

“Are We Being Called to be a ‘First Call Congregation’?”
A DISCERNMENT WORKSHOP FOR CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

INTRODUCTION: “WHO ARE WE? WHAT’S NEXT?”

There are many critical and profound times in the life of a faith community: times of beginnings, endings, crises, and joys. A congregation as community can embody all of life, just as a family, work team, neighborhood group, or school board, does.

In this life together as a congregation, some transitional moments require regrouping, envisioning, imagining again who we are, just as an individual does going through life, making changes in schools, college or work choices, marriage, children, where to locate at several stages, especially in the third age of life. A downward shift in income creates new opportunities to live responsibly within limits and eliminate excesses. An upward shift also requires responsibility about simplicity, stewardship and asking the questions that lead to a faithful life.

All these shifts require reflection, possibly regrouping, shifting directions, sometimes as individuals, but most often with those around us.

That’s what this time, in this workshop, is about. You may have reached a new NOW in the congregation, a time of growth or decline (neither being a negative thing), the end of the strong leadership of a pastor or lay person, the presentation of an opportunity that needs to be discerned or a time to name a weakness or obstacle and move on to embrace the challenge.

While negative aspects will need to be recognized, it is critical to be faithful to the call to be a community of co-workers with God in the world that God continues to love and create.

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

2 Peter 1:3 NRSV

Your particular challenge may be regrouping around a new situation, such as:

- What’s involved in calling a pastor new to ordained ministry?
- What’s our vocation as a community of faith?
- What goals might help us become more faithful to God’s call for us?

We will use this time to deal with what’s involved in calling a pastor new to ordained ministry. The workshop design which follows is a process that should be done before “The Ministry Site Profile” from the synod comes so you can thoughtfully incorporate your discernment. Very likely, a synod staff person has suggested this route for your congregation because they see the ministry of the congregation as one that would welcome, nurture and support a pastor just out of seminary.

This time before you get started with the ministry profile of your congregation will be a time to use your imagination to go beyond the usual characteristics, the usual questions, the usual perspectives (*we've always done it this way*), to who you are at this present moment. Sometimes it means standing in a different spot to take a new look at ourselves in order to see an intriguing (if not new) possibility. You will then be able to indicate that you are open to the possibility and that you have discerned it thoughtfully.

You might be considering a solo position, a team ministry position, or an associate position. There will be some unique challenges related to each of these call situations.

This process will introduce the question of whether or not it might be a good time in your life to call a pastor who is just newly ordained. Commonly known as a First Call Pastor, this is someone new to his or her calling as ordained clergy, even as a new teacher or doctor or truck driver is called to his or her particular vocation.

This may not be the new pastor's first call to a career, but the first call to a congregation will have a profound influence on the rest of the life and ministry of the pastor. This means the congregation will also find itself in an "over and above" situation of ministry. A congregation might find itself facing unique challenges as it welcomes and supports a pastor's first call to a career. Some of those challenges will be described more explicitly in the "Readers Theater" experience that you will be planning. We will also talk about what it means for the pastor and family and the congregation in terms of their understanding of ministry roles based on a solid sense of vocation.

You might use this process with one or more of the following groups:

- Congregation council
- Call Committee
- Forum of select adults spanning several generations
- Leaders from several congregations who are in the discernment process or anticipating a pastoral change.

The work described in this resource can be done over a series of four to six sessions or at an all day or overnight retreat, depending on what best fits your congregational needs. Of course, having an overnight retreat allows for spending quality time sharing the stories and current experience of your congregation beyond the facts and the current content. It also is a good opportunity for informal interactions, trust-building and experiencing the spirit of the community.

PRE-WORK

In order to have a workshop or a series of meetings go smoothly, a key leader or coordinator for this work needs to take some initial steps in getting ready. Much of this preparation can be done by other leaders who are asked to use their gifts in this planning and preparation stage. The following describe these initial steps and leadership needs:

1. Prior to the first session, find someone in the congregation who has access to the historical material (anniversary chair or congregational historian) and ask that person(s) to summarize the highlights of the congregation's history in a brief paper.
2. To get a sense of the present life and issues of the congregation, have someone look at recent newsletters, congregation council reports or other documents and summarize these. Research just enough to get a feel for life in the congregation and how it has evolved. Note shifts or changes over the years and the flexibility with which the congregation has coped with them.
3. Recruit three or four people to assist with a "mini" case study. Each person can interview two to four people with the questions* listed below. Be sure to tell the interviewees the purpose of the case study and explain what a First Call Pastor is, as well as what constitutes a healthy First Call Congregation. Try for an interesting range of people to interview: long-time and new members, younger and older, ethnic diversity and new Lutherans, new Christians. (*As a background to these interviews, see **Session 1: Vocation** for a list of desirable characteristics of a First Call Pastor and characteristics of healthy and effective First Call Congregations*).
 1. What would you say that our congregation is very good at?
 2. How do things happen in our congregation?
 3. Is there a "founding" story of our congregation (how it got started)?
 4. If you had to name our congregation's "spirit," (its character, personality, culture), what would you say? Are there recurring images or metaphors in the congregational story that give insights into the culture?
 5. Describe a time in the recent past when there was a proposed change in the congregation (worship, education, decision-making). What was the process for doing this? How was it received? Were there conflicts or fires to put out? How was this handled? What was the final outcome of this change?
 6. Do you think that members see themselves as involved in ministry in their daily lives – at work, in family, in school, in the community? Give me a couple examples of this.
 7. Are there ways that the congregation is connected to the larger church, the ELCA, the synod or ecumenical relations?
 8. If a person in the community asked you to give a thumbnail sketch of what our congregation is like, what would you say?
 9. What do you think is the unique story of our congregation that would make us a community where a First Call Pastor might thrive?

*While these questions are numbered, they don't need to be asked in that sequence. You may want to make some choices among these questions. Some questions may be answered better by those who are more involved in the life of the congregation than those who are new or not as involved. Some of the questions may be more appealing or appropriate to your congregation's situation

and some may not fit. It should be possible to complete an interview in 30-40 minutes. Jot down some notes during or shortly after the interview and give a legible copy to the key leader or coordinator.

4. Bring the interviewers together twice, perhaps over coffee or a light meal. The first time decide who might be interviewing whom and talk about the questions as well as some introductory comments to use with each interviewee. During a second gathering time share the findings from all the interviews, looking for similarities as well as differences in the responses. Ask a person(s) who is good at writing and summarizing to write up two to three pages that summarizes what people said, perhaps using the topics in the questions to organize the responses (without attaching names). Such a summary will have value in a variety of situations later on.
5. We will be using a method called “Readers Theater” to introduce the stories of several congregations featured in a case study project of the ELCA and the Lilly Endowment titled “The Vocation of First Call Congregations.” You may be familiar with Readers Theater. It is a way to distill and share information in a succinct and creative way. In this workshop the Readers Theater resource is based on case studies done in congregations who have called, supported and nurtured pastors in their first calls. Included in this project were rural congregations with solo pastors, urban congregations, small town congregations, two-point parishes, a congregation with a pastoral team and two churches in the Southwest.

To present the material as a dramatic reading, you will need to recruit a director for the Readers Theater who can in turn recruit and work with readers for one or two practice sessions to make the stories come alive. You will want to make it a special presentation.

The script, along with some directions and the narration, appear as Appendix A of this guide. Appendix B, a handout for the audience, describes each of the six congregations featured in this presentation. Appendix C, “Directions to Readers in Readers Theater Presentation,” provides ideas for the readers and the director for choreographing the presentation.

Depending on available time (keep the presentation to about 30 minutes to allow for questions), use at least three and up to all six congregations in this presentation. The variety will point up common themes, concerns and challenges. After studying the whole design in the Appendix, the workshop facilitator and director of the Readers Theater should determine whether to use the whole presentation or select which of the segments are most appropriate for your own workshop. For instance, if you are a rural congregation, be sure to use a rural example, but also go beyond geography to a different-sized congregation and add in the urban and/or a two-point parish as well.

6. Someone can be asked to make arrangements for the dates and locations of the workshop, weekend retreat or weekly sessions and get out invitations to people you want to include as participants, especially if it goes beyond an already existing group.

TELLING OUR STORY: A CONGREGATIONAL VOCATION WORKSHOP

Each of the following sessions can be adapted to fit 60-90 minutes as appropriate for your agenda.

As key leader or facilitator, it will be most efficient for you to:

- Recruit someone to do the newsprint recording (same or different person for each session);
- Make sure there are sufficient sheets and good dark magic markers for writing; and
- Save the newsprint and keep it visible as the day, weekend or weekly sessions move along. Much of what is on them is material on which you will build for the final session.

Session 1 – VOCATION

1. Begin with prayer and meditation for the time you are together and for faithfulness in carrying out the work. (10 minutes)
2. Introduce the workshop. For example: “Why are we doing this? The idea of this congregation discerning its vocation as a First Call Congregation has been presented to us by _____ (synod, by the departing pastor, by members) and we want to take that seriously as a possibility at this time in our life.” Make an honest but positive statement, such as, “This is not a necessity because of economics, but a chance to look at who we are at this time, how we see our ministry and to consider the vocation of First Call Pastors and the characteristics and contexts of congregations where they begin their ministries.”
3. Describe what a healthy First Call congregation looks like. The ELCA publication, *Sustaining First Calls – A Handbook of Best Practices*¹ states that First Call Congregations can be effective if they:
 - Consider their context as a training ground for new pastors;
 - Understand this role as a vocation for the congregation;
 - Are patient with mistakes and willing to learn and grow together;
 - Encourage and model flexibility, resiliency, and maturity;
 - Honor the fresh perspectives of their First Call leader;
 - Offer intentional entry into the life of the community; and
 - Encourage participation in lifelong learning as well as sabbath time.
4. While not inclusive, these are some characteristics of a healthy First Call Pastor:
 - Willing to learn together with members; don’t “go it alone;”

- Involved in continuing education;
- Able to accept criticism and learn from it;
- Uses a support group;
- Has communication skills and can problem solve;
- Is receptive to the congregation and its history and culture;
- Able to delegate and manage effectively;
- Empathetic and supportive of committees and people;
- Good listener; do visitation and counseling;
- Has a strong proclamation and sacramental role;
- Takes leadership as well as empowering others;
- Remembers people's names;
- Gives theological and biblical guidance and inspiration;
- Maintains confidentiality;
- Understands there will be some challenges in this beginning ministry together; and
- Introduces change slowly.

5. Briefly describe the work ahead, perhaps in goal language such as: "During the time together we are going to look at (a) how we understand vocation as individuals and congregation, (b) listen to and reflect on our own story and the stories of other congregations, and (c) see how we react to and feel about the possibility of being a First Call Congregation." You might want to allow for some questions, but call for a "trust the process" attitude. (10 minutes).
6. Now help the group think about vocation: Our individual calls, the vocation of the congregation, the vocation of the First Call Pastor and the connection between all of them. The following paragraphs provide some ideas for this discussion:

Vocation – Call – What is it? What does it mean to each member, individually and corporately? How do we understand our own vocation/ministry and that of the congregation currently? How are we the face of our congregation's ministry when we move back to Monday through Saturday activities wherever we are in the world and in the church?

As Lutherans, the idea of vocation and ministry of all people is foundational to our theology. Luther used the phrase "priesthood of all believers" to point out that each person has work that is necessary to God in sustaining and improving the world. And Frederick Beuchner, a theologian, has pointed out that we are in ministry when we "serve the world's deep needs."

Luther talked often about the equal importance of the vocation of those who work in the church and those who are the church working in the world. One of his famous images is that of the homemaker kneeling to scrub floors and the priest kneeling at the altar. Luther pointed out that they were different, but equally of value in God's work.

7. To build awareness of the variety of ministries and gifts that are represented in your congregation, choose one of the following process options with the group. They focus on real and recent events in people's lives.

You may want to do a five-minute experience of putting up newsprint and asking people what "ministry" and "vocation" means to them. There is no need for comments, just use it as a checklist and see if understandings change as you move along. Leave it up with the other newsprints. These will provide valuable insights and information as you move along.

Option 1 – Daily Ministries . . . in the World

Materials – Five 3 x 5 cards for each participant. (Place on seats before session or hand out quickly at the beginning.) Divide participants into groups of three to four people.

1. Recall the past week in participant's lives:
 - a. Ask everyone to recall five events or activities in their lives this past week. Have them jot down quickly the first five that come to mind on 3 x 5 cards – one on each card. Give no other explanation or information at this time.
 - b. Invite them to share these events or activities with others in their group. (5 minutes).
2. Choose the week's most and least satisfying times. (This step relates daily activities with ministry.)
 - a. Ask each person to arrange the five cards in order from most satisfying to least satisfying. Pause a moment to let them do this. Then tell them to discard the middle three cards. There may be many "oohs!" Don't explain.
 - b. Tell them to describe the remaining events or activities. Have them turn the remaining two cards over and jot down answers to the following questions as you say them slowly.
 - 1) Where were you?
 - 2) Who was with you?
 - 3) What were you doing?
 - 4) What did this have to do with your ministry?Ignore protests about #4. Don't help. Let them struggle with their two events and their ministry.
 - c. Invite them to discuss their responses to question #4 in their group. (15 minutes)
3. Connect daily life to ministry. (This helps participants identify and articulate the connections between daily life and ministry.)
 - a. Interrupt the conversations going on to ask if they have any discoveries, problems or question to share at this point. This should be a brief, check-in point, not a time to draw conclusions. (5 minutes)

- b. Back in small groups tell them to share new understandings and insights about ministry, especially ministry that occurs Monday through Saturday, away from the church buildings. (10 minutes)
- c. Sum up the learnings. Interrupt the conversation after ten minutes to get the group's attention. Record comments on newsprint and encourage people to make their own notes. These should be kept handy for reference during future workshops. (10 minutes)

You might pose questions like these:

- 1) What are we saying about ministers and ministry?
- 2) What's a new understanding for you or something that has a slightly different ring?
- 3) What's the connection between your faith and your daily life?

- d. Look for signs the participants comprehend that:
 - All baptized Christians minister. Baptism is our rite of ordination.
 - Most ministries occur away from the church building in everyday places.
 - The whole world is God's place. It has many "rooms."
 - Our work is what occupies most of our time. It is our arena/room of ministry.
 - God gives us the gifts we need to do our ministry.

4. Connect ministry to the world. (Help people to see that not only do they have an impact on people they see face-to-face, but they also make a difference in the lives of people they never see. This can be done fairly quickly.)

- a. Ask the group to consider the number of lives they touch daily. Point out that the places they identified on their cards are their ministry rooms. Ask for a show of hands for those who see at least one other person each day. Then 5 other people. Then 10, 20, etc. Together, they are in contact with many people daily. You can write these numbers on the newsprint.
- b. Ask if all of those individuals are aware of God's love. Some of the lives they touch daily are untouched by the church or people for whom the church was bad news, not good news. They may not come to church, but the church can go to them through the daily ministries of its members.
- c. Ask how far their influence goes beyond the people they contact directly. The things they do may make a difference in the lives of people in their counties, states or in other parts of the world. The way they do their work, stand for justice and treat people with compassion may make a difference half-a-world away. Teaching is an example. You touch one student, he touches another, she touches another, and so on. The impact, theoretically, is infinite. Or, mention other examples such as our care of the environment, entering data accurately into computer records, providing food products that are healthy to eat, etc.
- d. Ask about the potential impact of all the members of the congregation. Write comments on newsprint as a reminder for further conversation about how we might communicate this to a new pastor. As an image of the connection between personal and corporate ministry, talk about the ripples made by the

lives of congregational members living out their faith in their daily lives. Affirm such a broad ministry and thank participants for sharing and affirming one another's daily ministries.

(Adapted from *SPLASH! The Ripples of the Baptized*, ELCA, 2005)

Option 2 – Days of the Week

1. This experience is simple but powerful. All of us have days when we wonder how we can keep going. We become overwhelmed by work. We worry about family, friends and financial difficulties. Maybe we are just plain bored. Yet usually we do keep going. Each of us has some built-in way of surviving.
2. Call for volunteers to represent the days of the week. Ask participants to think back over the past week and recall a day that was particularly notable, that is, a day in which everything seemed to go right or seemed to go wrong. This may be hard to do at first, at least without looking at calendars. Take a minute or two to remember a particular day.
3. Have the “Monday through Saturday” volunteers pull their chairs into a circle in the middle. The remaining “Sunday” people should spread their chairs outside the circle.
 - a. As facilitator, tell those on the Sunday chairs to listen to the weekday stories, and ask the following questions of themselves:
 - What am I hearing?
 - What does faith have to offer to say to this person and this person's day?
 - What gifts do these people bring to the church and world?
 - b. Ask them to listen and be silent until asked to share their thoughts at the end of the sharing.
 - c. Ask the Monday person to describe his/her day, from waking up in morning to going to sleep at night.
 - d. In turn, each weekday person tells his or her day in detail, limiting storytelling to about five minutes.
 - e. After the weekday stories are completed, reverse places. The Sunday people now take the inside-of-circle chairs and talk about what they have heard from the weekday people. Their specific question: What are the gifts of the weekday people and what does faith have to say to the experiences of the weekday people?
 - f. Then gather in a single circle and talk about the experience. As you talk together, try to use the terms that the weekday people used, rather than falling into “church” talk.
 - g. As you facilitate this process, note it may take as long as five minutes for each story. This listening time is very important. If one person seems to be going on for a long time, gently suggest that the group move on to the next day of the week. If someone gives a particularly brief account, you might say “What happened during the time when you . . .?”
 - h. You may be concerned that nothing of substance worth discussing will surface. It will. Remember, even the seemingly mundane is substantive.

- i. The more challenging part will be when the Sunday people begin to talk about what they heard. Participants may respond only in generalities, or to the most memorable of what was said. Let the Sunday people talk about the weekday stories, but try to model a response that is specific. For example, you might say, “Mark, when you forgot your keys and were locked out, I heard the frustration in your voice.”
- j. Speaking faith using daily language can be hard because we don’t do it often. We tend to speak in generalities, such as “All things work together for good to those who love God.” Give participants time. They will find helpful words to say to each other. Someone might say, “Mark, I’m sure God knows our frustration, too. Being locked out is no fun. But God’s not inside saying, ‘You fool.’ God is outside with us.”
- k. Keep participants focused on the stories presented, not to insert more stories. There will be enough to talk about.
- l. Many different arenas of life will be represented in the group’s stories. Holy work includes all kinds of work. The complexity of daily life is obvious as you move from arena to arena. There are many stress points and some real struggles. While one or more people may have told about a difficult time, others might describe something that made a day wonderfully refreshing.
- m. The discussion may be very personal, so be sensitive and bring it to a close thoughtfully.

(Adapted from *Connections: Faith and Life*, ELCA, 1997)

4. End this session with a **prayer**:

Dear God, as I pray to you now my mind is full of my days; the pleasures and pains, the stresses and rewards are burned in my brain. Quiet my soul for a few moments and hear my prayer as one of your workers in the world.

My days are sometimes hard, God, and I need your counsel and comfort; when things fall apart, when I am confronted with evil, when the needs of the people around me are great, when I’m tired to the insides of my brain and when my work is not appreciated.

For your gifts and your grace that come to us each day, we praise your name and thank you for being our God. **Amen.**

(Adapted from *Working: Making a Difference in God’s World*, ELCA, 1995)

5. Before leaving, mention that next time you will look at the collective ministry and calling of the congregation. This is an important step, because each congregational story is unique and has a profound impact on how a new pastor steps into that story for effective ministry.

6. If you want to provide additional thought starters for the next session, post a newsprint list of questions used in the mini case study in preparation for this session. (See pre-work #2).

Session 2 – OUR STORY

1. If you have done a “mini” case study, hand out the summary of your interviews, along with the historical summary done from documents. The workshop facilitator or one of the interviewers can explain how the interviews were done and for what reason. Tell participants that all of this was done to get a good picture of the history, story, style and spirit of the congregation...how it works...what its spirit and culture are and how it deals with things like conflict, challenges and changes. Don't prolong this. Its purposes are to inform and affirm what is to come and provide additional data for moving forward.
2. Before the session, write the interview questions on newsprint or a handout (if you didn't do that at the end of the last session). Allow people 5 minutes to jot down a few of their own memories, impressions, ideas, thoughts about the questions.
3. In small groups of three or four, allow 20 minutes (or more if it is a longer event) for people to share their impressions of the findings with one another. One response will spark others, so you may need to close off the conversation, saying there will be more time later to explore this.
4. Have participants share with the whole group their observations, surprises, affirmations as they listened to one another. Get the responses on newsprint. These responses will feed into the conversation in the last session. You can point to some recurring themes, challenges, concerns, issues, or ask the group to do that with you.
5. Ask: Is this a pretty good picture of our community? Allow brief responses. Point out that in the next session you will hear the stories of other congregations who have called and nurtured newly ordained pastors and how they see themselves and their vocation as a First Call Congregation.

Session 3 – READERS THEATER

1. The director of the Readers Theater will introduce and manage this session. In addition to the Readers Theater script in Appendix A, several options are described to make a decision about the length of this presentation. Also, the director is given introductory language in Appendix A. The director may add any information that would be helpful to the group before the reading begins.
2. After the Readers Theater presentation, the workshop leader asks participants to share what they heard about:
 - themes
 - concerns
 - challenges
3. In small groups (if the group is large – or whole group if under six or seven) discuss the following questions:

- What similarities to our own congregation did you see in the stories we have just heard? That is, do you recognize something familiar in these stories?
- What are some differences? Where do you sense our congregation isn't like the stories you've just heard?
- Given all that we have heard and talked about, might our congregation have a vocation to become a First Call Congregation?

4. In preparation for the next session, ask participants to think about what they have heard about other congregations in the Readers Theater and about some examples of the following activities, characteristics of their own faith community.

- Nurturing
- Flexibility
- Connecting
- Partner Relationship (lay leaders with the pastor)
- Spirituality Practiced

Session 4 – BACK TO VOCATION

1. In this session we can build on each of the preceding sessions. What are the questions that would help us discern if we have a vocation to be a First Call Congregation? How robust, healthy and outgoing are we? This is an opportunity to be honest for the sake of the gospel. If there is resistance or resentment that this comes from necessity (decline, economic conditions, etc.), allow such sharing for a few minutes, but ask for a suspension of judgment as you consider what could turn it into "vocation." Ask for ideas; e.g., learning more, collaborating in a parish model with other congregations (one or more shared staff), models appropriate to your community, context, and assets).

2. Isaiah 43:18-19 points out that God is always doing new things. This may be one of the times when we listen to God saying, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" While the circumstances are clearly different, we can take the statement seriously and consider what new God may be seeing for our congregation and how we can live faithfully into that newness.

3. Ask: "Site one example in our life and history for each of the characteristics listed below of a vital First Call Congregation." (Make sure the newsprint sheets are up for all to see.) Or you might ask them to site situations that say "yes" or "no" to each of these characteristics. The idea here is to try to elicit "best practices" in the congregation that already exist, but perhaps could be strengthened or made more explicit to others.

- Nurturing
- Flexibility
- Connecting
- Partner Relationship (lay leaders with the pastor)
- Spirituality Practiced

4. It may be that this group is not the one who will ultimately decide whether or not to call a First Call Pastor. But they should be thanked and affirmed for the work they have done that will be invaluable input for the call committee or council. Encourage them to stay connected to the ongoing process during this transition and to continue to expect that the future of the congregation is solid and that its people are engaged in God's work.

5. You might end the event/last session asking participants to first write down three or four things that they learned about themselves, about other members or their congregation that could be helpful in moving into the weeks and months ahead. Ask each person to share one of these thoughts and record these on newsprint. If there are other things not mentioned after one round, ask for additions to the list. Also, request that if people are comfortable to turn in these lists (without names), that would be helpful for the next stage of the process.

5. End with prayer or a meditation. Perhaps weave in language about being thankful for the congregation and its committed and creative members. Express thanks for God's presence in the midst of sharing stories, hopes and dreams as well as frustrations evident in this faith community. God knows us all, individually as well as corporately, and is not shocked by anything we think or say. Pray that the congregation remain open to God's guidance, prods, and even insights as God's Spirit blows new life into all of us. Close with the Lord's Prayer, prayed in unison.

¹ For a full text of this resource, go to www.elca.org/firstcall and the Transition into Ministry section.

