

CHOOSING A BISHOP

QUESTIONS TO ASSIST IN PREPARATION¹



We begin by asking God's Holy Spirit to guide us.

Come, Holy Spirit!

Come, Holy Spirit and fill the minds and hearts of your faithful people!

Kindle in us the fire of your love,

And enlighten us with your wisdom.

Give counsel and insight, O God,

And guide our discerning, in Jesus' name.

You are both sun and shield, Most Holy God,

you give your people grace and glory.

No good thing will you withhold from those who walk with integrity.

O Lord of hosts, happy are they who put their trust in you!²

Almighty God, giver of all good gifts, look on your Church with grace and guide the minds of those who shall choose a bishop, that we may receive a faithful servant who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

"This church shall have a presiding bishop who, as its pastor, shall be a teacher of the faith of this church and shall provide leadership for the life and witness of this church" (constitutional provision 13.21. in the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*).

Electing a bishop is one of the most important decisions made by assemblies of this church. It is a call to a position of great responsibility and to a unique partnership with members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and with other Lutherans and ecumenical partners around the world.

Many people across this church long to talk with others as they consider the responsibility of electing a bishop. They are concerned with how to prepare for this task, how to seek the counsel of the Holy Spirit, and how to discuss this with others. They know that prayerful conversation and consideration must begin long before any assembly action.

1. The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (November 1994) authorized this document for distribution and commended it for appropriate use in synods.

2. Adapted from Psalm 84 and the Alleluia Verse for the day of Pentecost, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Minister's Desk Edition, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), page 158.

The election of a bishop is always experienced as a critical moment in the life of the Church, one full of promise and expectation.³ We depend upon the ministry of bishops to provide leadership, vision, wisdom, guidance, public witness, and pastoral care. Yet often it is very hard for us to articulate or even begin to describe carefully our hopes and desires for this ministry.

The desire for open discussion grows out of a sense of responsibility and stewardship for the gifts of persons and for this church's leadership needs. Where conversation about hopes, dreams, priorities, challenges, and possibilities occurs in preparation for an election, church members feel they have a greater stake in the church's ministry and a stronger sense of partnership with the bishop's office. This is the case when a current bishop is reelected as well as when a new bishop is called. Such preparation helps people move forward together. This resource is offered to enrich the conversation in preparation for the forthcoming synodical and churchwide assemblies.

■ *What conversations take place in your synod in preparation for the election of a bishop?*

WHAT IS THE MINISTRY OF A BISHOP?

In this church, according to Chapter 7 of the ELCA churchwide constitution, there is one office of ordained ministry, the office of Word and Sacrament. As ordained ministers, bishops are called as chief pastors of a synod or of this church. Bishops, therefore, are persons who adhere to our Lutheran confessional understanding of the Christian faith. The faith of a bishop is espoused in his or her response to questions asked in the service of Installation of a Bishop:⁴

Will you be faithful in your office? Will you discharge your duties in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church and in harmony with the constitution of this church or synod?

3. A presiding bishop will be chosen at the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, and several synodical bishops will be elected in the coming year. Some synodical bishops are retiring or choosing to take up other ministry tasks. Other bishops with terms expiring are open to a call to another term.

4. This rite was revised by the Church Council November 2000 for use with newly elected bishops and current bishops elected to serve a different synod. Current bishops who are reelected to serve the same synod may use a rite of affirmation of continuing service to observe the occasion.

Will you be diligent in your study of the Holy Scriptures and in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God's people, nourish them with the Word and Holy Sacraments, and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?

Will you give faithful witness in the world, that God's love may be known in all that you do?

We carry many images, expectations, and experiences of

what a bishop is and does. The root of the word "bishop" is from a Greek verb, which means "to look at, care for, pay attention to." It implies tender, vigilant love and care. In the Greek political and religious world, the noun, *episkopos*, referred to a person with responsibility for oversight or inspection. The writer of 1 Peter refers to Jesus as "the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (2:25). Other scriptural images connected to the work of care and oversight are shepherd, guide, leader, laborer, and witness. This ministry is alongside of and for the purpose of building up and encouraging the ministries of all the people of God. The use of the term, *episkopos*, to refer to leaders within the Christian community was a late development within the New Testament churches (e.g., Philippians 1:1). Through the centuries, some churches have chosen to use the title, "bishop," while others have used other terms. Lutherans in the United States began to use the title "bishop" in the early 1970s. Until then, these leaders were called "presidents."

The duties of the presiding bishop of this church are described carefully in provision 13.21. of the ELCA churchwide constitution. "This church shall have a presiding bishop who, as its pastor, shall be a teacher of the faith of this church and shall provide leadership for the life and witness of this church." Specific responsibilities for executive governance of the churchwide organization are detailed, including ministry such as "president and chief executive officer of the corporation" and as "chief ecumenical officer." The presiding bishop provides leadership for the work of the Church Council and the Churchwide Assembly, gives leadership and care for synodical bishops, supervises the other churchwide officers, provides for the administrative leadership and supervision of churchwide staff, convenes a Cabinet of Executives (officers, assistants to the presiding bishop, directors for churchwide units, and others) for common counsel and coordination, carries responsibility for the federal chaplaincies provided by this church, recommends legal counsel to the Church Council, and serves as advisor to all boards and committees of the churchwide expression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

As pastors who might serve as bishop are considered, the following are vitally important questions:

- ❑ *How does your understanding of the Christian faith in the Lutheran tradition provide the perspective that shapes and affects your calling to be a "teacher of the faith of this church?"*
- ❑ *How does your understanding of the Christian faith in the Lutheran tradition provide the perspective that shapes*

and affects your calling to "provide leadership for the life and witness of this church?"

The ministry of a synodical bishop is described carefully in provision 10.31. of the ELCA churchwide constitution and in Chapter 8, provision †S8.12. and following, in the *Constitution for Synods*. "As the synod's pastor," the bishop is called to oversee, administer, preach, provide pastoral care, advise, supervise, ordain, advocate, interpret, and serve as synodical ecumenical officer. This work takes shape within the mission goals, context, and structure of each synod. The individual serving as bishop also shapes the office.

- ❑ *What images and expectations of the ministry of bishop do you have?*
- ❑ *Look at the scriptural passages related to the work of "bishop" (e.g., 1 Timothy 3:1-17 and Titus 1:7-9) and those suggested for reading at the installation of a bishop (John 20:21-23, Matthew 28:18-20, 2 Timothy 1:13-14). What do these passages suggest about the ministry of a bishop?*
- ❑ *What characteristics do you consider most essential?*
- ❑ *Read the Service of Installation of a Bishop (revised November 2000) and the explanation in the Commentary on the Occasional Services (pages 165-170, 218-228). How do these affect your thinking about the functions of the office?*

WHAT IS OUR MISSION TOGETHER?

Like a congregation preparing to call a pastor, the Churchwide Assembly or a Synod Assembly must consider its specific situation and its vision. As you approach the election of a bishop, consider:

- ❑ *What are this church's or synod's priorities for ministry?*
- ❑ *What are our greatest challenges, opportunities, resources, and liabilities?*
- ❑ *Where do we want to be in the next five to ten years?*
- ❑ *What priorities and emphases do we have for leadership?*
- ❑ *What qualities, experiences, skills, and leadership styles would serve us best?*

These questions are equally appropriate for the election of a new bishop or with the possibility of reelecting the current bishop. They are helpful in thinking about the call to a presiding bishop or a synodical bishop.

In listing expectations for leadership, leave room for the uniqueness of each nominee. Consider not only the job to be done, but what unique gifts this man or woman may bring to the work of the office that would be appropriate for this time and this place.

HOW IS A BISHOP CHOSEN?

The election of a bishop takes place at the Churchwide Assembly for the presiding bishop and at the Synod Assembly for a synodical bishop.

The Churchwide Assembly and most of the synods of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America use an ecclesiastical ballot. This means there are no verbal or written nominations made in advance of the first ballot. Voting members to the assembly write on the first ballot the name of any ordained person on the clergy roster of this church. That ballot is considered a nominating ballot and everyone who received a vote is listed on the second ballot. The number of nominees is decreased on subsequent ballots until one nominee receives the required majority of votes. Chapter 19 of the ELCA churchwide constitution describes the process in detail regarding the presiding bishop. Each synod's constitution and bylaws describe the process for that particular synod.

Most assemblies using the ecclesiastical ballot provide opportunities during the assembly for voting members to hear from the nominees. These may be presentations in plenary session or smaller forums, question-and-answer times, or some combination of those or other options. They often also provide brief written biographical information on the nominees.

Some synods use a form of a pre-assembly nominating process. Synod members are invited to submit names to clusters, conferences, or a nominating committee in advance of the synod assembly. This process is described in the synod's bylaws and published widely in advance of the assembly. Some synods publish information about nominees in the synod's newsletter. Some provide opportunities, such as in forums in advance of the assembly, for members and nominees to meet. They encourage active discussion about the needs and hopes of the synod and the ministry it seeks from its bishop. At the assembly, additional nominations may be received from the floor. The number of names is reduced on each ballot until one nominee receives the required majority of votes.

- ☐ *What process is used in electing your synodical bishop?*
- ☐ *Is there discussion within your synod about possible nominees for presiding bishop?*

- ☐ *How does the process assist in choosing leadership that meets the church's needs?*
- ☐ *How does the process encourage careful consideration of a wide number of potential nominees?*

WHO MAY SERVE AS BISHOP?

The *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* and the *Constitution for Synods* state that the presiding bishop and the synodical bishop "shall be an ordained minister of this church" (see churchwide constitutional provision 13.21. and synodical constitutional provision †S8.11.). There are no further requirements or limitations. Thus, we may nominate from a pool of more than 17,500 ordained ministers.

In addition to a deep and abiding faith commitment, pastors who might serve as bishop will need to have broad skills in pastoral care and preaching, administrative leadership, and the ability to lift up a vision for this church and its ministry. Pastors who serve in all the various arenas of ministry throughout this church—congregations, agencies, institutions, and synodical and churchwide staff—have gifts and skills that may commend them for consideration in the calling of a new bishop.

The task of electing a bishop is best served when the nominating process encourages careful consideration of many pastors of this church who bring a variety of skills and experiences, each of whom could serve ably as bishop. The conversation needs not only to be about the nominees but, most importantly, about the needs of this church.

- ☐ *Have you identified for yourself some pastors of this church who may serve effectively in the office of bishop?*
- ☐ *What commends them to you?*

HOW ARE PRAYER AND CONVERSATION PART OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS?

This church's constitution refers to the "election" of a bishop. While there are parallels with other nomination and election processes, we bring a commitment to value the guidance of the Holy Spirit above other factors, such as popularity or platform. This commitment often is expressed in a desire to distinguish between conversation and campaigning in discussions about potential nominees.

We pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit throughout the nomination and election process. Some people are more comfortable seeking that counsel individually, telling no one their thoughts and not speaking about the process. Some people discern the Spirit's guidance in conversation and debate with others. They feel comfortable telling others what they think and inviting others to join them in those convictions.

Regardless of which process is used to nominate a bishop, a certain amount of discussion always occurs. All who engage in discussion should exercise great care to do so in a pattern of prayerful reflection, education, and Spirit-led deliberation which avoids divisiveness and even the appearance of campaigning or political advocacy.

It can be difficult for members of this church and for potential nominees and their supporters if we lack common understanding concerning how public and intentional the conversations should be. Some members hesitate to talk at all for fear that any conversation will be interpreted as inappropriate and held against potential nominees. Some are concerned about future working relations, if a nomination challenges other nominees or an incumbent. Some potential nominees are reluctant to indicate their willingness to serve for fear they will be perceived as aspiring to the office. Some potential nominees isolate themselves for fear that their presence at gatherings will be interpreted as promoting their election. Some nominees have felt used and bruised by the nomination and election processes, because the expectations were not commonly and clearly understood.

The counsel of the Holy Spirit is granted to God's people in a variety of settings. We can trust the Holy Spirit to be active in our private deliberations and in our conversations with others as we seek God's wisdom and guidance.

The call to serve as bishop comes out of the life of the Church. In the course of our careful consideration of persons to serve in this ministry, many gifted leaders will be lifted up, any one of whom could serve capably. Finally, a decision must be made to call one person to this office. In so doing, this church and its synods will find ways to honor and express appreciation to all those who were open to letting their gifts be shared in this way, and will affirm their continuing ministry in this church.

- ❑ *How do you understand the Holy Spirit to be at work in the process of preparing, nominating, electing, and supporting the ministry of a bishop?*
- ❑ *At what points do you feel comfortable and appropriate having conversation with others?*
- ❑ *How do you distinguish between conversation and campaigning? How important are these distinctions?*
- ❑ *What processes can best help nominees to consider the possibility of a call to service as bishop?*
- ❑ *What processes respect and express care for the nominees both before and after the election?*

As the people of God, we prayerfully enter into this process of discernment and deliberation. The election of a bishop marks the beginning of a new or renewed partnership in ministry. In the days ahead, uphold your bishops in prayer, and pray for all those who are asked to consider a call to this ministry. Be diligent in your own faithful and creative service to God's people and God's world, and work together in honesty and trust.

*You are both sun and shield, Most Holy God,
you give your people grace and glory.
No good thing will you withhold
from those who walk with integrity.
O Lord of hosts,
happy are they who put their trust in you!*
(from Psalm 84)

This resource was revised (March 2006) and adapted from material written by the Rev. Jan Erickson-Pearson upon the request of the Church Council for such a document; it was based on an earlier work by her, © 1993, for the Commission for Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

