

Candidacy for the Deaconess Community of the ELCA

Introduction

The Deaconess Community of the ELCA is an outgrowth of the revival of the New Testament diaconate that began in Germany during the 19th century. The movement came to America in that century and had an impact on many of the ELCA's predecessor church bodies. Deaconesses are approved through the ELCA synodical Candidacy Process in partnership with the Committee on Education and Candidacy of the Deaconess Community of the ELCA. They are consecrated for service upon receipt and acceptance of a letter of call.

"The Deaconess Community has been formed in order that skilled and committed women acting in community may complement the ministry of Word and Sacrament as well as the ministry of the whole people of God. This ministry is exercised within the context of the church's mission to proclaim the Gospel, to relate the Gospel to human need in every situation, and to extend the ministry of the Gospel to all the world." (Bylaws of the Deaconess Community of the ELCA, 3.1)

The vision statement and statement of purpose of the Deaconess Community are as follows:

It is the purpose of the Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to complement this church's ministry of Word and Sacrament and the ministry of the whole people of God. This Community of skilled and committed women centers its life in a commitment to diaconal ministry distinguished by these marks:

- A. a life of service to church and society
- B. a life grounded in the biblical witness and the Lutheran Confessions
- C. a life of intercessory prayer, corporate worship, and spiritual discipline and direction
- D. a life and discipline that emerge from a unique history and tradition
- E. a life together that nurtures and empowers its members
- F. a life lived in community that provides places for reflection and gathering
- G. a life that affirms the diversity and gifts of all people

The Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America exists to empower women for a life lived in service and a life supported in community by equipping them for ministry, usually on the frontiers of this church's outreach and often among the poor and marginalized.

A deaconess serves in a churchwide agency, synod, congregation, institution, or other ministry authorized by the ELCA or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC).

Note: This document applies only to women seeking membership in the Deaconess Community of the ELCA. ELCA women who are members of or seeking membership in the Lutheran Deaconess Association, Valparaiso, Indiana, may apply for rostering in the ELCA as associates in ministry or diaconal ministers.

Steps in Candidacy

Candidacy for women seeking to serve in the Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America includes full participation in the ELCA Candidacy Process and in the candidacy process of the Deaconess Community. Steps that are unique to deaconess candidates are printed in *italics*. The candidate has a responsibility to fulfill all the requirements and expectations of the synod Candidacy Committee as well as those of the Deaconess Community.

Deaconess candidates participate in the normal Entrance and Approval steps with the synodical Candidacy Committee. Endorsement for deaconess candidates is replaced by Investiture into the community. Approval for investiture is a decision made by the Deaconess Community Committee on Education and Candidacy and reported to the Candidacy Committee.

Entrance includes Discernment, Candidacy Application, Congregational Registration, Initial Interview, and Screening, including a Psychological Evaluation and a Background Check through the synod Candidacy Committee. Deaconess candidates must also complete the application packet provided by the Deaconess Community and participate in an interview with the Deaconess Community Committee on Education and Candidacy.

The synod Candidacy Committee must receive a positive recommendation from the Committee on Education and Candidacy of the Deaconess Community prior to giving a positive Entrance Decision to a deaconess candidate. The synod Candidacy Committee may not give Entrance as a deaconess candidate to anyone denied by the Community. The synodical Candidacy Committee may, however, choose to postpone or deny a woman recommended by the Community. A positive Entrance Decision qualifies a deaconess candidate to begin theological study.

Investiture A candidate may go through Endorsement with her synod Candidacy Committee. She will go through Investiture, which is the Deaconess Community's endorsement. The Committee on Education and Candidacy of the Deaconess Community will monitor all academic and practical requirements for deaconess candidates. Upon completion of preparatory standards and endorsement by the Board of Directors of the Deaconess Community, the Candidacy Committee will be notified of completion of this step. At this time the candidate publicly participates in the service of mutual affirmation known as Investiture, which admits her to the privileges and responsibilities of the Deaconess Community of the ELCA.

Investiture is required prior to a deaconess' internship. Internship is supervised by the ELCA Deaconess Community. All internship reports and CPE reports will be copied to the Candidacy Committee.

Approval is scheduled upon completion of all academic requirements and practical experience. An Approval Essay will be distributed by the Candidacy Committee and completed by the candidate. Copies of the essay should be returned to both the synod and the Deaconess Community.

The Candidacy Committee must receive a positive recommendation from the Deaconess Community prior to giving a positive Approval Decision to a deaconess candidate; they may not grant Approval for service as deaconess to any candidate who has been denied by the community. The Candidacy Committee may, however, postpone or deny a candidate approved by the Community.

Where there has not been adequate or conclusive consultation between the Deaconess Community and the synod Candidacy Committee, postponement of Approval is encouraged until the consultation can be completed and any misunderstandings resolved. When all the partners have been carefully heard, it is the Deaconess Community Committee on Education and Candidacy that makes the final decision regarding approval.

Standards for Members of The Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

A deaconess must meet the Basic Standards for all rostered ministries as found in ELCA *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions* Chapter 7. In addition the Deaconess Community maintains the following standards for admission and continuance in the Community.

A deaconess is a woman who:

- a. is an active communing member of a congregation of the ELCA or the ELCIC;
- b. affirms that she is called by God to ministry in and through the diaconate and who has sought and received confirmation of the call by this church;
- c. is academically and professionally prepared to function within her chosen occupation;
- d. is theologically prepared to express and reflect upon this church's understanding of the gospel; the ministry of the church as expressed in the historic Lutheran confessions; the mission, purpose, and uniqueness of the diaconate, and her own responsibility within and relationship to this total context;
- e. who has been examined for such theological competence in her vocation, occupation, and personal life; and who participates periodically in a formal period of reflection upon these themes;
- f. is committed to the continual strengthening of her relationship to and theological understanding of the Triune God through such means as prayer, study of the Holy Scriptures, personal devotional life, and the corporate celebration of Word and Sacrament;
- g. is unashamedly willing to relate and witness to the mission and message of the Christ, not only in her occupation but in her total life;

- h. pledges to meet the established standard for Deaconess Community membership spiritually, personally, corporately, financially, and in matters of time;
- i. participates in continuing education and periodic evaluation in accordance with the highest recognized standards of her profession or occupation;
- j. has a healthy self awareness and seeks to maintain a balanced life and spiritual, vocational, interpersonal, intellectual, physical, and emotional wellness.

Academic and Practical Criteria for Consecration

1. Basic Education Requirements

A candidate for the Deaconess Community is required to meet certain educational requirements:

- a. She must be prepared to meet the academic and professional standards of her chosen vocation or specialization, e.g. nurse, social worker, parish deaconess, etc.
- b. She must complete a course of theological studies prescribed by the Deaconess Community as detailed in #2, "Theological Education," found below. Such course of study is determined by the particular occupational focus of the deaconess. The course of theological study is designed to prepare her to express and reflect on this church's understanding of the gospel, the ministry of the church as expressed in the historic Lutheran Confessions, the mission, purpose, and uniqueness of the Deaconess Community as one of the ecumenical diaconal organizations, and her own responsibility within and in relation to this total context.
- c. In addition to professional/occupational and theological studies, the candidate is required to participate in at least one candidate seminar. During that time she pursues special studies in such areas as diaconics and spirituality.
- d. For parish ministry, the deaconess applicant planning to serve in a congregation of the ELCA or ELCIC must hold a bachelor's degree in an appropriate field of study.
- e. The deaconess candidate shall meet the educational requirements of her chosen profession, e.g., nursing, social work, education, etc., and any licensing or certification requirements for the state or province in which she will serve.
- f. For candidates without a bachelor's degree, the Committee on Education and Candidacy shall evaluate the previous education and experience of candidates not holding a bachelor's degree to determine whether there is satisfactory experience and skill in the chosen area of service. This shall be

done in consultation with the synodical Candidacy Committee. Examples include nurses who hold an RN/LPN rather than a BSN or occupations requiring only an AA degree, such as early childhood educator.

2. Theological Education

- a. Deaconess candidates preparing to serve in a congregation of the ELCA must earn a master's degree in theological studies (M.A.R., M.R.E., M.A., M.T.S., etc.). Such candidates shall confer with the Deaconess Community regarding the selection of an appropriate seminary and the curriculum requirements of the Community (see b. below). A unit of Clinical or Supervised Pastoral Education is required as part of the preparation for congregational service.
- b. The deaconess candidate preparing for ministry in which a seminary degree is not required shall complete a course of theological studies planned in consultation with the director of education and interpretation of the Deaconess Community. This will include courses listed below with a total of 20 semester credit hours or the equivalent in the subjects noted (*) as well as appropriate electives.
 1. Old Testament*
 2. New Testament*
 3. History*
 4. Ethics
 5. Lutheran Confessions*
 6. Pastoral Care and Counseling
 7. Systematic Theology*
 8. Worship/liturgy
 9. Field education (a total of 400 hours)
 10. Appropriate electives

The Committee on Education and Candidacy of the Deaconess Community is responsible for monitoring this course of study and will report successful completion to the synodical Candidacy Committee.

3. Health and Wellness

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America envisions a church in which those preparing for and serving in rostered leadership positions and their spouses and families will be encouraged, supported, and motivated to grow in their faith hardiness, which reflects their spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, interpersonal, and vocational health and well-being.

Healthy leaders enhance their lives and the lives of others. To be prepared for the rigor of public ministry and mission, candidates need to demonstrate and continue to develop healthy leadership qualities. Leaders in this church who practice self-care and attend to the balance of all aspects of their health enhance the church's faithful witness in the world. Candidates are expected to address any health concerns with their Candidacy Committee. Intentional efforts to improve all aspects of wellness will be most effective when supported by families, congregations, synod, seminary, and community.

4. Spiritual and Vocational Formation

All candidates for consecrated service are expected to follow a regular pattern of worship, prayer, Bible study, and disciplined faith practices that sustains and supports formal work in theological education and contextual learning. While such formation may follow a variety of patterns, a candidate is expected to engage in practices that are communal in scope, draw on the hearty traditions of the Christian life, and model an example of Christian living for others.

At the time of entrance into the Candidacy Process, a candidate will be asked to share a plan for how her faith life will be sustained and nurtured while in the Candidacy Process. Such a plan may include practices such as the use of a trained spiritual director, participation in a group discipleship experience, retreats, personal devotions and daily prayer, and regular participation in worship in a communal setting or a congregation. Plans for offering service to others, personal stewardship, vocational discernment, and healthy self-care will also be discussed.

Throughout the Candidacy Process the Candidacy Committee will inquire about the candidate's ongoing practices and habits and will offer encouragement for lively engagement with such facets of Christian living.

5. Deaconess Candidate Formation

The purpose of the Deaconess Candidate Formation is to enable the candidate to grow in the understanding of the Deaconess Community, including the history of the deaconess movement from biblical times to present, and its relationship to all the expressions of the ELCA/ELCIC and the ministries of deaconesses today; to have the candidate participate in the lives and ministries of deaconesses in a variety of calls; to enable the candidate to discern the ministry to which God has called her; and to enable the candidate to interpret the Deaconess Community to persons within the Lutheran tradition, within society, and to ecumenical partners.

The formation will also include the review of the Handbook of the Deaconess Community; Bible study; spiritual formation (through classes, reading, and individual spiritual direction); and independent study based upon the candidate's needs and interests. The formation components should be completed prior to internship.

6. Specialization

The ELCA has identified a need to provide for a variety of ministries in congregations and other settings where theologically trained leaders serve. While the forms of ministry might be different, there are common areas of specialization, focus, and need throughout this church. A call might include many varied responsibilities, but a rostered lay leader is expected to focus on at least one area of specialization in the Candidacy Process.

Deaconesses are expected to have demonstrated ability and experience within one or more areas of specialization. The list below provides categories in which leaders may have strength or demonstrated competency. The list is not exhaustive but rather descriptive of a variety of areas in which a deaconess might develop expertise or interest.

Administration	Music and Worship
Campus Ministry	Outdoor Ministry/Camping
Chaplaincy	Parish Nurse/Health
Christian Education	Public Policy/Advocacy
Community Organizing	Senior Ministries
Counseling/Social Work	Spiritual Formation/Direction
Early Childhood Administration	Teaching
Interim Ministry	Volunteer Coordination
Lay Evangelism/Mission	Worship Leadership/Preaching
Ministry in Daily Life	Youth and Family

Leaders are to be certified, trained, or otherwise competent in a specific profession with the appropriate and necessary education and practical preparation. Expertise in a specialization will be demonstrated through the following:

- undergraduate degree in field of specialization, or a major/concentration with a particular focus, or equivalent academic credentials
- professional licensure or certification, whenever normative or required, or, in some cases, significant recognized work experience.

A candidate declares the area of specialization (which must be reviewed and confirmed by the Candidacy Committee) by the time of Investiture.

For those seeking professional certification in ministries of chaplaincy, counseling, and clinical education, ecclesiastical specialized pastoral care endorsement is normative and expected. This ecclesiastical endorsement is pursued through the churchwide office near the time of assignment and call.

It is the responsibility of the Candidacy Committee to evaluate a candidate's readiness to serve as a deaconess. While a minimum of one area of specialization is expected, a candidate may be called to serve in a position with a broad position description. The committee must consider formation in theological education, spirituality, contextual education, and overall readiness that will provide the church with competent leaders for mission.

7. Investiture

Upon completion of preparatory requirements and endorsement by the Board of Directors of the Deaconess Community, each candidate publicly participates in a service of mutual affirmation known as Investiture, which during the remainder of her candidacy admits her to the privileges and responsibilities of the Deaconess Community of the ELCA. Investiture by the Board of the Directors of the Deaconess Community shall be reported to the synodical Candidacy Committee.

8. Internship

- a. Having completed her theological education requirements and following Investiture, the deaconess candidate normally participates in a one-year internship, which has a two-fold purpose:
 1. to use and improve professional skills
 2. to begin to function in her role as a deaconess.
- b. The deaconess candidate participates in her own internship placement, which is developed through consultation with the directing deaconess, bishops whose synods are seeking internship placements, and seminary faculty or contextual education staff, if she is attending seminary.
- c. In preparation for internship the deaconess candidate is provided with a copy of the Internship Manual for the Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- d. Internship evaluations are reviewed by the directing deaconess and the Committee on Education and Candidacy. Final internship reports shall be sent to the synod Candidacy Committee.

Consecration and First Call

A deaconess candidate is approved for consecration by the Candidacy Committee on successful completion of all requirements, agreement with the *Vision and Expectations* of this church, and a positive Approval Decision.

Deaconess candidates participate in the Churchwide Assignment Consultation scheduled two times each year.

Approval, assignment, and acceptance of a letter of call are reported to the Board of Directors of the Deaconess Community by the Committee on Education and Candidacy. A service of consecration is arranged and conducted under the direction and oversight of the bishop of the synod where the first call is received.

(www.elca.org/dcm/worship/liturgies)

Reinstatement

Reinstatement to the rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the responsibility of the Candidacy Committee of the synod where the applicant was last under call. The process for reinstatement is found elsewhere in this manual. Any person removed from a lay roster that existed prior to 1988 must apply for acceptance to a roster of this church under the standards, criteria, policies, and procedures that apply to current rosters of the ELCA.