

The Relationship between the Pastor and the Congregation Council
OR
“Where is Christ Among Us in Our Relationships?”

One of the more significant challenges in parish ministry is the relationship between the pastoral role and the Congregation Council’s (CC) role. In the best of situations, they work “hand in glove” to provide joint leadership in the life of a congregation. In the worst of situations, they argue about who has the final say about any host of issues.

The congregational constitution helps delineate that relationship which is both descriptive and instructive. As we look at those provisions, please note that I am following the current ELCA Model Constitution for Congregations. If your congregation has not recently updated your constitution, now is a good time!

We begin by noting that the ministry we do in Christ’s name is the reason we exist as the Church.

***C3.01.** All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head. All actions of this congregation are to be carried out under his rule and authority.

With that basis, on an organizational level, the Congregation as a whole is the ultimate authority. That is very clear in the provision below. Note that the pastor is “called” and the CC is “elected” by the Congregation in a properly constituted assembly.

***C5.03.** Only such authority as is delegated to the Congregation Council or other organizational units in this congregation’s governing documents is recognized. All remaining authority is retained by the congregation. The congregation is authorized to:

- a. call a pastor as provided in Chapter 9;
- b. terminate the call of a pastor as provided in Chapter 9;
- c. call or terminate the call of associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers in conformity with the applicable policy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America;
- d. adopt amendments to the constitution, as provided in Chapter 17, amendments to the bylaws, as specified in Chapter 16, and continuing resolutions, as provided in Chapter 18.
- e. approve the annual budget;
- f. acquire real and personal property by gift, devise, purchase, or other lawful means;
- g. hold title to and use its property for any and all activities consistent with its purpose;
- h. sell, mortgage, lease, transfer, or otherwise dispose of its property by any lawful means;
- i. elect its [officers][,] [and] Congregation Council, [boards, and committees,] and require [them] [the members of the council] to carry out their duties in accordance with the constitution[,] [and] bylaws[,] [and continuing resolutions]; and
- j. terminate its relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as provided in Chapter 6.

When a pastor is called by the congregation, there begins a longstanding relationship that is defined as “a continuing mutual relationship and commitment.” The constitution says:

***C9.05. a.** The call of a congregation, when accepted by a pastor, shall constitute a continuing mutual relationship and commitment, which shall be terminated only by

death or, following consultation with the synodical bishop, for the following reasons:

- 1) mutual agreement to terminate the call or the completion of a call for a specific term;
- 2) resignation of the pastor, which shall become effective, unless otherwise agreed, no later than 30 days after the date on which it was submitted;
- 3) inability to conduct the pastoral office effectively in the congregation in view of local conditions;
- 4) physical disability or mental incapacity of the pastor;
- 5) suspension of the pastor through discipline for more than three months;
- 6) resignation or removal of the pastor from the roster of ordained ministers of this church;
- 7) termination of the relationship between this church and the congregation;
- 8) dissolution of the congregation or the termination of a parish arrangement; or
- 9) suspension of the congregation through discipline for more than six months.

The constitutional provisions quoted thus far have an (*) before them, which notes that they are required provisions which are the same in every ELCA congregational constitution. As we get to these next provisions, they vary according to the congregation, but I will be using the Model Constitution's provisions.

Let's begin with C11.02, which helps a congregation define the Officers of the congregation. There are several models, as seen below, depending on the history and tradition of each local congregation. Note that the officers may be all lay persons or that the pastor may serve as the president of the congregation and CC.

C11.02. The [congregation][Congregation Council] shall elect its officers and they shall be the officers of the congregation. The officers shall be elected by written ballot and shall serve for one year or until their successors are elected. Their terms shall begin at the close of the annual meeting at which they are elected.

or

The pastor shall be *ex officio* president of the congregation and the Congregation Council. The [congregation][Congregation Council] shall elect by written ballot the other officers of the congregation who shall serve for one year or until their successors are elected. Their terms shall begin at the close of the annual meeting at which they are elected.

or

The pastor shall be *ex officio* president of the congregation and the Congregation Council. The [congregation][Congregation Council] shall elect by written ballot the other officers of the congregation who shall serve for one year or until their successors are elected. Their terms shall begin on _____ (month and day) and end on (month and day).

or

The officers shall be elected by the [congregation] [Congregation Council] by written ballot and shall serve for one year. The term shall begin on _____ (month and day) and end on _____ (month and day).

Now let's move to Chapter 12, which describes the make-up of the Congregation Council. In this section it becomes clearer how the pastor and CC function in a pattern of equality. Please note that "the pastor" is a voting member of the CC, whose term on the CC is not an elected position, but a specific position because he/she has been called by the congregation. The model constitution says:

C12.01. The voting membership of the Congregation Council shall consist of the pastor(s)[, the officers of the congregation,] and [_____ members] [not more than nor fewer than _____ members] of the congregation, at least one of whom shall be a youth and at least one of whom shall be a young adult. Any voting member of the congregation may be elected, subject only to the limitation on the length of continuous service permitted in that office. A member’s place on the Congregation Council shall be declared vacant if the member a) ceases to be a voting member of this congregation or b) is absent from four successive regular meetings of the Congregation Council without cause. Consistent with the laws of the state in which this congregation is incorporated, the congregation may adopt procedures for the removal of a member of the Congregation Council in other circumstances.

C12.02. The members of the Congregation Council except the pastor(s) shall be elected by written ballot to serve for _____ years or until their successors are elected. Such members shall be eligible to serve no more than two full terms consecutively. Their terms shall begin at the close of the annual meeting at which they are elected.

or

The members of the Congregation Council except the pastor(s) shall be elected at a legally called meeting of the congregation during the month of _____. Their term of office shall be for _____ years, with the term of office beginning on _____ (month and day) and ending on _____ (month and day). Newly elected Congregation Council members shall be installed at worship the Sunday prior to the date they assume office.

Next, notice the duties of the CC, which includes the pastor. Sometimes people like to describe the CC as doing the “business dimensions” of the congregation and the pastor doing the “spiritual dimensions” of the congregation. Constitutionally, the lines are not that clearly drawn. All are called to care for the business and the spiritual needs of the congregation. Let’s start with C12.04 and C12.05:

C12.04. The Congregation Council shall have general oversight of the life and activities of this congregation, and in particular its worship life, to the end that everything be done in accordance with the Word of God and the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The duties of the Congregation Council shall include the following:

- a. To lead this congregation in stating its mission, to do long-range planning, to set goals and priorities, and to evaluate its activities in light of its mission and goals.
- b. To seek to involve all members of this congregation in worship, learning, witness, service, and support.
- c. To oversee and provide for the administration of this congregation to enable it to fulfill its functions and perform its mission.
- d. To maintain supportive relationships with the pastor(s) and staff and help them annually to evaluate the fulfillment of their calling or employment.
- e. To be examples individually and corporately of the style of life and ministry expected of all baptized persons.
- f. To promote a congregational climate of peace and goodwill, and, as differences and conflicts arise, to endeavor to foster mutual understanding.
- g. To arrange for pastoral service during the sickness or absence of the pastor.
- h. To emphasize partnership with the synod and churchwide organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as well as cooperation with other congregations, both Lutheran and non-Lutheran, subject to established policies of the synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

- i. To recommend and encourage the use of program resources produced or approved by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
 - j. To seek out and encourage qualified persons to prepare for the ministry of the Gospel.
- C12.05.** The Congregation Council shall be responsible for the financial and property matters of this congregation.
- a. The Congregation Council shall be the board of [trustees] [directors] of this congregation, and as such shall be responsible for maintaining and protecting its property and the management of its business and fiscal affairs. It shall have the powers and be subject to the obligations that pertain to such boards under the laws of the State of _____, except as otherwise provided herein.
 - b. The Congregation Council shall not have the authority to buy, sell, or encumber real property unless specifically authorized to do so by a meeting of the congregation.
 - c. The Congregation Council may enter into contracts of up to \$ _____ for items not included in the budget.
 - d. The Congregation Council shall prepare an annual budget for adoption by this congregation, shall supervise the expenditure of funds in accordance therewith following its adoption, and may incur obligations of more than \$ _____ in excess of the anticipated receipts only after approval by a Congregation Meeting. The budget shall include this congregation's full indicated share in support of the wider ministry being carried on in partnership with the synod and churchwide organization.
 - e. The Congregation Council shall ascertain that the financial affairs of this congregation are being conducted efficiently, giving particular attention to the prompt payment of all obligations and to the regular forwarding of benevolence monies to the synodical treasurer.
 - f. The Congregation Council shall be responsible for this congregation's investments and its total insurance program.

What is the pastor's role over and above these responsibilities that are a part of his/her call and office? That can be seen below in a provision in Chapter 9:

- *C9.03.** Consistent with the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
- a. Every ordained minister shall:
 - 1) preach the Word;
 - 2) administer the sacraments;
 - 3) conduct public worship;
 - 4) provide pastoral care; and
 - 5) speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world.
 - b. Each ordained minister with a congregational call shall, within the congregation:
 - 1) offer instruction, confirm, marry, visit the sick and distressed, and bury the dead;
 - 2) supervise all schools and organizations of this congregation;
 - 3) install regularly elected members of the Congregation Council; and
 - 4) with the council, administer discipline.
 - c. Every pastor shall:
 - 1) strive to extend the Kingdom of God in the community, in the nation, and abroad;
 - 2) seek out and encourage qualified persons to prepare for the ministry of the Gospel;

- 3) impart knowledge of this church and its wider ministry through distribution of its periodicals and other publications; and
- 4) endeavor to increase the support given by the congregation to the work of the churchwide organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and of the (insert name of synod) Synod of the ELCA.

Are there other places that provide examples of shared patterns of equality between the CC and the pastor? Let's look at two, which provide equal authority for the president and pastor.

C12.11. The Congregation Council shall normally meet once a month. Special meetings may be called by the pastor or the president, and shall be called by the president at the request of at least one-half of its members. Notice of each special meeting shall be given to all who are entitled to be present.

C12.12. A quorum for the transaction of business shall consist of a majority of the members of the Congregation Council, including the pastor or interim pastor, except when the pastor or interim pastor requests or consents to be absent and has given prior approval to the agenda for a particular regular or special meeting, which shall be the only business considered at that meeting. Chronic or repeated absence of the pastor or interim pastor who has refused approval of the agenda of a subsequent regular or special meeting shall not preclude action by the Congregation Council, following consultation with the synodical bishop.

Also, please note the following provision, which again provides an equal pattern of equality for the pastor and the president.

C13.08. The [senior] pastor of this congregation shall be *ex officio* a member of all committees and boards of the congregation. [The president of this congregation shall be *ex officio* a member of all committees and boards of the congregation, except the Nominating Committee.]

Please note that *ex officio* is defined as holding that position because of his/her office and he/she has all the rights and privileges of that position, including voting. This is according to Robert's Rules of Order which governs parliamentary issues in the congregation according to C10.07.

There is one provision which may seem confusing at first. It notes that the CC is responsible for employing and supervising staff. However, this does not include the pastor, who is both a member of the CC and, as noted in the provision, is not covered in this instance because he/she is a rostered leader of this church. In fact, the pastor often fills the role as the "direct supervisor" of other staff – secretary, janitor, music minister, etc. because he/she is on-site for their regular work.

C12.08. The Congregation Council shall be responsible for the employment and supervision of the staff of this congregation. Nothing in this provision shall be deemed to affect the congregation's responsibility for the call, terms of call, or termination of call of any employees who are on a roster of this church.

So, what are the conclusions of all of this?

- 1) Remember that "All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head. All actions of this congregation are to be carried out under his rule and authority." The Congregation is

the highest organizational authority because it “calls” the pastor and “elects” the CC in a duly constituted assembly.

- 2) The CC and pastor are responsible for working as a team to discern and carry out the mission of the congregation and provide a model of healthy community for the sake of the Gospel.
- 3) Patterns of equality between the pastor and the elected lay leadership (president/CC) are found throughout the constitution. One is not the boss of the other. Rather, there is a mutuality of purpose and an opportunity for the varied gifts of the Body of Christ to work together for a common purpose.
- 4) Struggles over “who is the boss of whom” are struggles for control towards getting things done. When there are differing opinions about how to get things done, the pastor and the CC are called upon to model how to find new strength in mutual dialogue, deep listening, fervent prayer, and Scripture study to learn where God is leading the congregation. Hopefully, in doing so, they will determine how to use the gifts the Holy Spirit has given to them in their Baptism to determine who they are called to heal, help, save and redeem.
- 5) Lay and clergy leaders can become powerful leaders in the whole community of faith when their conversation is used to find ways to cooperate in the mission of God rather than to build alliances, undermine the authority of others, and gather supporters of one or another position. It is important for all to remember that the only position in God’s Kingdom is taught by Jesus in Mark 9:35, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

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Comments:

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“A central tenet of the Lutheran tradition is that the Church is the “priesthood of ALL BELIEVERS.” Pastors do not OWN the Church; they SERVE the Church. They do not dominate; they liberate the people of God. They do not lead in isolation, but in collaboration. Leadership is participatory, and is based on gifts of the spirit – not status, rank, or title. Governance, in ELCA congregations, belongs to the congregation meeting, but it is executed by elected leaders (the congregation council, which includes the pastor) who serve as the board of directors for the congregational corporation.”