adequately?
- How well would a bi-vocational rostered minister serve your congregation? Weigh the pros and cons.

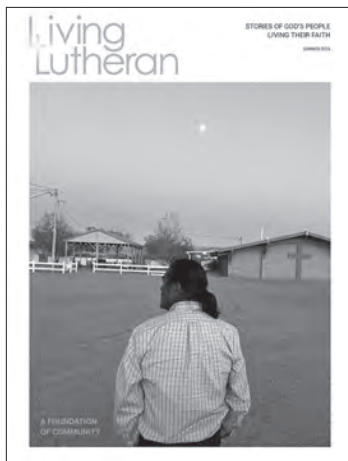
EXERCISE 5: DISTANCE LEARNING

Whereas the 20th-century model for rostered minister training largely involved full-time study and residence at a seminary for three or four years, distance learning through online courses is becoming the norm. Distance learning has been possible only in recent years due to technological advances in internet-based classroom education. Distance learning has reduced the costs of receiving a seminary education, which now is possible without moving to a seminary campus. By not requiring a student to be present in person, distance learning also enables education and training to be offered more widely to laypeople and as continuing education to in-place rostered ministers.

- What are the advantages of distance learning in flexibility and finances? How do these things benefit students? Benefit congregations? Benefit the church in general?
- What are the disadvantages of distance learning as opposed to intensive education in a seminary community?
- In what ministry contexts would distance learning be most advantageous? For what ministry leadership specialties? Why?
- In what ministry contexts would distance learning be less advantageous? For what ministry specialties? Why?
- Would distance learning be suitable for a leader in your ministry context?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- “Necessity is the mother of invention,” the old saying goes. How does that fit the emerging models of education and training for church leaders? What does that mean for your congregation? For your synod? For our denomination?
- How have recent changes in church attendance and finances brought about the necessity for greater lay leadership and a closer partnership between lay leaders and rostered ministers? In doing so, how are lay leaders and rostered ministers challenged to learn new ways of cooperation and coordination?
- Reflecting on the early Christian church, as well as the North American experience of ministry from pre-Colonial days, how were leaders recognized, trained and elevated into their positions? (Exploring this question may be aided by research.) How are emerging models of leadership education reclaiming some of that “homegrown” flavor? What are the pros and cons of this approach?



About the study guide author:

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is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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- Looking at the trends in church attendance, finance and leadership, what thoughts emerge about the current “season” in the 2,000-year story of the Christian church? What are causes for anxiety? What signs of hope are there?
- In her book *The Great Emergence* (Baker Books, 2012), theologian Phyllis Tickle asserts that the current changes in the Christian church worldwide reflect only the latest realignment of Christendom that happens every 500 years. The last big realignment came with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. As old models and presuppositions fade away, new ones will emerge. What do you think of Tickle’s theory? What about her hypothesis seems to fit the current trends? How does her theory provide hope for you? For your congregation? For Christianity in general?

Seedbeds and reimagined renewed

MINISTERIAL PREPARATION GROWS IN NEW WAYS TO
SERVE A CHANGING CHURCH

By Michael Cooper-White



Last year, ELCA Fund for Leaders launched both online discernment groups and a program offering guidance for those sensing a call to church leadership, delivered directly to their mailbox: a “retreat in a box.”

On their journeys with Jesus, the first Christians were prepared for their ministries by the master teacher who “taught them as one having authority” (Matthew 7:29). Jesus’ roving band of disciples, mentored as they traveled with him on “the Way,” led the church after his resurrection.

As the church evolved from small home gatherings

to more institutional forms, leadership formation shifted to monasteries and universities. In the United States, theological seminaries (meaning “seedbeds” in Latin) were first established in the early 19th century. In 2026, United Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania, the oldest Lutheran school, will celebrate the 200th anniversary

of one of its predecessors, the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg.

But before seminaries sprung up in the Americas, many clergy were “homegrown” preachers tutored by veteran pastors, with their classrooms being local congregations. Today, we see models evolving that combine the riches offered

Photo: ELCA/Rachel Kingsley

by seminaries with a return to localized small-group or personal study and mentoring.

Noteworthy also is the increase in diversity among those preparing for leadership.

“The needs of the ELCA are changing dramatically from pastor-led to sharing ministry in congregations,” said Philip Hirsch, executive director for ELCA Christian Community and Leadership. “This is not new, as churches on the prairie were founded by laypeople.”

Handing more leadership back to the laity, he said, will foster “reclaiming the ministry of the whole people of God,” a key tenet in a Lutheran understanding of the church.

Even as the laity resumes a greater role in our faith communities, rostered ministers are still needed. But the type of leadership required in many contexts has moved beyond the traditional one-pastor/one-parish model.

The number of smaller congregations has mushroomed in recent years, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A new study released by ELCA Research and Evaluation, “The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the ELCA,” reveals that whereas 3 out of 10 ELCA congregations in 2015 had an average worship attendance under 50, by 2022 nearly 60% of congregations fell into that category.

“Today,” the study concludes, the ELCA “is mostly very small congregations” and about 45% of them can’t afford a full-time pastor.

Changes in ministry

Yoked congregations sharing a pastor is a long-established pattern. And well-prepared people who can couple public ministry with another career

or engage part time while semiretired continue to serve many small parishes.

A growing number of congregations are identifying a member who can become their pastoral leader. Such people often can’t go off to a distant seminary lest the congregation be left without a leader. This is especially the case in new ministries among immigrants where often no available ELCA pastors speak the language of the people.

As the need to prepare leaders in their current locales is increasingly recognized, the ELCA has developed alternative routes to ordained service and stronger preparation for lay ministers.

Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) combines online or short-term intensive seminary courses with on-site learning and formation in congregations. The program recaptures the apprenticeship model of local mentoring, supplemented by the resources offered by seminary professors, classes, libraries and peer learners. TEEM-track candidates preparing for ministry are growing in number, with about 70 in 2024 and at least 122 in 2025.

Also growing is the cadre of synod-authorized ministers (SAMs). These nonordained lay leaders serve under supervision of bishops’ offices. The study on leadership needs revealed that at least 756 ELCA congregations, or 9% of the church’s total of nearly 8,500, are served by SAMs.

After four congregations lost a pastoral team in the Crosby, N.D., area, parish and synod leaders identified five laywomen who now provide pastoral care and worship leadership as SAMs. One of the five, Rebecca Knudson, sensed a call to prepare for ordained service

and is a TEEM candidate at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

At a point in life when taking on debt can be prohibitive, Knudson expresses gratitude for support from the ELCA Fund for Leaders program, her synod and the seminary. “I am very humbled people have taken an interest in me,” she said.

Changes in approach

Until recently the primary style of theological education was residential. Seminarians lived on a campus where courses were offered in classrooms, and students worshiped in chapel, ate together and studied in libraries. Accelerated during the pandemic, online and hybrid education has become a mainstay in many degree and nondegree programs.

For some learners, especially SAMs who often hold full-time jobs while serving congregations, an asynchronous approach is most accessible: they can proceed individually through online courses on their own schedules and at their own pace.

In a TEEM partnership with Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif., Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., currently offers more than 40 online courses to enrollees in its Faith+Lead series. This summer the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago is launching its asynchronous Starling Program to support TEEM and SAM learners, as well as others seeking online certificates, workshops and training opportunities.

In another joint program, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C., and United Lutheran Seminary partner with synods in the formation of TEEM and SAM



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leaders. Wartburg also offers in-person and online programs, and Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, offers a small roster of online courses in addition to in-person programs.

For new pastors and deacons on the other side of seminary education, alarm bells sounded when the ELCA recognized that some rostered ministers were finishing seminary with debts rising to six figures.

In 1997 the ELCA launched the Fund for Leaders program, with a goal of providing financial support for all students with need. With a current endowment of about \$90 million, the program annually awards 30 full-tuition scholarships to seminarians throughout their studies.

With declining numbers of students in traditional seminary preparation and the growing number of TEEM candidates, Fund for Leaders recognized the need to pivot and offer these emerging leaders financial support as well. In the past two years, all TEEM candidates received grants of \$3,000 to help with the costs of their preparation. “The fund’s impact cannot be overstated,” said Marissa Krey, the program’s director.

Changes in vocational discernment

In Romans 10:14, Paul asks the probing question, “How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” Identifying and encouraging people who can be proclaimers and public ministers is the responsibility of the whole people of God.

Many current pastors and deacons can point to encouragers in their home congregations, at church camp or in campus ministry who influenced their vocational decisions.

Seminaries’ outreach programs give them access to congregations where prospective rostered ministers or lay leaders may be found. For those sensing a call to explore church leadership, last year Fund for Leaders began offering online discernment groups designed to connect participants who are interested in learning more about seminary education. Similarly, it’s piloting a program offering the guidance of a discernment retreat delivered directly to people’s mailboxes: a “retreat in a box.”

An idea initially generated by Bethany Lutheran Church in Cherry Hills Village, Colo., through a local grant, the “retreat in a box” is beginning to spread among young people, such as ELCA camp participants, who are searching for their next step. The box offers Bible studies, inspirational messages, diaries for personal reflection and other prompts to “consider [their] own call” (1 Corinthians 1:26).

When we see gifts for ministry in fellow believers, we can all plant seeds of encouragement. Like the tiny mustard seed in Jesus’ parable, they may grow beyond our wildest dreams. †

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