



South-Central Synod of Wisconsin  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

October 16, 2018

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven”  
(Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Dear Siblings in Christ:

I remember the day when I was ordained, a day filled with joy and humbleness for the calling I had received. It was the day that started a new season in my life. As I entered this challenging and rewarding way to live out my baptismal calling, the axiom was “30 years and out,” but I couldn’t imagine that I would ever want to retire. As I start this new call as your bishop, though beyond 30 years of service, I’m not looking to be out of this wonderful life of serving the people of God.

I imagine that pastors who are retiring, or retired, feel much the same. The challenge is how to graciously move into the new calling God has placed before you – a calling to live as a retired pastor. It is time to engage in ministry in a new way. It is a new season in your life of serving God. I’m certain you loved being a parish pastor engaging in a wide variety of ministries, from visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, welcoming the stranger, teaching, preaching, administering, strategizing, and loving the people whom God had called you to love. Yet, you have now been called to a new season and a different way of serving, leaving the people that you have grown to love. I know this must be hard. I experienced that difficulty in leaving the congregation that I loved to take this new call as bishop. But leave we must - to every thing there is a season.

Our ELCA governing documents are clear: “A retired pastor should not remain a member of the congregation served at the time of retirement. Transferring one’s membership to another congregation allows the successor pastor to assume pastoral leadership more readily. It also provides an opportunity for the retired pastor to enter fully into the life of a different congregation with clarity about the pastor’s retired role.” (ELCA Roster Manual, p. 37) Our constitution clarifies that pastors are not to exercise any ministerial functions in congregations which they do not serve unless they are invited by the pastor or interim pastor. (SCSW Constitution, S14.19)

In my short time of service as the bishop of this synod, I have become aware that, while these provisions are widely understood, they are not widely embraced, and in too many cases, they are not being followed. Although I recognize that these guidelines may be viewed as harsh and against the stated desire of many pastors and congregations, I am finding that whenever they are not followed, congregational life and vitality are hindered. My call is to be the synod's pastor having primary responsibility for the ministries of Word and Sacrament and Word and Service in this synod and its congregations.

As my staff and I accompany congregations in transition, we will be including in our work the clear and firm expectation that retired pastors not retain their membership nor be involved in the congregations from which they retire. I know this is difficult. I know that it involves a painful separation from people we have come to know and love deeply, but I also know that this is a necessary step if our congregations are going to enter the next chapter of their life and ministry on healthy terms.

We will provide resources to assist our leaders (lay and clergy) with the transitions you face. My door is always open to you. I welcome your comments, questions and prayers as we seek to enter into a new commitment to assist congregations to enter into the next season of vitality and healthy ministry.

Blessings and Peace,



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