

# Lay Ministry Institute of the Upper Susquehanna Synod, ELCA Lay Worship Leaders Handbook

*Amended 2/28/2026 (SC)*

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*Adopted by the Upper Susquehanna Synod Assembly, 1996.  
Amended by Synod Council, November 19, 2022  
Amended by Synod Council, May 18, 2024  
Amended by Synod Council, February 28, 2026*

# Lay Ministry Institute (LMI)

The mission of the Lay Ministry Institute (LMI) is to educate and equip lay people for theologically sound ministry. Programs of the Lay Ministry Institute are administered by a Board of Directors (membership recommended by the LMI Board of Directors and appointed by the Synod Council) and a coordinator (appointed by the Synod Council). The Lay Ministry Institute is under the office of the bishop of the Upper Susquehanna Synod (USS) which provides oversight and accountability to its programs, and which authorizes lay leaders for ministry in USS congregations.

## [A Brief History of Authorized Lay Ministry in the Upper Susquehanna Synod](#)

In the 1980s, the Central Pennsylvania Synod (Lutheran Church in America) developed a training program—the “Lay Assistant Program”—to teach lay persons to preach and lead worship to assist their own congregations. The congregations and territory of the Central Penn Synod were divided into three different synods—one being the Upper Susquehanna Synod—with the birth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988.

In 1995, the ELCA Church Council produced a document that allowed for the development of Synodically Authorized or Licensed Ministries (CC95.04.47t). This new document renewed conversations within the Upper Susquehanna Synod about the growing need to train more lay persons in leading congregational worship. USS Bishop A. Donald Main asked Pastor Glenn Heasley, assistant to the bishop, to form a committee to explore what this could look like on the territory of the synod.

Around this same time, the Upper Susquehanna Synod was encouraging all congregations to move toward weekly communion. This effort influenced the training program’s focus to include both preaching and presiding at the sacrament when authorized by the bishop. The Authorized Lay Worship Leader training program was created to cover the appropriate issues of homiletics, worship, theology, Church history, and some practical hands-on experiences. The training was extensive and addressed some people’s concerns about laypersons being adequately prepared for this service. While many lay persons had been trained by their pastors over the years to lead worship during the pastor’s vacations, the Lay Worship Leader training program was an effort to standardize the training and bring the use of those so trained under the office of the bishop. In 1999, six USS members who were trained in the former Central Pennsylvania Synod’s “Lay Assistant Program” were inducted as the Upper Susquehanna Synod’s first Authorized Lay Worship Leaders.

The initial USS worship leader’s training program consisted of two years of sessions. The Authorized Lay Worship Committee then evaluated and revised the program and process based on comments from seminary professors, mentor pastors, and the students themselves. In 2000, having completed the first training program, twenty-three more USS members were inducted as Authorized Lay Worship Leaders. Concerns were addressed, admission and continuance standards described and applied, and the joys of persons serving in this role were celebrated!

In 2004, the Authorized Lay Worship Committee expanded into areas of ministry other than worship. The Lay Ministry Institute was formed, allowing for the future development of lay catechists, evangelists, steward leaders, youth workers, and others. The initial programs of the Lay Ministry Institute in 2007-2009 featured training for Lay Catechists, Lay Evangelists, and Lay Worship Leaders.

In March 2005, the ELCA Conference of Bishops adopted “A Statement of Understanding Concerning Synodically Authorized Ministry of Word and Sacrament” [CB05.03.01] (**Appendix A**). In November of 2022 the ELCA Church Council adopted amendments to the “Guidelines Related to Synodically Authorized or Licensed Ministries” (**Appendix B**). In 2007, the Board of the Lay Ministry Institute discerned the need to create a handbook to better interpret their program for the synod, to provide guidance for participants in the program, to revise and update the program for current synodical needs, and to bring it into compliance with the revised standards of the ELCA.

In 2008, USS Bishop Robert L. Driesen developed a theological foundation regarding the church’s use of authorized lay persons to preside at the Eucharist. This foundation was used by the Board to refine further the synod’s protocol for using authorized lay worship leaders. The new protocols took effect in 2009 and have been updated in the ensuing years.

## Commissioned Lay Leaders

The term “commissioned” in regard to the LMI lay leader programs carries a distinct meaning and does not apply to all LMI program participants. Most participants in LMI programs do so for the purpose of making their skills and gifts available as resources to the congregations of the Upper Susquehanna Synod.

**Lay Worship Leaders** are trained to lead worship, preach, and preside in congregations of the Upper Susquehanna Synod. With the bishop’s written permission a commissioned Lay Worship Leader may preside at the Eucharist of a particular congregation for a specific time.

At the conclusion of the Lay Worship Leader training program, participants may be recommended to the bishop for commissioning by the LMI Board. Upon commissioning, they may receive the authorization of the bishop to preside at worship. Authorization by the bishop assures congregations that Lay Worship Leaders have been adequately prepared, continue to develop their skills, and are accountable to the larger church.

The Board of the Lay Ministry Institute trains, examines, and recommends lay leaders to the bishop for commissioning. In consultation with the Synod Council, the bishop approves, commissions, and authorizes lay leaders for service in congregations. Commissioned lay leaders are supervised by a Minister of Word and Sacrament in a covenantal relationship and comply with the Code of Practice for Authorized Lay Worship Leaders. The bishop reviews all commissioned lay leaders annually and determines eligibility for continued service.

It is because of our Lutheran theological understanding of ministry and in compliance with the “Guidelines Related to Synod Authorized or Licensed Ministries” of the ELCA that the Upper Susquehanna Synod requires any lay person who would preside at the Eucharist be authorized by the bishop to do so.

## Lay Ministry Institute Board of Directors

The programs of the Lay Ministry Institute are administered by the LMI Board of Directors and LMI Coordinator. The responsibilities of the Lay Ministry Institute Board of Directors include the following related to the Lay Worship Leaders program:

- **Application:** determining requirements for application to LMI programs in accordance with the guidelines established by the ELCA; creating application forms; making application forms readily available to applicants; reviewing, cataloging and securing all applicant files; and determining which applicants may be admitted.
- **Curriculum:** determining educational requirements for each of the lay ministry programs including pre-classroom work; recruiting instructors; giving guidance to instructors for class expectations; creating class schedules; and providing for classroom needs.
- **Evaluation:** creating guidelines for reviewing students' progress; creating and reviewing evaluations forms for mentors/supervisors.
- **Examination:** reviewing and evaluating students' files; determining and enforcing standards for eligibility for commissioning; and establishing standards for evaluating applicants whose training/preparation has occurred outside the Lay Ministry Institute programs.
- **Recommendation:** recommending suitable candidates to the bishop for commissioning; establishing requirements for continued authorization of such lay leaders over time; establishing a protocol for permitting Lay Worship Leaders to preside at the Eucharist.
- **Installation:** providing for a rite of passage for those who will be commissioned as lay leaders.
- **Expectations:** creating a code of practice for commissioned lay leaders and distributing it widely among leaders and congregations.

## Application to The Lay Worship Leader Program

Participants in the Lay Worship Leader programs are active, confirmed, communing, and contributing members of Upper Susquehanna Synod congregations. They are recognized as leaders by their congregations, uphold the highest standards of the Christian life, are faithful in their personal lives, and agree to live by the standards expressed in *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline Rostered Ministers, Congregations, and Members of Congregations* (elca.org Office of the Secretary). They work closely with a mentoring ordained minister (usually the pastor of their home congregation) throughout the training process.

Applications to participate in a Lay Worship Leader program of the LMI include the following:

- Completed application form, including basic personal information, prior church leadership experience, and answers to questions about the applicant's spiritual formation.
- Any application fees determined by the LMI board.
- Contact information for three personal references (other than the applicant's pastor).
- An autobiographical essay reflecting the applicant's process of discerning this call to service.
- A completed and signed statement from the applicant's pastor, including a letter of reference.

- A letter of reference from the applicant’s Congregation Council.
- A personal interview with two members of the LMI Board.
- Reports from required background checks (<https://epatch.pa.gov> and [www.dhs.pa.gov](http://www.dhs.pa.gov)). No report shall be more than one year old at the time of application.

Based on their complete application, the LMI Board determines whether an applicant may be admitted to the Lay Worship Leaders program.

## Lay Worship Leader Curriculum

The core curriculum of the Lay Worship Leaders program includes instruction in the following:

- Bible (Old and New Testament);
- Lutheran Theology, the Lutheran Confessions, and the Confession of Faith and polity of the ELCA;
- Worship (including a worship practicum provided by the LMI);
- Preaching;
- Spiritual discernment and faith development;
- Leadership expectations and identity;
- Contextual understanding; and
- Instruction may include catechetics, visitation, pastoral care, and outreach.
- Training in healthy boundaries.

### Requirements for a Certificate of Completion

Participants in programs of the Lay Ministry Institute who have satisfied all requirements of their program receive a certificate of completion at program’s end. Those participants will have:

- Attended all class sessions, or for sessions missed, arranged for makeup work (readings, recording, etc.) and received evaluation from the instructor.
- Completed all assignments as required by their program, both written and tasked in the congregation.
- Initiated regular meetings with their Mentor Pastor. Participants are expected to meet with their Mentor Pastor prior to each session to discuss resource materials and study preparations, and after each session to reflect on the participants’ learning experience.
- Completed final evaluations as requested.

## Expectations for Mentor Pastors of Lay Leaders in Training

Mentor Pastors are key partners in the training of Lay Worship Leaders, assisting the LMI Board and class instructors in a participant’s education and supervision. Mentor Pastors make a commitment of their time and expertise to support the equipping of lay leaders for ministry. Mentor Pastors provide individual attention and support to participants as they engage in theological education and ministry practice. They provide valuable feedback both to participants

and the LMI Board about a participant's development. Mentor Pastors invite and encourage participants to apply what they've learned in their own congregational setting through experiences of leadership in the participant's area of study.

A Mentor Pastor shall:

- Be a Minister of Word and Sacrament on the roll of the Upper Susquehanna Synod, ELCA.
- Be approved as a Mentor Pastor by the bishop.
- Clearly understand and be committed without reservation to the programs of the Lay Ministry Institute.
- Be an effective model for and guide to the LMI participant in their area of study.
- Maintain the Mentor Pastor relationship with the participant unless the relationship is terminated in consultation with the bishop.

The responsibilities of the Mentor Pastor are as follows:

- Participate in Mentor Pastor training.
- Willingly be available to meet and share with the participant throughout his/her training process:
  - Throughout scheduled classes to offer resource materials and study suggestions.
  - Soon after each scheduled class to reflect on the participant's learning experience and/or work.
- Provide appropriate leadership opportunities within the congregation setting for the participant.
  - Lay Worship Leaders in training are expected to lead worship frequently during their year of training and be given opportunities to preach at least twice during the second half of the year.
  - Lay Worship Leaders are asked to assist with Communion-frequently, including setting the table.
- Provide thorough evaluations as requested by the LMI Board and the bishop on or before dates due. Evaluations include the initial letter of reference for the applicant, and final evaluations.

## Requirements for Commissioning as a Lay Worship Leader

To receive a positive recommendation by the LMI Board for a lay leader to be authorized by the bishop, participants in a program of the Lay Ministry Institute must:

- Read, complete, sign and submit the "Statement of Commitment" for authorized lay leaders.
- Read, complete, sign and submit the "ELCA Standards Questionnaire" for authorized lay leaders.
- Submit original copies of required background checks to the synod office for their file (must be less than five years old).

- Satisfy all requirements to receive a Certificate of Completion for an LMI program, including final evaluation from the Mentor Pastor.
- Complete an interview with the LMI Board.
- Following recommendation of the LMI Board, create a covenant with a Supervising Pastor appointed by the bishop, including a plan for remaining accountable to the larger church as a commissioned lay leader (**synod website**). Copies of the covenant must be sent to the synod office for the lay leader's file.

The bishop of the synod determines whether a lay leader who is recommended by the LMI Board may be commissioned. Those approved participate in a joint service of commissioning marking their authorized status.

## Requirements for Continued Authorization as a Lay Worship Leader

The continued authorization of a Lay Worship Leader shall be reviewed annually by the office of the bishop. Authorized Lay Worship Leaders shall be required annually to submit to the office of the bishop an updated covenant agreement, signed by the leader and their Supervisor, outlining their mutual expectations for the leader's ministry for the coming year. The covenant shall outline the leader's plans for a continuing education experience, and the leader/supervisor's plans to meet periodically to review the leader's ministry. All Lay Worship Leaders must have current background checks (every five years) and boundaries trainings (every three years). A letter of good standing will be sent to each commissioned Lay Worship Leader following the bishop's review of their file. An updated roll of Lay Worship Leaders will be kept at the office of the bishop, and only those whose authorization has been continued may receive assignments or permission to preside at the Eucharist.

**\*\*“Authorization to provide ministry within the synod may be revoked at any time by the synod bishop, who need not specify the reason”.\*\***

## Code Of Practice for Authorized Lay Leaders

### Supervisor Relationship

Lay Worship Leaders are supervised by a Minister of Word and Sacrament of the USS with whom they have made a covenantal agreement outlining their mutual expectations. If a leader's Supervisor is unable to keep their covenant, the leader is required to notify the bishop. The bishop will identify a new Supervisor (see following section for “Expectations of Supervising Pastors for Lay Worship Leaders”).

### Permission for Authorized Lay Worship Leaders

An Authorized Lay Worship Leader (ALWL) may lead worship and preach at a Service without communion at the invitation of the congregation. Unless assigned by the bishop, the ALWL presides at these services as any lay person may and should not use the title Authorized Lay Worship Leader and should not expect compensation.

An Authorized Lay Worship Leader may preside at the Eucharist only with the permission of the

bishop. A request for permission for an ALWL to preside may be made in one of the following ways:

- The pastor or Supervisor of an Authorized Lay Worship Leader may be given a single and enduring letter of permission for that Authorized Lay Worship Leader to preside at the Eucharist in their congregation(s) when called upon by the pastor, provided that the leader's authorization is current with the Bishop's office. This enduring letter is no longer in effect upon the resignation of the pastor or Supervisor.
- The bishop's office makes worship leadership assignments for congregations without a called pastor, and may assign an Authorized Lay Worship Leader to supply at one of these congregations.
- A pastor may contact the bishop's office to ask that a particular ALWL lead worship, preach, and preside at their congregation(s) on a particular date.
- The bishop may give written permission for an Authorized Lay Worship Leader to lead worship, preach, and preside at a particular congregation or group of congregations for an extended period of time. A letter of permission, indicating their assignment, is sent from the office of the bishop to the Lay Worship Leader and to the congregation(s) to be served.

### Congregational Settings

Lay Worship Leaders are not authorized to serve in congregations outside of the Upper Susquehanna Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. If asked to serve in a congregation of another denomination or synod, Lay Worship Leaders may only respond as individuals at their own discretion but are not authorized by the bishop of the Upper Susquehanna Synod to do so.

Lay Worship Leaders may lead worship in federated or union congregations with the permission of the office of the bishop under the supervision of the Lutheran (interim) pastor of the federated or union congregation(s). When a federated or union congregation is served by a non-Lutheran pastor, the office of the bishop may make special arrangements .

### Expectations for Commissioned Lay Leaders

All commissioned lay leaders shall:

- Represent the Lord and his Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Upper Susquehanna Synod with the grace, dignity, respect, and responsibility required of their position.
- Report any difficulties and/or irregularities to the office of the bishop within 48 hours of their designated visit to a congregation.
- Use only these titles--Lay Worship Leader, Synod Authorized Minister, Authorized Minister, or similar -- to identify themselves in person or in print only when in an assigned setting. They shall never use the title Reverend, Pastor, Deacon, etc. in person or in print.
- Never wear a clerical collar or other attire which specifically identifies those individuals called to and ordained for the Office of Word and Sacrament.

Commissioned Lay Worship Leaders shall also:

- Follow the normal worship practices of the congregations in which they are serving.
- Be diligent in preparing to lead worship.

- Be entitled to compensation for their services, including reimbursement for mileage.
- Normally wear a white alb when leading worship. Stoles of any kind and chasubles are inappropriate and shall not be worn.
- NOT baptize someone during a regular service of worship or in private unless given express permission by the bishop.
- NOT officiate at a wedding.
- Normally NOT conduct a funeral service unless authorized by the the bishop.

## Expectations for Supervising Pastors of Lay Worship Leaders

Supervising pastors are a key partner in the continued authorization of lay leaders by the bishop. It is a local, supervising Minister of Word and Sacrament who provides for the ongoing supervision and accountability of an authorized lay leader through a mutually established, annually renewed covenant.

The bishop will identify a Supervisor from among the Ministers of Word and Sacrament of the Upper Susquehanna Synod. Ideally, but not necessarily, the Supervisor may be the Lay Worship Leader’s own pastor. Together, the Lay Worship Leader and their Supervisor complete a covenant which outlines their mutual expectations. The Lay Worship Leader provides a copy of the covenant, signed by both partners, to the bishop’s office when applying for initial or continued authorization. Both partners are responsible for fulfilling the expectations of the covenant.

A supervising pastor is expected (as are all rostered leaders) to uphold the standards of *Definitions and Guidelines For Discipline* ([elca.org](http://elca.org) **Office of the Secretary**) at all times, and the “Normative Ethical Practices for Ordained Ministers of the Upper Susquehanna Synod” ([synod website](http://synod.org)). A Supervisor who violates these standards and practices may be terminated by the bishop in his/her role as a Supervisor and be subjected to further discipline according to the practices of the ELCA.

If a Supervisor is unable to keep a covenant, they are to alert bishop and the Lay Worship Leader as soon as possible to allow them time to find a new supervising partner—a requirement for the leader’s continued authorization.

## Continuing Education for Lay Worship Leaders

Lay Worship Leaders need opportunities for continued growth in competence and understanding as they utilize their gifts in ministry. Continuing education is how leaders enhance ministry abilities, acquire new skills, and experience personal growth for more effective ministry. It is the expectation of the Upper Susquehanna Synod that each Lay Worship Leader participates in at least one continuing education experience annually, for a total of **no less than six contact hours**. Such experiences may include formal classes or workshops, independent study, participation in pericope study groups\*, and the like. The leader’s plan for their continuing education experience

shall be included in their annual covenant with their mentor.

*\* pericope studies may account for only three hours of the required continuing education.*

## **Discipline**

Lay Worship Leaders hold a unique and important public position and responsibility in the Upper Susquehanna Synod and the church at large. This position should never be taken lightly. Failure to function appropriately as a Lay Worship Leader shall result in immediate discipline through the office of the bishop and may include termination of authorization and removal from the roll of Lay Worship Leaders of this synod. Questionable or inappropriate behavior on the part of a Lay Worship Leader shall be reported to the office of the bishop immediately.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A – “A Statement of Understanding Concerning Synodically Authorized Ministry of Word and Sacrament”

The Conference of Bishops has reviewed the recommended approval of a revised “Policy and Guidelines Related to Synodically Authorized Ministries of Word and Sacrament” document and offers the following statement of understanding related to that policy and guidelines.

- A. To affirm the policies and guidelines of this church on synodically authorized ministries as stated in the bylaws, in “Policy and Guidelines Related to Synodically Authorized Ministries of Word and Sacrament” as revised, and in *Use of the Means of Grace*, and to encourage and support one another in applying and interpreting these policies.
- B. To affirm that synodically authorized ministry policies are intended to honor the God-given office of Word and Sacrament (Article V, The Augsburg Confession) and this church’s commitment to ordained ministry as the primary means for fulfilling this office. Synodically authorized ministry is intended to assist this church to respond pastorally and effectively to emerging opportunities in Christ’s mission where it is not possible to provide an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament.
- C. To affirm that when addressing the need for Word and Sacrament ministry in a congregation or other ministry where an ordained minister of this church is not available, that synods will seek the utilization of an ordained minister of a full-communion partner church, under the guidelines related to the orderly exchange of ordained ministers.
- D. To affirm that synodically authorized ministry of Word and Sacrament is normally intended for a specific congregation or other ministry where appropriate ordained ministry is not available for an extended period of time.
- E. To agree that, in keeping with the policies of this church, synodically authorized ministry of Word and Sacrament is not intended for and should not be used to authorize an individual to provide for short-term, intermittent absences of a specific congregation’s called pastor. However, we acknowledge that there is often need to provide for the celebration of the sacrament for such circumstances, and we acknowledge that in some areas and at some times neither an ELCA nor a full-communion partner church ordained minister is available to meet such a need. Such situations highlight a tension between a bishop’s authority to provide for “appropriate ordained pastoral leadership” (7.61.01.) and the guideline that authorization is only to be used when the need for such leadership is “for an extended period of time” (*Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 40). We agree that for congregations in such areas, the inability to provide “appropriate ordained pastoral leadership” may require flexibility in interpreting “for an extended period of time.” This flexibility may be accomplished for a transitional period by the authorization of a person or persons to be available to provide Word and Sacrament ministry in congregations in the area where ordained leadership is chronically unavailable. Authorization would be for a renewable term not to exceed one year and for the specific area. Like all synodically authorized ministers, such persons would be appropriately prepared and supervised. Though authorized for an area and for a term, such persons would only serve in specific ministry settings with the approval of the bishop. The synod should continue to seek ways to make available ordained ministers to serve in that area.
- F. To affirm that this church’s policies and commitments name four clear aspects in synodically authorized ministry: *an invitation to service, the preparation of persons to serve, supervision and accountability, and authorization for specific service*. All four aspects are vital to faithful use of synodically authorized ministries.
  1. We agree to hold one another accountable for the ongoing recruitment of candidates for the ordained and rostered lay ministries of this church.
  2. We encourage congregations and other ministries to enhance the mission-effectiveness of the policies and guidelines by commending to the bishop persons who should be prepared for possible service in synodically authorized ministry.
  3. We encourage bishops and synods to plan for the preparation of persons to meet anticipated and unanticipated mission opportunities of that synod.
  4. We commit ourselves to seek always to authorize for ministry only individuals who have been well prepared and who will serve under supervision.
  5. We will encourage congregations and other ministries to become aware of these guidelines and, in collaboration with the synod, to seek to anticipate their own mission needs and opportunities and to plan for them.

*Adopted by the Conference of Bishops as an agreed statement  
March 2005 [CB05.03.01].*

## APPENDIX B – Synod-authorized Ministries

**7.31.10. Synod-authorized Ministry.** When need exists to render Word and Sacrament ministry for a congregation or ministry of this church where it is not feasible to provide rostered ministers of Word and Sacrament, the synod bishop—acting with the consent of the congregation or ministry, in consultation with the Synod Council, and in accord with standards and qualifications developed by the appropriate churchwide unit, reviewed by the Conference of Bishops, and approved by the Church Council—may authorize a person who is a member of a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to offer this ministry. Such an individual shall be supervised by a minister of Word and Sacrament appointed by the synod bishop; such service shall be rendered during its duration under the sacramental authority of the bishop as the synod’s pastor. Such an individual will be trained to fulfill this ministry for a specified period of time and in a given location only. Authorization, remuneration, direct supervision, and accountability are to be determined by the appropriate synod leadership according to churchwide standards and qualifications for this type of ministry. Authorization for such service shall be reviewed annually and renewed only when a demonstrated need remains for its continuation.

### **Purpose**

Synod-authorized ministry is intended to assist this church to respond pastorally and effectively to emerging opportunities in Christ’s mission, to equip the baptized to live out their vocations for the sake of the world. Synod-authorized ministry honors and respects the office of ministry of Word and Sacrament within this church as well as the ministry of the baptized to serve in their local settings to proclaim the gospel and equip the believers.

Synod-authorized ministry recognizes and honors the office of Word and Sacrament (Article V, The Augsburg Confession). While this church calls and ordains qualified persons to carry out the ministry of Word and Sacrament on behalf of the whole church, there may be times and contexts when qualified persons are called to carry out specific ministry only in their local settings for a designated period of time.

Synod-authorized ministry recognizes the need to be flexible and adapt to the ministry challenges and needs of smaller congregations and other ministry settings. And synod-authorized ministry recognizes that individuals may have the gifts and ability to serve this church through the proclamation of the gospel in a local context, but not the resources, ability or call to serve the whole church as ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament. The purpose of synod-authorized ministry is to pair the gifts of individuals with the ministry needs of local communities in order to assist them to carry out their calling to be the church in the world.

### **A. Identification of need for ministry**

The synod identifies a congregation or other ministry setting where synod-authorized ministry may be appropriate, such as smaller congregations that do not have the resources to call an ordained pastor, congregations that are geographically isolated making collaboration difficult, congregations that are part of multi-point parishes and in need of additional pastoral leadership, or ethnic-specific communities where a pastoral leader is already recognized. Because of the relationship of such authorized lay ministry to those serving in the ministry of Word and Sacrament, ELCA pastors and pastors of our full communion partners serving congregations within the area where this ministry need is located normally will be consulted concerning this determination.

When determining the need for a pastor in a congregation or other identified ministry where a minister of Word and Sacrament of this church is not available, synods will first consider the utilization of an ordained minister from a full communion partner church, under the guidelines related to the orderly exchange of ordained ministers.

### **B. Qualifications**

A person invited to prepare for a synod-authorized ministry must be an active member of an ELCA congregation, preferably for at least one year. (The synod bishop may approve an exception to this rule if the individual is a member of a full communion partner congregation or ordained in another tradition.) In addition, prior to preparing to serve in synod-authorized ministry, an individual must have:

1. been recommended by the individual’s pastor and Congregation Council;
2. met with and been interviewed by synod staff and/or the synod committee responsible for the synod’s program of preparation;
3. demonstrated the ability and willingness to participate in a program of preparation leading to possible service in a synod-authorized ministry or provided satisfactory evidence of prior preparation toward the goals and standards of the program outlined in this policy;
4. submitted written responses to the questions similar to those on the candidacy Entrance Form; and

5. obtained an in-depth background check, as outlined in the Candidacy Manual.

Any individual who has resigned or been removed from rostered ministry in the ELCA in connection with alleged misconduct, or who has been denied continuance in candidacy by reason of misconduct allegations, is precluded from serving as a synod-authorized minister.

### **C. Synod committee for authorized ministry**

A committee may be appointed by the Synod Council to provide the synod bishop with recommendations concerning the authorization of and accountability for authorized ministries within the synod.

The Synod Council or, if appointed, the synod committee determines the educational program within the synod for individuals preparing for service in an authorized ministry; determines eligibility of individuals to enter this program of preparation; and advises the bishop on the suitability of an individual for authorization and service in a synod-authorized ministry.

### **D. Program of preparation**

The synod defines the program of preparation for synod-authorized ministry consistent with this policy. The program of preparation can be accomplished in a variety of ways including: Select Learning (an ELCA resource with online courses facilitated by ELCA seminary and college faculty), synod educational programs that utilize current rostered ministers and/or ELCA seminary and college faculty, seminaries and continuing education centers. Such programs shall prepare individuals to have knowledge and abilities in the following areas:

1. Bible;
2. Lutheran theology, the Lutheran Confessions, and the Confession of Faith and polity of the ELCA;
3. worship;
4. spiritual discernment and faith development;
5. leadership expectations and identity;
6. contextual understanding; and
7. pastoral skills including preaching, catechetics, worship leadership, visitation, pastoral care, outreach, and administration.

### **E. Authorization for service**

When the synod has determined that a specific need exists, and with the consent of the congregation to be served, an individual may be authorized for service within the synod by the synod bishop, in consultation with the Synod Council. The bishop will authorize for this ministry only those individuals who have been well prepared or are in the process of being prepared and who will serve under supervision. Completion of a program of preparation does not mean that authorization for service will follow. There is no guarantee of service within the synod. When authorized, such service shall fulfill assigned responsibilities, and authorization shall be for a specific period of time not to exceed one year. Authorization must be reviewed annually and may be renewed on an annual basis.

Individuals who serve in synod-authorized ministry are to meet the following criteria:

1. evidence of mature Christian faith and commitment to Christ;
2. satisfactory participation in a synod program of preparation, and/or demonstration of appropriate ministry skills;
3. knowledge and acceptance of the Confession of Faith of this church; and
4. willingness to meet this church's expectations concerning the personal conduct and behavior of individuals serving in public ministry as described in "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline of Rostered Ministers."

### **F. Letter of authorization**

The bishop's authorization shall be evidenced by an appropriate letter describing the terms and conditions of the authorization. The description may limit the activities the person is authorized to perform.

### **G. Supervision and accountability**

Accountability for synod-authorized ministry in a congregational setting is the direct responsibility of the Congregation Council. Accountability for a synod-authorized ministry in a non-congregational setting within a synod is the direct responsibility of the governing body of the entity that conducts that ministry, or if there is no such entity, the Synod Council. In all cases, a synod-authorized minister is to be under the direct supervision of a minister of Word and Sacrament appointed by the synod bishop. The supervising minister of Word and Sacrament shall report to the governing body and seek the advice and counsel of the bishop or designated synod staff in relation to the synod authorized minister.

## **H. Candidacy for rostered ministry**

When, in the judgment of the authorizing bishop, synod-authorized ministers are well-suited and qualified for ordained ministry, they shall be encouraged to discern if they are being called into ordained ministry and consider entering the candidacy process. Individuals may remain active in candidacy and theological preparation while serving in a synod-authorized ministry. Individuals may discern that they are called and have the abilities to serve only in their local settings for specific periods of time. These individuals may be set apart for a different kind of ministry that still serves the needs of the faith community in a more limited and specific way that does not put them on the roster of Ministers of Word and Sacrament. A decision not to pursue candidacy does not preclude the need for ongoing faith formation and leadership development.

## **I. Renewal and revocation**

Renewal of authorization after one year may be given when a demonstrated need exists for its continuation. This need is determined by the synod bishop at the request and with the consent of the congregation or other ministry being served, consultation with the supervising minister of Word and Sacrament, and a review of both the ministry setting and the service of the authorized minister.

Authorization to provide ministry within the synod may be revoked at any time by the synod bishop, who need not specify the reason.

## **J. Marriage services**

Where permitted by law, synod-authorized ministers may officiate at marriage services for members of the congregation in which they are authorized to serve, with the concurrence of the congregation and the approval of the synod bishop.

## **K. Other matters**

Individuals may serve in a synod-authorized ministry only within the synod that has authorized that ministry. A synod may consider for authorization an individual trained and authorized by another synod, based on the individual's qualifications and ability to meet the new synod's criteria for authorized ministry.

Individuals authorized for such ministries are not to wear clerical stoles and should not wear clerical collars unless authorized by the synod bishop. The title "Pastor" is reserved for ministers of Word and Sacrament and is not to be used by synod-authorized ministers.

## APPENDIX C – The changing face of Synod-authorized Ministry

*Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call.* (Augsburg Confession (CA), Article XIV Concerning Church Government)

The Lutheran Reformers are clear in their concern to maintain holy orders in the church, that is to continue a ministry of stewardship that preserves the purity of the Gospel proclamation and right administration of the Sacraments (CA V). The church's recognition of vocation to this ministry, exercised through ordination, has been the means to ensure those who publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments do so in accordance with the Gospel.

At the time of the Reformation, the church faced a crisis of pure teaching among those who were called, the leaders of the church. Philip Melanchthon wrote in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession of bishops compelling priests to teach doctrine contrary to the Gospel, thus requiring certain compromises by the reformers in the ordination of those deemed rightly called to the priesthood. Those compromises did not do away with the proper training and testing of those called; rather, they led to greater emphasis on the proper understanding of the Gospel that justifies sinners by the grace of God.

Today our church faces a crisis unseen by the Reformers, a crisis brought about in part by changes in our modern culture that move people away from the church and from acceptance of authority. This has led to smaller congregations and, consequently, fewer leaders discerning a call to leadership in the church. While our congregations struggle to maintain the practice of gathering weekly for worship, including public proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments, we find ourselves short on those called to this ministry in accordance with our Confessions.

The ministry of Lay Worship Leaders began in the Upper Susquehanna Synod to address the looming crisis. At its inception, the program authorized leaders to preside and preach in the absence of their congregation pastor so that the pastor could take vacation and the congregation not go without the Word and Sacraments. This practice was limited to particular times and places and a very specific purpose.

Over time, the need grew in the synod as congregation pastors resigned for retirement or calls beyond synod territory. Where once retired pastors and those in specialized calls in the synod could cover the need for preaching and presiding at Sunday worship in congregations without pastors, the demand began to exceed supply. Thus, Authorized Lay Worship Leaders were added to the schedule to provide this service widely around the synod. What began as a limited response to a need grew to a regular weekly practice.

Bishop Robert Driesen wrote in 2008,

“A tension exists between the church's need for the Gospel and the church's need of an ordained ministry to proclaim the Gospel through Word and Sacrament. In the face of a shortage of ordained ministers, the solution of synodically authorized worship leaders does not eliminate this tension but only intensifies it. Thus, the solution is a temporary one, authorized by the church as one response to the emergent need.”

This “temporary” solution must be constantly evaluated for its effectiveness and adapted to changing circumstances in the synod. In addition, each bishop of the synod must determine how best to use those commissioned to this ministry in accordance with the bishop’s understanding of vocation.

As stated in the ELCA guidelines for Synod-authorized Ministry, individuals authorized to this ministry serve under the church’s call to the bishop of the synod: They serve at the pleasure of the bishop who is responsible for their actions and to whom they must answer. Because the number of those commissioned to this ministry has become great, the bishop relies on supervisors – ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament – to ensure they adhere to the standards and expectations set forth by the church’s three expressions. In addition, the Lay Ministry Institute Board assists the bishop to establish appropriate training and evaluation of candidates for this ministry and annual review of those currently serving.

The continued use of synod-authorized ministers must not keep us from facing difficult decisions in our congregations continuing to experience decline of membership and overwhelming challenges to their programs and properties. We must proclaim the Gospel not as appeasement of the anxieties of the people but as a dying and rising with Christ. We have learned that this program does not alleviate the problems we perceive in our church, and so we must continue to discern the ways God calls us to organize and govern the church.

We will continue to use synod-authorized ministers and invite others to consider this ministry. At the same time, we will prayerfully make adjustments to this ministry according to our perceptions of God’s working among us and in the world.

Bishop Craig A. Miller  
May 6, 2024

## APPENDIX D – “Applying for a Background Check”

All applicants seeking the authorization of the bishop to serve as authorized lay leaders of the Upper Susquehanna Synod are required to submit two different background checks: The *Pennsylvania State Criminal History Record* and *Child Abuse History Clearance*. (Note that an application for the *Child Abuse History Clearance* requires a copy of the *PA State Criminal History Record*.) Applicants who have resided in a state other than Pennsylvania as adults are also required to submit a *Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Criminal History Report*.

Applicants are required to submit originals of criminal history reports dated no more than one year prior to their application. Applicants may follow the procedures below for obtaining the required reports, or submit originals from reports already in their possession. A copy of each report will be made and retained in the applicant’s file. Originals will be returned to the applicant.

### **To access Pennsylvania Criminal Background Check**

<https://www.dhs.pa.gov/KeepKidsSafe/Clearances/Pages/default.aspx>