

# DEFINITIONS *and* GUIDELINES *for* DISCIPLINE

ROSTERED MINISTERS,  
CONGREGATIONS AND  
MEMBERS OF CONGREGATIONS



**Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

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## **DEFINITIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR DISCIPLINE OF ROSTERED MINISTERS**

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As an expression of its life in the gospel of Jesus Christ, this church embraces disciplinary processes of counseling, admonition, and correction, with the objective of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing.

Simultaneously, out of deep concern for effective extension of the gospel, this church remains alert to the high calling of discipleship in Jesus Christ. The rostered ministers of this church, as persons charged with special responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel, are to seek to reflect the new life in Christ, avoiding that which would make them stumbling blocks to others. To that end, this church recognizes that there is behavior that is deemed to be incompatible with ordained ministry and that calls for disciplinary action.

The following definitions and guidelines do not set forth the high expectations this church has of its rostered ministers. Other documents and guides have been and will be developed for that purpose. The normative expectations of this church for its rostered ministers focus upon faithful and effective exercise of ministerial leadership. In all matters of morality and personal ethics, this church expects its rostered ministers to be exemplary in conduct.

These definitions and guidelines describe the grounds for which rostered ministers may be subject to discipline according to the practice of this church. Their purpose is juridical: to assist in the processes of consultation, discipline, and appeals.

### **Grounds for discipline of rostered ministers are as follows:**

- A. Preaching or teaching in conflict with the faith confessed by this church** is grounds for discipline of rostered ministers. A summary of the faith confessed by this church is found in Chapter 2 of this church's constitution.
- B. Conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office** is grounds for discipline of rostered ministers. These guidelines define and describe kinds of behavior which are incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.
  - 1. Confidential Communications (Word and Sacrament only):** Ministers of Word and Sacrament must respect privileged and confidential communication and may not disclose such communication, except with the express permission of the person

who has confided it or if the person is perceived to intend great harm to self or others.

2. **Integrity:** Rostered ministers must be honest and forthright in their dealings with others while protecting privileged and confidential communications. Dishonesty, deception, duplicity or the manipulation of others for personal benefit or gain is incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.
3. **Professional Attention to Duties:** A rostered minister of this church has made commitments through ordination and through acceptance of a letter of call. Continued neglect of or indifference toward such duties constitutes conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.
4. **Relationship to Family:** This church is committed to the sanctity of marriage and the enhancement of family life. Rostered ministers of this church are expected to uphold this church's ideals of marriage, family, and relationship in their public ministry as well as in private life. Spouse and children, if any, are to be regarded with love, respect, and commitment. Departure from this standard may be considered conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office. Such departure might include any of the following:
  - a. Separation or divorce that occurs without consultation with the synod bishop's office and appropriate implementation of such consultation;
  - b. Desertion or abandonment of spouse or children;
  - c. Abuse of spouse or children;
  - d. Repeated failure to meet legally determined family support obligations.
5. **Sexual Matters:** The expectation of this church is that a rostered minister is to lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed. In keeping with this expectation, chastity and abstinence are required outside of marriage, and chastity and fidelity are required within marriage. Adultery, infidelity, casual sexual relationships, promiscuity, the sexual abuse of another or the misuse of the ministerial relationship for sexual activity constitute conduct that is incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.

6. **Addiction and Substance Abuse:** Any addictive behavior that impairs the ability of a rostered minister to perform effectively the duties of the office or the misuse of alcohol, drugs, medications, sex, gambling, or pornography is incompatible with the office of ministry. The approach of this church to such a problem may be to insist upon effective treatment or to initiate immediate discipline. Refusal to accept treatment or failure to abide by the terms of such treatment is conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.
7. **Fiscal Responsibilities:** Rostered ministers of this church are expected to conduct their fiscal affairs in accordance with ethical and legal requirements. Among those fiscal activities that may be considered conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office are:
  - a. Indifference to or avoidance of legitimate and neglected personal debts;
  - b. Embezzlement of money or improper appropriation of the property of others;
  - c. Using the ministerial office improperly for personal financial advantage.
8. **Membership in Certain Organizations:** This church has specifically declared in 7.31.11. and 7.61.05. that discipline may be administered to any of its rostered ministers who belong to any organization other than the Church which claims to possess in its teaching and ceremonies that which the Lord has given solely to the Church.
9. **Conviction of a Felony:** The society in which this church ministers has placed a high premium upon the role of law in regulating the rights and duties of individuals to promote the common good. This includes laws which define certain conduct as felonies. Pleading guilty to, or being convicted of, a felony is grounds for discipline as conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office but may not be grounds for discipline in those instances where the violation of law was to protest or to test a perceived unjust law or as an expression of civil disobedience.

- C. Willfully disregarding or violating the functions and standards established by this church for the rostered ministries of this church** is grounds for discipline of ordained ministers. Such functions and standards established by this church are found in Chapter 7. of this church's constitution, bylaws, and continuing resolutions.
- D. Willful disregard of the constitution or bylaws of this church** is grounds for discipline of rostered ministers.

## **DEFINITIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR DISCIPLINE OF CONGREGATIONS**

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- A. Departing from the faith confessed by this church** is grounds for discipline of a congregation of this church. A summary of the faith confessed by this church is found in Chapters 2 and 3 of this church's constitution.
- B. Willfully disregarding or violating any of the criteria for recognition as congregations of this church** is grounds for discipline of a congregation of this church. These criteria are set forth in 9.21. and 9.22. of this church's constitution.
- C. Willfully disregarding or violating the provisions of the constitution or bylaws of this church** is grounds for discipline of a congregation of this church.

## **DEFINITIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR DISCIPLINE OF MEMBERS OF CONGREGATIONS**

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- A. Persistent and public denial of the Christian faith by a member of a congregation of this church** is grounds for disciplinary action against the member. The Christian faith as confessed by this church is expressed in Chapter 2 of the constitution for congregations. A congregation member who persists in denial of this faith and seeks to convince others to do so, may be subject to discipline. In order to warrant discipline, such behavior must be more than occasional expressions of doubt or private comments and conduct contrary to the Christian faith; the behavior must be seen to bring harm to the faith of others and detract from the mission and ministry of the congregation.
- B. Willful or criminal conduct grossly unbecoming a member of the Church of Christ** is grounds for disciplinary action against a congregation member. Commission of murder, attempted murder, rape, sex crimes or hate crimes, child abuse, spousal and elder abuse, public and profane obscenity and vulgarity, and similar conduct seen as reprehensible to the Christian community may warrant discipline. Persons deemed guilty of such behavior remain in need of pastoral care and compassion.
- C. Continual and intentional interference with the ministry of the congregation** is grounds for discipline of a member engaging in such behavior. A congregation member who repeatedly interrupts the congregation's gatherings, worship services, fellowship and educational activities, congregational and council meetings, or disparages the congregation or its ministry to others in ways that damage or destroy the ability of other members to carry out the church's mission may be disciplined by the church. In order to warrant discipline, such conduct must be more serious than a member merely expressing disagreement, being impolite or even exhibiting anger. The member must have engaged in a course of conduct and communication so persistent, inappropriate and objectionable, that the congregation's ability to perform ministry is being impaired.
- D. Willful and repeated harassment or defamation of member(s) of the congregation** are grounds for discipline of a member. If the treatment of another by a member of the congregation repeatedly devolves into slanderous, vicious or intentionally hurtful communications, no matter the means of such communications, the behavior is unacceptable and may

warrant disciplinary action. Similarly, if any members are being constantly harassed by another member for any reason, whether such harassment is based upon gender, race, sexual orientation or any other reason, perceived or real, the behavior may warrant discipline without regard to the nature of the harassment. The use of phone, email, text messages or other means of communication, and behaviors including anything from shouting and gestures to actual stalking, may all be means of unacceptable defamatory or harassing behavior between members.



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