

Trustworthy Servants of the People of God

*Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.
Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.
I Corinthians 4:1-2 (NRSV)*

Pastors and Deacons of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Office of the Presiding Bishop

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

[Letter from the Presiding Bishop will go here]

1 **Trustworthy Servants of the People of God**

2 Every church has hopes and expectations for its leaders. The constitutions of the ELCA clearly state the
3 expectations of rostered ministers.¹ Another policy document, *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*,
4 describes consequences for unacceptable behaviors.² The ELCA’s constitution outlines the importance
5 of the office of ministry and the requirements for serving the church in that role.³ Expectations are also
6 outlined for the calling body, understanding the call of pastors and deacons to be one of mutual
7 accountability.⁴ The responsibilities for pastors and deacons are outlined below.

8 This document, *Trustworthy Servants*, is different. It is intended as a guide, both for pastors and deacons,
9 and for candidates seeking entry onto those rosters. As such, it will be used as part of the candidacy
10 process, both for the candidates and for the candidacy committee.

11 *Trustworthy Servants* affirms the high value that pastors and deacons have in the life of the ELCA. It
12 presents aspirations for integrity in professional life and faithfulness to the calling that all rostered
13 ministers share.

14 These aspirations are not simply for individuals. They are for the whole church, corporately. As a people
15 united in Christ, we respect and honor the diversity of histories, traditions, cultures, languages, and
16 experiences in the ELCA and the larger Christian community. We seek full participation of all in the
17 life and work of this church and will strenuously avoid and repent when the culture of any one group
18 becomes the norm for all in the ELCA. It is a blessing when pastors and deacons live their lives

¹ *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (Updated November 2016). In the remainder of this document citations from this church’s governing documents are codified variously as “ELCA 3.04.” (a churchwide provision), “ELCA 7.31.01.” (a churchwide bylaw), and “ELCA 5.01.A16.” (a churchwide continuing resolution).

² *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Printed May 2010).

³ ELCA 7.21-7.22; 7.51-7.52.

⁴ These expectations are outlined in documents accompanying a letter of call and in provisions for mutual ministry committees.

19 advocating against all of the ways that racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of prejudice and
20 injustice limit participation, and harm individuals, communities and the whole body of Christ.

21

22 As outlined in the ELCA's constitution, the specific responsibilities of pastors and deacons include those
23 named here.

24 **Ministry of Word and Sacrament (Pastor)**

25 Consistent with the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, every
26 minister of Word and Sacrament shall:

- 27 1) preach the Word;
- 28 2) administer the sacraments;
- 29 3) conduct public worship;
- 30 4) provide pastoral care;
- 31 5) seek out and encourage qualified persons to prepare for the ministry of the Gospel;
- 32 6) impart knowledge of this church and its wider ministry through distribution of its
33 periodicals and other publications;
- 34 7) witness to the Kingdom of God in the community, in the nation, and abroad; and
- 35 8) speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice
36 and proclaiming God's love for the world.

37

38 Each pastor with a congregational call shall, within the congregation:

- 39 1) offer instruction, confirm, marry, visit the sick and distressed, and bury the dead;
- 40 2) relate to all schools and organizations of the congregation;
- 41 3) install regularly elected members of the Congregation Council;
- 42 4) with the council, administer discipline; and

43 5) endeavor to increase the support given by the congregation to the work of the ELCA
44 churchwide organization and its synod.⁵

45 **Ministry of Word and Service (Deacon)**

46 Consistent with the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, every minister of
47 Word and Service shall:

- 48 1) Be rooted in the Word of God, for proclamation and service;
- 49 2) Advocate a prophetic diakonia that commits itself to risk-taking and innovative
50 service on the frontiers of the Church's outreach, giving attention to the suffering
51 places in God's world;
- 52 3) Speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for
53 justice and proclaiming God's love for the world, witnessing to the realm of God in
54 the community, the nation, and abroad;
- 55 4) Equip the baptized for ministry in God's world that affirms the gifts of all people;
- 56 5) Encourage mutual relationships that invite participation and accompaniment of others
57 in God's mission;
- 58 6) Practice stewardship that respects God's gift of time, talents, and resources;
- 59 7) Be grounded in a gathered community for ongoing diaconal formation;
- 60 8) Share knowledge of the ELCA and its wider ministry of the gospel, and advocate for
61 the work of all expressions of this church; and
- 62 9) Identify and encourage qualified persons to prepare for the ministry of the gospel⁶

64 **Trust is the Foundation of Relationships**

⁵ ELCA 7.31.02.

⁶ ELCA 7.61.02.

65 From Scripture we learn of God’s love for humankind and all of Creation, revealed most powerfully
66 through God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again to give new life to all. Our
67 Lutheran tradition puts a special emphasis on God’s mercy: a kind of love that breaks through human
68 categories of deserving and undeserving, and embraces all.⁷

69
70 It is this all-encompassing and merciful love that allows us to trust in God’s favor toward us; trust, in turn,
71 is the foundation of our human relationships. Marriage, friendship, community and even government all
72 depend on levels of trust between humans. Our ultimate trust is in God, but we also must be able to trust
73 one another to be faithful to the promises we have each made, and to live faithfully within the
74 responsibilities we each bear.⁸

75 76 **A Trustworthy Life in Rostered Ministry**

77 In a broken world and among imperfect people, trust is both precious and fragile. It is particularly
78 challenging, for those who are called to be speakers of God’s word and bearers of God’s sacramental
79 promises, to live out their callings in ways that both acknowledge their own imperfection and yet stay fully
80 deserving of their people’s trust. This is the tension in which those called to public ministry in the church
81 must live: to be both true to themselves *and* at the same time a model to others.⁹

82
83 With all Christians, pastors and deacons are called to lead a “life in a manner worthy of the gospel of
84 Christ” (Philippians 1:27, NRSV). Christ’s own self-giving in life and unto death on the cross is the
85 example for Christian life for all believers. Because pastors and deacons are also recipients of God’s
86 gracious gift in Christ Jesus, they are called to use their gifts and abilities to enable others to understand
87 themselves as recipients of that same grace and to live as God’s people in the world. In their life and

⁷ Examples of this inclusive mercy are found in Psalm 86:5; Luke 6:36; Romans 5:8.

⁸ The crucial role of trust is made clear in passages like Luke 16:10-12; 1 Cor 4:1-2; 1 Peter 5:3.

⁹ This paradoxical role is illustrated in passages like Matt 23:11; Mark 10:45; Gal 5:13.

88 conduct, pastors and deacons are to witness to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ and aspire to use their
89 gifts in lives worthy of the gospel of Christ and equip others to do the same.¹⁰

90

91 Pastors and deacons fulfill their calling not only in what they do by carrying out certain tasks, but also in
92 who they are. The expectations and hopes placed on them, from their congregations and their communities,
93 ask that their very lives proclaim and witness to the gospel of Christ. Even as we confess that as part of a
94 broken humanity, the life of a rostered minister cannot be one of moral or spiritual perfection, yet the hope
95 remains that pastors and deacons strive for daily living that witnesses to the good news that we are justified
96 by God's grace and called to live out that grace in daily life.

97

98 The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has high expectations for those who serve in public
99 ministry as pastors and deacons of this church. Those who publicly profess to be witnesses to the gospel
100 of Jesus Christ also aspire to maintain integrity and character so that their lives give authentic witness to
101 their trustworthiness for the sake of effective ministry. The public nature of the church's ministries
102 makes the character of its ministers central to the church's own trustworthiness. The negative impact of a
103 pastor or deacon breaking trust often results in an inability to carry out public ministry effectively.

104

105 **When Trust Is Broken**

106 When effective ministry depends upon a relationship of trust, the vulnerability of those in that
107 relationship is acute. And when that trust is broken, the wounds are that much deeper and wider,
108 impacting more than just the parties involved, but the whole sphere of ministry influence in the
109 community. Since the possibility for harm is great, the need to hold that trust is all the more imperative.

110

¹⁰ Matthew 28:16-20.

111 Sin and brokenness are realities in the lives of all persons, including those who serve as pastors and
112 deacons. But when there is failure in the lives of those who serve in public ministry, this church seeks to
113 provide counsel and understanding, while emphasizing that though repentance and forgiveness are
114 always part of the life of faith, they may not be sufficient for restoration to rostered ministry. Rostered
115 ministry is a privilege granted by the community of faith, not the right of any individual. Forgiveness for
116 a break of trust is the hope, but it cannot be assumed that forgiveness results in the removing of
117 consequences. The consequences of such a broken trust may well remain.

118

119 **Leadership Rooted in Faith**

120 First and foremost, pastors and deacons are people of faith: people who find their identity and meaning in
121 a deep and trusting belief in the God who created, sustains, judges, and loves them, and is known most
122 perfectly in the life and work of Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh. This commitment to faith shapes
123 every part of the lives of pastors and deacons and draws them ever toward God's Word proclaimed, the
124 sacramental means of grace, and the Spirit's presence in beloved community. Pastors and deacons are
125 expected to be people of prayer and personal devotion, to avail themselves of opportunities for confession
126 and forgiveness and sharing of Holy Communion, and to join with the people of God in daily intercession
127 for the church and for the world. They should cultivate in themselves the spiritual disciplines and gifts
128 they promote in those they serve.

129

130 Pastors and deacons are members of the congregations to which they are called. If they are called to
131 ministry in a setting other than an ELCA congregation (including full communion partners and institutional
132 ministries), they are to maintain membership in an ELCA congregation whenever possible, and to consult
133 with their synod bishop if that is impossible because of relational boundaries or geographical or physical
134 limitations.

135

136 Pastors and deacons of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are leaders not only in the
137 congregation or setting to which they are called, they are an integral part of the ministry of the whole
138 church. Recognizing the church's call as God's call, and in response to their promise to work in harmony
139 with the ELCA, pastors and deacons are expected to be bridge-builders between their own congregations
140 and the other expressions of the church. They are also expected to be trustworthy and engaged colleagues
141 of the other pastors and deacons of this church, to be accountable to those under whose oversight they
142 serve, and to share in responsibility for the whole church's mission. They also have a particular
143 responsibility to help identify other qualified and gifted persons who might be suited to public ministry
144 in this church and encourage them to consider candidacy for rostered ministry.

145
146 Pastors and deacons of our church should also be lifelong learners, eager for growth in knowledge and
147 insight into the Scriptures, the teachings and history of the church, and the world around them. The work
148 of ministry in a complex and changing society requires intelligence, mental agility, and curiosity, and
149 pastors and deacons are expected to take advantage both of structured opportunities for expected
150 continuing education, but also to keep themselves aware of current events and the world around them.
151 Pastors and deacons are expected to make personal study and reflection a priority in their lives, and also
152 to study when possible in the company of other pastors and deacons in collegium or other gatherings. They
153 are also encouraged to take advantage of sabbatical or other programs for extended study, and to take
154 advantage of resources made available to them for these. Congregations and ministry settings are also
155 expected to help their pastors and deacons with time and resources to do this. The ELCA expects fifty
156 contact hours of continuing education annually.

157

158 **Faithfulness in Health and Self-Care**

159 Physical health is central to well-being, vital to relationships, and makes it possible to live out vocations
160 in church, family, and community. Pastors and deacons are expected to make their own health a priority

161 in their lives, and to express their care for others by a concern for others' health as well. Congregations
162 and ministry settings are likewise to respect the needs of pastors and deacons for rest and self-care. If a
163 pastor or deacon is faced with the challenge of serious illness, then it is important that the rostered minister
164 inform both the synod bishop and congregation so that the leader's and congregation's needs may be met
165 and compassionate care extended.

166
167 Awareness of and care for one's own physical condition, reasonable and regular physical and mental health
168 care, nutrition and exercise are all parts of the responsibility given to pastors and deacons for self-care,
169 being alert to health care challenges presented by stress and overwork. Pastors and deacons are to be
170 particularly aware of the possible challenges to their health, wellbeing, and professional judgment
171 presented by the overuse of alcohol or other addictive substances or practices.

172

173 **Trustworthiness in All Dimensions of Life**

174 Pastors and deacons are to be examples of holy living so that their life and conduct do not become an
175 impediment to the hearing of the gospel or a scandal to the congregation or to the surrounding
176 community. The qualities of such a life include developing and maintaining a public reputation of
177 personal integrity and trustworthiness in all relationships.

178

179 Pastors and deacons are expected to be honest and forthright in dealings with others while protecting
180 privileged communications. They are to avoid conduct that is dishonest, deceptive, duplicitous or
181 manipulative of others for personal benefit or gain.

182

183 **Trustworthiness in Relationships and Friendships**

184 In all relationships, pastors and deacons are to seek to build up the body of Christ. In public ministry and
185 in private life, pastors and deacons are expected to develop and nurture appropriate relationships, behaving
186 in ways that build and sustain trust.

187

188 Friendships are both essential and complicated for those who serve in rostered ministry. On one hand,
189 pastors and deacons will respect the ties of friendships among others and will welcome and nurture
190 friendships for themselves. On the other hand, they will avoid compromising their role as ministers in such
191 relationships, maintaining appropriate boundaries and remaining alert to the dangers of acting out of
192 multiple roles in a single relationship. Wisdom and care are needed to define friendships without
193 inappropriate closeness or over-sharing in communities with a smaller number of peers or when a rostered
194 minister leaves a call or moves into retirement.

195

196 **Trustworthiness in Family Life**

197 Pastors and deacons will strive to serve others and nurture trust by faithfulness within their own family
198 life. Within the family, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, and mutual care are to be expressed. Children,
199 if any, will be regarded with love, respect and commitment. It is also expected that pastors and deacons
200 will maintain responsible relationships with their parents and other immediate relatives wherever that is
201 possible, recognizing that brokenness within family structures is a human reality. Neglect, abuse, desertion,
202 or abandonment of spouse and children, or failure to meet legally determined family support obligations,
203 are all inconsistent with serving as a rostered minister in the ELCA.

204

205 **Trustworthiness in Finances and Use of Intellectual Property of Others**

206 Pastors and deacons who are faithful stewards of time, talents, and possessions are examples of generous
207 living and earn trust within their community. Pastors and deacons are expected to conduct personal fiscal
208 affairs in accordance with ethical and legal requirements. Included among those fiscal activities considered

209 incompatible with the character and role of a rostered minister are indifference to or avoidance of legitimate
210 and personal debts, embezzlement of money, or improper appropriation of the property of others. The
211 ministerial office is not to be used for personal financial advantage.

212

213 Where indebtedness creates a significant burden for pastors and deacons (and their families) consultation
214 with the synod bishop's office and work with a financial counselor is to be approached without shame and
215 with confidence that a solid foundation can be created for managing financial obligations.

216

217 Care is also to be given to the thoughts and writings of others when they are used to illustrate, support or
218 enhance the thoughts, presentations, sermons and writings of pastors and deacons. When the intellectual
219 property of others is used, the source must be identified and referenced. This includes proper use of
220 copyrighted materials in worship.

221

222 **Communications**

223 The social teachings of the church guide the public advocacy of pastors and deacons, whether from the
224 pulpit or social media, the state house or the local restaurant. It is important, especially when using social
225 media, to distinguish between one's personal convictions and the teachings of the church, if they diverge.
226 Pastoral sensitivity, respect and common sense are important in using social media and in ordinary
227 conversations. Citing sources and using intentional, thoughtful speech in posts can help insure clarity of
228 position. A public figure page, separate from one's personal page, also aids the separation of official and
229 personal positions.

230

231 **Human Sexuality and Gender**

232 Sexuality is a rich and universal aspect of human life. In the teachings of the ELCA, human sexuality is
233 understood as a gift and trust from God.¹¹ Those who serve as pastors and deacons reflect a variety of
234 sexual orientations and diverse gender identities. Whether single or married, the personal attitudes and
235 conduct of pastors and deacons are to honor this understanding of sexuality as a good gift and trust from
236 God in the lives of all people.

237

238 **Trustworthiness in Sexual Conduct and Speech**

239 In a cultural context in which sexuality is often objectified and used for commercial purposes, pastors
240 and deacons are called to a counter-cultural ethic.¹² Whether single or married, they embrace a holistic
241 understanding of sexuality that counters a rigid or shame-filled attitude about the human body. It is
242 useful to remember Martin Luther's view of vocation. For Luther the celibate life is not intrinsically
243 holier than the life of those who marry nor is marriage itself a life-saving sacrament.¹³ God hates nothing
244 that God has made, and sexual desire and procreation are parts of God's good intention for humankind.
245 Like every other aspect of human life, our dual "saint and sinner" nature makes the most powerful human
246 impulses also the most challenging ones. With this in mind, pastors and deacons are to reject sexual
247 promiscuity in their own lives and are never to use their role in the church to manipulate, exploit or
248 abuse another person sexually or emotionally. To prevent such abuse and exploitation, pastors and
249 deacons should refrain from emotional or sexual intimacy with those among whom they serve, such as
250 congregation members, staff, and other active participants in the ministry.

251

252

¹¹ A detailed theology of human sexuality can be found in *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (2009).

¹² See "Social Trust and the Common Good" in *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. Pages 12-13.

¹³ *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *LW* 36:92-106 and 114-115. (Pelikan and Lehman, eds. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).

253 In the entrance rites for pastors and for deacons prayers are offered, calling for them to “serve without
254 reproach” and to live in such a way as “to reflect God’s grace so that many may come to know and love
255 God”.¹⁴ This exemplary role is meant to give joy, as well as responsibility, to those serving in the public
256 ministries of the church. Aligning this with the ELCA’s understanding of the deeply significant, lifelong
257 nature of marriage, the expectations upon sexual expression by pastors and deacons may well run against
258 the grain of contemporary culture.

259
260 This church teaches¹⁵ that degrees of physical intimacy should be carefully matched to degrees of
261 growing affection and commitment and that the greatest sexual intimacies should be matched with
262 marriage. Pastors and deacons, as public witnesses to this church’s respect for marriage, are therefore
263 to live in accordance with the understanding that deepening degrees of sexual intimacy are aligned with
264 deepening levels of commitment to one another and the relationship. Such relationships are to be
265 exclusive, monogamous, consensual, and in the ELCA, require marriage before cohabitation for those
266 serving as pastors and deacons.

267
268 In speech and in action, pastors and deacons are to refrain from sexual harassment and to address such
269 behaviors within their ministries. Ignoring or excusing language and behaviors that belittle, bully or harm
270 others undermines the responsibility of pastors and deacons to uphold a safe and supportive climate for all
271 within the congregation or ministry site.

272

273 **Trustworthiness in Marriage**

274 This church does not permit its pastors or deacons to marry or to be married without a valid civil marriage
275 license. This church recognizes the legality of divorce to end a marriage.

¹⁴ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. Pages 191 and 205, respectively.

¹⁵ *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, pages 31-33.

276 It expects all pastors and deacons in committed relationships to enter into (or be expecting to enter into) a
277 legally-recognized marriage. It also encourages them whenever possible to participate within a
278 congregation in a public marriage or service affirming the relationship.¹⁶ Should unmarried pastors or
279 deacons seek to marry, the counsel and guidance of their bishop is to be sought and the rostered minister
280 will make the decision known among those they serve.

281

282 All married pastors or deacons are expected to live within a marriage relationship that is mutual and faithful
283 to their spouse. Pastors or deacons, who are married, are expected to keep their marriage promises until
284 death, to cultivate love and respect for their spouse, and to seek marital counseling whenever it is needed.

285

286 Because of sin and brokenness, some marriages may dissolve. Pastors and deacons who seek to separate
287 or divorce will enlist the counsel and guidance of the synod bishop. Similarly, a pastor or deacon
288 planning to remarry following a divorce will seek the counsel and guidance of their bishop.

289

290 **Trustworthiness with Creation**

291 Together with all Christians, pastors and deacons are called to respect the integrity of God’s creation and
292 to live in a way that acknowledges the special role of humans in stewarding this gift.¹⁷ Such trustworthy
293 stewardship involves the temperate use of resources as individuals and the work of promoting care of
294 creation in congregations and ministry settings. As leaders in the congregation and in the community,
295 pastors and deacons are in a unique position to raise awareness of the human impact on the environment
296 and lead people towards behavior and practices that minimize damage to natural resources. Personal,

¹⁶ The 2009 Churchwide Assembly acted to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize and support same-gendered couples and to hold their relationships publicly accountable. (*Gift and Trust*, pages 20-21). The ELCA has not created a separate liturgy for the marriage of same-gendered persons. At the recommendation of the “Ministry to and with Same Gender Couples and Families” work group, authorized by the 2013 Churchwide Assembly, supplemental resources were created that both same-gendered couples and all couples could use.

¹⁷ *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1993), 2.

297 congregational, and community-wide efforts toward recycling, reusing, and energy conservation witness
298 to the care of God's creation.

299 **Conclusion**

300 Ministers of Word and Sacrament and ministers of Word and Service have been chosen by God and this
301 church to lead the people of the ELCA and equip them as they bear witness to God and serve this world.
302 Each pastor and deacon has both the privilege and the responsibility of guiding this church into God's
303 future.

304

305 The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America prays for the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit
306 for those who serve this church in the ministry of Word and Sacrament and in the ministry of Word and
307 Service.

308

309 *Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and*
310 *make us worthy of your call, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*¹⁸

311

¹⁸ Prayer for the Third Sunday after Epiphany. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.