

Dear People of the Northern Great Lakes Synod,

In the few short weeks that I have been in office, I have been asked more than a few times about the role of Licensed Lay Ministers and other questions having to do with worship leadership, preaching, and presiding at the table in our congregations.

While I know that these same questions have been asked, and answered, in the past, it seems that some clarification and repetition is warranted. So at the risk of stating what you may already know, I will offer what I hope is clarification regarding these issues.

### **What is a Licensed Lay Minister?**

Also known as a Synodically Authorized Minister, or SAM in some other synods, a Licensed Lay Minister in our synod is a person who has not graduated from seminary with a theological degree, nor is an ordained minister, but is authorized by the Bishop of this Synod to provide leadership and care to a given congregation. This would include presiding at the table, funeral ministry, baptisms, financial leadership, stewardship education, and everything needed for the congregation to be encouraged and equipped in its mission to proclaim Christ.

### **How does a person become a Licensed Lay Minister?**

A person is invited to apply by the Bishop and then interviewed by the Lay School Dean and members of the board. There must be a need in the synod, and that need must be of a certain circumstance and situation that the Bishop deems that a LLM is the most appropriate kind of leadership for that congregation.

It is not unusual for an LLM to also be a seminary student who serves a congregation while pursuing a seminary degree, or a nursing home chaplain.

### **If I am a Lay School Graduate, can I become a Licensed Lay Minister?**

Maybe. While it is preferable that a LLM be a Lay School graduate, it is not necessarily a requirement. It depends upon the situation. Conversely, being a Lay School graduate does not automatically make that person qualified to preach, preside, or become a LLM.

### **So why go to Lay School?**

Lay School is a ministry of this synod that is meant to deepen the faith and expand the theological knowledge of anyone and everyone who would participate. Students are challenged to learn something new and often are appreciative of insights gained.

Sometimes Lay School students discern a call to ordained ministry. Sometimes gifts for preaching and worship leadership are identified and these strengths are further utilized by more congregations, meeting the needs for pulpit supply.

Being a Lay School graduate, however, does not mean that the graduate is now qualified to preach or preside. The graduation is not accreditation. Rather it is a celebration of having attended all the classes that Lay School has to offer.

### **So can I preach if I'm not a Lay School graduate?**

The privilege of preaching, and who fills the pulpit in a pastor's absence, is the responsibility of the pastor called to that congregation, or that of the interim if the congregation is pastorally vacant. If a gift for preaching is evident in you, the pastor may invite/encourage you to preach. Best

practices would mean that the pastor would work with you ahead of time, preview your sermon, offer ideas for improvement, and then along with the congregation, would hear you preach in order to give you feedback on your delivery style, content, volume etc.

Preaching in your own congregation, under the guidance of your pastor, would be a beginning. If there is interest in preaching in other congregations, your pastor could recommend you to the Bishop in order for you to be included on the pulpit supply list.

The Synod keeps a "Pulpit Supply List" which is posted online. This list gives interim pastors and Congregational Councils some idea of who might be available should the need arise to call someone, lay or clergy, to fill the pulpit on a given Sunday or mid-week worship service.

**What if I'm not clergy, but the congregation wants communion?  
Can I preside at the table?**

Permission to preside at the table for a Lay person must be asked for by the called pastor or the interim, and granted from the Bishop for any given Sunday in any given congregation. Permission is granted only for a particular person on a particular day in a particular place. If the same person leads worship in the same place a week later, permission must again be asked for and granted for that day.

And again, it is the responsibility of the called pastor in place, or the interim pastor, to be sure that the person for whom they are asking permission will preside in a manner worthy of the sacrament and the trust placed in them to proclaim the promise of Christ's presence. Best practices would include a rehearsal of how

to bless the elements, when and how to lift the bread and wine, where to place the hands in welcome or blessing, how to project the voice, what preface to use, how to bless children, the use of hand sanitizer, how to put things back, and any other point of leadership that would enrich and not detract from worship.

While the finer points of worship leadership need to be attended to, it is helpful to remember that it is Christ's own promise that makes Holy Communion all that it is, and not the worthiness of the one who presides, Lay or Clergy.

It is also worth remembering that God is still worshiped, and Christ is still present, even when Holy Communion is not a part of worship for whatever reason. Our hymnals, and our Lutheran tradition, also include a Service of the Word and other orders of service. However, I prefer to still include the sharing of the peace in every worship service, as this is a welcome point of contact in the worshipping community even if it is liturgically connected to Holy Communion. We can still greet each other in peace.

The work we do in the name of Christ is a partnership between clergy and lay, Synod leadership and Congregational leadership. We are charged to equip the saints for ministry, and this means recognizing and encouraging gifts for preaching, leadership, ministry, teaching, singing, and so much more. We are blessed the more we all use the gifts that God has given us to build up the kingdom of God. However, there is still a need for accountability and oversight, for teaching and encouraging, for learning and improving. May we all do this work to the best of our ability.

Yours in Christ, Bishop Katherine Finegan