

## **About the ELCA Call Process, from a Synod Staff Member's Perspective**

I've served as an assistant to the bishop in the Upper Susquehanna Synod for 3½ years now. I don't work a lot with call process in our synod, but enough to have a window that most parish pastors don't have. Here's what I can share with you about the ELCA call process...

The ELCA's online databases for call process were launched in 2008 or 2009...pretty recently, in other words. If you've never filed "mobility papers" before, you may not know that previously the process involved filling out paperwork (electronic forms were available, but weren't collected electronically) and submitting it to your bishop. Your synod office then copied and snail-mailed your paperwork to any particular synods you designated as preferred sites for you. Our synod office kept such papers in manila folders in a file drawer, and when looking for potential candidates, staff paged through them to find possible matches. Paperwork tended to remain in those file folders until either 1) one of our congregations called them, or 2) someone phoned a candidate to describe a possible call and found out they'd already received one somewhere else. In other words, it wasn't very efficient from a synod office's perspective. Another negative aspect of the process the "old way" is that synod offices only knew about possible candidates when that candidate specifically directed their paperwork to that office. Some synods got lots of profiles; others got just a few.

Fast forward to today...now all Rostered Leader Profiles (RLPs) are filed electronically into one churchwide database that is only accessible by synod and churchwide staff. (That prevents congregation members from running across your RLP... "Oh, look! Our pastor's looking for another call!") When someone indicates a synod as a "preference" in their RLP, an electronic notice is sent to that synod's Call Process Administrator. I know that some synods send an electronic response when they receive such a notice; more often they don't. Some synods get one or more new RLP notices a day—it's just not possible to adequately and personally respond to all of them, let alone read and remember each RLP's contents.

The secure RLP database allows synods to call up paperwork for anyone in the system by name, but also allows us to search for candidates who have indicated specific preferences (geographical area, ministry site, community type, ministry position), or (under "advanced options") preferences for full or part-time ministry, size of worshipping community, and minimum defined compensation. Further, we can search for people with specific gifts (language proficiency, competencies and specialization, degrees, fields of study), or leaders serving in a current context of a particular size or budget range. (Note: these are the limitations of the search engine, and they call upon the responses in specific fields in the RLP. It's not possible to search for random key words, for instance, throughout all RLPs.)

Those are the things we CAN do; I don't know what happens in every synod office as far as searching the database for potential candidates. An unscientific survey of other synods seems to indicate that most use it as we do. In our synod (with mostly smaller, more rural congregations), we get comparatively fewer leaders indicating us as a preference (versus most of the Metro synods, for instance). When looking "blind" for possible candidates outside of the names we already have, my bishop tends to look first at those already living in our region (reasoning that they may be more willing to move short-range than someone from the other coast, and have

fewer expenses related to that interview/move). The names we are MORE likely to call up and check out are those who have made personal contact with our office. That tells us they really are willing to consider a call to our synod (as opposed to someone who checks EVERY synod off as a “preference”, but really isn’t “open to all”).

What all this means for someone searching for a new call is that you need to be as proactive as you were under the “old” system. Previously a candidate contacted synods by submitting paperwork through their synod office. Now, after filing your RLP electronically, I would advise you to take the initiative to contact the synod offices that you are particularly interested in. If they don’t know you at all, try to make an appointment to meet with someone on the synod staff to introduce yourself. If you have particular circumstances or gifts that make a call to their synod especially desirable, make sure to communicate that to a synod staff person who works with call process.

Also, go onto the ELCA’s database for Ministry Site Profiles (MSP)...a publicly searchable database for open calls in the ELCA (<http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Rostered-Leadership/Call-Process/Ministry-Opportunities.aspx>). Look for calls that interest you, and follow up with the contact person indicated in the database. (Note: the entire MSP is not available to you online, but only a short summary and a few descriptive details. You may be able to find out more by looking up the congregation in the ELCA’s “find a congregation” system, and/or Googling their website.) You can also look at websites for the synods you’re interested in. Ours posts the ministry opportunities available in our synod on our webpage. It’s hard to tell which might be considered the most “up to date”, the website or the MSP database; so if it appears in one and not the other, it doesn’t hurt to check whether a congregation is still considering names.

If you’re frustrated waiting for a new call to emerge, please remember that synod offices cannot CREATE calls out of thin air; we can only assist congregations in discerning possible candidates for them to call. If your need for a new call is particularly urgent, there’s only so much we can do to speed anything along. We may know of a congregation who has not yet completed their Ministry Site Profile, for instance, but who will be able to consider names in the near future. If they’ve been dragging their feet, the news that someone’s interested in their MSP might spur them to complete it. Or it might not...synod staff only have so much influence that way!

Now, some suggestions for completing your Rostered Leader Profile...

- 1) **Take your time.** Should go without saying, but you need to complete this form carefully and with thoughtfulness. This is the first impression you may make on a bishop and a call committee. Be professional and honest. Make certain you have corrected all spelling errors and typos.
- 2) **Highlight your gifts.** If you have a particular gift for music ministry, youth, visitation, whatever...make sure that’s clear in the way you complete your paperwork. Some congregations will be looking for specific gifts, and you want them to be easy to spot.
- 3) **Be realistic.** Know that every rostered leader is looking for a congregation that is “serious about mission, not just maintenance”. Most congregations think that describes them, when sadly it describes too few. That’s part of the call of church leaders to try to inspire, teach, promote, change. And it’s REALLY hard to do. Sorry.

- 4) **Pay particular attention** to the Personal Ministry Statement on Page 8. This box appears on the summary page of your RLP in the RLP database, and may be one of the first things a synod staff member notes about your file.
- 5) **Don't describe your next church as the "anti-version"** of the place you now serve. Be cautious not to come off sounding bitter about your current call, even if you are. That's not a way to attract the interest of a call committee, nor is it an especially healthy place from which to approach the call process. If that's too difficult for you, you may need to work with a spiritual advisor, mentor, health professional before moving into a call process.
- 6) **Be discriminating about your geographic preferences.** Contrary to what many of us were advised in seminary, it is no longer helpful to check off EVERY synod in the ELCA as your preferences ("open to all", in other words). The effect of doing so tends to be that NO ONE takes your RLP to heart. If 65 synods receive notice of your RLP, they may take a look and surmise that you haven't really discerned where you may be called. Synods like ours may conclude that you're not REALLY open to us, based on our experience of candidates' reactions: "Upper Susquehanna Synod? Where's that?" Instead, list a smaller number of preferences...maybe 6-8? There's no magic number. Synod staff can tell from your preferences whether you're looking in a particular geographic area, or just metro synods, or a particular region. That will probably influence the ones who pay attention to your profile. Then follow up with contact to those synods (see above). If nothing pans out in the synods you've selected, you can always broaden your preferences and resubmit.
- 7) **RE: The optional Candidate Commentary and Twelve Reflections:** these additions to the RLP were intended to provide space for leaders who desired to share more information through their RLP. I can't comment on how they may/may not be received by a call committee, but my own opinion is that more information is usually better, especially if you can use them to speak passionately about your calling to ministry, or give examples of your fine work. It's possible other synods may insist on some or all of the Twelve Reflections (but I don't know of any personally).
- 8) **Have another church professional proofread** your RLP before you submit it. Ask for their honest opinion, and be ready to hear it. If they're not also good proofreaders for grammar, ask someone else to read it who is, in addition.
- 9) **Submit your final draft only.** When you make small changes and resubmit your RLP, it means someone on the synod staff has to discern which is the correct one in the system, and possibly have to transfer your other related materials (reference form, signature page, Twelve Reflections) from one to the other (not an easy task in this system). Of course you may notice errors later or have to update things, but please take care otherwise to only submit once. Your synod staff will thank you!
- 10) The **References you list on Page 6** are names that call committees MAY contact as they work with your RLP. Some will; some won't. The reference for a lay person in your current setting may be problematic for people who don't want their current congregation to know they're open for a new call. Our synod assembly memorialized the appropriate Churchwide office to change this requirement, but it's still on the form at this writing. Although they may never be called upon to give a reference, I wouldn't list anybody who couldn't be in your confidence from the moment you submit your RLP. (Note: our synod does not require this reference to be listed in order for your RLP to be activated.)

- 11) **Reference Recommendation:** notice the yellow box at the bottom of the last page of the RLP. After you submit your RLP, you will have to log back into the ELCA site and access your account ([www.elca.org/call](http://www.elca.org/call), and “access account” on the left sidebar) in order to download the Reference Recommendation Form. It’s a PDF form with an electronic quirk: whoever opens the form is the only one who can electronically submit it. That means if you want to download it and look at it yourself, you’ll have to download a new, “unopened” version to save to your computer, and then attach the new one to an email to send to your reference. That way, when your reference clicks on “submit”, it will go into the system properly. This step seems to hang up a lot of people.
- 12) **Signature Page:** page 12 is a “signature page”, which you are asked to print out in HARD COPY form, sign, and mail to your synod office. (I think most if not all synod offices accept a PDF version of your “wet signature”—that is, you’ve printed it out, signed it, and scanned it into a PDF file for emailing to the synod office).
- 13) **RLP Activation:** The person in your synod office who administers call process paperwork has to receive three things before they can make your profile “active” in the database: your “wet signature” page in hand, your reference recommendation (electronically submitted), and the Bishop’s own recommendation form (that is shared only with other bishops), electronically submitted. The call process administrator (CPA) then has to manually activate your profile (otherwise, it remains visible only to your synod’s CPA). If you’re sure everything’s been submitted, follow up with a contact to your synod office to politely inquire if it’s been activated, or if they’re still waiting for anything. (Sometimes, there may be a glitch you didn’t know about, or the activation may have been overlooked by mistake.)
- 14) **It’s not (just) you.** Know that the entire ELCA call process system is moving at a pachydermal pace now, and has for the past year or two. This has everything to do with the economy and state of our congregations right now, and little to do with the “new” on-line call process system (although they coincide). Most synods are reporting uncharacteristically few openings and longer waits for people seeking new calls. As the economy improves and more pastors feel confident in retiring, this gridlock should improve. We add our prayers to those of many that may be so very soon!

That’s all I can think of right now. I’ll update this as I get questions or suggestions for additional info. I understand it’s not fun to fill out paperwork, and that it can feel rather impersonal. But we believe and do see that the Holy Spirit often really does work through human processes like our call process, and as synod staff, we try to be mindful of that ourselves, and to encourage call committees to be so mindful, too.

May God bless you in your discernment and ministry as you seek to serve Christ through his Church!

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