

A Process When Considering a Currently Serving Associate Pastor for Senior Pastor or Head of Staff

Recommended by the Bishop of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA

When a currently serving associate pastor wishes to be considered for a vacant senior pastor or head-of-staff call, the synod recommends that the congregation discern the associate pastor's candidacy before receiving other candidates. The committee should first define the congregation's future mission and leadership needs and then undertake a thorough evaluation of the associate pastor in consultation with synod staff. If the associate pastor is not recommended, withdraws, or is not called, the congregation may proceed with the regular call process. This practice is recommended, not required, and does not presume either that the associate pastor will be called to the new role or that the existing associate call must end if the answer is no.

Rationale:

This recommendation recognizes that the question before the congregation is initially different from the question addressed in a fully open call process. The congregation is first discerning whether an existing call relationship is being changed: whether God may now be calling the associate pastor and the congregation to serve together in a new relationship of pastoral leadership. Only if the answer is, "no" does the congregation proceed to the separate question of which other pastor may be called.

Considering the associate pastor first also provides a clearer and fairer process for everyone involved. A currently serving pastor and an outside candidate do not enter the process from the same position. The associate pastor is already known through an established ministry and many existing relationships, while outside candidates are known principally through profiles, interviews and references. Comparing them simultaneously may make it more difficult to discern either question clearly.

This approach may also help preserve the associate pastor's existing call if the congregation concludes that the pastor is not called to the senior role but that the present associate ministry remains healthy and fruitful. Placing a currently serving pastor in prolonged competition with outside candidates can strain relationships, divide the congregation, weaken the associate pastor's continuing ministry and complicate the ministry of the pastor eventually called. It may also be unfair to outside pastors who enter a process in which the congregation's preference concerning the associate pastor has not yet been fully resolved.

Continuity of leadership can be a significant gift to a congregation, but continuity is not always the right outcome. Faithful service as an associate pastor does not by itself establish a call to become senior pastor or head of staff. The responsibilities and gifts required for the new role must be clearly identified, and the associate pastor should be evaluated carefully, prayerfully and honestly in relation to those needs.

The synod therefore recommends that:

1. The congregation clearly define the responsibilities and leadership needs of the senior pastor or head-of-staff position.
2. A call committee or other properly authorized discernment body be formed according to the congregation's constitution.
3. The associate pastor be considered through a thorough process, in consultation with synod staff.
4. The committee decide whether to recommend the associate pastor before receiving other candidates.
5. If the associate pastor is not recommended, withdraws, or is not called by the congregation, the congregation may then proceed with the regular call process.
6. No assumption be made that a decision not to call the associate pastor to the senior role automatically terminates the associate pastor's existing call. That question should be addressed separately and pastorally by the pastor, congregation and synod.

This is a recommended practice, not a requirement. The authority to call a pastor remains with the congregation according to its governing documents and the practices of this church. The synod offers this recommendation to support clear discernment, fair treatment of pastors and congregations, the health of existing pastoral relationships, and confidence that the call process is centered not merely upon choosing among applicants, but upon seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.