



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

## **Word and Service Task Force**

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **What is the Word and Service Task Force? How was it started?**

Since 1993, the ELCA has maintained four public ministry rosters: the roster of ordained ministry and three lay rosters — associates in ministry, deaconesses and diaconal ministers. Each roster has maintained its own function, standards and required preparation. The integral role of rostered lay ministry in the ELCA has contributed much to the life and mission of the church in the world.

Beginning in 2007, a series of regional consultations, study and dialogue began to examine the work and ministry of these three lay rosters, and these conversations eventually led the ELCA Church Council to form a Word and Service Task Force.

The task force soon came to recognize that the most important question was and is whether the mission of the people of God in the ELCA would be strengthened by the convergence of the three lay rosters of the ELCA into one and by a redefinition of this one new roster.

#### **Why move from three lay rosters to one lay roster of Word and Service?**

Establishing one unified roster of Word and Service ministry will simplify and clarify the identification of these public ministers and their leadership role in the life of the church and world, bring the ELCA's forms of public ministry into closer alignment with ecumenical and global Lutheran practice and provide for the energetic engagement with God's mission of healing, hope and new life among suffering people and creation.

The proposed new roster of Word and Service ministry honors many of the particular gifts of the previous rosters, while at the same time calling for new and strengthened diaconal impetus for all who are called to serve in and through this new ministry.

#### **How do we understand the biblical call to *diakonia*?**

The word *diakonia* comes from the New Testament Greek word for service. Christ the servant leads God's church into ministries that serve the needs of God's world. Lutherans read the Bible as the story of God's love before, during and after the cross of Jesus Christ. We see that this "theology of the cross" is rooted in God's diaconal character. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit lives in intimate solidarity with every suffering person. Therefore, wherever one works to announce God's forgiveness, to heal, to bring



peace, to establish justice, to harbor hope and proclaim promise, there one serves Christ himself and there the servant makes visible to the served the God who insistently and selflessly is with us. Such is service to “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). All of this mandate is *diaconal*.

The ELCA affirms this call in its Statement of Purpose (Chapter 3, ELCA Constitution):  
**“Serve in response to God’s love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs.”**

### **Why deacon?**

The name *deacon* is proposed for those who are called to this ministry of Word and Service because it is biblically rooted, historically informed, ecumenically related and mission driven. The name or title deacon is gender neutral. The title and office of deacon is used by our full communion partners in the Episcopal and United Methodist churches as well as in many global Lutheran World Federation churches.

Deacons will be called to advocate a prophetic *diakonia* that commits itself to bold and innovative service on the frontiers of the church’s outreach, giving particular attention to the suffering places in God’s world. Deacons will be called to provide leadership that inspires, calls out, equips, encourages and advocates for the church’s call to witness and service in the world. A ministry of *diakonia* invites participation, builds bridges and accompanies others in God’s mission in many different ways.

### **How will those on the present three lay rosters move to the new roster of Word and Service ministry?**

We give thanks to God for the ministry of all who have served and are serving on the present lay rosters. In order to make the transition from three rosters to one as smooth as possible:

- All members of the current three rosters (under call, on leave from call, on disability or retired) will automatically be transferred onto the new roster, unless they choose to resign from the roster.
- On the new roster, the *date of entering public ministry* for each leader will be the same as the leader’s original date onto the previous roster(s).
- Current associates in ministry, deaconesses, diaconal ministers and candidates in process will be expected to attend gatherings where they will celebrate the new



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roster and receive formation for a common ethos of the diaconate, including its biblical, historical, ecumenical and missional emphases.

### **What formal preparation will be required of candidates for Word and Service ministry?**

Under the guidance of ELCA synodical candidacy committees, candidates will satisfactorily complete the requirements for a Master's Degree in theology or a related area, including practical preparation, as defined by the appropriate churchwide unit, such as internship and supervised clinical work, or in lieu of a Master's Degree, had equivalency assessed through a competency assessment at the request of the candidacy committee.

### **By what rite will ministers of Word and Service be received onto the roster?**

At the present time, candidates who have been approved and received a call as an associate in ministry are commissioned. Candidates who have been approved and received calls as either a deaconess or diaconal minister are consecrated. A candidate who has been approved and received a call as a pastor is ordained. The ELCA Church Council appointed a working group to discern what the entrance rite for the new Word and Service roster might be. The Church Council later affirmed a recommendation from the Conference of Bishops to delay a proposal on the appropriate entrance rite and related issues until the November 2018 meeting, asking the working group to engage conversations across the church about this rite. Consecration will be used as the entrance rite until then.

### **How are deacons on the roster of Word and Service ministry distinguished from other deacons found within the ELCA?**

Some synods and congregations use the name deacon to designate a person who has followed a course of preparation administered locally or at the synod level and who serve in ministries that are defined, authorized and accountable locally. Those who serve in synodical or congregationally based ministries are recognized in their particular location but are not members of the churchwide roster.

Deacons who have been approved through the ELCA candidacy process and who serve under a Letter of Call as outlined in the ELCA Constitution will appear on the official roster of Word and Service ministry of this church. These individuals, as rostered public ministers of the ELCA, regardless of where they may serve, are accountable in their conduct and ministries to the ELCA and its governing documents. ELCA rostered deacons are recognized and may serve in all synods.



### **What is the relationship between deacons and the ministry of the baptized?**

Christians have always emphasized the need to live faithfully and actively with care for the neighbor, our own individual identity and purpose already having been secured for us by the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. This is the work of the priesthood of all believers. As Scripture and history show and as cited in the ELCA Constitution, **“This church affirms the universal priesthood of all its baptized members. In its function and its structure this church commits itself to the equipping and supporting of all its members for their ministries in the world and in this church. It is within this context of ministry that this church calls some of its baptized members for specific ministries in this church.”**

Thus, deacons represent, serve, lead and equip the whole people of God in service to God's world. Deacons come from and stand with, by and for the whole ministry of the baptized. In this way, too, deacons uniquely incarnate the church's call to *diakonia* and inspire renewed action.

### **What is the relationship between deacons and pastors?**

Deacons serve and lead in the ministry of Word and Service. Pastors serve and lead in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. These two emphases are inextricably linked inviting and encouraging these leaders into complementary and collaborative ministry in a great variety of settings. Both lead and serve under the name of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. The emphasis of deacons is to lead and equip the baptized for service within and beyond the congregation.

### **Will there continue to be intentional diaconal communities?**

Affirming the value of community, it is foreseen that intentional communities will continue to be part of the life of the new roster of Word and Service ministry. New communities might emerge on their own or could be birthed out of the presently functioning communities. Either way, such communities can be resources for the mutual uplifting, enlightening and encouragement of their members and can serve as models of community in Christ for the wider church.

### **What is the timeline for these recommendations?**

Following review by the ELCA Conference of Bishops, the ELCA Church Council received the report and recommendations of the Word and Service Task Force at its November 2015 meeting and recommended the following action to the 2016 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA:

- *To unify the three existing rosters of laypersons (Associates in Ministry, Deaconesses of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Diaconal Ministers) into a roster of Ministry of Word and Service*